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The political nature of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

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ronment. The degree of experience is impressive, however, especially among students, and colleges and universities should help incoming students build upon these experiences.

There was strong support among the respondents for all forms of international education at the college and university level. The public and students recognize the importance of international knowledge and skills. They see training in these areas as essential to success in the job market and in one's daily life. Consequently, there is strong support for U.S. colleges and universities to provide enhanced international knowledge, skills, and opportunities to students. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of respondents clearly felt international education was an important consideration in choosing a college or university. The findings from both studies indicate that institutions need to think comprehensively and creatively about their international education goals and strategies.

Unfortunately, universities and colleges have not been

able to respond adequately to the strong support from the public or students. Forty-eight percent of the students said they wanted to study abroad, and yet we know that it is likely that only 3 percent actually will by the time they graduate. Similarly, there is strong support for international knowledge and skills to be taught on campus, or even required, but knowledge about international topics is still disappointingly low overall; the average American could answer only half the questions. Institutions need to do better in responding to public and student interests. And they can. Education positively impacts international knowledge and skills. In addition, international experience, such as traveling abroad, increases international knowledge. Colleges and universities can help to increase the level of knowledge and skills needed in a more global environment by internationalizing more courses, increasing the depth and breadth of their international offerings, and by expanding access to international experiences—both on and off campus.

The Political Nature of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

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The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) is Mexico's flagship higher education institution. Its centrality is the product of a strong historical tradition, the prestige of its academic faculty, the quality of teaching and research, and its large share of the country's graduate and undergraduate student enrollments. Throughout history, UNAM's centrality has also been the product of the significant political presence of this institution in the context of a strong authoritarian regime.

Historically, the overt political nature of the Universidad Nacional has long been evident in Mexico. In spite of this, university administrators, government members, and a number of higher education specialists have rejected the politicization of UNAM as a set of undesirable episodes that challenge the very nature of higher education institutions. With this rejection has come a failure to fully understand the dynamics of higher education in general, and the history of the UNAM in particular.

Official denials of everyday political processes and condemnations of openly expressed political conflicts occurring at UNAM, as well as the inability to comprehend the political nature of this institution, are grounded in two distinct traditions. Conceptually, most studies of higher edu-

cation share a disinclination toward and dismissal of political analyses of higher education institutions; this perspective has generally characterized the field of higher education worldwide.

Throughout history, UNAM's centrality has also been the product of the significant political presence of this institution in the context of a strong authoritarian regime.

In Mexico, the political issue was already addressed in the UNAM governance system established by Congress in the Organic Law of 1945. This governance system is grounded in an ideological construct that dominated the debate and decision-making processes that gave birth to this law in the mid-1940s: the separation between technical and political issues. It was argued that all members of the university had a commonality of purpose in the search for truth. Consequently, there was no place in the university for politics and the development of contested interests or views about the institution. It was assumed that gover-

nance was essentially a technical process. Issues that could become political, such as the appointment of university rectors or deans, should be handed to a select body of notable academics: the governing board. During the last 25 years, the alleged separation between politics and academe has been the main legitimization device for the political system at UNAM. Political competition for governing board membership and the positions of rector and dean has been restricted to members of distinct groups within a very closed and select university elite. In spite of the existence of limited faculty and student representation in academic bodies, these sectors have been excluded from decision-making processes within the university.

The existence of a relatively free and autonomous university environment within an authoritarian political regime explains to a large extent the history of confrontations between student movements and the government over democratization, educational policies, and other national political issues. Most notable among these were the student movements mobilized around university autonomy, in 1929, and democratic rights and civil liberties, in 1968 and 1971.

In addition to these “external” confrontations, the university has been involved in other types of political conflicts that we can label “internal”—in spite of the difficulties of making this distinction and the constant government intervention in university affairs. Given the absence of real participation by large segments of the academic and student body, the appointment of deans and rectors as well as decisions over evaluation procedures and tuition policies or faculty and student affairs have generated considerable open political confrontation within the university.

Rectors were forced to resign in conflicts over tuition and student evaluations.

Rectors were forced to resign in conflicts over tuition and student evaluations in 1945, 1946, and 1966. After the 1968 student massacre by the Mexican government, the 1970s and early 1980s were plagued with faculty and staff unionization struggles and strikes. Since 1986 the university has been involved in conflicts between students and the administration over tuition increases and restructuring policies. In the last 15 years, decisions by the Consejo Universitario, the university’s most important academic body, have lacked legitimacy and support among students and faculty and engendered four major student movements in 1987 and 1991, and in 1995 and 1999.

The explicit causes of these confrontations were attempts to increase tuition and restrict student access to the university. Underlying these conflicts, however, is the critical situation of the governance system at UNAM and its inability to make legitimate decisions and generate broad consensus concerning much-needed university reforms.

Established university governance structures mirror the authoritarian features of Mexico’s authoritarian political regime.

Established university governance structures mirror the authoritarian features of Mexico’s authoritarian political regime. Its main features are rigorous centralization, subordination of academic bodies to executive authorities, strict limits on legitimate political competition for alternative visions and projects for the university, and exclusion of members of the academic community from decision-making processes. Historically, a lack of legitimacy internally and heavy reliance on the administration in dealing with internal conflicts have weakened university autonomy.

This is the context in which UNAM’s 10-month-long student strike over tuition took place during 1999 and 2000. After such a painful and lengthy confrontation, it should be evident that the decision-making process within the Universidad Nacional is not a technical matter. Legitimate decision making implies a complex dynamic of university politics in which a broad range of interests and academic perspectives should be openly expressed and taken into consideration.

The most recent conflict brought the profound legitimacy crisis of the governance structure at UNAM out into the open. The consequences of this crisis include an extreme polarization within the university. This difficult state of affairs poses at least one unavoidable challenge: to reform governance at the National University. In the reorganization of the university, it is necessary to dismantle various myths about the *apolitical* nature of higher education and to reject the distinction made between technical and political issues in academe. Participation and legitimacy have to be based on the recognition of the diversity of views and perspectives about the present and future of the university. This amounts to a recognition of the political nature of higher education in general and of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, in particular.