

## La Máxima Casa de Estudios

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### *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México as a State-Building University*

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Visitors to Mexico and international scholars alike frequently notice that the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) is commonly called the *máxima casa de estudios*<sup>1</sup> by a large majority of Mexicans (Rhoads and Durdella 2005). This title expresses the people's deep appreciation of Mexico's most prominent university. Admiration for the Universidad de la Nación<sup>2</sup> or Mexico's alma mater is deeply embedded in Mexican society and runs across different classes and social groups.

UNAM is one example of a distinctive institutional type that we identify as state-building universities. UNAM—and other such universities, including the Universidad de Buenos Aires, the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, the Universidade de Sao Paulo, and the Universidad Central de Venezuela—are dominant teaching and research-oriented universities. They have also been central in building the material conditions for the expansion and consolidation, as well as the intellectual and social legitimacy, of their respective states. While scholars of international higher education have endeavored to understand universities on the periphery in light of models of higher education at the center of global economic and political power, insufficient attention has been paid to the role of state-building activities in defining prominent universities on the periphery (Ordorika forthcoming).

To conceptualize these universities, we have focused essentially on Latin American institutions and more particularly on the Mexican case

of UNAM. However, there are a number of other institutions around the world for which a similar case could be made. These institutions are in most cases located in nations on the periphery of world economic and political power. While the state-building university shares many of the attributes of flagship universities in the United States and abroad, its distinctive and historically contingent role in the formation of states on the periphery marks the state-building university as a unique institution. However, under the political economic pressures of neoliberalism and globalization, UNAM, like other state-building universities, has been hard pressed to maintain its dominance and centrality in state projects. In this chapter, we examine the current state of these universities, the pressure they face to emulate the flagship model, and their future prospects. We also consider the likelihood that these institutions might transform themselves into something closer to flagship universities, and we offer some speculations on the meaning of such a shift for postsecondary education in nations on the periphery. Because we see UNAM as a fundamental example of the origin, emergence, and contemporary crisis of a state-building university, we present its case in some detail.

### THE CASE OF UNAM

The history of UNAM goes back to the Real y Pontificia Universidad de México, established in 1553. After undergoing a number of transformations over the centuries, the university was reconstituted in 1910. It has taken the better part of a century for the national university in Mexico to develop fully the attributes of a state-building university. At various points in its long history, UNAM has played a major role in the creation of such essential state institutions as public health ministries and the Mexican judicial system. The national university has also played a key role in the design of innumerable government bodies and offices and in educating and credentialing the civil servants who dominate those offices. UNAM has served since its founding as the training ground for Mexico's political and economic elites as well as for a significant portion of the nation's professionals (Ordorika 2003b).

Perhaps most important, at many key moments in Mexican history, UNAM has served as a focal point for the contest over the creation and recreation of a national culture that placed such postsecondary functions as critical inquiry, knowledge production, social mobility, and political consciousness at its center. This role was particularly relevant during the late 1940s and the 1950s in a period that has been labeled the "Golden Era"

of this university. The strength and clarity of purpose of UNAM during this period were deeply connected to its centrality in state-development projects. With the demise of these projects and the precarious state of the Mexican economy since the late 1970s, UNAM has faced critical challenges. Institutional identity has been eroded and the university's capacity to respond to multiple demands has been called into question.

UNAM is not alone. The crisis of legitimacy that UNAM faces has emerged over the past 20 years in a context in which public institutions across the world, in every sphere of society, have been challenged. The crisis of legitimacy faced by state-building universities is fundamentally the crisis of public-sector institutions under siege from neoliberal restructuring and privatization projects (Marginson 1997; Levin 2001). In Mexico, as is the case with other nations on the periphery, the number of private higher education institutions and their enrollments have expanded, often with state support. In concert with the shifting postsecondary context, the discourse of institutional legitimacy has also changed. In the wider political economy, private organizations and practices have been depicted as more successful and efficient than their public counterparts, while public universities have become the object of close scrutiny and intense critiques. The intensity of the contest between the historical legitimacy of state-building universities and the contemporary push for market-based and privatized institutions reflects both the rising tide of neoliberal challenges and the continuing symbolic and functional importance of the public sector.

