

## **Student exchange programs: understanding of Mexican and American cultural differences**

by

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### Introduction

Relationships between Mexico and United States have been important issues in the agenda of both countries' government systems. More frequently American and Mexican people approach jointly economic, politic, and social problems and realize the need of mutual understanding and cultural awareness. Despite the tremendous trade and immigration between the two countries American and Mexican people hardly know and understand each other's culture.

Global economic trends appear to be increasingly important to the decisions we make which affect us personally. When students think of obtaining an education they must make their decisions against a backdrop of international technological and economic forces of which they may be only indirectly aware. More and more students decide to experience a short term program in Mexico hoping this will facilitate language learning and understanding of Latin-American culture

Higher education plays an important role in this issue. Since Mexican and American universities prepare young people to enter in the work world, global understanding and cultural awareness are key issues in higher education now more than ever. The cost of the ignorance about the world is too evident since both economic and social information is claiming for cross cultural awareness, foreign language training and global understanding in every professional field. As educators we must recognize that the education of our students will be seriously incomplete if it does not include a real knowledge of the other cultures, especially those in which our relationships are closer. There is a every day more common idea that there is simply no substitute for living in another culture in order to gain that knowledge.

Either in business, engineering, counseling, education or any other professional field, studies have indicated a need for cross-cultural and language training at higher education level. In the United States, many community colleges and universities have implemented international education programs. Their primary efforts have been in bringing global perspectives to the curricula, expanding overseas programs, improving services to foreign students, and nurturing international awareness in the community. Definitively, global and international education must be a high priority of higher education if students are to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary for decision making and effective participation in a world characterized by interconnectedness, cultural pluralism, and increasing competition for resources.

However, even when it is a common understanding that international programs are important ones, there are few studies which have focused on the impact of those programs. The Mexico-United States relationships related to

economic, social and cultural issues make us, as educators to pay attention in the programs aimed to develop a better understanding of both cultures. Even we are aware about the importance of those programs, we need to gain a better knowledge about what are the outputs we get as a result of those programs. It is hoped that this study may be of benefit to those engaged in developing international exchange programs.

### Background

American and Mexican Universities are themselves a vehicle for economic advancement of their students, and seek expansion of their international connections and programs. However, international programs must be carried out at a time when institutions are trying to do more with less. Often, the higher education institutions receive financial support from any foundation as they can be either Ford, Fullbright, FIPSE, Kellogs, civic organizations or federal grants. But whatever the financial sources are, we as educators need to develop strategies to play them up and be able to justify benefits of international programs to the sources of funds and then, a number of possible sources could provide funding for program with an international impact.

#### American and Mexican Students

Without question educational institutions are undergoing change as they seek to meet the needs of students. Any number of factors drives the change, but certainly demographics and market niches along with technology are playing a major role. The internationalization of business and governments are also a factor. Government and business seeks to have workers fluent in different languages and well as knowledgeable of other cultures. Schools at all major cities serve immigrant and transitory populations. These macro forces are often the focus of policy makers and administrators in educational institutions, as they should be. However individual students, be they from the United States or Mexico also makes decisions with respect to their own lives and view educational institutions as vehicles for achieving their aspirations. "Serving" the aspirations of students is the purported justification of educational institutions, nevertheless the "product" of the institution serves the student in the context of an economic process. The student may "choose" his or her program of studies, but as we have seen one of the strongest motivations for a field of study is eventual job acquisition. However, as Michael Apple reminds us (1986 p.20) education, like culture, is not an "autonomous nor externally determined field, but a site of social differences and struggles.". Culture as defined by Spindler and Spindler (1988) is the means by which people attain perceived needs.

Diverse studies have been conducted aimed to explore different aspects of the education and its implications over young people's perceptions about their own or other's culture. A recent research of Japanese women graduates (Tanaka, 1996) showed that schools did little if anything to either produce sexual divisions of labor or to promote continuous full-time employment for women to the degree expected by large increases in women attending universities. The high interest that women have in Sage programs of nursing and therapy reflect a traditional women's role of assisted care giving. The

UADY women are attending the Facultad de Educación, also traditionally a field dominated by women. This is not to belittle these much needed vocations, but only to underscore the political and gender variable. A study by Mendiola (1989 p. 334) investigating schools in Costa Rica demonstrated that in spite of higher educational reform and availability, social and gender differences continued to exist and may be strengthened. He says this may be due to a certain “incompatibility of egalitarian educational reforms with efficient reproduction of labor for capitalist work.”

