

U.S.-Mexico Educational Exchange: Academic Underperformance and a New Diplomatic Opportunity

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Overview: Large Nations, Small Educational Exchange

The United States' and Mexico's geographic proximity and 2,000 mile border have historically enabled a variety of post-secondary educational exchange. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994 fostered momentum for additional bilateral cooperation that established the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC) in 1994 and helped the Mexican- U.S. Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange (COMEXUS, established in 1990) increase the number of Fulbright-Garcia Robles scholarships for students in both the U.S. and Mexico from a total of 700 in 1948-1990 to a total of 4,000 in 1991-2011 (Council for International Exchange of Students, 2013).

While this is a notable increase in the percentage between these two eras for this particular program, the absolute numbers for total postsecondary academic exchange are notably small for large, neighboring nations with such important global presence, powerful economies and sizeable postsecondary education systems. The numbers of American students studying in Mexico has decreased significantly in the past few years. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), a leading private nonprofit in international exchange, the number of students from the United States to Mexico dropped by 42%, from about 7,157 in 2009-2010 to 4,167 in 2010-2011. The violence in Mexico that peaked in 2010-2011 deterred many study abroad students from going to Mexico. In 2010 (and renewed yearly until 2014), the U.S. Department of State issued a travel warning for Mexico that in some cases caused the suspension of well-established study abroad programs in Mexico.

U.S. and Mexican Exchange Students, 1996-2013

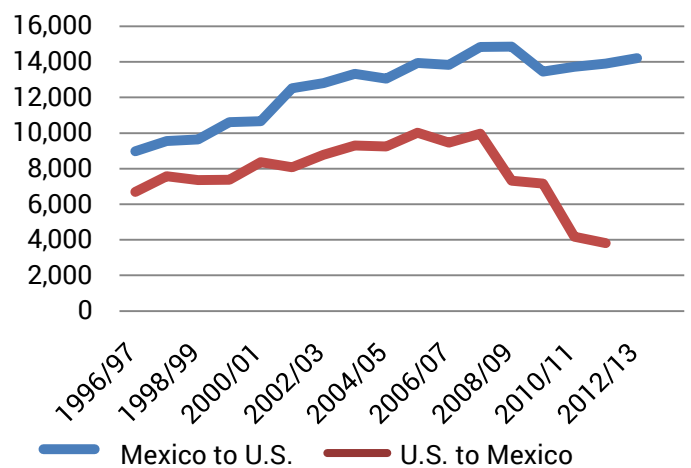


Figure 1 Educational Exchange Data from IIE Open Doors 2013

On the other hand, the number of Mexican students studying in the United States (14,199 in 2012-13) has for the most part steadily increased. Mexican government-sponsored scholarship programs, among other factors, sustain the flow of Mexican students studying in the U.S. Violence in Mexico has also played a part. Affluent Mexican students able to pay private or out-of-state public university tuition have opted to study full time at U.S. universities. In some cases, students living in northern Mexico pay in-state tuition at border universities, particularly in Texas. Still, Mexicans make up only 1.7% of all international students studying in the United States, trailing Chinese, Indians and South Korean students, which together make up 49% of all international students in the U.S. ("Open Doors," 2013). In general, the flow of binational educational exchange is moving in one direction, mainly northward.



Figure 2 President Barack Obama delivers remarks at the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City, Mexico, May 3, 2013. (Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson) <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/05/03/president-obama-reaffirms-united-states-mexico-relationship>

Though the overall numbers are anemic, the influence of educational exchange on the two nations has at times had an outsized effect. As an example, a significant portion of the political leadership that came to power in Mexico in the late 20th century known as “technocrats” were educated at prestigious American universities. Mexican presidents such as Miguel de la Madrid (Harvard, master’s, ’65), Ernesto Zedillo (Yale, Ph.D., ’78), Carlos Salinas (Harvard, Ph.D., ’78), and Felipe Calderon (Harvard, master’s, ’00), fit the description of a Mexican technocrat: holding master’s or doctoral degrees, usually in economics, from the United States (Ai Camp, 2010, pp. 126-7). Notwithstanding, these scholars represent a very small percentage of a portion of the overall student population, and despite this notable history, educational exchange between the two countries has fallen far short of its potential.