The enduring legitimacy of state-building universities is understandable, as these institutions are a powerful representation of the communal knowledge and power of the intellect in the state.

## THE CONCEPT OF THE STATE-BUILDING UNIVERSITY

The concept of the state-building university is rooted in a broad understanding of the state as the web of relations between individuals and among social groups in a given societal arrangement shaped by historical traditions, culture, economic development, and political processes. The state is organized in institutions or apparatuses that express these social relations. These social relations are also essentially unequal and imply the domination of some groups over others. Both the government and universities are institutions of the state (Ordorika 2001, 2003b).

State-building universities are defined by their assumption of central roles in building nation-states. They have been key players in the development, expansion, and maintenance of the state as an integral entity as

well as other state institutions (i.e., the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government), and particularly in the national project of building and extending postsecondary education. Their role as state-building institutions has been both historically contingent and key to shaping the character of national institutions and national postsecondary capacities.

State-building universities share many of the attributes of flagship universities, yet they are distinctive in important ways. First, state-building universities often embody the aspirations of the emerging society, with powerful linkages to historical and contemporary social and intellectual movements, in ways that are increasingly distinct from the emerging missions of flagships. Second, state-building universities stand as the reification of a particular form of national sovereignty, as sites of the preservation of collective autonomy through intellectual development and social contest. Third, the state-building university embodies the creation myth of the national intellectual, social, and political projects, the legacy and promise of scholarly purpose and national advancement. The presence of the state-building university reifies the symbolic national saga of national pride, opportunity, and development through higher education. It is an institution that nurtures the intellectual and personal aspirations of the nation and its people, its social movements, revolutions, and restorations. To describe these complex and often contradictory institutions, which are understood at the same time as temples of learning, crucibles of social justice, seedbeds of knowledge generation, and hotbeds of social protest, tests the limits of language. State-building universities exist not only *in* the hearts and minds of the people, they are *of* their hearts and minds. The institution is an anchor and a point of departure, both a statement of *nacion* and a manifestation of *el pueblo*.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to delineate the conditions that have enabled state-building universities to emerge in nations on the periphery and to consider the degree to which this vision of the university can be preserved in a rapidly globalizing world. We believe UNAM, in its transformation into the *máxima casa de estudios*, and in its relationship with the Mexican state, the political system, and the broader society, offers a useful case for understanding the future of state-building universities on the periphery. It is also a helpful example of the distinction between the state-building universities and the flagships.

## FLAGSHIP UNIVERSITIES

Can we talk about a Mexican flagship? The answer is a qualified “no.”

Although state-building universities have been a distinct form that reached particular prominence during a developmentalist era, internal and external pressures are driving state-building universities to emulate flagship universities. To understand this assertion, and the pressures for adaptation faced by state-building universities, it is useful to explore the notion of the flagship university in its original context.

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 developed in the United States and subsequently appeared in a few other parts of the world. Finally, the term has been used in a prescriptive way to symbolize a model of an institution that prominent universities in every country face demands to emulate.

### A Descriptive Term

References to flagship universities immediately imply an allusion to the leader, the most prominent or the finest among a broader group of state or national higher education institutions. The term *flagship* is derived from naval warfare and in its more contemporary usage 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 that can be common to different nations, states, regions, and realities. Flagship universities constitute, almost universally within the English-speaking world, 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. The flagship has long implied the dominant public institutions in a postsecondary system. Contemporary analyses often include private universities. While this may be analytically appropriate for flagships, it is at odds with the historical development of the flagship concept and serves as a useful starting point for understanding the distinction between flagships and state-building universities.

