

Fifty years of UNAM in the U.S.

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As unsuspecting tourists walk through HemisFair Park in downtown San Antonio, they are pleasantly surprised by a number of pre-Hispanic replicas. Curiosity beckons them to find out more, and they enter Plaza México, located in the middle of the park, behind the Convention Center. There they find a two-story building at the end of the Plaza, with an imposing sign reading “Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.” They squint, not quite sure of what they read. The most curious, not satisfied with what they see, decide to venture into this building. What’s this about a Mexican university here in San Antonio?

This is a common reaction of visitors who come to this city not only from other parts of the United States but from Mexico as well. It must seem rather bizarre to many people to see a foreign university campus in the United States. International exchange programs are common between universities and certain universities sometimes open offices in a country where they have specific interests. But no other foreign university actually has a campus in this country.

Well, we might as well guess the next questions from curious tourists. How, why and when? Of course they suspect that the campus has only been here for a few years. Try telling them that *UNAM* is celebrating its Golden Anniversary in San Antonio—a 50-year presence in the United States. That leaves our visitors speechless!

Keeping a proud heritage alive

But how and why? Our visitors persist, wanting to understand a little more. Fifty years ago, *UNAM* came to San Antonio in the form of annual courses that took place during the winter months. Outstanding scholars from Mexico would come to instruct eager students in the language and culture of Mexico. Although negotiations for

the courses began in 1943, it was not until the following year, on September 16, Mexican Independence Day, that classes actually began. It should be noted that this was during the Second World War, a time when cross-border exchanges were not usually welcomed.

Also unusual are the reasons behind this project. *UNAM*'s presence here was based not on official negotiations between two governments, but rather on a request by a group of Mexican emigrés residing in San Antonio. These were people who felt a deep need to keep their cultural heritage alive. This emigrant community had grown in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. The first *UNAM* courses found their audience among this proud and nostalgic community, residing on the West Side of San Antonio, who wanted their American children not to forget about Mexico.

The history of *UNAM* in San Antonio involves many individuals. To achieve their dreams, this group worked closely with the Mexican Consulate and organizations such as the Mexican Chamber of Commerce and even the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce. But it was the perseverance and faith of the emigrants themselves that kept the courses alive, even through severe financial troubles at the end of the forties.

Private donations made the continuation of courses possible until 1952, when an organization was created with the sole purpose of facilitating and promoting these classes in San Antonio. Over the following twenty years, the Patronato de los Cursos de Extensión Universitaria, its members drawn from different parts of the community, worked closely with *UNAM*'s “Escuela de Verano” (Summer School) in Mexico City—later renamed the School for Foreign Students—to continue the tradition of academic excellence initiated in 1944.

The audience also changed over this period, as the non-Spanish-speaking Anglo community developed a tremendous interest in learning about Mexico. Although the courses continued to serve the needs of San Antonio's Mexican community, they became increasingly universal, serving to promote Mexican language and culture among all interested persons. Hundreds of students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds participated in these yearly events; each came away not only with what they had learned but also with unique memories of the special people they had met and the experiences they had lived. There is no doubt that the perception many San Antonians held of Mexico, its people, history and culture changed during those years as a result of these courses.

Eight homes in 28 years

During the first twenty-eight years the courses were held at different locations: the San Antonio Technical and Vocational School (now known as Fox Tech), Brackenridge High School, Mark Twain Middle School,

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San Antonio College, Trinity Baptist Church, McNay Museum and Incarnate Word College. However, Trinity University hosted these courses continuously from 1955 to 1971. On the Mexican side, the courses continued to be organized and structured by the different directors of *UNAM*'s School for Foreign Students, who were also considered directors of the courses in San Antonio.

