



The limits of university autonomy: Power and politics at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*

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Abstract. The nature and extent of institutional autonomy at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) has been a matter of contention between academics, policy makers and university members for many years. Opinions about governmental influence over the university in Mexico range from absolute autonomy to absolute control. Few of them, however, are founded on research on university-government relations. Most studies of university autonomy in Mexico are based on classical definitions and pluralist political perspectives that limit a thorough understanding of this relation between the University and the government in the context of an authoritarian State. This article provides an alternative perspective on the nature and limits of autonomy at UNAM based on conflict theories, resource dependency and theories of power.

Keywords: higher education, governance, autonomy, power, politics, resource dependence, culture, Mexico, authoritarianism, Latin America

Introduction

It has often been argued that change – or the lack of it – at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM), flagship of Mexico's public higher education system, is essentially determined by internal organizational, academic, or political processes. The argument is based on the assumption that UNAM has considerable latitude from the Mexican government in determining its own policies and transformation projects.

The extent to which this autonomy has really existed in the presence of a highly centralized and authoritarian political regime is a matter of contention. Opinions about governmental influence over the university in Mexico range from absolute autonomy to absolute control. Almost everybody holds a view about the real limits of university autonomy. Many of these are based on personal experiences within the university. However, few of them are grounded in any type of research.

Contemporary changes in the Mexican political system¹ and current transformations within the University² increase the need for a better understanding of university-government relationships. The new political context at the

broader level, the current crisis of university governance structures and norms (Ordorika 2002a), and changes in the political spectrum within the University will have a strong impact on the characteristics and limits of autonomy. They will most probably be the cause of intense transformations in the organization of UNAM. A full understanding of changes to come depends on having a good grasp on political structures and relations within the University until this day. Most particularly, it requires a deep analysis of the complex relations between the UNAM and the State and a fair assessment of the nature and limits of autonomy at this university. The study of university autonomy at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* is the focus of this article.

This study about politics and power at UNAM is based on a variety of data sources. These include historical documents, media accounts, organizational charts, university statutes and laws, interviews with key political actors, and a set of political biographies compiled by the author.

I conducted 24 in-depth interviews with current and former University and government officials as well as student and union leaders. Interviewees constitute a set of key political actors from a broad range of the political spectrum at UNAM. Interviews contribute essentially to understand the workings of the Governing Board at UNAM. These interviews as well as organizational charts and a study of university administration appointments from 1945 to 1998 provided evidence on university political elites and bureaucracies. Evidence about the nature of university power-holders and its connections with government officials and political groups is compiled in a database of 184 political biographies of University officials since 1945.

This work is heavily rooted in a historical study of politics and conflict at UNAM (See Ordorika 2002b). It is this historical scrutiny that brings together different levels of analysis and data sources in order to provide a full understanding of the limits of university autonomy at Mexico's National University.

Autonomy: Resources, politics and power

Classical research on autonomy (Berdahl et al. 1971) addressed the relation between state governing and coordinating boards, and higher education institutions from an interest-articulation framework (Pusser 1999). In a normative attempt to establish an adequate relation between autonomy and state coordination, in order to preserve institutional autonomy from state intervention, Berdahl suggested a distinction between substantive and procedural autonomy. Substantive autonomy refers the "goals, policies, and programs that an institution has chosen to pursue" and procedural to the "techniques selected to achieve the chose goals" (Berdahl et al. 1971, p. 10). Continuing this tradition later studies (Millett and Harclerod 1984; Zusman 1986)

focused on conflict over the control and coordination of higher education institutions.

These perspectives are rooted on a pluralist view in which postsecondary institutions are distinct and separated from the State and this entity is a homogeneous representative of the common good (Rhoades 1993). Relations between the State and higher education are essentially analyzed in the realm of laws, rules, and regulations.

Beyond the study of instrumental relations between government boards and postsecondary institutions, new research (Gumport and Pusser 1995; Hardy 1996; Slaughter 1993; Slaughter and Silva 1985) has focused on the political economy of higher education and its impact on university autonomy. From a resource dependence perspective, Slaughter (1997) argues that resource providers “have the capability of exercising great power” (p. 68) over higher education institutions. According to Slaughter, governments have traditionally allowed considerable autonomy through unstipulated or block grant funding. Contemporary changes in the funding patterns of federal and state governments, as fundamental providers, increase higher education dependence and place additional constraints on institutional autonomy.

Classical views on university autonomy were limited in their ability to capture the relevance of resource dependency to assess the nature and limits of autonomy. In addition to this, pluralist political perspectives are not able to grasp the complex nature of power relations within and between State institutions. Higher education organizations are State institutions (Ordorika 2001; Rhoades 1993). The interaction between universities and governments is subject to contested power relations at the level of rules and regulations, political actors, agenda control and ideologies (Ordorika 2001).

Autonomy in an authoritarian system

Few studies have thoroughly researched the relation between the National University and the government. One of the notable exceptions is Daniel Levy’s work *University and Government in Mexico: Autonomy in an Authoritarian System*. In 1980, Daniel Levy published this extensive study on the relation between universities and government in Mexico.

Levy provided a working definition for autonomy as the location of authority “*somewhere* within the university,” (p. 4) or “as university control over [the] components [of institutional self-government]” (1980, p. 7). This characterization is compatible with Berdahl’s classical definition where autonomy is “the power of a university or college. . . to govern itself without outside controls” (Berdahl et al. 1971, p. 8).

Following a pluralist perspective, Levy assessed the extent of autonomy in three broad areas or components of institutional self-government: appointive,

academic, and financial (Levy 1980, p. 7). Appointive autonomy includes the hiring, promotion, and dismissal of professors; as well as the selection and dismissal of deans, rectors, and administrative personnel. Academic autonomy includes the definition of access and career choice policies, curriculum and course selection, establishment of degree requirements, and academic freedom. Financial autonomy includes the definition of funding levels and criteria, preparation and allocation of the university budget, and accountability.

Levy provided an operational frame for the study of *who decides*, on each of these policy realms. The foundation for this assessment is the characterization of the Mexican political system as an authoritarian regime and of the University as a conservative institution reluctant to adapt to government policies. The study focused essentially on who makes policy decisions in each of these realms.