### The Historical Concept

In the United States, the flagship concept is fundamentally connected to the historical development of the land grant universities founded in the

United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Berdahl 1998).

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

The success of these institutions had a strong influence on the land grant colleges created under the Morrill acts of 1862 and 1890 (Kerr 2001). Over time, such powerful public state colleges as Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin evolved toward the research university model (Rudolph 1965). In this way, public land grants became flagships and then what Kerr termed, “multiversities,” on the way to becoming some of the world’s most influential postsecondary institutions. Berdahl offers three key reasons for the evolution of the flagship concept. The first is the expansion of enrollments in postsecondary education in the United States after World War II. That expansion led to the creation of branch campuses of the original state universities, branches that lacked the resources and prestige of the original campuses. Second, in the 1960s, as the college-going population continued to increase and more campuses were opened, state postsecondary systems were created—as was the case, for example, with the University of California system under the California Master Plan (Douglass 2000). Another key reason for the creation of systems was to ensure political and economic support for the original campuses as the number of public institutions within a state expanded. In this manner the original dominant public and land grant universities within each state emerged at the head of powerful systems of public universities with widespread popular and political support (Berdahl 1998).

The evolution of the flagship universities in the United States is linked to strong state support and commitment toward the emergence, expansion, and maintenance of public higher education institutions in the states. Historically this commitment has been expressed in state and federal support for undergraduate teaching, graduate and professional education, and scientific research (Kerr 2001). Over the past decade, flagships in the United States have rapidly raised undergraduate, graduate, and professional tuition in order to continue to compete for institutional prestige

and influence (Geiger 2004). These tuition increases, in combination with rapidly increasing college costs, have strained relations between flagships and the state legislatures that have long supported them. These conflicts are not new phenomena.

Over the past two decades, the prestige competition has engendered significant contest over access and affordability in the flagships. In the 19th century, negative popular perceptions about the elite nature of emerging higher education institutions were in some places so strong that the creation of new public institutions was intensely contested. This was the case, for example, in the struggle over the foundation of the University of California (Douglass 2000). In spite of these conflicts, throughout the land grant movement new state universities that would combine elite teaching, training, and research were created across the United States.

There is a paradox embedded in the mission of the flagship university today. On the one hand, the flagship generally upholds the elite traditions of private universities, through selective admissions, high-quality research, and training for elite professions. On the other hand, the flagships endeavor to democratize access, as they attempt to create diverse student cohorts, participate in community service, and devote significant energy to generating public goods.

The latter goals, while less prominent in public discourse and policy debates, are expressed in the flagships through a variety of historical roles and commitments, including:

- dedication to professional education and training for the public good
- relative democratization of access to education, knowledge, and training
- a “democratic” role in the reproduction of society through the inculcation of democratic values and through the creation and recreation of identities, shared beliefs; and norms
- commitment to equality and social justice
- commitment to critical inquiry and autonomous knowledge creation

As a consequence of pursuing these 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, oversight, and reinforcement of institutional legitimacy.

## 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 and Leslie 1997; Kirp 2003; Geiger 2004; Slaughter and 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 an agenda:

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.<sup>4</sup>

A similar commitment to competitiveness and funded research has begun to emerge at universities beyond the United States. The University of 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 European Union in an "increasingly competitive environment."<sup>5</sup> A web search for flagship universities reveals other examples like these for the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

These emerging mission statements reveal a different view of the flagship. From this perspective, a flagship university is a symbol of the changing contemporary relationship between the state and higher education and a vehicle for a new set of social and individual aspirations (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Contemporary university leaders, policymakers, and administrators cite similar characteristics of the emerging flagship ideal:

- knowledge production-centered (emphasis on research and graduate studies)
- 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
- autonomous through financial diversity

Not surprisingly, these emerging redefinitions of the flagship university are consistent with those that define a category of prominent universities variously labeled as entrepreneurial universities (Clark 1998), enterprise universities (Marginson and Considine 2000), or centers of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). What these redefinitions share in common is a portrayal of the most successful research universities in Europe and the United States in a global competition for greater resources, prestige, and legitimacy. Despite the rapid adaptation to the demands of globalization at elite universities, most retain one element central to the historical role of flagships: a discursive emphasis on service to the local community, state, and region.