Though the latter are examples of Mexicans returning to their country after their U.S. educations, the “brain drain” phenomenon is a significant risk to educational exchange. Countries such as Mexico risk losing their educational investment in their students when they study abroad. These risks can be measured by the number of college-educated Mexicans residing in the United States, which increased from about 300,000 in 2000 to 530,000 in 2010. This number is significant in a broader context: 32.3 million adults in Mexico over the age of eighteen have not completed primary education (38.5% of the total population over 15) and fifteen million people over the age of eighteen do not have a high school education (“Plan Nacional de Desarrollo,” 2013, pp. 61). Furthermore, of Mexico’s 30,000 citizens with a PhD, 11,000 of them live in the United States (Velasco, 2013).

The Way Forward

Both governments are currently seeking to address these shortcomings as part of an overall shift in the bilateral agenda. Since President Enrique Peña Nieto’s six-year term began in December 2012, his administration has shifted the direction of the national agenda. Mexico’s National Development Plan 2013-2018 focuses on boosting productivity (“Plan Nacional de Desarrollo,” 2013,). To increase productivity, Mexico aims to bolster human capital and Mexico’s international standing. This brings education to the forefront of the national and binational agendas.

Interestingly, the National Development Plan argues that a lack of human capital in Mexico is not only a reflection of a deficient education system, but also a result of a lack of linkages between the educational, private and public sectors. The Plan also argues that Mexico cannot simply focus on increasing human capital in Mexico but also ensuring employment opportunities and lessening barriers to innovate for its highly educated citizens. (“Plan Nacional de Desarrollo,” 2013)

President Obama initiated the “100,000 Strong in the Americas” program in 2011 to increase international study in Latin America and the Caribbean, including Mexico. President Obama’s goal is to see 100,000 Latin American and Caribbean young people studying in the United States and 100,000 young Americans studying across the Western Hemisphere. The Department of State has been working to implement the initiative through various partnerships with foreign governments, universities and colleges, and with the private sector (“100,000 Strong,” 2013). Simultaneously, the Mexican Government has initiated “Proyecto

100,000” which aims to have 100,000 Mexican students studying in the U.S. and 50,000 U.S. students studying in Mexico by 2018.

Education has thus been given a higher profile on the bilateral agenda. President Obama’s visit to Mexico City in May 2013 highlighted a working group to support entrepreneurs as well as initiatives to strengthen border cooperation and expand educational exchanges (“Statement of Intent,” 2013). To address these priority issues, President Obama and President Peña Nieto announced the High Level Economic Dialogue (HLED), which consists of an annual meeting of Cabinet level officials “to advance strategic economic and commercial priorities central to promoting mutual economic growth, job creation, and global competitiveness” (“Factsheet,” 2013). The HLED seeks to build on and promote sustained progress on several bilateral forums and working groups, including the Mexico-U.S. Entrepreneurship and Innovation Council (MUSEIC) and the U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Forum on Higher Education, Innovation, and Research.

The U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Forum on Higher Education, Innovation and Research brings together government and academic institutions to collaborate on educational and research programs. Participating government institutions, including the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) and its counterparts in the U.S., seek to increase access to quality post-secondary education for underserved demographic groups, especially in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, expand educational exchanges, increase joint research on education and learning, and share best practices in higher education and innovation (“Factsheet,” 2013).

Recommendations

The United States and Mexico are right in elevating education as a priority in the bilateral relationship. Both countries should take greater advantage of the lower costs related to proximity and the potentially high return on investment in cross-border educational exchange. Bringing together leaders in private and public sectors, as well as major universities, to rethink strategies will be essential for its success. Some recommendations include:

- 1. Leaders should reevaluate traditional mechanisms for cross-border educational exchanges.** Aside from providing students scholarships to study abroad and forgiving or offering discounted tuition, setting up distance centers for students and sending academics to teach at universities may be more cost-effective, reach more students, and increase collaboration among higher institutions.
- 2. An increase in professional development programs, especially professional exchanges in education, would maximize efforts to increase human capital.** Community colleges in the U.S. offer specified vocational training degrees at lower costs without sacrificing quality. Together with Mexico’s technological universities, community colleges can potentially increase the span and scope of these programs.
- 3. The two governments should emphasize outreach on objectives and metrics and strongly encourage universities to utilize creativity in boosting their educational exchange.** Current practices utilized by U.S. and Mexican universities in educational exchange will not be sufficient for the two countries to meet their goals in this area.
- 4. There should be a greater effort to provide opportunities to less affluent students to study abroad, moving study abroad away from an elitist endeavor to a formative experience for all students on both sides of the border.**

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