After analyzing each of these policy areas, Levy concluded that there is substantial autonomy in the three dimensions. According to Levy, academic autonomy is almost absolute and there is practically no noticeable government interference in the definition of access policies, curriculum, and academic programs. He argued that the government's monopoly over university funds does not imply the exercise of control through the flow of resources. He established that autonomy in the hiring and promotion of faculty is essentially an internal matter. Levy recognized the problematic nature of procedures for the appointment of university authorities. He concluded however, that although limited and probably the subject of external intervention, these procedures are more university based than most of the United States and Latin American universities are. In summary Levy stated that "public university autonomy in Mexico, though certainly far from complete, is relatively strong – stronger than government control and considerably stronger than university autonomy in most other Latin American nations" (Levy 1980, p. 19).

Autonomy at UNAM: An alternative perspective

This work contests the first part of Levy's argument and shows the limitations of pluralist analyses for a full understanding of university autonomy in Mexico. I show that the degree of autonomy of UNAM has changed according to different historical circumstances. It also shows that effective autonomy is weaker than what Levy argued. This might seem a simple matter of appreciation about the degrees of autonomy. It is more than that.

This work shares Levy's definition of autonomy as the power to make decisions within the University. It also draws on his distinction of autonomy levels, in different realms of university policymaking. I have arranged these levels into: (a) political autonomy, including appointment of authorities and

conflict resolution; (b) academic and campus autonomy; including access, academic freedom, and free speech; and (c) financial autonomy, including tuition and salary policies among other issues.

The main differences in assessing the nature and limits of autonomy at the National University are the consequence of different theoretical perspectives and related sources of historical evidence. Levy's study is based on a classical instrumental and pluralist understanding of university-government relations with at least two important shortcomings. First, Levy establishes a complete distinction between the University and the government. Even though he claims that the "autonomous university is a power *within* a power" (p. 4), he later conveys the idea of two distinct mutually dependent entities. The State is external to the institutions and operates on them through diverse mechanisms (i.e. financial control). Perhaps the most revealing statement is that "democracy, participation and intra-university power distributions are important issues, but should not be confused with autonomy" (p. 4). I agree that autonomy and internal democracy should be distinguished as two distinct relations. However, there is a direct connection between the two. In the next pages, I will show that the nature of the political relations between social actors within the University has had a strong influence on the nature and extent of university autonomy.

Second, Levy's study of University-government relations is based on a static evaluation of formal decision-making realms and structures as determined by laws and statutes. While Levy recognized the limitations of such a study, he did not go beyond an instrumental study of decision-making to explore other dimensions of power that shape policy practice.

My work is based on an alternative set of theoretical assumptions. Higher education organizations are State institutions and therefore arenas of conflict and contestation. Universities are subject to power relations with other State institutions, mainly government, expressed in three distinct dimensions: instrumental, agenda control, and ideology.³ The limits and nature of autonomy can only be fully grasped through the study of political processes along these three dimensions.

Following this perspective, relations between UNAM and the government are assessed by looking at internal conflict, in its articulation with broader struggles in a historical perspective. This study highlights the connections between actors in conflict at the level of the State and its higher education institutions. It also looks at power beyond the instrumental study of decision-making, by looking at agenda control (Levy makes a brief reference to the issue of non-decision making), and the cultural dimension of political confrontations.

Based on this alternative perspective, the conclusion of this study contrasts with Levy's findings. I agree that the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de*

México is not fully captured by the government and that it enjoys substantial formal autonomy as established in the 1944 Organic Law. However, I show that, in reality, University autonomy has been limited by constant State intervention in the appointment and removal of rectors. I provide evidence of interference to hamper reform projects and democratization attempts. I show that the government has forced admissions and tuition policies upon the University. I provide evidence of how the heavy reliance of University authorities on government support in the face of conflict and the political expectations of a bloated bureaucracy have created linkages that subordinate University decisions to government projects and practices.

I argue that the levels of confrontation of opposing reform projects determine the limits of University autonomy. Overt or covert conflict operates as a counter balance to the most powerful political actors within the university (bureaucrats and university elites). In the absence of conflict, these dominant groups act within the parameters of the dominant political discourse and educational projects at the broader State level. This is not to say that relations between these dominant groups, operating at different levels of the State, are exempt of tensions. The autonomy of the university is shaped and constrained by societal and internal conflicts and by the articulation and tensions within the dominant groups.

Governing board, power elite and bureaucracy

The Governing Board (or *Junta de Gobierno*) at UNAM was established in the 1945 Organic Law. It has since been center of political power and decisions within the University.⁴ It has also been the object of political competition among rival factions of the University elite (Ordorika 1999, 2002b). Research published in a previous work (Pusser and Ordorika 2001) shows that three professional groups in medicine, engineering and law held the majority of the board from 1945 to 1998.

Physician Ignacio Chávez exercised the single most powerful influence over this body. Chávez was a member of the Board from 1945 to 1953. He was also Rector of the National University from 1961 to 1966. Chávez and his colleagues and disciples within the medical profession have dominated the Board over time. It is not an exaggeration to state that Chávez and his political coalition have been the most powerful and members of this body until this day (Ordorika 2002b).

The Board is a relatively homogeneous representation of University liberals. Elsewhere I have described the historical evolution of dominant groups at UNAM and characterized the dominant ideology within the University as liberal conservatism, “a mixture of humanist and spiritual values”

(Ordorika 1999). Within this dominant ideology two groups developed in the early 1930's. I have labeled them "radical conservatives" and a group of more "progressively oriented liberals who attempted to reestablish connections with the State, insuring the survival of the University without formally altering its conservative traditions" (p. 87).

Over time, the *Junta* shows a high level of interrelation with the government through the presence of former and current *funcionarios*, members of PRI-led administrations.⁵ A high number of Board Members are recognized as "obedient to power" and openly willing to carry political "suggestions" from the president or high-ranking government officials.⁶ The presence of progressive representatives has been extremely reduced and basically constrained to the Rector Barros Sierra (1966 to 1970) and Rector González Casanova (1970 to 1973) administrations. These two rectorships were more liberally oriented and heavily influenced by the 1968 student movement.

The power elite and the bureaucracy

In the study of the dominant political groups at UNAM I followed a two-pronged, reputational and positional, analysis. The reputational method identifies the most influential actors as those that are repeatedly named by interviewees. In the interviews I conducted, key informants were asked to name the most politically influential *Universitarios*⁷ they could recall.

In every case, respondents mentioned that the Governing Board and the Rectors included the vast majority of prominent political actors. In addition to these, respondents provided 88 other names. These included 42 members of the Governing Board; 9 Rectors; 9 sciences and 5 humanities Research Coordinators; 6 Secretary-Generals; and 46 Directors of schools and research institutes. Only seven of the names correspond to individuals that have held no administrative positions.

