

ISSUE BRIEF **08.20.14**

U.S.–Mexico Academic Mobility: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities

David Vassar, Ph.D., Contributing Expert, Latin America Initiative

Beverly Barrett, Ph.D., Lecturer, Bauer College of Business, University of Houston

THE BILATERAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY CONTEXT

The United States and Mexico are neighbors, economic partners, political allies, and sometimes competitors for talent, capital, and technologies. Just last year, the administrations of President Barack Obama and President Enrique Peña Nieto reaffirmed the strategic importance of the bilateral relationship by launching two significant initiatives: the High Level Economic Dialogue, a cabinet-level vehicle for deeper engagement on economic issues, and the Bilateral Forum on Higher Education, Innovation and Research (BFHEIR), a parallel effort to increase academic and scholarly exchange and innovation between the two countries. These bilateral initiatives are intended to create a more dynamic, politically aligned economic region. One of the key factors of success for the BFHEIR will be the ability of the two governments, in cooperation with nongovernmental actors, to provide a framework to develop mechanisms that generate and sustain a meaningful exchange of students, faculty, and staff from educational institutions at all levels of post-secondary education.

These exchanges are critical for robust collaborations in education, research, and innovation. Academic mobility will provide increased understanding of culture and language, deeper knowledge

of educational and research practices and technologies, and insight into the key lines of inquiry that drive research and innovation in both countries. Taken together, the impact on this region could be transformational, creating the potential for increased economic integration through the standardization of appropriately prepared human capital across the region. Beyond these primary impacts of exchange, the longer term importance of academic and scientific exchange, which has been proven time and again with strategic relationships such as U.S.–China and U.S.–Russia exchanges, is the creation of social and academic networks that undergird any political and economic bilateral relationship that may evolve over time, particularly during times of geopolitical turmoil or complication.

THE ACADEMIC MOBILITY SURVEY INSTRUMENT

To aid in identifying the baseline for the BFHEIR initiative, the Mexico Center implemented the U.S.–Mexico Academic Mobility Survey 2014, an online questionnaire assessing the attitudes and experiences related to academic mobility of universities in the United States and Mexico. It was sent to approximately 400 U.S. and Mexican institutions of higher education in the spring of 2014. The most active universities send



upwards of 100 students and faculty across the border each year, while the least send hardly a handful.

SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR MOBILITY

The main factors that have the greatest impact on number of exchanges between the U.S. and Mexico are 1) information about the foreign higher education system; 2) information about individual foreign institutions (academic programs, interest in exchange, how to engage); 3) financial support; 4) faculty and student ambivalence toward exchange; and 5) externally influenced factors, like financial downturns, travel warnings, and perceptions of risk.

Repeatedly, institutions profess a lack of knowledge about their peer institutions abroad and the best modes of collaboration with them. Concerns regarding a “lack of information” and “lack of foreign language skills” were noted by more than two-thirds of the survey responses. Lack of communication, both institutionally and linguistically, is a key barrier for Mexican institutions and for their U.S. counterparts as well. The survey findings also reveal the importance of faculty-to-faculty relationships to facilitate academic mobility. These approaches to student and faculty mobility are driven by (1) institutional commitment and priority; (2) center-driven engagement; and (3) consortia networks. Each of these approaches allows for a variety of mobility modes, depending upon the institution, the needs of its students, and the natural networks that it may have. Two U.S. university programs demonstrating institutional commitment and center-driven engagement are the Mexico Liaison Office at Oklahoma State University and the Center for U.S.–Mexico Studies at the University of California, San Diego. Important binational models for consortia networks are the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC), the Research Program on Migration and Health (PIMSA) started by the University of California,

Berkeley, and the Puentes Consortium. All of these consortia, in different ways, build distinctive networks of Mexican and U.S. students, staff, and scholars through joint research collaborations, faculty exchanges, conferences, and information sharing.

Bilateral mobility of higher education and research complements the North American idea that advocates trilateral policy cooperation among the U.S., Mexico, and Canada.¹ Unfortunately, governmental cooperation on higher education between the U.S. and Mexico remains discursive. Although the U.S. and Canadian higher education systems are aligned in degree structure and accreditation, as select institutions are members in the American Association of Universities (AAU), this organization lacks any member institutions from Mexico. Importantly, though, the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) admitted four Mexican universities in January 2014. Administrative and cultural impediments to strengthening the bilateral relationship in higher education persist, too. Course credit and degree structure, as well as broader accreditation systems to ensure quality, are potential areas for future cooperation. Language is also a defining aspect of national culture, and foreign language acquisition is a sociocultural structural barrier to overcome. A key reason why students study abroad is foreign language acquisition, and demonstrated language ability in English in the U.S. and in Spanish in Mexico is a requisite for extended periods of study for advanced degrees. Higher education mobility is also related to binational workforce development. Higher education cooperation may be considered in the workforce development and migration reform contexts. There is the opportunity to overcome rigidities in the bilateral labor market.² Considering governance at multiple levels—in higher education, migration, and workforce development policies—there is a tension between the domestic national and international regional objectives.³

Academic mobility will provide increased understanding of culture and language, deeper knowledge of educational and research practices and technologies, and insight into the key lines of inquiry that drive research and innovation in both countries.