Contemporary research on postsecondary organization and governance has also depicted flagship universities as political institutions (Pusser 2003; Ordorika 2003b). As such, they are sites of interest group competition over a range of issues, including student access, knowledge creation, funded research, and a myriad of social issues (Pusser forthcoming). As interest group competition has intensified, the flagships have increasingly aligned themselves with industry and the private sector, at increasing distance from their historical sources of legitimacy (Pusser, Slaughter, and Thomas forthcoming; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

The flagship is also a self-referential and self-replicating concept. As the leaders of the postsecondary arena, the flagships shape and give substance to the meaning of excellence in academe and in turn legitimize the entrepreneurial and political behaviors that solidify their positions as leaders. The concept of the American flagship university has become enticing to postsecondary institutions around the world on the strength of its success—where those global perceptions of flagship success, while genuine, are nonetheless shaped by the flagships themselves. 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, 151)

The flagship model is a prescriptive model because of the power of the flagship concept in international higher education. The flagship form is so dominant in discourse, planning, and prestige rankings that the concept exerts an almost coercive force on institutions, systems, and policymakers. As Kerr noted, the hegemonic influence of the American flagship has been unrivaled for centuries. That dominance establishes global norms for post-secondary excellence and demands conformity from those institutions and systems that would emulate the success of the American flagship model. Ironically, despite a perpetual contest within the United States over the appropriate missions of the flagships, the idealized version of the flagship may reduce the traditional role of the university in the periphery as a site of social protest and contest. Instead, peripheral universities increasingly find themselves contesting demands to conform to the idealized norms of the American flagship. The prescriptive concept of the flagship also shapes the criteria for ranking postsecondary institutions and establishing international benchmarks for institutional performance.<sup>6</sup>

### Flagships on the Periphery?

There is no doubt that American flagships are the source of the dominant postsecondary model in contemporary society and that they are the most successful institutions within that model. Yet, to understand whether it is appropriate to expect that model to establish itself on the periphery turns our attention to three key questions: (1) Is the flagship concept understood on the periphery in the same way as it is understood at the core? (2) Is it appropriate to adopt the American flagship model in peripheral countries? (3) If the flagship model can be adopted in the periphery, will it supplant the state-building institutions?

Where *flagship university* refers to the most notable, most important, finest, or even largest institutions in a country we see little conflict between the concept of a flagship and that of a state-building university. In either case the term used refers to the most distinctive colleges or universities at a state, regional, or national level.

Where the concept of the flagship diverges significantly from the state-building university is when each institution is considered in its own

historical perspective and grounded in its specific context. The American flagship and the state-building universities on the periphery considered in historical context are quite distinctive, and distinct, from one another. This is largely due to the unique historical processes and events that have shaped individual institutional traditions, normative values, and organizational cultures and beliefs. The concept that distinguishes flagships and state-building universities as unique institutional archetypes and distinguishes one university from another within those archetypes is *historical centrality*. Historical centrality is shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural processes occurring within higher education institutions and between those institutions and other institutions of the state, social actors, and economic forces. It is 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. Flagships and state-building universities have quite different degrees of historical centrality in their respective states. In part, this is due to the historical decentralization of higher education in the United States, where there are many unique and prominent state universities, but no national university. In many countries on the periphery there are national universities, with considerable historical centrality in the creation and sustenance of their respective states.

