

UNAM: A Place of Learning, Knowledge, and Culture

Rector José Narro Robles*



Guillermo Perea/Cuartoscuro

My first words must be our thanks to the Congress for this recognition of the nation's university. Through me, the university community expresses our gratitude to all the Chamber of Deputies and Senate caucuses, to the presidents of the leadership councils, to the political coordination committees, to all our legislators, both men and women. For us, this ceremony is of inestimable value.

The University of Mexico is part of our country's history. It is an institution that has changed along with our nation. That was its history during the vice-royalty, amidst the tumultuous nineteenth century, and that is its history in the centennial we are celebrating now.

The project crafted by Justo Sierra created a fundamental institution for Mexico's modernization, so the Mexico from before the Revolution could transit to the Mexico of today. For that reason, I believe we can say in all fairness that the Mexican nation would not be the same today without its university, just as we can say that the university would not be the same if it had not been so closely tied to the society it is a part of, to its needs and aspirations. The university's link to the nation is the best demonstration of just how right Justo Sierra was when he thought that Mexico needed a liberating institution, capable of mentally emancipating it, an institution that would give sustenance to its modernization and material progress.

* Speech of the Rector of the UNAM before the Solemn Joint Session of Congress to celebrate the national university centennial, September 22, 2010.

Photo on the previous page by Barry Domínguez/UNAM Office for Cultural Outreach Communications Department.

National Autonomous University of Mexico

Chronology

BACKGROUND

- **September 21, 1551**
The decree creating the Royal Papal University of Mexico is issued.
- **January 25, 1553**
The Royal Papal University of Mexico, modeled after European universities in the scholastic tradition, particularly that of the University of Salamanca, opens its doors.
- **1810-1820**
Period of Independence. The institution's name changes to the University of Mexico.
- **1867**
Dr. Gabino Barreda establishes the National Preparatory School, with a study plan inspired in the thought of Auguste Comte.
- **1881**



ISSUE/AFUNAM/
Justo Sierra Collection

Justo Sierra introduces a bill to the Chamber of Deputies that will be the precedent for Mexico's modern university. It includes proposals to create the Schools of Fine

Justo Sierra founded a university for the whole country, an institution that has not just been a simple purveyor of knowledge, but a true educator. As he wanted, in the last 100 years, the National University has supported the country's development. The National University has contributed a great deal in service provision, in the economy, in the expansion of infrastructure, in science, in technological development, in culture, in politics. For that reason, with pride and satisfaction we can say to our founder Justo Sierra, "Mission accomplished!"

The most visible contribution of the National Autonomous University of Mexico to the country's development is the education of millions of young people who have studied and graduated from its classrooms, both its high schools and bachelor's and graduate studies programs. The UNAM has opened the doors of knowledge to young people from all levels of society, many of whom have been the first in their families to venture into higher education.

The UNAM is one of the country's most important spaces for the cultivation of science and the humanities. It is a place not only for developing Mexican thought but Ibero-Ameri-

The new course of development must make its axis the fight against inequality, poverty, exclusion, ignorance, and disease. We must recognize that no project is worthwhile if it does not serve to improve the population's living conditions.



Guillermo Pérez/Cuartoscuro

The project crafted by Justo Sierra created a fundamental institution for Mexico's modernization, so the Mexico from before the Revolution could transition to the Mexico of today.

can thought. It has produced new knowledge to benefit society over the entire 100 years of its existence as the National University; it has contributed to the development of institutions of higher learning in Mexico and abroad. In addition to being a place of learning, the UNAM is a place of culture, creativity, and of the dissemination of all three. In its different spaces, the university fulfills its function of extending the benefits of Mexican, Ibero-American, and universal culture.

At the same time that it has lived up to its essential responsibilities, the UNAM has shouldered many other tasks. It is the custodian of Mexico's historic memory in its National Library and National Publications Library; it is the repository of many national collections; and it provides invaluable services to the entire country. Examples of this are the Seismological and Oceanographic Services and the National Observatory. We can also add its role in forging the country's regimen of freedoms; in developing the democratic life of Mexico; in educating leaders for all sectors of society and in all the fields of knowledge and human endeavor; and in organizing and developing several of our institutions.

We recognize our shortcomings, and we make our best efforts at overcoming them. We know that there is room for improvement, and we are committed to that. We are constantly encouraged by the possibility of advancing toward the fulfillment of our aims.