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND BEST PRACTICES FROM WORLD REGIONS

The idea of a “Region of Knowledge” proposed by the Mexican government through its Bilateral Forum on Higher Education, Innovation and Research (FOBESII) is similar to the idea of a Europe of Knowledge proposed by the European Commission in 1997.⁴ The vision of policymakers and education ministers working in partnership at the international level over decades in Europe has driven ongoing policy cooperation in higher education.⁵ Shared political, economic, and cultural values have resulted in higher education policy harmonization the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which is the largest academic mobility initiative in the world. The Bologna Process, initiated in 1999, established the objectives for the EHEA, in which the European Commission is a partner together with the participating 47 sovereign states. These efforts are a response to broader economic integration through globalization. The internationalization of higher education institutions, with the ultimate objective to recognize academic degrees within the EHEA, is the principal driver of the Bologna Process.⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BILATERAL HIGHER EDUCATION MOBILITY

Insights from the Mexico Center surveys and interviews reveal that while there are certain barriers to cooperation, such as lack of information, language skills issues, low communication levels, insufficient funding, and insecurity in Mexico, there are great opportunities. Our recommendations going forward seek to address these barriers by making structural improvement in the higher education ecosystem of North America. Higher education mobility should be a binational effort (and tri-lateral in the North American context), institution-led, and in partnership with public sector government agencies and private sector contributors/investors. We recommend

that the regional academic mobility of higher education institutions be collected and loosely coordinated by a governing coalition. This coalition may be connected to the Border Governors’ Association or another organization created for this purpose. In light of economic and political constraints and with the intention to strengthen the bilateral relationships, we recommend the following actions:

1. Create a framework for higher education mobility that is voluntary and flexible over time that includes a loosely coordinated central entity to both convene and focus binational dialogue

As is the case in Europe, an open method of coordination is essential, and the framework must allow for multiple points of participation by interested institutions. The framework should include a centralized secretariat entity that facilitates information exchange and provides a context for binational dialogue about the range of issues that are important for higher education in our region. These issues may include both those that affect the future of higher education, like financial pressures, public and governmental oversight, and international competition, as well as those that higher education institutions are well-positioned to affect, like workforce preparation, regional development, research, and innovation. The framework should also provide a strategic road map for joint action among like-minded institutions. Finally, it should also provide resources, including funding information, and best practices, for those institutions that seek to continue their efforts outside of the joint action model.

2. Identify strategic academic fields that benefit most from bilateral collaboration, and build higher education clusters for regional development centered on learning in these fields

Experience in the U.S.-Mexico context tells us that a strong sense of community and information sharing develops within focused binational consortia. Consortia should have three principle aims: 1) to create active networks of students and faculty around

Experience in the U.S.–Mexico context tells us that a strong sense of community and information sharing develops within focused binational consortia.

Government or industry could lead in this effort by providing seed funding toward binational workshops on specific problems such as, for example, shale gas production in South Texas–Northern Mexico region (Eagle Ford Shale).

The U.S.–Mexico region provides a unique opportunity to develop an educational area that is functionally bilingual. Failing to do this may become a regional impediment in the future.

problems of importance to U.S.–Mexico regional development; 2) to build a financial model that includes institutional baseline funds, along with governmental, private philanthropic, and corporate sources; and 3) to build educational and training capacity in ways that integrate U.S. and Mexican higher education systems, such as through joint or dual degrees, joint curriculum development, and jointly taught courses.⁷ Government or industry could lead in this effort by providing seed funding toward binational workshops on specific problems such as, for example, shale gas production in South Texas–Northern Mexico region (Eagle Ford Shale).

3. Provide government support in partnership with institutions of higher education, industry, and other important actors

In Europe, the European Commission serves a critical facilitator role, working alongside sovereign states, to advance academic mobility. In North America there is not a similar political organization to serve as a coordinating body. A coalition of actors, including universities, foundations, individuals, corporations, and state governments from border states in the U.S. (California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) and Mexico (Baja California, Sonora, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas) may be able to exert both the political and financial will to build lasting mechanisms for exchange. Potential cooperation may also come from institutions such as the Texas Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education, which may partner with similar coalitions across the border states. The Border Governors' Conference (BGC) may be an ideal venue to bring together the constituencies necessary to move toward an agenda focused on higher education research, innovation, and workforce preparation. These kinds of mobility opportunities may be funded by industry and by individual philanthropists, foundations, and governments, which may provide pools of funds for targeted mobility opportunities.

