La máxima casa de estudios:
Historical centrality of the
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

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La máxima casa de estudios

Foreign visitors and international scholars alike frequently take notice of the way in which the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) is commonly called the máxima casa de estudios\(^1\) by a large majority of Mexicans (eg. Rhoads & Durdella, 2005). This title expresses the people’s deep appreciation of México’s most prominent university. Admiration towards the Universidad de la Nación\(^2\) or Mexico’s Alma Mater is deeply embedded in the Mexican society and runs across different classes and social groups.

The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México is a clear representative of a distinctive institutional model that we identify as Nation Universities. That is strong public teaching and research oriented universities that have been central in the assumption of Nation-State building roles, capacities and activities. The responsibilities and performances as State building institutions have been historically contingent and have shaped the nature and characteristics of Nation Universities.

Since its reestablishment in 1910, the National University in Mexico\(^3\) developed into a Nation University. It combined a long historical tradition with a strong influence in the creation of State institutions (public health, judicial system, design and population of government bodies and offices, training ground for political and economic elites, as well as the recreation of a

\(^1\) The meaning of máxima casa de estudios is that of highest house of studies or highest institution of knowledge.

\(^2\) The Nation’s University.

\(^3\) The antecedents of UNAM go back to the Real y Pontificia Universidad de México established in 1553. After a long series of conflicts it was reestablished in its modern form in 1910 as the Universidad Nacional de México (National University of Mexico). In 1929 it became the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico). For a historical account of the National University in Mexico see Ordorika (2003).
National culture, among others). This role was particularly relevant during the late 1940’s and the 1950’s in a period that has been labeled “the golden era” of the University. The strength and clarity of purpose of UNAM during this period was deeply connected to State development projects. With the demise of these projects and the precarious situation of the Mexican economy since the late 1970’s, UNAM has also been embedded in a critical situation. Institutional identity has been eroded and the University’s capacity to respond to multiple demands has been put into question.

The crisis of UNAM has occurred in a context in which public institutions, in every sphere of society, have been challenged all over the world during the last twenty years. Private higher education has expanded in both the number of institutions and enrollments. Private organizations and practices have been depicted as more successful and efficient than their public counterparts, and this is also the case with Mexican higher education, where public universities have become the object of close scrutiny and intense critiques.

In spite of this, the national prominence and respect for UNAM has remained a salient feature of Mexican higher education. Its prestige and legitimacy has survived contemporary attacks and the profound effects of aggressive government policies, as well as recent conflicts over the nature of the University.

Public perceptions of the National University have changed continually throughout its history. A public university of UNAM’s presence and magnitude has to be constantly recreated in order to keep up with societal expectations and contemporary demands. With this idea in mind, the purpose of this paper is to understand the historical process that enabled UNAM to become the máxima casa de estudios, in its relation with the Mexican State, the political system and the broader society. It also examines the contemporary challenges to this dynamic,
challenges that stem from changes in the global political context and a subsequent institutional identity crisis.

Flagship universities: the core and the periphery

Can we talk about a Mexican flagship? The answer is no. To understand this assertion, and the nature of the most prominent universities in Latin America and particularly in Mexico, it is useful to explore the notion of flagship university in its original context.

We contend here, that the term flagship university has three different though deeply interconnected connotations in the English speaking world. First, it is used in a simple way as a strictly descriptive term. Second, it is a concept that characterizes a particular type of higher education institution that has developed historically in the United States. Finally, the term flagship university has been used in a prescriptive way to symbolize a model of an institution that prominent universities in every country should aspire to emulate.

A descriptive term

References to flagship universities immediately imply an allusion to the “leader; … the best of its kind; …” or the “finest, largest, or most important one” among a broader group of state or national higher education institutions. The term flagship is derived from naval warfare and in its more contemporary use refers to leading or prominent institutions in competitive arenas (e.g., the flagship of the department store chain). In these uses it entails an understanding

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4 According to the Oxford English Dictionary flagship means “1. A ship bearing an admiral's flag. 2. a. transf. and fig. A leader; something that is or is held to be the best of its kind; spec. the major product, model, etc., in a company's range. The Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary provides the following definition: “1 : the ship that carries the commander of a fleet or subdivision of a fleet and flies the commander's flag. 2 : the finest, largest, or most important one of a series, network, or chain <the company's flagship store>”.

that can be common to different nations, states, regions and realities. Flagship universities mean, almost universally within the English speaking world, those postsecondary institutions that constitute the pinnacle of a state or national higher education system, those that excel among others. This understanding usually depicts the largest, oldest, most traditional and most highly regarded institutions within a larger set of colleges or universities.

_A historical concept_

In addition to this understanding, the idea of a flagship university entails a more profound meaning in the United States. Flagship-university is also used as an analytical concept. The concept is implicitly associated with normative understandings of a certain type of public higher education institution. The term is fundamentally connected to the historical development and the essential nature, responsibilities, and expectations of land grant public research universities that developed in several states within this country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and their evolution into “elite public research” institutions.