The results of the reputational study in this case can only be indicative of general patterns, but are not enough to identify the elite group with a relative degree of accuracy. This is due to the size of the interviewee pool.⁸ However, the results of the reputational study show conclusively that the Governing Board and the upper echelons of the administration constitute the majority of members of the University elite.

Therefore, I focused the attention of this research in a positional analysis of the distribution of power at UNAM. The positional method identifies influential actors as those who occupy key political or administrative positions. In this case I looked at those individuals who were appointed to the Governing Board, the Rectorship, and upper echelons of the University administration over time. A historical study of UNAM (Ordorika 2002b) and the positional analysis show that the group that exercises control over decision-making at

UNAM has two essential components: power-holders (following C. Wright Mills I will call them the power elite), and operatives (I will label them university bureaucracy). The two groups are not necessarily exclusive.

The university elite

The university elite is composed of individuals who are or have been part of the University and play a major role in decision-making in this institution at the central or local level. This analysis shows that their capacity to influence outcomes in the University stems from a combination of family heritage, political linkages, or academic prestige. Members of the university elite do not necessarily hold an official appointment at the university but this reputational study has shown that this elite has concentrated in the highest instances of UNAM's power structure. Members of the power elite combine three different traits:

University aristocracy. Reflects family tradition and belonging to select University groups. This family tradition is usually associated to ancestors' academic prestige or with relevance in the foundational struggles of the University. These include the foundation of the University in 1910, the struggle for autonomy, the combat against socialist education and for academic freedom, and more recently the confrontation against unions and democratization attempts.

Political strength or centrality. Reflects the external and internal political connections and supports. Political alliances outside the University are important but not sufficient. Usually political strength is based on both of these components. In many occasions, political strength is the product of the temporary occupation of University posts.

Academic prestige. Actors gain political power and moral authority because of their academic recognition. During the "golden years" it was represented by a group of faculty that had gone beyond teaching activities and had received recognition for establishing the first steps of research in a variety of academic disciplines.

In order to maintain the legitimacy of the governance structure and its most important bodies, it is possible to identify a certain socialization of academic prestige especially for the benefit of outsiders. Differences within the University elites are well recognized among their members. However, in their façade towards the rest of the University all of the members of the power elite and even some of the operators have received a coating of academic recognition. This can explain the cycle of membership to governing bodies, academic associations, and academic awards that constitutes a very interesting topic for research in its own right.

Political competition within the elite takes place in several instances. One of these is the contest over the composition of the *Junta*, and therefore over the appointment of executive authorities such as the Rector and the directors.

University bureaucracy

The Governing Board defines the political balance of the University but it is the Rector, directors, and other elements of the bureaucratic organization of UNAM that manage the operations of the institution. Most Rectors and some directors of schools and research institutes can be identified as part of the University elite, as shown by the positional study that I described previously. They are also part of the bureaucracy. Consequently I have identified the university bureaucracy as the set of university officials appointed by either the Governing Board (Rector and directors of schools and faculties), the University Council (Governing Board and Board of Trustees), or by other appointed officials. This sector is comprised of several layers including the Rector, General and Administrative Secretaries, sciences and humanities, Coordinators, directors of schools and research institutes, administrative general directors, and other top-level administrative personnel at the central and local levels among others. It also includes the body of mid-level managerial and administrative that I identified as *personal de confianza*.⁹

This bureaucracy constitutes both the operational base for the University elite and a significant part of its political constituency. The table below provides evidence of the notable process of bureaucratic expansion, especially since 1973. This bureaucratic expansion involves the growth in the number of appointed officials and the creation of new appointed positions.

Bureaucratization can be explained in part by institutional growth and by increasing organizational complexity. However, during the intense confrontations against the unions and democratization attempts, bureaucratization became a mechanism to increase the operational capacity by the elite, and to expand its loyal constituency or social base (Kent Serna 1990; Ordorika 2002b).

In this research, I focused on the data for administrative and bureaucratic expansion as a whole, and on the study of political trajectories for the upper rank of the bureaucratic apparatus (Rectors and secretaries). This data shows that UNAM officials at different levels have created their own labor markets and career paths towards upper echelons of the University administration and the federal government.¹⁰ Hegemony of the elite over the bureaucracy was established through the creation of identity, *vis-à-vis* the adversary, and through an implicit offer of access to superior levels of the administration or the federal government (Ordorika 1996).

Table 1. UNAM: Hired personnel and students, 1970, 1973, 1980 and 1999

	Research		Teaching		administrative		Students	
	Total	% fulltime	Total	% fulltime	Total	% confianza	Total	Total
1970	525	40%	8,885	2%	9,126	3%	106,718	
1973	611	68%	11,040	4%	10,230	5%	198,294	
% growth	16%	99%	24%	118%	12%	107%	86%	
1980	1,911	89%	27,515	7%	23,716	20%	294,542	
% growth	213%	307%	149%	337%	132%	837%	49%	
1999	2,060	100%	28,180	17%			269,516	
% growth	8%	17%	2.4%	151%				

*Estimates

Source: *Anuarios Estadísticos, UNAM, 1970, 1973, and 1980. Agenda Estadística, UNAM 1999.*

Table 2. Analytical components of autonomy

Political	Academic/Campus	Financial
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appointment and dismissal of Rectors, directors, and administrative personnel • Internal conflict resolution • Free speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student access • Faculty hiring • Curriculum and academic programs • Degree requirements • Academic freedom • Free speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding • Allocation of resources • Accountability • Tuition

This expectation of access to the federal government has created loyalties to external political groups. It establishes a self-imposed subordination of University authorities in order to increase possibilities of transit to the government. University bureaucrats respond favorably to government initiatives and, in practice, autonomy is diminished.

The limits of university autonomy

I have previously reviewed Levy's definition of university autonomy and its components: appointive, academic, and financial autonomy. The first category includes the hiring, promotion, and dismissal of faculty; the selection and dismissal of Rectors, directors, and administrative personnel; and the definition of terms of employment. The second category includes access, career selection, curriculum and academic programs, degree requirements, and academic freedom. The third category includes the determination of who pays, funding levels, funding criteria, allocation of resources, and accountability. These categories include a comprehensive set of fundamental decision-making aspects for university life.

As stated in the first section of this work, I have shared Levy's operational definition of autonomy as the power to make decisions within the University. However, I consider that Levy's organization of three categories mixes some distinct decision-making realms. In an attempt to clarify these processes, I propose the following components for the evaluation of university autonomy.