Because of our commitment to the country's affairs, we members of the university community are concerned with the conditions affecting Mexico. Without a doubt, today we are better off than we were a century ago, but we have still not gotten where we want to go. True progress cannot be created amidst inequality and exclusion, amidst ignorance and preventable deaths. Neither can society prosper or live in peace with the levels of insecurity now plaguing us.

It is time to recognize that many of our problems, both the historic ones and those derived from the process of modernization itself, have no solution if we continue along the same road, if profound reforms are not made, if alternate policies are not put into practice, if a new national project is not imagined and sketched out.

We require updating many of our institutions to move ahead in democracy, to strengthen federalism and the separation of powers, to stimulate economic development, to consolidate the true rule of law establishing its primacy, but also to reinforce social policy. Mexico's new times demand a renovated design for its future, and, as a result, a comprehensive reform.



Elsie Montiel

The University Coat of Arms and Motto¹



Elsie Montiel

José Vasconcelos (1882-1959), who became rector of the university in 1920, was the creator of the university coat of arms and motto. They both summarize his belief in the emergence of what he called a “cosmic race” that, through culture, would free not only Mexicans but all the peoples of Latin America from oppression. “To avoid having ever to disown our homeland, it is fitting that we live up to the highest interest of the race, even when that is not in the high interest of humanity. The fifth race, the race that will abolish all races and infelicitous racist obdurances, will raise high the standard of the ultimate tone of Man and his superior destiny.”² This fifth race would

come about from Latin America’s mixing of the races. That is why the UNAM coat of arms displays the Mexican eagle and the Andean condor, atop a volcano and a nopal cactus, protecting Latin America from Mexico’s northern border to Cape Horn. In addition, the spirit transcends the race and everything material. To Vasconcelos, as Mexican philosopher Abelardo Villegas explains, the spirit is the reorganizer of substance; that is, the spiritualization of the material world allows human beings to create and perceive beauty. For that reason, the motto “The spirit shall speak for my race” expresses the hope that the “cosmic race” will be the home to the spirit that will generate universal knowledge and greatness.

Isabel Morales
Staff Writer

¹ Information taken from Álvaro Matute and Martha Donís, comps., *José Vasconcelos: de su vida y su obra. Textos selectos de las jornadas vasconcelianas de 1982* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1984), Textos de Humanidades Collection no. 39 and http://www.100.unam.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=101.

² José Vasconcelos, “La raza cósmica. Misión de la raza iberoamericana,” *Obras completas* vol. II (Mexico City: Libreros Mexicanos, 1958), pp. 903-942, http://www.iphi.org.br/sites/filosofia_brasil/Jos%C3%A9_Vasconcelos_La_raza_c%C3%B3smica.pdf.

We need to make the great leap from unequal Mexico to a Mexico with equity, solidarity, and social justice, where opulence and misery are curbed, as José María Morelos y Pavón outlined 200 years ago. Social rights for all Mexicans today are a basic condition for advancing toward the country we all want, but it is not enough for those rights to be enunciated in the text of the Constitution. We must move ahead and make it possible to demand them.

In the twenty-first century, Mexico’s agenda must recognize this as its starting point. The new course of development must make its axis the fight against inequality, poverty, exclusion, ignorance, and disease. We must recognize that no project is worthwhile if it does not serve to improve the population’s living conditions. It is true that in budget terms, we must act responsibly, but not by making policies whose central thrust is to preserve financial or fiscal equilibriums more important than resolving social inequalities or our people’s human development.

We need focuses that look at the country in the long term. We must regain our self-confidence and change to anticipate

Arts, Commerce and Political Science, Jurisprudence, Engineering, and Medicine; the Normal School; the School of Higher Studies; the National Preparatory School; and the Women’s Middle School.



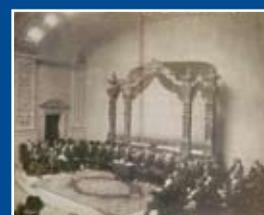
ISSUE/ARUNAM/
Colección Universidad

■ 1907

The Ministry of Public Instruction, headed by Justo Sierra, sends pedagogue Ezequiel A. Chávez to Europe and the United States “to analyze the functioning of several universities.” This fieldwork was the basis for the final proposal for the National University of Mexico.