As noted earlier, the prescriptive influence of the flagship university generates coercive pressures on aspiring institutions throughout the world to conform to the norms of the American flagship and to adapt the structures and policies associated with the flagship. Those demands have historically been met with considerable contest and resistance. It is important in the case of institutions on the global periphery to focus on the dynamic concept of the university as a contested autonomous space, the process of opposition and resistance to demands to emulate the successful and dominant model from the core. The ways in which higher education institutions and constituents have resisted the prescriptive norms of the flagship model are central to understanding the distinction between flagships and state-building universities and the challenge that faces those who endeavor to create and sustain flagships on the periphery.

#### DISTINCTIVENESS, HISTORICAL CENTRALITY, AND CONTESTED AUTONOMOUS SPACE

A thorough understanding of most prominent public research universities on the periphery requires that we move away from implicit comparisons

between universities on the periphery and the dominant institutions at the core. An effective comparison must be grounded in historical and contextual explanations for institutional distinctiveness and centrality on the periphery. Further, the university as a public sphere, an autonomous space for contest and resistance to conformity (Pusser forthcoming) has historically been a major component of the construction and shaping of colleges and universities on the periphery. In postcolonial peripheral countries, the university itself, as a concept and as an organization, is a historical product of contest entailing resistance and acquiescence to colonial powers and their hegemonic projects. This resistance to coercion by dominant models can be thought of as contested conformity. It can be located in any number of historical and contemporary struggles over higher education on the periphery (Ordorika 2003b).

Using UNAM as a lens for bringing clarity to these concepts, we turn attention to the historical contests, competing forces, and contradictions that have shaped UNAM's prominent position as a state-building university within Mexico. We then apply the insights from UNAM in an analysis of the role of distinctiveness, historical centrality, and the university as a contested autonomous space in distinguishing state-building universities from flagships.

### La Universidad de la Nación as a Distinctive Institution

UNAM is the most legitimate and prestigious of all Mexican universities. It is also the most distinctive, distinguished by its unprecedented mix of academic programs and unique relationship to the state. The magnitude, centrality, and history of UNAM have firmly rooted the university within the Mexican society. UNAM is also involved in a wide array of activities beyond the realm of higher education, including government, economics, business, and health care. UNAM is truly Mexico's university.

As with other state-building universities, UNAM's distinctiveness, its historical centrality, and its legacy of resistance to conformity are key to its legitimacy and prestige. Legitimacy and prestige, in turn, are deeply related but distinct indicators of the status of UNAM. One cannot understand UNAM, or the nature of state-building universities, without understanding the sources of the legitimacy and prestige these institutions have long enjoyed.

## The Attributes of UNAM

UNAM is a large and multifaceted institution. The university offers three levels of degrees: baccalaureate,<sup>7</sup> undergraduate (which includes professional schools), and graduate studies. These levels encompass 2 baccalaureate programs; 70 undergraduate and professional programs, as well as 9 technical and vocational programs; 45 doctoral, 110 master's, and 60 specialized study programs.

In the 2003–2004 academic year, nearly 270,000 students were enrolled at UNAM; 143,405 in undergraduate and professional programs, 104,554 in baccalaureate programs, and 18,987 in graduate programs. UNAM accounted for 3 percent of the nation's baccalaureate enrollments and 7 percent of its undergraduate enrollments. UNAM also held 13 percent of total national graduate enrollments, with 30 percent of the enrollments in specialized studies, 6 percent of the master's programs, and 26 percent of the doctoral programs.<sup>8</sup> According to data provided by CONACYT (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología [National Council for Technology]), Mexico's national science and research government agency, in 2003 UNAM awarded 30 percent of Mexican doctoral degrees.<sup>9</sup>

Research at UNAM is organized into two systems: the sciences (natural and physical) and the social sciences (including the humanities). Research takes place in 26 research institutes, 13 research centers, and many schools and departments. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of all research in Mexico takes place at UNAM. In 2003, the university produced 37 percent of all research articles in Mexico in the physical sciences that were published in international refereed journals,<sup>10</sup> and in 2004, faculty at UNAM comprised 29 percent of the nation's academic researchers. UNAM has also been entrusted with the National Seismologic System as well as the National Observatory and sails two research vessels along the Mexican coasts. The university is also a repository of Mexico's most important archives and book collections, held in the National Library administered by UNAM.