The flagship concept is complex and, like the public universities it characterizes, its meaning has evolved historically. According to different authors (eg. Rudolph, 1965; eg. Flexner, 1994; Kerr, 2001) the contemporary “American model” of higher education was the product of a fusion between two distinct higher education traditions. On the one hand, were the German-based graduate schools providing research and high-level professional education (essentially in medicine and law). On the other, was the British tradition of the liberal arts college, with a strong emphasis on the humanities. The emerging “American model” of university developed in private institutions like Johns Hopkins, Harvard and Cornell.

Later on, this model had a strong influence on the more practically oriented public higher education institutions -of agriculture, engineering, economics and business administration-
stemming from the land grant Morrill acts of 1862 and 1890 (Kerr, 2001). With time, the strong southern tradition of powerful public state colleges and a set of northern state universities, like Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, evolved towards this new prominent research university model (Rudolph, 1965). In this way, prestigious public land grants became “flagships,” and eventually what Kerr termed, “the multi-versity.”

The evolution of the flagship universities in the United States is linked to strong State support and commitment towards the emergence, expansion and maintenance of public higher education institutions in the states. Historically this commitment has been expressed in federal support for undergraduate teaching, graduate and professional education and for scientific research (Kerr, 2001).

There is a paradox at the center of the prevalent concept of the flagship university today. The flagship ostensibly combines the elitist tradition of private universities, in research and graduate education, with a democratization of access and university practices at the undergraduate level. Flagships embody an intrinsic contradiction as they endeavor to attain the status of “elite public” institutions. This has long been a problematic endeavor. In the nineteenth century, public perceptions about the elitist nature of emerging higher education institutions were in some places so strong that the creation of new institutions, despite their fusion of research and land grant models, was intensely contested. This was the case of the battles over the foundation of the University of California between 1869 and 1872 (Douglass, 2000).5

5 California farmers and working class organizations challenged the creation of the University of California arguing that the Regents and university president (Gillman, a former graduate from Yale) adhered to many elitist practices of traditional colleges and universities and that they ignored the land grant charge. They also challenged that the
In spite of these conflicts new state universities that endeavored to combine elite teaching, training and research were created across the United States. As the higher education systems within the states expanded and diversified, the strongest and more traditional institutions acquired the distinct identity of flagship universities.

This identity comprises several discursive and practical elements that in some cases express contradictory views or conflicting interests. The flagship university has come to simultaneously symbolize a diversity of normative values. Among these it is possible to note the following:

- commitment towards knowledge production, emphasizing the role of research and graduate studies;
- dedication to professional education and training;
- a relative democratization of access to education, knowledge and training;
- a “democratic” role in the reproduction of society through the inculcation of citizenship values, and practices; through the creation and recreation of identities, shared beliefs and norms;
- path towards equalization and social justice as a vehicle for social mobility; and
- responsibility in the promotion of local and regional public and private economic development.

As a consequence of these normative goals, the flagship university has also come to symbolize a site of strong State commitment to the public good through federal and local state funding.

University addressed the needs of the same powerful economic groups and to serve the “industrial classes” (Douglass, 2000 p. 48).
Flagships at the Core: A prescriptive model

Over the past two decades a number of authors have pointed to rapid changes in the nature of flagship universities in the United States, with an increased emphasis on applied research, graduate and professional training, and a status competition for elite students (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Kirp, 2003; Geiger, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The titles and content of a set of reports and policy documents available on the internet support this emerging vision as they suggest a different understanding of the notion of flagship university. Louisiana State University’s LSU campus online news reports:

The National Flagship Agenda is a seven-year plan focused on the historical significance of the year 2010, LSU’s 150th anniversary. The agenda has been designed to build the University into a nationally competitive flagship university and serve the short- and long-term interests of Louisiana. Focusing on the action steps will increase research and scholarly productivity and will improve the quality and competitiveness of our graduate and undergraduate students.

In an editorial piece, published in the Houston Chronicle, William H. Cunningham, former chancellor of the University of Texas System writes: “Logical to make UH our next flagship university”. On more international notes, the University Edinburgh’s 1999-2000 Annual Report calls for “A Flagship University for Scotland” stressing the importance of a “commitment to internationalism” and the need to attract international students from beyond the

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6 This editorial was originally published in the Houston Chronicle on Friday, June 2, 2000 (Section A, page 41, in the Outlook section).
European Union in an “increasingly competitive environment”. A web search for flagship universities reveals other examples like these for the United States, Australia and the UK.

