



**Paula MEJIA  
VELASQUEZ**

**Home Country**  
**Colombia**

**Degree**  
**PhD in Botany and  
Geology**

**Expertise**  
**Botany**

**Research Focus**  
**Diversification and  
Radiation of Flowering  
Plants in Lower  
Cretaceous Period**

**Host University**  
**University of Florida,  
United States**

**Fellowship Awarded**  
**2008**

Paula Mejia Velasquez was born and grew up as the eldest of three children in Medellin, Colombia. She is married, and in her spare time she loves to read, hike, dance, bike, crochet and knit. Paula began her academic career studying biology and geology, her two great passions. She graduated in 2004 with a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Antioquia in Medellin, where she also pursued athletic activities such as softball, running and rugby.

After working briefly in the private sector she obtained her master's degree in botany in 2007 at the University of Florida in Gainesville, United States. She then was able to combine her two passions when she began to specialize in the area of paleobotany (the study of fossil plants) at the University of Florida, where she is now working toward her doctorate.

Paula's research focus is on the diversification and radiation of flowering plants in the Lower Cretaceous period (120 million years ago) as inferred from fossil pollen. Flowering plants (angiosperms) are the dominant group of plants in most terrestrial ecosystems today. However, their origin and diversification – described by Charles Darwin as “the abominable mystery” – remains one of the major unresolved questions of science.

Paula is attempting to reconstruct the floristic composition and paleo-environmental conditions of several tropical sites during the Lower Cretaceous period. She is sampling cores in Colombia, Brazil, Peru, Gabon and Egypt and analyzing a stratigraphic section of approximately 30 samples per site. In addition to helping determine the conditions under which flowering plants began their rapid and unparalleled process of diversification in the tropics, her research may yield clues as to how different plant groups respond to severe global warming events.

Paula plans to teach at the University of Antioquia in Colombia.