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Advancing Mutual Knowledge Of the Complex U.S.-Mexico Agenda

Introduction

Colloquially, the University of Arizona (UA) has been known as “the most northern Mexican University” because of

Mexico’s enormous importance to it. Located in Tucson, the epicenter of the borderland regions of Sonora and Arizona, the UA was established in 1885 as a public research university, even before Arizona was admitted as a sovereign state to the Union in 1912. Along the U.S.-

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Mexico border, many shared challenges, interests, geography, and populations have brought together the UA and Mexico's most important university, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). In this context, the Center for Research on North America (CISAN) has become an ideal partner for the UA to strengthen mutual knowledge on the complex binational agenda. This article briefly recounts and celebrates the strong collaboration, as well as the many initiatives in the social sciences, that the UA and the UNAM have shared in recent years.

Mexican Initiatives in the Social Sciences: Mexico in Tucson

The University of Arizona has one of the longest traditions of collaboration with Mexico in existence, covering the natural and social sciences, the arts, and the humanities. For decades, the UA has exchanged students and professors in many fields of knowledge. This is demonstrated by its profound relationship with the UNAM, which is so strong that in 2015 the UNAM established an inter-

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national center in Tucson, reciprocating the existence of the UA office at the UNAM main University City campus in Mexico's capital.

Among the many scientific fields of mutual interest, the social sciences represent a critical area of opportunity between the UNAM and the UA simply because the United States and Mexico are linked through many social dimensions. On top of these efforts, the UA College of Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS) is deeply committed to becoming a platform for increased, sustained academic collaboration with the UNAM. The college provides a deep, broad perspective for understanding firsthand the multiple dimensions and complexities of the United States-Mexico border and connecting with the local Tucson community, rich in expressions of cultural diversity and whose historic relationship with Mexico is profound and robust.

For that reason, in fall 2016, the dean of social sciences, Dr. John Paul Jones III, created the Office of SBS Mexico Initiatives, originally designed by Professor Scott Whiteford, a prominent anthropologist with academic interests in international migration, violence, power, human rights, research methods, and the political ecology of water. SBS Mexico Initiatives was established to consolidate collaborative efforts with Mexico, its academic institutions, organizations, scholars, students, and communities in the social and behavioral sciences. Its purpose was to generate the basis for binational collaboration and provide resources for SBS units, faculty, and students to facilitate joint research and scholarly activity. Its main mission up to now has been providing spaces to think and discuss broadly on the impact of the social sciences in Mexico and the United States, celebrate shared cultural heritages and populations, and promote awareness on issues of mutual importance.

It is important to mention that the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences has strong academic capabilities in all the key topics of the binational agenda with Mexico. It houses 31 academic, research, and outreach units in

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the social sciences and the humanities. Promoting collaboration with Mexico is a priority, as its research capacities in numbers indicate: around 90 of over 500 faculty engage in scholarship on Mexico, Mexico-U.S. relations, border studies, and Mexican-American populations, often in collaboration with colleagues in Mexico from top universities and research centers. The sbs student body is 30 percent Hispanic and Mexico's Science and Technology National Council scholars are welcomed to graduate programs every year. The sbs hosts academic units and research centers focused specifically on the border and the binational agenda with Mexico, such as the Binational Migration Institute, the Center for Border and Global Journalism, the Center for Regional Food Studies, the Southwest Center, the Southwest Institute for Research on Women, and the Border Lab in Nogales, Arizona, to be located at the historic Castro House, a property donated by former Arizona Governor Raul Castro.

The UA-UNAM Binational Research Consortium: Migration, Human Rights, and Human Security

In April 2018, UNAM Rector Dr. Enrique Graue visited Tucson and signed several collaboration agreements, among which was the establishment of a Binational Research Consortium on Migration, Human Security, and Human Rights. Why are these topics key to the binational agenda? Among the central challenges of the twenty-first century is the need to strengthen human rights and security globally. The critical threats to human rights and human security inherent in the migration process between Mexico and the United States make it necessary to conduct social science research and propose joint solutions, including new or amended policies to ensure their protection. Thus, UA-UNAM joint research capacities on the social sciences are crucial in these times.

It is important to say that research carried out thus far by scholars in both countries has greatly increased

scientific knowledge around issues of migration, human rights, and human security; however, collaboration in research between the two participating institutions could exponentially strengthen dialogue between their respective countries and enhance the search for common solutions from a shared, interdisciplinary, multidimensional perspective.

In a few words, the consortium is both a financial instrument for promoting joint academic collaboration and a research network of specialists. It seeks to provide an infrastructure for binational cooperation and collaboration between the UNAM Humanities Coordinating Department and the UA College of Social and Behavioral Sciences to strengthen research in these key topics. Both institutions recognize the importance of the bilateral exchange of academic staff, researchers, technical specialists, and students associated with them.

Since 2018, the consortium has sought to establish mechanisms and financing models to strengthen joint research between the UNAM and the UA on these topics between the United States and Mexico, including, but not limited to, their shared border region. It promotes the mobility of academic staff and students between the two universities and the establishment of collaborative projects between academic degree programs to create undergraduate and graduate study opportunities for students at both institutions in related areas. Lastly, it seeks to create a permanent exchange of bibliographical resources and other teaching and research materials, as well as joint publication of research products carried out by scholars from both countries.