Political autonomy

Appointment of University authorities. The appointment process for Rector and academic directors is concentrated in the Governing Board. University authorities and dominant groups reject the notion that these appointments

take place essentially through a political process. The characterization of the Governing Board is one of the most contested political debates about UNAM.

Several of the interviews coincided with ample sectors of the University community in considering that appointment procedures are undemocratic and favor a small group that has control over the institution.¹¹ It is also widely believed that the Governing Board has no autonomy *vis-à-vis* the government. Former Rectors and members of the Board Mario de la Cueva and Manuel Gómez Morín stated that the *Junta* has annulled the autonomy of the University. They also argued that it had excluded faculty and students from decision-making and opened the way for government intervention in all aspects of university life.¹² Former Rector García Téllez criticized the Organic Law of 1944 because “it followed a trend that limited university co-governance by creating bodies like the Governing Board in which students and faculty have no participation.”¹³ He argued that the University was governed by “a system that is oligarchic, centralized, and separated from the throbbing problems of students and faculty, [the situation is] worsened by projections of auto-perpetuation.”¹⁴ García Téllez concluded that this part of the Organic Law was “a fraud for autonomy.”

Traditionally, University officials and members of the bureaucracy have argued publicly that the Board is independent and that it constitutes the most important element in guaranteeing institutional autonomy. Along these lines, former board member Aguirre Cárdenas said,

I give you my word. I never felt any external influence in an appointment by the Governing Board. I do not tell you that there never was any, no. I cannot give you my word. But I can give you my word that I never felt it or lived anything like it.

The same board member added,

And the discussions in the Governing Board, I always felt that they were very free. Very free, that is we discussed and we were convinced that the appointments were always for the best person. I never, never felt that there was any external attempt to influence my decisions, remember that I gave you my word, especially when we appointed a Rector.¹⁵

Historical evidence shows that the appointment process is complex and varies in time and for each designation.¹⁶ Since 1945 there have been systematic instances in which Mexican presidents have exercised influence over members of the Board. Elsewhere (Ordorika 2002b), I have provided evidence of this type of intervention in the designation and re-appointment of Rector Luis Garrido, in 1948 and 1952; in the appointment of Rector Nabor Carrillo in 1953; and in the designation of Rector Ignacio Chávez in 1961. I

also described the importance of government connections in the appointment of González Casanova.

Other current and former University authorities interviewed for this work are more cautious in their assessment of the independence of the *Junta*. Board member Jiménez Espriú explains that government intervention in the appointment of authorities follows no rules. Government intervention “depends a lot on the circumstances and depends also on the President.”¹⁷ Jiménez Espriú, a former Secretary General and former director of the school of engineering at UNAM, related how he lost the Rectorship in 1981. According to his testimony, on the day when the Governing Board appointed Rector Rivero Serrano, one of its members (identified later by Villoro as an active part of the “obedient group”) met with President López Portillo.¹⁸ Jiménez Espriú argues that the President did not like the former Secretary General as UNAM’s Rector. In spite of being considered the strongest candidate, Jiménez Espriú lost.¹⁹ He suspected that the Board had voted in agreement with the President’s wishes.²⁰ Former sciences coordinator²¹ Martuscelli confirms this version.²²

Former Rector Guillermo Soberón (1973 to 1980) described attempts by government officials to influence the appointment of a Rector in 1985. According to his version, Mexican President De la Madrid did not want to intervene in this process. The Board appointed Carpizo, a close collaborator of former Rector Soberón, against the expectations of the secretaries of education and the interior. Soberón describes this event as evidence of independence of the *Junta*. However, he fails to recognize the fact that he was also a government minister, and could potentially exercise enormous influence on the *Junta’s* decision.

Madrazo, humanities and social sciences coordinator during Carpizo’s Rectorship, agrees with this description of the Board’s performance in this election. However, in reference to previous designation processes, he stated that

I knew, for example, that in some cases there was a direct, more or less direct, intervention by the executive in the designation of Rector. In a subtle way, the executive let know who could be a good Rector, and he let the members of the Governing Board feel this.²³

Villoro’s accounts of the internal workings of the Governing Board from 1972 to 1984 provide insights into the level of autonomy of this body. In a general description of the internal workings of the Board, he said that

the President was very careful not to give any appearance of intervention [in the Board’s decisions]. Messages to the Board were indirect, always allowing the possibility of presidential denial. Intervention took place

through some of the Board's members. Only a few of them played this role. In my time [as a member of the Board] it was only done through some members.²⁴

He warns against simplistic assessments that argue, "that the Governing Board is not independent and depends from the public voices" or those who maintain that, "the Governing Board is totally independent and impartial."²⁵ Instead he suggests that this body attempts to make independent decisions within the latitude or constraints imposed by high-level government officials.

Bringing the evidence together it is possible to draw some conclusions about the political autonomy of the Governing Board. There is ample historical evidence showing that presidential intervention in the appointment of Rectors was an open and recurrent process before 1968. Given the delicate nature of the relationship between University and government after the student massacre, the forms of intervention evolved into more subtle mechanisms. At the same time, however, the government's political interest in UNAM also increased. The combined effect of these two dynamics provided some space for the interaction of internal and external influences within the Board.

Even the most ardent defenders of the independence of the Board agree that this body cannot appoint a Rector against the President's will. This statement has two implications. On the one hand, it shows that the President enjoys an unwritten right to veto. On the other, it shows that the relationship between internal and external influences depends precisely on the extent of the President's will. The President's interest on the designation of Rector is determined by historical circumstances. It increases in times of conflict or any other condition that enhances the centrality of the University. In a lesser way, it can also be spurred by personal commitments or political alliances. It is then possible to state that the independence of Board decisions is heavily determined by the President's willingness to intervene in the process.

However, subtlety and deniability are required in order to maintain the appearance of autonomy. This puts a relative constraint on the President's commitment with one candidate or another. The President's candidate requires a certain amount of legitimacy among the University elite. The candidate has to fit the image of a legitimate academic and a committed *Universitario*. He has to be able to garner a significant amount of support among the dominant groups. Given these conditions, the President can define the designation if he is willing to do so.

Presidential participation brings the voices of other government officials into line. In his absence, government secretaries and other members of the administration try to intervene in the process in different directions and with varying weight. This is also what happens in the case of director appointments

for a few schools or institutes. In this situation, however, the internal relation of forces within the Board carries more weight in the final decision.

Regarding the appointive autonomy of the University, Levy stated that

while the government probably involves itself more in this university appointment than in any other, its power is quite limited *compared to UNAM's power and compared to government power in other nations* (Levy 1980).