BIRTH OF THE UNAM

■ September 22, 1910



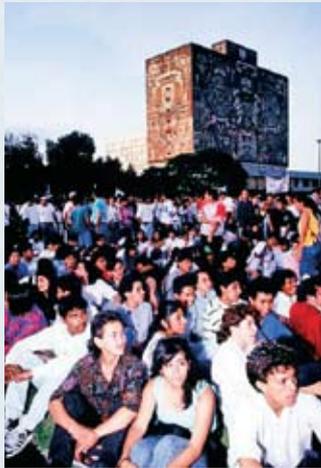
ISSUE/ARUNAM/
Colección Universidad

The National University of Mexico is inaugurated. The Universities of Salamanca, Paris, and Berkeley act as sponsors of the new institution.

■ 1910

Justo Sierra proposes the university’s first motto, “In the love of science and of the homeland is the health of the people.”

The UNAM's Place in the World



Since 2004, World University Rankings has put the UNAM among the world's top 200 universities. Published in *The Times* of London's *Higher Education* supplement, in 2008, the rankings put the UNAM in 150th place; in 2005 it was among the top 100 because it was awarded 20th place in the field of arts and the humanities, and 93rd in sciences. In July 2010, the Higher Council of Scientific Research of Spain's Cybermetrics Laboratory published its ranking of universities of the world on internet, in which the UNAM occupies 70th place (<http://www.webometrics.info>).

new challenges. It would be very difficult to advance along this road if we did not put the priority that is required on education, on science, and on technological development. Today's information society is transforming industrial societies into societies based on knowledge and innovation. This implies substantial investment in both these fields.

Progress in this area implies enormous challenges for nations like ours. How can we belong to the information society and economy in our current condition? Rhetoric aside, if our reality does not change radically, we will remain stranded in the old century. We will not be on the right path as long as we earmark 0.7 percent of GNP to higher education and 0.4 percent to research. It will not be possible as long as only three out of every ten Mexican young people study in institutions of higher learning. It will not be viable as long as the number of patents Mexicans register does not increase tenfold.

In these times when the value of politics is in decline, we must vindicate its original meaning: the participation of the citizenry in matters of interest to all, not as an end in itself, but as a means for realizing aims useful to society. We must return to the intrinsic values of politics: dialogue, negotiation, respect for the opinion of others, and the determination to reach agreements.

The UNAM has produced new knowledge to benefit society over the entire 100 years of its existence as the National University; it has contributed to the development of institutions of higher learning in Mexico and abroad.

The university is an academic institution. To fulfill its aims, it must preserve freedom of thought, research, expression, and criticism. This freedom implies that the university must not be subordinate to or fall into line with the interests emanating from the exercise of politics. In the university, all ideologies, all currents of thought, have their place, whether as an object of study, as a way of analyzing reality, or as a method for making sure that pluralism is expressed with absolute freedom. However, what does not have a place is the politics whose aim is obtaining power. It does not have a place because taking a side would put an end to the richness of its pluralism.

I am among those who have no doubt that the different national agendas run through our university. However, for this to be real, those of us who coordinate the community's labors must put to one side personal agendas at the same time that a healthy, responsible proximity is maintained with all the country's political forces, all its sectors, with society as a whole. The event that brings us together today is one example of this.

I have not heard a single legislator in Congress oppose education, science, and culture. On the contrary, in the last decade, the Chamber of Deputies increased support for higher education by Mex\$50 billion. That decision created neither an imbalance in public finances nor a collapse of our economy.

In contrast, with these increases and those proposed by the federal executive, in ten years high school and higher education enrollment has increased by more than one million students, and the universities were strengthened.

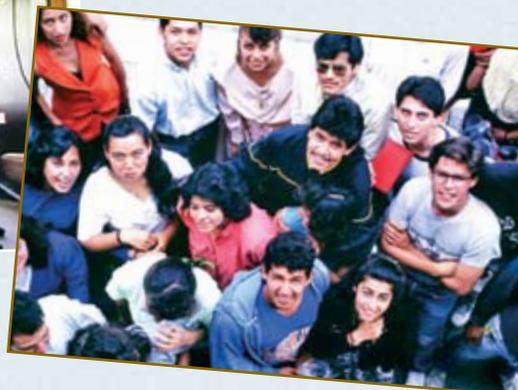
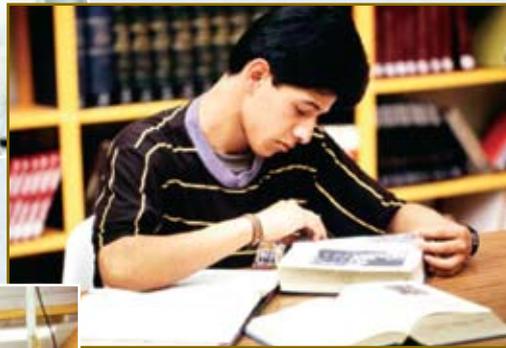
We citizens have frequently seen our country's political forces come to agreements. We are very pleased by this. It is clear to us that this is difficult in electoral times, but we are even clearer that not all times are electoral times. It has also been possible to establish political pacts that initially seemed unlikely.