Clearly these types of statements reveal a different view of what a flagship university is. From this perspective a flagship university is a symbol of the changing contemporary relationship between the State and higher education vehicle for a new set of social and individual aspirations. Through these statements university policy makers and administrators cite similar characteristics of the emerging ideal university:

- knowledge production centered (emphasis on research and graduate studies)
- with strong ties to business and the knowledge economy
- competitive (for students and funds)
- focused on excellence and prestige
- productive and efficient
- locally grounded and internationally oriented
- financially diversified

Not surprisingly these prescriptive notions, emerging redefinitions of the flagship university, coincide with some of the basic ideas of what has come to be known as the “entrepreneurial university” (Clark, 1998), an idealized portrayal of the most successful research universities in Europe and the United States.

In these prescriptive notions there is, however, still a significant element grounded in the historical concept of flagships. This element is a discursive emphasis on local grounding and embeddedness and responsibility towards the state and region.

This last element is not surprising either. It reveals the connection between the three constructs surrounding the notion of flagship university. The prescriptive model is simultaneously rooted in dominant views about higher education and in the historical prestige and presence of the most central of state universities; the public research oriented land grants; the flagships.

The flagship is a self-referential and self-replicating concept. The flagships (the leaders, the best of their kind, the finest) are of course the flagships (the historically central mergers of the academic tradition and the land grant project) who shape and give substance to the flagships (as models of successful entrepreneurial institutions). These connections between the term, the concept and the model are historical and contextual. The concept of flagship university depicts an American brand of higher education that becomes enticing to other institutions around the world on the strength of its success defined in terms of a model that is shaped by itself to a great extent. In the words of Clark Kerr:

The American research grant university has been an enormous intellectual success, particularly in the sciences: Since 1950, when the development of the federal research grant universities was in its infancy, 55 percent of all Nobel and Fields (mathematics) prizes have been awarded to scholars resident in the United States; in the 1980’s, 50 percent of all citations in leading scientific journals around the world were to members of the same group; in 1990, 50 percent of all patents registered in the United States were of U.S. origin; and by 1990, the United States had 180,000 graduate students from foreign nations, clearly making it the world center of graduate study. Not since Italy in the early centuries of the rise of universities in western Europe has any single nation so dominated intellectual life (Kerr, 2001 p. 151).
There is no doubt that United States flagship universities are the most successful institutions within the model. More so, there is no doubt that American flagships are the source of the dominant postsecondary model in contemporary society. American flagships are at the core of contemporary “common sense”, policy making and research on higher education at the world wide level.

*Flagships at the periphery?*

So what does it mean when we refer to flagship universities in countries other than the United States? More specifically, what does the concept signify in peripheral countries like Mexico? Consistent with the previously stated understanding of flagships in the United States it is possible to think of this concept, as related to universities in other countries, in three different ways.

From a descriptive perspective the term flagship university can be used to identify the most notable, most important, finest or even largest institutions in each country. Essentially it represents an attempt to single out and focus on a specific set of institutions. As an alternative to the term flagship, We will denote them the most distinctive colleges or universities at a state, regional or national level. The notion of distinctiveness, at his stage, is only a descriptive term. It’s explanatory power and usefulness is limited.

At a second level the notion of flagship acquires a different meaning when understood in a historical perspective and grounded in its specific context in the United States. In similar fashion, the alternative notion of distinctiveness expands into a broader concept when we focus on understanding the historical and contextual elements that shape particular universities into the most distinguished, important and influential in each state or country’s higher education system. At this level we deal with historical processes and events that have wrought university traditions,
normative values, organizations, practices and beliefs about higher education. We will denote this concept as *historical centrality*. Historical centrality is shaped by social, political, economic and cultural processes occurring within higher education institutions and between these and other institutions of the State, social actors or economic forces. It also an outcome of the internal dynamics of the professions and the disciplines, as well as a consequence of teaching and knowledge creation processes that take place within colleges and universities.

At a third level the prescriptive model of the flagship university must be understood in terms of the problems of institutional conformity to dominant models of higher education as well as the guidelines and policies associated with these models. In opposition to the notion of flagship university as a relatively fixed incarnation of the successful and dominant entrepreneurial model, its is important in the case of institutions on the global periphery to focus on the dynamic concept of *contested conformity* as the understanding of the conflicting processes through which higher education institutions and actors have complied with or resisted dominant views, and policies.

*Understanding distinctiveness, historical centrality and contested conformity*

According to this view, a thorough understanding of the nature and role of the most prominent public research universities in the periphery requires that we move away from heavily loaded concepts that narrow our views to implicit comparisons between our universities and those, commonly denoted flagships, within the central countries. A balanced comparative approach has to be grounded in historical and contextual explanations for institutional distinctiveness and centrality. Contested conformity is also a major component of the historical construction and shaping of colleges and universities. In post colonial peripheral countries, the
university itself, as a concept and as an organization, is originally a historical product of conformity to colonial powers and their cultural projects.

In this approach to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), We will move away for a moment from the notion of flagship university in order to understand the distinctiveness and historical centrality of this institution. Through a historical approach we will point out the processes, competing forces and most salient contradictions that have shaped UNAM and its prominent position within Mexico. We will also explore the tensions and conflicts that stem from contemporary contested conformity towards dominant prescriptive models.