The findings of my work point to a different conclusion. The appointment of Rector concentrates a high degree of attention from the Mexican government. When exercised with full commitment, external influences by the President and other major political actors outweigh the internal dynamics and relation of forces on the Governing Board. The presence of external influences in the appointive process depends on the political will of the executive as shaped by historical circumstances and political considerations. Finally, the President can exercise his political will under certain constraints, requiring a relative degree of academic and internal political legitimacy for the President's candidate.

Intervention in internal conflicts. The removal of University Rectors is one, among many situations of political conflict, in which the government has intervened in the University. External interference in University affairs increases in the presence of political conflict. University authorities can welcome these interventions or they can take place against their will. Again, it is the magnitude and political implications of these conflicts that condition the forms and the extent of government interference.

There is historical evidence of three types of government intervention in University conflicts. A first form of intervention has taken place by providing or denying support for the University administration in the presence of political actions by students. These are the cases of rectors Fernández McGregor, Zubirán, and Barnés who resigned in the midst of student strikes against tuition increases (in 1945, 1946 and 2000 respectively) when they lost support from the President. During the 1977 union struggle rector Soberón received full government support to the extent of ending the strike through the occupation of the university campus by the police. Recently appointed rector Juan Ramón de la Fuente received the same support from the government in order to end the student strike in February of 2000. Based on this evidence I argue that the government has played a balancing role in favor of University authorities in the presence of social movements that threaten the stability of the administration.²⁶

On other occasions, there have been instances of direct intervention in University conflicts. These include police and military repression against

student movements in 1929, 1948, 1968, and 1971; or the occupation of the University by public security forces in 1968, 1972, 1977, and 2000.

Finally, the government has intervened by tolerating or promoting the actions of other external actors in order to produce political changes within the University. This occurred in the cases of Rector Chávez's ousting in 1966 and the occupation of the Rectory building against González Casanova in 1972. Small student gangs with external linkages to state governors or other government officials occupied the Rectory building until the resignation of these two rectors. In each case, these gangs assumed alleged left-wing discourse and identities but were completely isolated from broader contemporary student movements.

Academic and campus autonomy

It is in this area that UNAM enjoys a larger degree of formal and real autonomy. There is barely any example of government intervention in the hiring of faculty. That is, beyond the case of government politicians in disgrace that are hired as professors and for whom formal requisites are waived. In the case of academic programs, curricular issues, or degree requirements, in general these matters are of little interest to government officials. The commonality of purpose between the dominant coalition that emerged in 1945 and the Mexican government ensured compliance with State demands for higher education. The University projects of Rectors Chávez and Barros Sierra followed government requirements and expectations about UNAM.²⁷

Student access and University policy. Student access and broader issues of University policy have always attracted the attention and intervention of government officials. Soberón and Martuscelli argue that Chávez's reluctance to expand student enrollments at UNAM was the cause of his confrontation with President Díaz Ordaz.²⁸ González Casanova's attempt to democratize UNAM and expand its national perspective as an agent for the transformation of society was met by President Echeverría's decision to control the political opposition within the University.²⁹ The interests of conservative *Universitarios* represented by Soberón matched the government demands for political control and stability. President Echeverría allowed safe passage to politically obscure student gangs who attacked Rector González Casanova and in this way opened the way for University conservatives to get hold of the rectorship.³⁰

Academic freedom. Levy draws a useful distinction between *libertad de cátedra*, and academic freedom. According to his definition, *libertad de cátedra* is the right of every university professor to decide what to teach, or research. Academic freedom entails the right to voice any ideological or political position within campus. Because of the historical evolution of the

concept, *libertad de cátedra* has been equated with academic freedom since the Caso – Lombardo debate in 1933. Therefore, I reformulate the distinction posed by Levy as academic freedom, understood as *libertad de cátedra*, and free speech, as the expression of the right to hold political or ideological views.

Academic freedom is an entrenched value at UNAM and a constitutive element of the dominant discourse (Jiménez Mier y Terán 1987; Kent Serna 1990; Ordorika 2002b). This tradition also reflects the virtually unfettered practice of University professors to establish the contents and orientation of their courses and research projects. There have been few attempts to standardize contents and teaching practices. Some of them have been successful at the local level. Attempts to establish standardized tests as a general practice have generated wide repulse from students and faculty. This was the case of Carpizo's departmental exams established in 1986 and repealed a few months later in the midst of student and faculty protests.³¹

Research practices, on the other hand, have been increasingly affected by internal and external performance-based salary programs and research funding guidelines. Professors are still able to choose their research topics, theoretical frames, and methodologies independently. However, access to funds is determined by the established priorities and guidelines of funding sources. The government science and technology agency Conacyt,³² and its compensatory salaries program SNI (*Sistema Nacional de Investigadores*)³³ constitute the principal elements through which the State attempts direct research practices, selection of topics, and graduate programs in all higher education institutions. UNAM authorities have complacently accepted these external guidelines and mirrored them into their own performance-based salary initiatives and research funding programs. The effects and unintended outcomes of these externally driven policies on research practices are currently the object of intense discussions.³⁴

Free speech. There is no doubt that UNAM has historically enjoyed considerable political liberties compared to other institutions within the authoritarian Mexican State. Political opposition and criticism against the government have been tolerated as long as they develop within campus. The government's violent reaction against the 1968 and 1971 student movements as well as police occupations of campus against union and student strikes in 1977 and 2000, respectively, remind us of the limits of free speech *vis-à-vis* the State. The siege against González Casanova is another example of government intolerance towards real or perceived attempts to produce social transformations.

Given the political centrality of UNAM, this institution merits constant attention by government officials.³⁵ Government intelligence agencies moni-

tor opposition groups as well as student, faculty, and staff organizations. In general, the government has entrusted the University administration with the task of political containment. However, the linkages between elite University groups and government counterparts make it difficult to distinguish the origin of political containment policies and actions. For many years, organized student gangs called *porros* have been promoted and employed by internal and external politicians in order to confront opposition groups within the University.³⁶

Political opposition against University authorities or participation in conflicts is not always tolerated by the administration. In 1945 Rector Fernández MacGregor sanctioned student leaders and organizers of different political orientation. Since the first day of Chávez's Rectorship in 1961, opposing students were systematically sanctioned, expelled, or the object of legal prosecution promoted by the University administration.³⁷ During the Soberón Rectorship, union organizers as well as student and faculty adversaries of the administration were the objects of repression.³⁸

In summary, the National University in Mexico exercises full control over academic activities such as faculty hiring, design of curricula and academic programs, and definition of academic requirements. The government is usually not very concerned over these areas. There is an implicit understanding that these issues are entirely the responsibility of University authorities. From 1968 to 1976, the government was essentially preoccupied with establishing political control over the University. Since then, the federal government has tried increasingly to orient and shape University policies towards the assumption of efficiency measures, the establishment of University-business partnerships, and increased competition.³⁹

Given the political characteristics of the University administration that have been analyzed extensively in this chapter, UNAM's authorities are in most cases compliant with government designs for higher education. At the same time, high-level authorities at UNAM carry much weight in defining and negotiating government policies towards this sector. There have been situations, however, in which UNAM has rejected government directives.⁴⁰ On some of these occasions, the government has forced UNAM to adapt to these directives through political or financial intervention. The next section will show how financial measures have been increasingly used to shape and orient University policies.