In 1970-71, the Patronato and *UNAM* played a major role in bringing an extensive and important exhibition by contemporary Mexican artists to San Antonio. The exhibit was so successful that it played an influential role in decisions leading to the establishment of a permanent Mexican cultural presence in San Antonio. Additionally, from 1970 onwards, under the Patronato's continued sponsorship, a search was undertaken for a permanent home for these courses. Thereafter, San Antonio's city government began to realize the importance of *UNAM*'s presence in the cultural life of the city. Four years after San Antonio hosted a World's Fair in 1968, the city provided one of the fair's pavilions as a permanent home for the *UNAM* courses.

These facilities were inaugurated by then Mexican President Luis Echeverría, under the auspices of the Mexican Cultural Institute, which was also given a permanent home adjacent to the new *UNAM* campus. The Mexican Cultural Institute and *UNAM* operated jointly for one year before embarking on separate courses. Thereafter, 1972 marked the beginning of a new chapter in the involvement and commitment of *UNAM* in San Antonio.

A new campus, a new name and a new support group

The mission of the campus, now known as the Permanent Extension School of *UNAM*, continued to be the promotion of the Spanish language and Mexican culture. It also continued to be an affiliate of the School for Foreign Students, although it had now established an administrative infrastructure of its own.

From 1972 to 1986, the school continually expanded and increased the numbers of students enrolled. As a Mexican academic institution on foreign soil, the various administrations that directed the campus were always faced with exciting challenges. Every new director introduced new ideas and concepts aimed at improving the services offered, which in turn strengthened *UNAM*'s image within the San Antonio community.

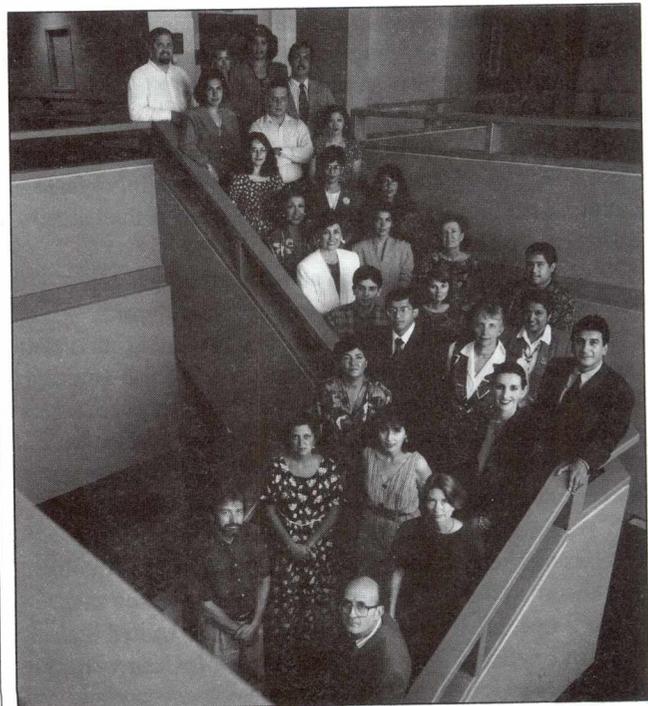
Aside from the year-round language and culture courses offered, special events were organized and a number of courses related to non-cultural aspects of Mexico were also periodically organized. Beginning in 1983, academic activity grew to encompass the teaching of English as a second language in response to overwhelming demand from Mexicans living in the city.

As a result of this continuous growth, a major effort to find new facilities was undertaken by a new support group,

Amigos de Plaza México, formed in 1983 with the objective of supporting the Mexican institutions located in the plaza. The original support group that had worked with *UNAM* prior to 1972 had become an independent organization, eventually renamed the Patronato de la Cultura Hispanoamericana; while it was supportive of the *UNAM* school during the early seventies, it took on a new mission no longer linked to the *UNAM* courses, but rather to the promotion of Hispanic-American culture as a whole. Working with the city government and Amigos de Plaza México, a new building was constructed and inaugurated in 1986.