La Universidad de la Nación

The magnitude, extension and history of UNAM have firmly rooted this university within the Mexican society. The Universidad Nacional is the most legitimate and prestigious of all Mexican universities. It can be said that it is also one of the most legitimate and prestigious entities among public or private institutions devoted to a wide arrange of activities outside the realm of higher education (politics, economics, business, health, culture, etc.). UNAM is truly the Nation’s university.

Legitimacy and prestige are deeply related but distinct expressions of the nature of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. One cannot understand UNAM without understanding the sources of its legitimacy and prestige.
Distinctiveness of UNAM

UNAM’s distinctiveness and its weight within the Mexican higher education system are readily apparent. This university offers three levels of degrees, baccalaureate\(^8\), undergraduate (includes professional schools) and graduate studies. These include two baccalaureate programs; 70 undergraduate and professional as well as 9 technical and vocational programs; and 45 doctoral, 110 masters and 60 specialization studies programs.

In the academic year 2003-2004, nearly 270,000 students were enrolled at UNAM (143, 405 in undergraduate and professional programs, 104, 554 in baccalaureate, and 18, 987 in graduate programs. In this way UNAM held 3% of baccalaureate and 7% of undergraduate national enrollments. At the graduate level, UNAM held 13% of total national enrollments with 30% in specialization studies, 6% in masters and 26% in doctoral programs\(^9\). According to data provided by CONACyT, Mexico’s national science and research government agency\(^{10}\), in 2003 UNAM awarded 30% of Mexican doctoral degrees\(^{11}\).

\(^{8}\) In the Mexican case, baccalaureate, or preparatory school, is a secondary degree which is required in order to move into the higher education system. This component of the secondary level is labeled Educación Media Superior (Middle Higher Education) in the Mexican education system.


\(^{10}\) CONACyT stands for Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (National Council for Science and Technology).

\(^{11}\) Calculation by the author based on graduate degrees awarded in 2003 at the national level data provided by CONACyT (Indicadores de actividades científicas y tecnológicas, México 2004, Edición de bolsillo, http://www.conacyt.mx/dap/INDICADORES_2004.pdf) and doctoral degrees awarded by UNAM in 2003 data.
Research at UNAM is organized into two systems: the sciences (natural and physical sciences) and the humanities (social sciences and humanities). Research takes place in 26 research institutes, 13 research centers and in several schools and faculties. It is often stated that more than 50% of all research in Mexico takes place at UNAM. In 2003 the National University produced 37% of all Mexican research articles in the hard sciences, published in international refereed journals\textsuperscript{12}. Faculty at UNAM constituted 29% of the national researchers in the country in 2004\textsuperscript{13}.

In addition to these indicators of UNAM’s national presence in teaching and research activities, this institution’s reputation is further enhanced by a vast amount of extension programs and cultural events. There are more than 60,000 events sponsored by UNAM each year, including musical concerts, theatrical performances, dance recitals, literary readings, movies, conferences, book presentations, guided tours and seminars. UNAM has one of the most prestigious classical music orchestras (Orquesta Filarmónica de la UNAM); a number of arts and sciences museums; several cinemas, theaters and music halls; and even a professional soccer team that won the last two national league championships. Radio UNAM’s two frequencies reach the entire country and TV UNAM, though not a channel on open access television is constantly present on private and public broadcasts.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} The Sistema Nacional de Investigadores (SNI) is a government run program of merit pay complementary salaries. Membership in SNI is based on thorough evaluations of faculty productivity. For a description of the program see www.main.conacyt.mx/sni/sni003.html. For a critical perspective on SNI see Ordorika (2004).
This university has been entrusted with the National Seismologic System as well as the National Observatory. It is also a repository of Mexico’s most important archives and book collections in the National Library. It has two internationally prestigious observatories (Tonanzintla and San Pedro Mártir) and sails two research vessels along the Mexican coasts.

UNAM owns and maintains magnificent buildings in Mexico City’s colonial center (Santo Domingo, Minería, San Ildefonso, and el Chopo among others). The Ciudad Universitaria, the magnificent campus built in the 1950’s, is the core of UNAM’s activities. Many of its buildings host murals by some of Mexico’s most famous artists (Rivera, O’Gorman, Siqueiros, and Chávez Morado). There are 14 baccalaureate as well as 5 graduate and undergraduate campuses in Mexico City alone. There are also new research and graduate studies campuses in other states and cities, including Cuernavaca, Mérida, Morelia, and Ensenada.

**Historical centrality**

The contemporary magnitude and extension of UNAM cannot be understood without looking at the history of this institution. The legitimacy and prestige of the University is difficult to grasp in descriptive terms.

We contend here that the historical centrality of the National University and much of its legitimacy can be explained by the fact that this university has been intensely related to many of the most significant events in Mexican history. The University in Mexico shares this historical relevance with some other Latin American institutions like the Universidad de Buenos Aires.