Finally, to some extent UNAM constitutes a relatively safe political sanctuary in which critical attitudes toward the State are tolerated. That is as long as these critiques are circumscribed to the University. When political opposition expanded outside the campus, the State responded with violence and repression. The University administration traditionally tried to contain

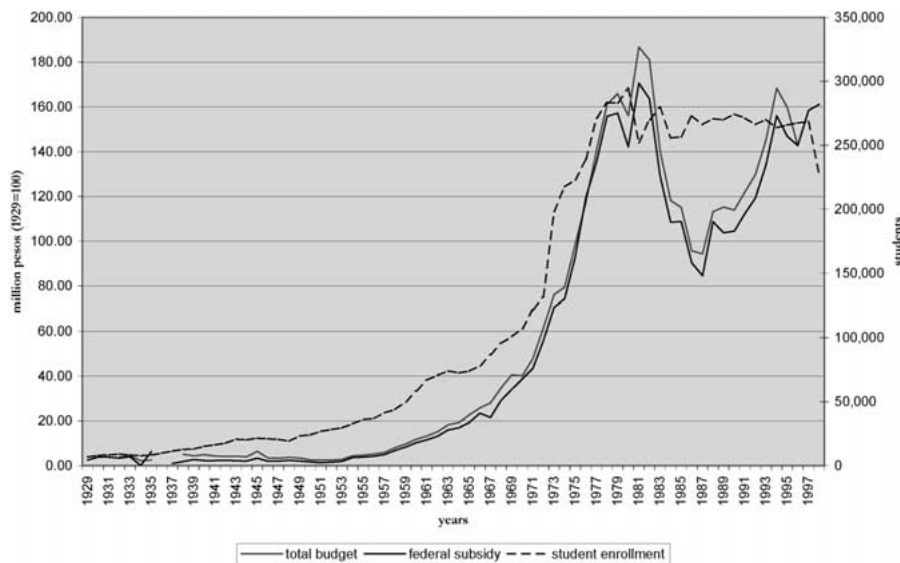


Figure 1. UNAM: total budget, federal subsidy and student enrollment (1929–1998).

political conflict. Internal dissent is marginalized and the opposition has been the object of isolation or repression from the administration.

Financial autonomy

Historically UNAM has relied heavily on federal subsidy. In 1954, federal appropriations constituted 80% of the total budget. Since 1970, they have represented more than 90% of the University budget.⁴¹ It has been argued that such a degree of financial dependence constitutes the most important threat to autonomy. However, there is no evidence that the government used University funding to control the institution before 1982.

During the “golden years,” from 1945 to 1968, government subsidy increased 774% (percentile subsidy gains in this section are calculated in constant prices 1929 = 100), while student enrollment grew 342.8%.⁴² The graph shows that subsidy increased every year, except for 1967. The average annual rate was 15.5%. From 1968 to 1973, subsidies increased 142.78% while enrollment grew 107.45%. Federal funding grew at an average annual rate of 19.41%. The growth in student enrollments and public subsidy responds to the State’s attempt to recover legitimacy among urban middle classes and intellectuals and overcome the trauma of 1968.

This policy continued until 1981, a year after Rector Soberón’s second administration. From 1973 to 1981, federal appropriations grew 141.5% at an average annual growth of 11.65%. During that period student enrollment

grew 27%. It reached an all-time high in 1980. Federal subsidies had slowed in 1978 and decreased in 1979 due to the economic crisis of 1976. The “oil boom,” however, allowed for a notable expansion from 1979 to 1981 when the subsidy for UNAM reached an all-time high.

Subsequently, the economic crisis and structural adjustment policies agreed with the IMF shaped the government’s expenditure policies towards education and particularly UNAM. From 1981 to 1987 federal subsidies decreased 50.43%. University authorities were forced by the government to establish strict efficiency measures including enrollment reductions. The government also forced salary caps on faculty and staff in 1976. Faculty salaries decreased steadily until 1987. The highest salary for a full professor was reduced in 72.8% (salary gains are calculated in constant 1975 pesos) while the lowest associate professor lost 70.4%. While federal subsidies grew by 84.4% from 1987 to 1994, adjustment policies forced upon the University only allowed salaries to grow 5.7% for the lowest associate professor and 25.4% for the highest full professor.

Globalization has increased the impact of neo-liberal policies pushed forward by the World Bank and the IMF. The Mexican government has adopted the discourse and culture of entrepreneurial higher education. On the one hand, it has pushed public universities and colleges to compete for diminishing public subsidies and encouraged the search for alternative sources of funding. On the other, the government has shifted away from unstipulated funding.

Since the mid-1980s the government has applied pressure on UNAM administrators to diversify the University’s financial sources. The most obvious source was student tuition. The government demanded fee increases, in a decision that broke one of the constitutive elements of the social pact between urban middle class students and the Mexican State since the forties. University authorities were happy to comply with this directive. In 1986, 1991, and 2000 they tried to amend tuition regulations that had been in place since 1947. Some of these initiatives have been part of a package of reforms that followed government directives to reduce costs and improve the efficiency of higher education. In two occasions (1987 and 2000) after being approved by the University Council, these reform packages were repealed due to the enormous student protests that it had generated.

More recently, government finance policies have moved away from block grants to special external compensatory funding programs based on individual or institutional performance and quality assurance. Reduced base faculty salaries have been complemented by internal and external merit pay programs since 1985 (Canales Sánchez 2001). Institutional evaluation was put in place since 1990. In 2002 UNAM still does not participate in federal

performance based finance programs. Shifts in financial patterns for public higher education as a whole will surely affect this university in the near future.