The university's reputation is further enhanced by the more than 60,000 extension programs and cultural events sponsored by UNAM each year. These presentations include musical concerts, theatrical performances, dance recitals, literary readings, movies, conferences, book presentations, guided tours, and seminars. UNAM has one of the nation's 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 a constant presence through private and public broadcasts.

The Ciudad Universitaria, the extensive campus built in the 1950s, is the center of UNAM's activities and a key site for public gatherings in Mexico City. Many of its buildings host murals by Mexico's most famous artists, including Rivera, O'Gorman, Siqueiros, and Chávez Morado. In addition to Ciudad Universitaria there are 14 baccalaureate and 5 graduate and undergraduate campuses in Mexico City, augmented by research and graduate campuses in other states and cities, including Cuernavaca, Ensenada, Mérida, Morelia, and Tlaxcala.

As is the case for other state-building universities, UNAM is more than a university—it is a distinctive institution of the state. The depth and breadth of its offerings demonstrate the extent of its intellectual, social, cultural, and political activities; and its essential contributions set it clearly apart from other institutions in the country. They also clearly distinguish UNAM from flagship universities on a number of dimensions. First, there are many flagships in the United States, but only one national university in Mexico. Second, while there are some flagships that have a complexity and breadth of academic and research offerings similar to what is available at UNAM, none approach the cultural, political, and social prominence of UNAM. It can be argued that all of the flagships of the United States taken together do not influence the national character to the degree that UNAM shapes the Mexican state. It is also the case that UNAM emerged as the sole higher education institution in Mexico and remained so for many years. As the system expanded and new universities were created, UNAM became the pinnacle of a relatively undifferentiated higher education arrangement. Unlike prominent universities in master-planned postsecondary systems, UNAM has evolved with many of the responsibilities of a differentiated system built into its own structure and processes. Finally, flagships in the United States differ in degree rather than in kind. The University of California, the University of Texas, the University of Michigan, Harvard University, and Yale University have a great deal in common. If one stands above the others at a particular moment, it is for the quality of its undergraduate education, the total size of its research productivity, and the excellence of its graduate schools; and those distinctions are subject to rapid change. UNAM, like many other state-building universities, has since its founding been like no other Mexican institution.

The historical centrality of the UNAM and much of its legitimacy can be explained by the fact that the institution has been closely linked to many

of the most significant events in Mexican history. As is the case with other state-building institutions, UNAM has shaped the Mexican state and, in turn, its intense involvement with the country's key historical moments has shaped UNAM. This symbiotic process of shaping and being shaped, often through contest, is central to understanding the historical centrality of state-building institutions. While flagships in the United States have had significant influence upon the American political economy (Pusser 2003), the impact has been of an entirely different magnitude than the influence exerted by state-building universities.

### Antecedents of the Universidad Nacional

UNAM in its contemporary form was established in 1945 by an act of the Mexican Congress. The antecedents of the university, however, can be traced to the Real y Pontificia Universidad de México, founded by a royal decree in 1551. In the aftermath of the war of independence and through the early years of the new republic, the Real y Pontificia Universidad suffered a long period of uncertainty and lack of stability leading to its closure in 1867. Despite the demise of this first incarnation of the national university, its memory stands as a powerful symbol of Mexican higher education, a tradition that predates the founding of Harvard College, with a lineage older than that of the contemporary Mexican state. The power of the symbol of the ancestral university, progenitor of the modern university and the modern state, has given UNAM an almost transcendental legitimacy in its conflicts with the various national regimes that have sought to use the state to shape the university.