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14 At the baccalaureate level, there are 9 Preparatorias (preparatory schools) and 5 Colegios de Ciencias y Humanidades (colleges of sciences and humanities). At the graduate and undergraduate level there are five campuses (Acatlán, Aragón, Cuautitlán, Iztacala and Zaragoza) spawning at the edges of Mexico City.
Intense involvement with the country’s main historical trends has shaped UNAM to a great extent.

Antecedents of the Universidad Nacional

The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in its contemporary form was established in 1945 when the Mexican Congress approved the current Organic Law. The antecedents of this University, however, go far back into the Real y Pontificia Universidad de México founded by royal decree in 1551 and inaugurated in 1553. During the war of independence and in the early years of the new Republic, the University became a partisan conservative institution and suffered intensely for that. After a long period of uncertainty and lack of stability the Real y Pontificia Universidad was finally closed in 1867.

Modern Mexican higher education inherited four strong traditions from the colonial university. These were the principle of autonomy; internal election of university officials; student participation in university governance; and the State’s financial responsibility towards the university (Ordorika, 2003b).

The university was reestablished in its modern form in 1910, at the end of the Porfirio Díaz 40-year dictatorship. Previously existing post-secondary institutions were brought together for this purpose. The new university was called Universidad Nacional de México. The new

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15 These included the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School); the Escuela Nacional de Jurisprudencia (National School of Law); the Escuela Nacional de Medicina (National School of Medicine); the Escuela Nacional de Ingenieros (National School of Engineering); and the Academia de las Bellas Artes (Academy of Fine Arts) (Marsiske, 1985). Minister of education Justo Sierra, founder of the University, also created the Escuela de Altos Estudios (School of High Studies) to provide graduate and specialization studies for the other schools and to focus on the study of philosophy and the sciences (Alvarado, 1984).
institution was a complex mixture of philosophical traditions: conservative scholasticism, spiritual humanism and positivism. Only a few months after its foundation the new National University, was engulfed by the Mexican Revolution, a decade of military confrontations and the succession of revolutionary factions in government.

*The University against the revolutionary State*

The National University truly began its operation after 1920, at the end of the armed phase of the revolution. The relation between the National University and the populist governments emerging from the Mexican Revolution was extremely confrontational and distant. The distance between the University and the Mexican State was sanctioned through the granting of autonomy in 1929. The critical positions of the *Universitarios*\textsuperscript{16} against the State’s educational projects gave birth to a strong tradition of academic freedom.

Catholic students and faculty embraced academic freedom and expelled proponents of historical materialism from UNAM in 1933. The University became a symbol for Catholics and conservatives as well as a site of resistance against the government’s project of socialist education (Mayo, 1964; Mabry, 1982). The government detached itself from the University by granting full autonomy, cutting public funding (after awarding a unique financial endowment) and by stripping the appellation Nacional from the institution’s name (Guevara Niebla, 1983, 1985). The government created a parallel higher education system while the University attempted to become a *de facto* conservative ministry of education (Mayo, 1964).

The conflict between the University and the State was also the struggle between urban middle classes that had been sidelined by the populist policies of the Mexican State and the leadership of the Revolution. It was in every sense a political conflict involving definitions of

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\textsuperscript{16} This is the way in which members of the university are called. The name includes faculty as well as students.
society and the University (Ordorika, 2003b). Like other contested relations in the Mexican political scenario, it would enter a new phase in the ensuing transformation of the Mexican State. 

*Developmentalism and national unity: the “Golden Era” of the University*¹⁷

The University barely survived until 1938. The ties between this institution and the Mexican State were discretely reestablished in the late 30’s when public funding was resumed. But it was not until the Mexican government turned from socially oriented development to a more orthodox capitalist program in the early 40’s that the University flourished and started to gain legitimacy and prestige among broader segments of the population.

The Organic Law of 1945 sealed the defeat of radical conservatives within UNAM and the establishment of a new pact with the Mexican government. The symbol of this pact was a major building project, the construction of the *Ciudad Universitaria* in the early 1950’s. The new university charter sanctioned autonomy and academic freedom. It also established new governance structures and rules that were supposed to eliminate politics and enhance the academic nature of the institution (Ordorika, 2003b).

*The University as a State builder.* In the ensuing years UNAM played a major role in the construction of a developmentalist State and in the consolidation of the authoritarian political regime. The University was instrumental in the expansion of the urban middle class that accompanied national economic growth from the 40’s to the early 60’s (Guevara Niebla, 1980).

¹⁷ Developmentalism was a prominent form of the welfare State in many Latin American countries. The name stems from the notion of economic development as the central project for peripheral post-colonial countries. Developmentalism was based on a critique of development and modernization theories from the United States. It promoted national development on the basis of industrialization and import substitution. Developmentalism had a strong ideological component of national unity, sovereignty and independence (Marini, 1994).
Increasing enrollments and professional preparation were the vehicles for social mobility through which urban middles classes developed into a significant segment of Mexican society.