The CISAN in the UA-UNAM Consortium, A Key Partner for sbs Mexico Initiatives

The inaugural meeting of binational scholars to pave the way for the consortium took place in Tucson, Arizona, April 5-7, 2018, on the UA campus. It brought together 27 faculty from the UA College of sbs and 10 delegates from the UNAM Humanities Coordinating Department. They identified numerous research areas that they wanted to collaborate on, including border deaths, immigration enforcement, policies that impact refugees, environmental challenges, economic integration of returned families, media representations of migrants, public health issues re-

lated to Mexican and Central American populations, violations of indigenous rights in both the U.S. and Mexico, human rights violations against women, elite migration networks, and the cultural impacts of immigration policies.

Since the beginning, the CISAN has participated enthusiastically in the research cluster focused on human security. Firmly supported by CISAN Director Dr. Graciela Martínez Zalce and Academic Secretary Dr. Juan Carlos Barrón, Dr. Roberto Zepeda has led many projects and conducted research stays in Tucson, positioning the CISAN as the pillar of the human security team. By summer 2018, they had established the Binational Emerging Actors in Human Security Permanent Seminar jointly with SBS Mexico Initiatives.¹ Through this permanent think tank, the CISAN has hosted visiting UA scholars covering topics connected with the field.

In February 2019, the consortium launched the first set of funding opportunities to support mobility. The Faculty Research Travel Grants supported academic visits from Mexico City to Tucson and from Tucson to Mexico City. Since then, three faculty research exchanges have taken place, two led by CISAN professors.

In March and June 2019, representatives of three Mexican institutions (the CISAN-UNAM, the College of San Luis, and the Autonomous University of Sinaloa) and two U.S. universities (Bradley University and Fort Hays University) participated in the first and second Shared Cultural Heritage Binational Research Symposiums, which included research dimensions connected to human security. The first took place in Tucson and the second in the city of San Luis Potosí. Among other activities in Tucson, they met with Professor Noam Chomsky and Professor Marvin Waterstone to discuss further collaboration.

Slowly the CISAN's permanent seminar has turned into a platform to connect researchers in all three areas of the consortium, not only human security. For example, in April 2019, UA-SBS Professor Kathleen Schwartzman from the Sociology Department shared her research on binational commerce at the "Integration or Disintegration in North America?" International Colloquium. In June 2019, UA-SBS Professor Javier Osorio from the UA School of Government and Public Policy and Coordinator of the Consortium Cluster on Human Security visited the UNAM Institute for Legal Research and the CISAN and delivered the lecture "Organized Crime Violence and Big Data" at

the Humanities Tower at the UNAM's main campus. In sum, up to 15 faculty from both universities have completed academic visits between fall 2018 and fall 2019.

The second plenary meeting of consortium members took place in Mexico City September 12-13, 2019. The Binational Research Workshop UA-UNAM: Migration, Human Rights, and Human Security was very successful because six faculty from UA-SBS met 18 UNAM faculty directors from the Humanities Coordinating Department to develop joint proposals. In two days, they formed seven binational teams, developed eight proposals, and submitted three proposals for grants to institutions like the Haury Foundation, CAZMEX, and UNAM-PAPITT. Up to now, it is impossible to think about the UA-UNAM consortium and not think of the CISAN as a key partner.

The Arizona-Sonora Border: A Fascinating Invitation to Continue Binational Research

On January 25, 2017, the new Trump administration announced the construction of a border wall between Mexico and the U.S. Just a few days later, Tohono Oodham Chairman Edward D. Manuel declared that his community will not tolerate the construction of a wall dividing their ancestral land, since they consider the international border an artificial line that divides their indigenous homelands.² This is only one dimension of the border's complex panorama that can be explored through binational research. One can ask how borders –of any kind, at any time— create tensions that reflect cultural, ideological, linguistic, artistic expressions of division or cooperation among human beings. Social, cultural, historical, and economic dimensions of the border are extremely elusive, unattainable, even ungraspable when examined through rigid or boxed-in methods. In just a few years, the partnership between CISAN and the UA College of Social and Behavioral Sciences has demonstrated the importance of developing an international/interdisciplinary working

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group of scholars from different fields to address common problems, actors, or processes in different cases, spaces, and timeframes.

Resulting from complex, ongoing historical processes, boundaries manifest in many aspects of human life, fueling tensions but also facilitating cross-cultural engagement. Approaching such a ubiquitous phenomenon as boundaries implies examining how social interactions along borders promote the formation of specific identities and foster permanent struggle over space, knowledge, and the very practice of “community.” Undoubtedly, the collaboration between the UA and UNAM in the social sciences—to which the CISAN has been instrumental—is an open invitation to continue doing binational research as a way to shed light on the complex relationship be-

tween the United States and Mexico, and on the permanent negotiation and construction of what we call North America.

Congratulations to the CISAN on its thirtieth anniversary and thank you for advancing our mutual knowledge about our complex binational agenda. **MM**

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Notes

- 1 See <http://www.cisan.unam.mx/seminarioBinacional/index.htm>.
- 2 Stephanie Innes, “Tohono O’odham Leaders Confident Trump’s Wall Won’t Rise on Their Border,” *Arizona Daily Star*, accessed March 1, 2017, http://tucson.com/news/local/border/tohono-o-odham-leaders-confident-trump-s-wall-won-t/article_6403a694-d3f4-5bcf-9120-fba3a0f53bdc.html.

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