Emerging privatization and marketization trends fostered through shifts in the magnitude and distribution of public resources for universities like UNAM have created increased constraints to university autonomy.

Autonomy and accountability

While institutional autonomy and public accountability are clearly two distinct processes, the nature of the pact between the State and University elites has blurred this distinction. Historically, the Mexican State has allowed absolute independence to University administrations in handling financial resources (Ordorika 2002b). In this way, the absence of public scrutiny over University finances has been equated with institutional autonomy and any "external" claim to exercise control over University budgets and expenditures is considered by many *Universitarios* as a violation of autonomy.

Students, faculty, and staff have all been the target of efficiency-oriented policies since 1982. The administration of the University, however, has not been threatened by accountability measures that were applied to other institutions of the State. In this area, the political pact between the University elites and the State has not been touched. University authorities are only accountable to the University Council and the trustees who are part of the internal circle of power. Internal demands for financial accountability have been neglected even in the face of corruption scandals. Government officials have supported University administrators against faculty and students' demands for accountability. Autonomy was formally preserved and political dependency on the government increased.

In sum, federal subsidy trends show that the federal government did not exercise financial restrictions as a control device until the 1980s, in the midst of an intense financial crisis. Based on financial efficiency considerations, the government finally agreed with University elites and bureaucrats on the need to reduce student enrollment. At the same time, the government intervened in the allocation of resources within UNAM by establishing salary controls for faculty and staff. Salary data shows that University authorities have complied with this guideline. University authorities embraced government policies demanding tuition increases. Student movements, however, were able to stop increases in 1986, 1992, and 2000. The debate and conflict around tuition continues on to this day. It is possible to conclude that for many years UNAM enjoyed substantial autonomy in financial matters. However, since 1982, the financial autonomy of UNAM has been greatly reduced and government interference in the internal allocation of resources and in the establishment of tuition policies is increasing.

Summary

University autonomy is a historical product of the struggle between urban middle class intellectuals and the populist State that emerged from the Mexican Revolution. The *Universitarios* valued autonomy as a mechanism to preserve the independence of a liberal humanist space in the face of the emerging authoritarian political system. Within the State apparatus autonomy was perceived in two different ways: on the one hand, as a concession that would provide the State with legitimacy in the face of political challenge; on the other, as a mechanism that sanctioned the distance between the University and populist education policies in the 1930's.

Factors that affect University autonomy. The limits of University autonomy have varied historically in relation to three structural factors. First, University autonomy increases in situations in which the University has entered a confrontation against the State. Second, autonomy has increased when the University elite and the subordinate groups within the institution have closed ranks or established political alliances. Internal cohesion increases the political strength of the institution improving the relation of forces between the University and the State. On the other hand, autonomy decreases in the presence of internal conflict when the University elites rely on government support to maintain the *status quo*. Third, University autonomy has been limited when important sectors of the University elite and the bureaucracy have established political linkages or alliances with groups inside the State apparatus.

Mechanisms of intervention. In this historical study, I have been able to identify four mechanisms through which the government affects and shapes internal decisions. The first mechanism is direct intervention. There are three instances of direct intervention. These are: the exercise of direct influence on the Governing Board in the designation of University Rector; control over the University budget; and direct political action by tolerating or promoting external political interference in University affairs. The second mechanism is the subordination of University officials. Political allegiance or ideological conformity creates informal chains of command from government to University officials. The third mechanism is the political dependency of University elites and bureaucrats in order to maintain control of the institution in the face of internal conflict. The fourth and most subtle mechanism is the internalization of government designs by University officials, due to expectations about future political careers in UNAM and at the government level.

The relative autonomy of UNAM. The relative autonomy of UNAM should be assessed in the light of the factors and mechanisms that affect University autonomy. The governance organization of UNAM and the exacerbation of the authoritarian traits of the political system, after 1973, have

eroded the internal cohesion of the University. Student and union conflicts during the 1970s increased the dependence of University authorities on external government support. The need to expand the operational capacity and broaden the political constituencies of University elites generated a bureaucratization phenomenon that increased political linkages with the government and created ample expectations for political careers. The political cohesion of the Governing Board has increased and the presence of former government officials has remained relatively constant.

Overall, these factors show that the institutional autonomy of the University has weakened in the face of the government. The weakness of structural foundations of University autonomy is an outcome of the internal political organization of UNAM. Given this condition it is possible to establish that:

- University autonomy depends in fact, on the political will of the executive in the context of historically determined social, political, and economic requirements.
- Consequently, autonomy is lower in those areas that are of fundamental interest to the government.
- The most significant areas of government intervention take place in the political realm. That is, in the appointment of University Rector and in the presence of internal conflict.
- After the economic crisis in 1976, 1982, and 1994, government intervention in financial issues like salaries and tuition policies has increased.
- *Libertad de cátedra e investigación* has been increasingly affected by external evaluation, as well as compensatory and research funding programs.

Let us provide a closing summation to this section on the limits of University autonomy. It is important to state that mechanisms of State intervention in University affairs have evolved over time. In the absence of overt political conflict, government intervention in the appointment of authorities, and other University affairs has increasingly relied on subtle mechanisms as opposed to more direct forms of action. I have already argued that the weakening of structural factors affecting University autonomy has enhanced the possibilities of external influences shaping University policies and constraining internal decision-making processes.

Among other things, a political outcome of the conflicts in the 1970s that shaped the relationship between the University and the State during the 1980s was the tightening of bonds between the Federal Government and dominant groups within the University. It is in this context that I make the following argument in opposition to Levy and others. During the 1980s, government intervention in political, academic, and financial affairs of the University may have become more covert; but it has affected as many policy

areas and decision-making realms, or more, than in the worse times of open interference.

Conclusion

The Mexican Congress legally established the relations between the Mexican government and the UNAM in 1910, 1929, 1933, and 1945. Since 1929, the Mexican government granted institutional autonomy to the National University. With historical variations, the government gave UNAM an autonomous statute; the legal rights to administer its resources, to make academic decisions, and to appoint university authorities. The National University's current legal status has remained unchanged as established by Congress in the 1945 Organic Law. In spite of this, the nature and extent of institutional autonomy has changed over time.

It is important to note that, since the early 1920's, the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* has been historically embedded in the context of an authoritarian political regime. In the absence of real political competition within the Nation's political system, the political features of this academic institution became more salient, more relevant, and more evident (Ordorika 2002a).