*Universitarios* were also instrumental in the creation of the new public institutions of the State. Physicians from UNAM created the Ministry of Health as well as the most important National Institutes of Health (Cardiology, Nutrition, etc.).¹⁸ Engineers from this University organized and occupied the Ministry of Public Works. UNAM’s lawyers created and manned the judicial system. They also wrote significant pieces of legislation that constituted the foundations for the developmentalist State.

*Symbiosis of authoritarianism.* Since the mid-1940’s the UNAM also gave form and provided leadership for the Mexican political system. In 1946 Miguel Alemán was elected president of Mexico. He was the first president after the Revolution, who was not part of the army, and he was a graduate of UNAM. Since 1946 the presence of *Universitarios* in government posts at every level has signaled their influence (Camp, 1985). UNAM became the single most significant source of formal political leaders in the country, as UNAM graduates and professors dominated the three branches of power (Smith, 1979; Camp, 1984). Roderic Ai Camp (2002) has shown that UNAM became the most important center for elite formation, as politicians, intellectuals, business people and a few members of the catholic and military hierarchies were educated, recruited and created networks at UNAM.

¹⁸ Gustavo Baz founded the Ministry of Health (*Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia*) in 1943. Ignacio Chávez founded the National Cardiology Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Cardiología*) in 1944. He was also this Institute’s first director from 1944 to 1961. Salvador Zubirán in 1946. He was the first director from 1946 to 1980. Baz, Chavez and Zubirán were all former deans of the School of Medicine and former rectors of UNAM.
The authoritarian Mexican political system was at its peak between 1940 and 1968, characterized by a powerful and politically stable regime. One of its sources of legitimacy was its ability to incorporate professional expertise and intellectual networks from the National University. In this way, UNAM helped to shape, strengthen and reproduce an authoritarian political system, and in turn UNAM was shaped by Mexican authoritarianism. Professional groups became the most powerful actors within the Universidad Nacional. Lawyers, physicians and engineers controlled the Governing Board, the rectorship and the University Council. They helped implement new university laws that allowed them to establish themselves as an emerging University elite (Ordorika, 2003b).

UNAM and the discourse of National Unity. The developmentalist State was grounded in a discourse of a classless society and national unity. UNAM contributed in many ways to the creation and recreation of this discourse and that State. Its very existence epitomized the notion of a unified, merit-based society as a vehicle of social mobility. During the 1950’s and early 60’s economic development allowed for the growth of a more broadly based professional class. Students from the lower middle classes and occasionally from the working class obtained professional degrees and increased social mobility. The University celebrated its success in promoting social mobility, and its contributions to developmentalism and authoritarianism as the sources of economic growth and political stability.

The acquisition of prestige and legitimacy. Because of its central role in the economic and political structures of the developmentalist State UNAM was rewarded with strong financial support and a relative degree of autonomy. The University gained significant prestiges as a

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19 For a discussion about the nature and limits of autonomy at UNAM see alternative appraisals by Daniel Levy (1977; 1980) and Imanol Ordorika (2003b; 2003a; 2005 forthcoming).
professional degree granting institution. It was also recognized as a prominent institution through the efforts of many reputed *Universitarios* in institution building, politics and business. Graduates and faculty occupied the emerging spaces of an expanding national system in the realms of healthcare, architecture, culture, science and the media. The prestige of UNAM’s degrees was widely advertised by professionals in urban and rural settings alike. Its is still very common to see professional practices of physicians, engineers and lawyers publicizing their UNAM degrees as a mark of expertise, merit and high professional standards.

The role of UNAM as a State builder, a vehicle for social mobility and a distinguished institution of the developmentalist State earned it great legitimacy in the eyes of the Mexican society. As a central piece of the State and instrument of national political arrangements it was constantly praised by politicians, businessmen and intellectuals alike.

In this context, academic groups and intellectuals within UNAM expanded their research and related activities. Although there are important antecedents, organized research and knowledge production in Mexico is essentially a product of the 1960’s and 70’s. During these early years, research in the sciences and the humanities essentially took place at the UNAM. Few other institutions, the National Institutes of Health among them, were active in research activities. While research in the sciences and humanities added to UNAM’s prestige, research

\[20\] Antecedents can be traced back to the *Escuela de Altos Estudios* established by Sierra at the foundation of the National University in 1910. The first courses in high level calculus and physics were taught in 1932. The school of sciences was established in 1938. Research institutes within UNAM were established at different times: Biology in 1930, Mathematics and Physics in 1938, Astronomy in 1967 (thought the National Observatory was absorbed by the university since 1929).
and knowledge creation were secondary to the professional degree orientation of UNAM in the eyes of the government, public and within the university.