Sánchez and Iber (1997) investigated differences between students in Yucatan and New York and found that women in both institutions are not overtly politically involved, though as noted, the Mexican students are involved and at the same time more pessimistic that an individual can change society. Perhaps they prefer to “Romance the State” as proposed by Stromquist (1995). As she notes, the state provides women opportunity to enter the workforce, but it clearly limits their power by providing a limited number of options and tying women to families (Stromquist, 1995). We see this in women’s dual desire to raise a family and pursue a career.

Education as an extension of the state and private education as an extension of the market place reflect similar norms. That a women’s college, from inception, could form its charter around the idea of “Republican Motherhood” and today after decades of feminist scholarship, draw its largest cadre of students into technical health support field is noteworthy. That its students are making such “informed” choices at the age of 18 in a non-political framework, is even more striking. The larger cultural setting of family and secondary education seems to not have provided a wide range of alternatives for these women.

The U. S. and Mexican secondary institutions offer some type of humanities and foreign language program as well as math and science. Kamens, Meyer, and Benavot (1996) have argued that national educational systems are at their basis a cultural system, “With much of modern’s schooling’s power deriving from public meanings and purposes” (p. 117). They further argue that secondary education has come under a world model which links education with “notions of social and economic progress” (p. 117). Based upon their proposed model we see that US and Mexican schools both provide a ‘comprehensive’ curricula that does not eliminate stratification (Ogbu, 1987).

Ornelas and Post (1992) found that at a “radical” university in Mexico, Universidad Autonoma de Puebla, few working class students enrolled and fewer graduated. Of those who did enter, they demanded traditional professional tracks rather than modern technical ones. We can see a subordination of political philosophy for economic advantage on the part of the students’ choice. Students in Mexico demand access to higher education, so that they may improve their economic situations. In the United States, student access to some type of higher education it is virtually guaranteed through a matrix of public, state, and private colleges, but here the 20 year trend shows rising concern over college financial assistance, and if college “pays off” with entry into graduate school or marketable skills (Sax, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney, 1996).

In an age of global economic considerations and tight local economies, both students and institutions must pay attention in these considerations while

making decisions about their futures. On the one hand, students want their time spent in school to improve them personally and economically. On the other hand, institutions spend resources in pursuing their international and global educational goals. To the extent that economic considerations impact the individual ones, the decision to optimize current and future economic resources also becomes more important. Individuals have always worked within a cultural matrix that includes economic considerations. Colleges and Universities are perceived as institutions that can increase one's economic and cultural capital.

As both individual and institutional concern, cross-cultural understanding should be aimed as a part of the educators and researchers' agenda. If international programs impact American and Mexican students' perceptions, it is important to know in which directions and in what level.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to collect information about the effects of the international programs in the students' perceptions of both Mexican and American cultures. Since most Mexican public universities do not offer international programs for their students, the focus of this study is to gain understanding about how the perceptions about both American and Mexican culture change through the contacts between American and Mexican students while the Americans are in Mexico.

### Objectives:

1. To describe the American and Mexican students' perceptions about Mexican and American cultures respectively, before and after the international program is carried out.
2. To determine if there is any difference between the students' perception about the American and Mexican cultures before and after the American students participate in an international program.
3. To identify if there is any difference between the American and Mexican students before and after the American and the Mexicans are in contact while the Americans are in Merida, Yucatan.
4. To identify if there is any connection between the kind of international program and the American and Mexican students' perception about both cultures.
5. To identify if there is any connection between the students' characteristics and the students' perceptions about the cultures.

### Method

#### Subjects

American students spending an academic stay of a minimum of two weeks at the University of Yucatan will be interviewed at their arrival and just before departure. Interview will seek information regarding Mexican culture and perceptions of Mexicans.

Similarly, Mexican students that have regular contact with them will be interviewed in order to obtain information regarding the American culture and their perception of American Students.

### Instruments

A survey design will be developed. Two questionnaires will be administered, to both, American students who participate in an International Program, and the Mexicans who are in contact with their American peers. The questionnaire will be administered twice, before and after the program is carried out. The focus of the questionnaire will be the perceptions about the American and Mexican cultures. The Americans will be asked about the Mexican culture and the Mexicans about the American culture. The topics will be related to different aspects of a culture, such as: values, traditions, political organization, economic system, art, religion and education. The data analysis will be done by the descriptive as well as inferential statistics through the SPSS software. The variables which will be analyzed will be: the program (duration, organization, courses and cultural connections encouraged) the students (age, ethnic background and cultural connections) and perceptions of the culture (values, traditions, political organization, economic system, art, religion and education).

The population of this study will be delimited by convenience to the Yucatan state in Mexico, since there are appropriate conditions for carrying out the study such as the academic connections between an American and Mexican universities as well as the personal interest of the researchers. Additionally, the Yucatan State attracts many international programs as a result of its geographical location, historical sites and demographic characteristics.

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