This heralded another phase in the development of the Mexican university. With the newly created space, the school has continued to grow and prosper, taking on an ever-broadening role in educating public and private sectors of the American population on Mexico and its language. Many steps were taken to encourage research in diverse areas related to bilateral relations between Mexico and the U.S. Since 1989, the San Antonio campus has received considerable support and encouragement from the administration of José Sarukhán, the current Rector of the University. This has brought about an increase in services, activities, academic performance, efficiency and modernization.

In 1991, *UNAM* was a major participant in the events that complemented the "Splendors of Mexico" exhibition that toured major cities in the United States, including San Antonio. A monumental exhibition from Mexico City's



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Chapultepec Castle was built at the school and inaugurated by the president of Mexico, Carlos Salinas. This was a historic occasion, marking the first visit of a Mexican president to the new location.

With NAFTA, another new mission

In the same year, the school's library was reinaugurated and renamed the Rómulo Munguía Library. It was a fitting honor for one of the members of the original group that founded the *UNAM* campus, who had worked tirelessly on this endeavor for almost thirty years.

A special collections room, containing the newly-formed Henry Cisneros Special Collection, was added to the library earlier this year. Grandson of Rómulo Munguía, former mayor of San Antonio and now Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Cisneros donated all his documents and papers pertaining to his academic background and career in public service.

A new bibliographical reference section on NAFTA-related topics is currently being developed to serve the business and financial community. All this adds a new and unique dimension to the services the library offers.

An unprecedented step was taken in 1992-93 when a seminar and module were initiated on various aspects of trade with Mexico. This seminar, hosted by distinguished scholars on loan from *UNAM* in Mexico City, targeted business persons, scientists, politicians and scholars who needed specific information on Mexico in light of the pending Free Trade Agreement.

On the cultural side, and under the guidelines set forth by *UNAM*'s Cultural Affairs System in Mexico, the school has increased its role as an avid promoter of Mexican art, organizing countless events, including many symposia and conferences. Indeed, the Cultural Affairs System considers the San Antonio Campus as a treasured venue for diverse cultural activities that have not been offered in the United States previously.

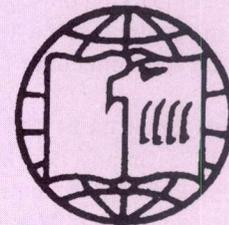
All this has taken place in addition to the school's teaching role, which has also grown extensively with enrollments increasing every year. The first publication ever produced by the San Antonio campus—a Spanish-language learning text—was presented this year. Further publications are currently in process. Demands for certain courses have been such that the need for additional classroom space has become an urgent priority for the school's administration.

A new area of growth of the San Antonio *UNAM* campus has been in Mexico itself. *UNAM* in San Antonio has become widely identified throughout Mexico as a place for people interested in coming to the United States to learn English. Enrollment from these Mexican visitors has grown so much that it has had a positive economic impact on the city itself. Additionally, different institutions and schools within *UNAM* have begun to take increasing

advantage of the school as a "liaison" with academic institutions in Texas.

With all this growth and transformation, what can be said of the original goal of reaching out to the Mexican-American population in San Antonio? There is no doubt that beneath all the changes, this has continued to be a key mission carried out by *UNAM* in the community. In addition to all its cultural and academic services, the school has recently embarked on a community outreach program aimed predominantly at Hispanic youth in San Antonio, with the objective of fostering awareness of, and pride in, the Hispanic cultural heritage.

Today, new doors are continually being opened. With the establishment of numerous Mexican institutions and businesses in San Antonio, *UNAM* can pride itself on setting precedents, exemplifying the spirit of cooperation and mutual respect that can be achieved between two countries. The relationship between the university and the city of San Antonio, as well as the community as a whole, has been the most basic and significant element in the continued success of the only branch of a foreign university in the United States of America. Fifty years of this presence truly constitutes a major achievement, worthy of celebration on both sides of the border. ✕



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