Today, before this sovereign body, I would respectfully like to ask the political forces represented in Congress to establish a grand agreement for the rescue of society that

Mexico demands, that is required for paying the debt owed down through history, that we need to solve the problems that concerned Morelos, Benito Juárez, or Emiliano Zapata, the very same ones that plague many of us today.

Specifically, I would invite you to initially mark that commitment by establishing an on-going state policy —not the policy of a single administration— to double higher education coverage and enforce the General Law of Education, which for the last five years has stipulated that one percent of GDP should be earmarked for “scientific research and technological development.” Equally, doubling the resources destined to art and culture and the approval of multi-annual budgets in this area should be considered.

We must regain our self-confidence and change to anticipate new challenges. It would be very difficult to advance along this road if we did not put the priority that is required on education, on science, and on technological development.



▪ **1915**

José Vasconcelos takes office as the Minister of Instruction. Legislation is passed and signed by Venustiano Carranza declaring the university autonomous.

▪ **1920**



José Vasconcelos becomes rector of the university. “At this time, I am not here to work for the university, but to ask the university to work for the people,” he said in his inaugural speech. From his post in the university, he proposed education be federalized as a step toward the creation of a Ministry of Public Education. As rector, he reincorporated the National Preparatory School into the university, launched a national literacy campaign, incorporated women into public education, and exempted poor students from paying tuition.

▪ **1921**



The law establishing the institution’s coat of arms and motto, “The spirit shall speak for my race,” went into effect. On the coat of arms, the motto, still current today, together with the image of an eagle and a condor, surround the map of Latin America.

We must return to basic principles. What is important is not what people have on the stock market. What is transcendent and must be appreciated are the values citizens carry with them.

For the current budget year, equally respectfully, I would ask the Honorable Chamber of Deputies to increase the resources destined to public federal and state universities, to science, and to culture, in addition to maintaining those proposed by the federal executive for the UNAM, which we all respect. Doing this will strengthen the institutions and will be an investment in the present and the future of our country: its youth.

Not a single peso of what is required for higher education, science, and culture must be denied those institutions, but neither should a penny of the budget be channeled away from its purpose. Therefore, transparency in the exercise of public monies and accountability are irreplaceable and any siphoning off must be vigorously punished.

Today, when the world's system of secular values is flagging, today when money and material goods have become the emblem of success, we must return to basic principles. We must not forget! What is important is not what people have on the stock market. What is transcendent and must be appreciated are the values citizens carry with them.

I am sure that a better Mexico is on the horizon, more just, free, and democratic. A Mexico with greater opportunities for its youth and children; with better jobs and income for our working population; with greater dignity for our senior citizens; with better living conditions for all. A different Mexico, but with its National University accompanying it on its path and mission.

There are more, many more of us who believe in our homeland, who know that we can do it, who maintain that a change of paradigm is possible, without upsets or shakeups, but with a clear push toward the future. The challenge is not only to make the economy grow, but also and particularly, to improve the dignity of those who have nothing, to build true human development for all. For that, we must act more justly, as well as think big and for the long term.

In the name of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, I reiterate my most sincere gratitude to the Congress for this solemn session. Those of us in the university community, academics, students, and employees, those of

today and those who came before us, express our profound recognition of all those who, down through the years, have believed in and supported Mexico's university.

We also thank all the branches of government, the legislature, the judiciary, the municipal and state governments, the government of Mexico City and the federal government, who have supported our institution in very different ways. I also want to express our recognition of those individuals and social, business, philanthropic, and the most diverse kinds of organizations, as well as sister academic institutions in our country and around the globe, for their support and encouragement of the UNAM.

Lastly, I cannot omit a very special mention of Mexican society. It is to that society that we owe our existence and for it that we continue our endeavors. To society as a whole, our gratitude.

I have said that in these times, it is appropriate to shout "Long live Mexico and the UNAM!" It is also the time to reiterate the university's motto: "The spirit shall speak for my race." **MM**