In spite of its centrality in the reproduction of the Mexican society and its political and economic connections, UNAM retained a certain aura as a challenging and critical institution vis-à-vis the political system. In part, this perception stemmed from the University’s defiant stance towards the populist governments of the Revolution. At the same time, UNAM was awarded a certain degree of leniency when faculty and administrators adopted judiciously critical positions and when students adopted defiant stances, critical of the national political leadership. This perception of the University as a critical oasis in the midst of authoritarianism increased its legitimacy and appreciation among vast segments of the Mexican society.

The end of developmentalism

The radical exercise of critique and the rebellious stance of university students in Mexico foreshadowed a coming crisis of developmentalism and the authoritarian political system. The economies of Mexico and other Latin American countries began a steep decline at the end of the 1960’s (Carmona, 1970; Marini, 1994). The miraculous economic growth that had characterized the developmentalist State was coming to an end, and the subsequent economic crises diminished the expectations of the professional urban middle classes. In 1968 the political expression of dissatisfaction took the form a massive protest movement at UNAM, IPN21 and other higher education institutions where students challenged the foundations of the authoritarian political

21 *Instituto Politécnico Nacional* is the other national public higher education institution in Mexico. It was founded by President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1936 when the National University had distanced itself from the Mexican government.
The ferocious repression exercised by the government against students, faculty and university buildings alike shattered the relationship between the *Universitarios* and the Mexican State.

The tragic events of 1968 shaped Mexico’s public policies towards higher education in the 1970’s. Public investment in higher education increased, new institutions were created and enrollments expanded. UNAM received the lion’s share of State support for higher education. At the same time, UNAM struggled through an intense series of internal political conflicts over democratization and efforts to establish faculty and staff unionization (Ordorika, 2005 forthcoming).

In the wake of the economic crises of 1976 and 1982 the connections from the University to national economic development and the political system were further eroded. Government enforced economic structural adjustment polices profoundly impacted public higher education, and UNAM was no exception. In spite of the increasing difficulties of the authoritarian political regime, UNAM’s elites maintained their close ties with the government and the government party. A new segment of the University elite, stemming from the professional groups but grounded in the research institutes, took control of the institution. The authoritarian governance system of the University, however, was kept in place and strengthened, despite continued internal and external conflicts.

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23 Between 1982 and 1988 federal funding for all levels of education decreased 43.65% (Martinez Della Rocca & Ordorika, 1993). UNAM’s budget was reduced in 49.47% between 1981 and 1987 (*Ibidem*).
Over the past twenty-five years structural adjustment policies and efficiency models for the entrepreneurial university have dominated the State-University relationship. During this period, traditional sources of legitimacy and prestige were broken, and like many other public institutions, the Universidad Nacional became the object of criticism and attacks. Under the guise of critiques of the efficiency and quality of the university, the traditional role of the institution was called into question.

*Contested conformity*

The traditional connections between the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and social, political and economic realms were broken with the end of developmentalism and the crisis of the authoritarian political regime. A similar political economic and cultural transformation has played out in many other universities on the periphery. The role of public higher education institutions in the complex context of peripheral societies in a globalized world is yet to be constructed. In the absence of well defined projects that root institutions like UNAM in their own realities, the images of “successful” universities and models of successful universities located in core nations become more appealing and ever more dominant.

This shift is clearly seen in the case of UNAM. Since the 1970’s dominant groups within the University have redefined the role of the institution and, consequently, its priorities.24 Research and knowledge creation as well as graduate education have been framed as the most appropriate objectives of the University. Though serving vast numbers of students,

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24 The shift towards a research oriented institution can be easily traced to Rector Guillermo Soberon’s reorganization of UNAM in 1973 (see Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1977; see Soberón Acevedo et al., 1983). Faculty evaluation policies established since 1985 favor research and hinder teaching (see Díaz Barriga, 1997b; Ordorika, 2004).
undergraduate education and professional training have become marginal to research institutes and centers that have been defined as the core of the University.

The discourse accompanying the reorganization of UNAM along these lines suggested a *de facto* diversification and stratification project within the same institution.\(^{25}\) Institutes, research centers and graduate programs in a few disciplines, became the equivalent of research universities. Undergraduate studies acquired the status of liberal arts colleges. Profound stratification occurred even within professional schools. Some academic programs and advanced student groups could be compared to elite professional institutions. At the other end of the spectrum, “normal” student groups are arrayed in structures similar to comprehensive state colleges; and some schools, like nursery and social work, resemble community colleges. At the lowest level of the system are the baccalaureate schools. Neglected by university administrations and deprived of the necessary resources, these schools lay at the margins of the UNAM.