4. Include a meaningful number of higher education institutions: technical and community colleges, four-year teaching institutions, and research universities

Although initial interest will largely, though not exclusively, come from institutions in border states, it is important that even within this limited region of the U.S. and Mexico this framework is communicated and made available to all higher education institutions along the educational value chain. Without significant participation from higher education institutions, there is a risk that meaningful regional development and mobility goals will not be achieved. Both in terms of access to educational opportunity and in terms of maximizing regional development, robust participation of the institutions within the binational system of higher education is essential for success.

5. Take an “all of the above” approach to mobility at the institutional level

While we have laid out specific recommendations based on feedback from the survey, interviews, and a comparative review of global higher education systems, it is important to keep in mind how vast the higher education landscape is across the United States and Mexico. With more than 2,500 higher education institutions between our two countries, this region boasts a great volume and variation of institutions. We must think broadly about the models that can work, from short-term programs that provide an introductory experience leading to longer term studies or research abroad, and we must be open and willing to make these opportunities available in our institutions.

6. Prioritize language study, as it is foundational for the long-term development and competitiveness of the region

Language study should be a component of any research or co-curricular international program that is developed between partners in the U.S. and Mexico. The U.S.–Mexico region provides a unique opportunity to develop an educational area that is functionally bilingual. Failing to do this may become a regional impediment in the future.

As the two countries deepen their economic integration through trade and labor mobility, foreign language acquisition becomes even more important, and the region's competitiveness globally will depend on each country's ability to communicate with one another.

By implementing these recommendations, North America would become, over time, one of the most integrated higher education regions in the world, further consolidating its leadership in economic and human development, higher education, and policy innovation. These changes would also help to sustain the region's economic and political leadership, as highly developed human capital is, as it always has been, the engine for leadership, innovation, and impact around the world.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Pastor, *The North American Idea: A Vision of a Continental Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 165.

2. Isabel Studer, "2012: A New Mexican Vision for North American Integration," Modern Mexico Task Force, Center for Hemispheric Policy, University of Miami, December 4, 2012; Isabel Studer, "Mercados de trabajo y capital humano en América del Norte: oportunidades perdidas," *Foro Internacional* 209, no. 3 (2012), 584–627.

3. Adrian Curaj, Peter Scott, Lazăr Vlasceanu, and Lesly Wilson, eds., *European Higher Education at the Crossroad: Between the Bologna Process and National Reforms*. Parts 1 and 2 (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 2012).

4. Mexican Consultation Group of the Bilateral Forum on Higher Education, Innovation, and Research, "Proyecto 100,000: Towards a Region of Knowledge," FOBESII, Mexico City, Scientific and Technological Consultative Forum, Civil Association, 2013.

5. Anne Corbett, *Universities and the Europe of Knowledge: Ideas, Institutions and Policy Entrepreneurship in European Union Higher Education 1955–2005* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

6. Terhi Nokkola, "The Bologna Process and the Role of Higher Education: Discursive Construction of the European Higher Education Area," in *Public–Private Dynamics in Higher Education: Expectations, Developments and Outcomes*, Jürgen Enders and Ben Jongbloed, eds. (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 223.

7. As more and more institutions endeavor to build joint programming with foreign partners, the opportunities for integration and tuning around certain fields becomes possible. Specific fields based on objective learning that provide technical expertise lend themselves to international cooperation. Engineering, business, and mathematics are academic fields with potential for international cooperation. Engineering programs in tuning, an international initiative for common reference points in higher education curricula that started in the European Union, are in Texas and are funded by the Lumina Foundation. Mexico also participates in tuning.

AUTHORS

David Vassar, Ph.D., is a contributing expert for the Baker Institute's Latin America Initiative. Vassar serves as the lead administrator of the Puentes Consortium, a public policy initiative made up of five institutions from the U.S. and Mexico that conducts research on important issues impacting the U.S.–Mexico border region, including security, public health, economic development and education.

Beverly Barrett, Ph.D., is an international policy specialist, educator and researcher. She was the initial program director for Literacy Texas, a statewide association, and public affairs representative at the Houston branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

méxico center

See more policy briefs at:
www.bakerinstitute.org/issue-briefs

This publication was written by a researcher (or researchers) who participated in a Baker Institute project. Wherever feasible, this research is reviewed by outside experts before it is released. However, the views expressed herein are those of the individual author(s), and do not necessarily represent the views of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

© 2014 Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Cite as:
Vassar, David and Beverly Barrett. 2014. U.S.–Mexico Academic Mobility: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities. Issue Brief no. 08.20.14. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.