Historical evidence shows that the autonomy of UNAM depends on a complex set of political relations and linkages between university politics, actors, and conflicts with those at the level of the broader State. The limits of autonomy change fast in relation with very subtle internal and external political processes. It depends heavily on the dynamics of political elites, bureaucracies, and other actors (students, faculty, and staff).

Pluralist perspectives on university governance fail to grasp the complexity of these relations between universities, like UNAM, and other State institutions. This article is based on an alternative perspective that looks at autonomy beyond legal arrangements, federal laws and university statutes. This is the only way in which the limits of university autonomy in the context of a one-party authoritarian system, that lasted for seventy years, can be fully understood.

There should be no doubt that recent political changes in Mexico will have a strong impact on these delicate balances between University and government. Moreover, the internal weakness of political elites and bureaucracies, *vis-à-vis* the rest of the *Universitarios*, compounded by the removal of traditional allies from office in the Federal Government, also contributes to a rapidly changing political scenario within UNAM.

Neo-liberal policies, advocating an end to the isolation between higher education institutions and markets, have put the whole idea of university

autonomy into question at a worldwide level. In Mexico, this challenge upon traditional views of university autonomy now interacts with political changes affecting the relation between the University and the State.

The nature and limits of autonomy at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, and other higher education institutions in this country, will be a major issue in the political and academic realms. The ability to understand how these will evolve in the near future, in a context of rapid political change, will be one of the most important intellectual tasks.

Notes

1. The 2000 elections at the federal level brought an end to PRI's, Mexico's ruling party, seventy years in office. A complex set of political arrangements within Mexico's authoritarian political regime have been shaken and exposed. Among these, linkages between the National University and the government are uncertain and changing in nature and intensity.
2. The *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM), is living times of uncertainty. A ten-month student strike against tuition increases and the occupation of university campuses by the Federal Police in 2000 created a profound internal crisis. The lack of consensus of government-backed administration's decision to increase tuition that led to an intense campus war, the students strike itself, and its violent outcome further de-legitimized university governance structures and eroded the social fabric of the University.
3. This alternative view is fully developed in Ordorika (2001).
4. For a thorough study of the Government Board at UNAM from 1945 to 1998 see Ordorika (2002b)
5. For a description of professional and business group membership in the Board see Pusser and Ordorika (2001) as well as Ordorika (2002b)
6. In one of the interviews former Board member Villoro described one of the groups within the Governing Board as *los obedientes al poder* (obedient to power). These are the ones that, "received from external, the federal government, or internal sources" (Villoro 1998).
7. Members of the university.
8. The size of the interviewee pool for this research did not allow for enough repetition.
9. *Personal de confianza* are the staff directly dependent on and appointed by executive authorities. Their growth was enormous (837%) between 1973 and 1980 (Ordorika 2002b). It is estimated that at least 50% of these 4,808 employees were appointed by University officials of different levels including directors, academic secretaries, division and department chiefs, coordinators, technical secretaries, and advisors (Kent Serna 1990).
10. See University Biographies database. Also Kent Serna (1990).
11. (De la Peña 1997; Del Valle 1997; Imaz Gispert 1997; Martínez Della Rocca 1997; Muñoz 1997; Peimbert Sierra 1997; Villoro 1998).
12. See statement by Mario de la Cueva (in *Excelsior*, July 10, 1969, p. 13-A), also his article *Autocratismo en la Universidad: Negación de los Derechos Humanos* (in *Excelsior*, September 14, 1976, p. 7-A), and statement by Gómez Morín (in *Excelsior*, July 13, 1969, p. 1-A).

13. (García Téllez 1970).
14. (p. 55).
15. (Aguirre Cárdenas 1997).
16. (De la Peña 1997; Del Valle 1997; Morales Aragón 1997; Peimbert Sierra 1997; Villoro 1998).
17. (Jimenez Espriú 1997).
18. Board member Henrique González Casanova met with President López Portillo during the morning. Later that same day, the Governing Board met to appoint the Rector. Henrique González Casanova was the current president of the Governing Board during the elective permanent session.
19. (Pérez Arreola 1998).
20. (Jimenez Espriú 1997).
21. Sciences coordinator is the equivalent of a Provost for Research in the natural and exact sciences.
22. (Martuscelli 1997).
23. (Madrado Cuellar 1997).
24. *Ibidem*. See also (Villoro 1998). In this first interview Villoro mentioned Henrique González Casanova, appointed to the Board during the Soberón administration, as one of the most notorious “messengers” of presidential opinions.
25. (Villoro 1998).
26. More historical evidence in favor of this argument can be found in Ordorika (2002b).
27. (Domínguez 1986; Ramírez and Domínguez 1993).
28. (Martuscelli 1997; Soberón Acevedo 1997).
29. (Imaz Gispert 1997).
30. (Del Valle 1997).
31. (Castañeda 1987; Imaz Gispert 1997; Moreno 1990).
32. The *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología* (National Council for Science and Technology, Conacyt) was founded by President Echeverría in 1970.
33. SNI, the National Researchers System was established in 1984. The purpose of this program was to complement faculty earnings in relation to academic productivity.
34. See (Díaz Barriga and Pacheco 1997; Pacheco and Díaz Barriga 1997).
35. (Muñoz, 1997).
36. See Huacuja Rountree and Woldenberg (1976, pp. 103–104), Mabry (1982) and report by *Proceso* (1977).
37. See Romo Medrano (1997, pp. 255–437).
38. Faculty organizers in CCH Vallejo were sanctioned in 1975. This same year, the contracts of faculty union members were terminated in the school of business and the school of professional studies at Cuautitlán (one of the new campuses) (Woldenberg 1988, pp. 284–292 and 414–415). Faculty members were expelled from the schools of engineering and sciences in 1978 (*Boletín de la Asamblea General de la Facultad de Ciencias*, November 11, 1979).
39. (Villaseñor 1992).
40. The most significant example is Chávez’s refusal to comply with President Díaz Ordaz’s demand to continue expanding student enrollments at UNAM. For example, Rector Rivero Serrano rejected the recommendations of undersecretary for higher education and scientific research Jorge Flores in the meeting of ANUIES (National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions) in 1983.
41. All calculations on federal subsidy for UNAM contained in this section are based on a table compiled by the author. See Ordorika (2002b).

42. All calculations on student enrollment contained in this section are based on a table compiled by the author. Data from 1958 to 1972 from historical series published in *Anuario Estadístico UNAM*, 1975. Data from 1973 to 1985 from corresponding *Anuarios Estadísticos, UNAM*. Data from 1973 to 1985 from corresponding *Agendas Estadísticas Anuales, UNAM*.

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