During the last decade even the research oriented university vision of UNAM was challenged by increasingly dominant entrepreneurial views of appropriate postsecondary organization. These views have been shaped by the myth of the market oriented (Pusser, 2002), privatized university as embodied in the prestigious, entrepreneurial flagships of the United States. The discourse of entrepreneurialism was adopted, emphasis was placed on knowledge production, competitiveness, quality and excellence, efficiency, international orientation, and financial diversification at the expense of undergraduate studies, democratization and social justice (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

\(^{25}\) It is as if the guidelines of the 1960 California Master Plan had been put into practice within one institution, substituting the university, for a diversified system.
Along these lines, Mexican university administrators established faculty evaluations and merit pay systems modeled on those used by successful flagships. Research was privileged over teaching and faculty members were driven into intense competition for their own salaries and research funds. Articles in international journals were more highly valued than in refereed national or local academic publications with significant implications for national research, academic work, and the role of the faculty as a social body.26

Under the guise of increasing efficiency, admission regulations were changed and access to the University restricted. Attempts at “financial diversification” were immediately translated into tuition increases. These initiatives generated intense conflicts in 1986, 1991 and 1999 and tuition increases were reversed three times in response to student movements and strikes (Ordorika, 2005 forthcoming).

UNAM endured these conflicts with great difficulty. Attacks from government officials and business sectors upon the University increased during these conflicts. In the transition to a flagship model university the UNAM has alienated its broadest constituency. Knowledge creation and research, as a new source of prestige, is not immediately appealing to broad segments of the Mexican population. There is no doubt that UNAM is the most important research institution in the country. The relevance of UNAM in this arena is widely recognized nationally and internationally. However, the connection between postsecondary research and knowledge creation and the public good in a peripheral country is unclear. Prestige derived from international recognition at the level of the disciplines and research groups is not enough to maintain and recreate the legitimacy of an institution like UNAM.

26 For a discussion on the implications of these policies on faculty and academia work see Díaz Barriga (1997a), Canales (2001) and Acosta (2004).
Efforts to introduce the entrepreneurial model of postsecondary organization, though contested, have narrowed the very idea of the University. In the minds of decision-makers and administrators the social responsibilities and aims of an institution like UNAM are increasingly limited to a space of interaction with markets and the business world. Compliance to this narrow perspective might enhance the prestige of UNAM among these sectors but it will surely endanger its legitimacy as a public institution among the broader population.

Conclusion

Flagship universities are a historical construct of the United States. These constructs are dynamic, they have changed historically and they have been the object of conflict and contest. The evolution of prestigious land grant state institutions into flagships has entailed a transition towards elite research based universities. As they seek greater autonomy from their states, these public institutions become increasingly similar to private universities. Their prestige is increasingly based on their capacity to produce knowledge, measured through the acquisition of research grants and contracts; publications and patents; and, to a lesser extent, on citations, impact and academic awards.

The notion of flagship is contextually and historically loaded with meaning. When the notion is used in a transcultural and transnational setting it transfers the meaning to a different context and obscures our understanding of this historical process. Higher education institutions at the periphery have historically conformed to notions, visions and projects from the dominant countries. In order to understand the impact of these forces on institutions like UNAM it is important to distinguish them analytically. This is the process we have tried to follow in this chapter.
We have shown here that the distinctiveness of a University like UNAM, its magnitude, moral authority, relevance, and impact, can only be understood as part of a dynamic historical process. The prestige and legitimacy of UNAM developed from historical interactions between the university and the State in the political, economic, social and cultural realms. Legitimacy and prestige are rooted in social actors. The historical centrality of UNAM can only be understood as a product of public perception, running across different segments, sectors and groups within the Mexican society. It is the perception of its contribution to the public good at the national and the individual level that creates the symbolic power of UNAM. The historical centrality of the University has been based on two distinct perceptions, academic prestige and institutional legitimacy.

As historical social products, legitimacy and prestige are not static concepts. We argue that UNAM and other institutions on the periphery are in a critical phase of their histories. the contemporary sources of prestige for universities at the periphery are not widely understood, they are not widely shared and there is significant and growing contest over how to define legitimate behavior in these institutions. The widely adopted contemporary administrative tactic, efforts to conform to the entrepreneurial model, has two distinct and negative effects. On one hand, conformity increases internal conflict and weakens the internal cohesion of the University. In the case of UNAM this condition is worsened by the continuing adherence to authoritarian practices and structures of university governance, despite democratic changes occurring in the broader society and the Mexican political system. On the other hand, conformity to entrepreneurialism widens the disconnection between the National University and its traditional constituency, the Mexican people. While these consequences may not concern private universities, or even elite flagships, in the case of a National public institutions, broad societal
support for the functions of the university are essential for institutional survival. The social role of UNAM has to be recreated to generate a balance between its core academic functions (knowledge production and teaching) on the one hand, and its social responsibilities (democratization of access, production of public and private goods and service) on the other. It is obviously not an easy task, but this is the most important contemporary challenge facing the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, its faculty and its students. It is also essential that the lessons of UNAM and other institutions of higher education located on the periphery of global power not be lost in the rush to adopt practices developed for flagship universities that exist under different regimes, with different resource bases and different cultural projects. Vive le difference!
References