Along with a powerful symbolic legacy, modern Mexican higher education inherited four strong principles of the colonial university that shape UNAM today. These were the principles of autonomy, internal election of university officials, student participation in university governance, and public funding for the university (Ordorika 2003b).

### Autonomy and Academic Freedom

The university was reestablished in its modern form through the consolidation of existing postsecondary institutions in 1910, at the end of the 40-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. The reconstituted university was called Universidad Nacional de México (Alvarado 1984; Marsiske 1985). That iteration of the institution reflected a complex mixture of philosophical traditions: conservative scholasticism, spiritual humanism, and

positivism. The relationship between the national university and the populist governments emerging from the Mexican revolution was extremely confrontational. After considerable conflict, the tension between the university and the Mexican state was eased in 1929 by the formal granting of autonomy from the state to the university. The tension between the desire for self-governance by the *universitarios*<sup>11</sup> and the state's continuing interest in shaping national educational practices also gave rise to a powerful norm of academic freedom within the university.

Over time, the conflict between the university and the state emerged as a symbol of 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 society and the university (Ordorika 2003b). At such defining moments the historical centrality of the university as state-building institution comes into focus. The university becomes both site and symbol of broader national contests, shaping those contests as it is shaped by the conflict.

### Developmentalism and Authoritarianism

In the ensuing years UNAM played a major role in the consolidation of the authoritarian political system and in the subsequent construction of a developmentalist state, one devoted to self-determination in economic and social improvement and increased independence in core-periphery relations (Marini 1994; Wallerstein 2004). The university was instrumental in the expansion of the urban middle class that accompanied national economic growth from the 1940s to the early 1960s (Guevara Niebla 1980). University credentialing and professional preparation were the vehicles for social mobility through which urban middle classes developed into a significant segment of Mexican society. The prestige of UNAM's degrees was widely advertised by professionals in urban and rural settings alike. To this day it is common to see physicians, engineers, and lawyers publicizing their UNAM degrees as a mark of expertise, merit, and high professional standards.

*Universitarios* were also instrumental in the creation of new public institutions of the state. Physicians from UNAM created the Ministry of Health as well as the most important National Institutes of Health. Engineers from the university organized and staffed the Ministry of Public Works, while lawyers trained at UNAM created the modern judicial system and wrote significant pieces of legislation that constituted the foundations of

the Mexican state.

Beginning in the 1940s, 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 a member of the army, and he was a graduate of UNAM. Since that time *universitarios* have dominated government posts at every level. UNAM became the single most significant source of formal political leaders in the country (Smith 1979; Camp 1984, 1985). Roderic Ai Camp (2002) has argued that UNAM became the most important center for elite formation, as politicians, intellectuals, businesspeople, and a few members of the Catholic and military hierarchies were educated and recruited and then created networks at UNAM. From 1946 to 1994 every Mexican president was a graduate of UNAM.

Between 1940 and 1968, the Mexican state was governed by a powerful and politically stable authoritarian regime. A primary source of its legitimacy was its ability to incorporate professional expertise and intellectual networks from the national university. UNAM helped to shape, strengthen, and reproduce an authoritarian political system, and in turn UNAM was shaped by Mexican authoritarianism. These professional groups also became the most powerful actors within UNAM, as attorneys, physicians, and engineers controlled the governing board, the rectorship, and the university council (Ordorika 2003b).

### The State-Building University and the Discourse of National Unity

The developmentalist state was grounded in a discourse of class collaboration and national unity. UNAM contributed in many ways to the creation and re-creation of this discourse and that society. Its very existence epitomized the notion of a unified, merit-based society as a vehicle of social mobility. This key attribute of UNAM is one that has been widely shared by state-building universities in other nations.

The role of UNAM as a state-builder, a distinguished institution of the developmentalist state, and a vehicle for social mobility earned it great legitimacy in the eyes of Mexican society. As a key function of the authoritarian state and a central source of legitimacy for that state, UNAM was held in great esteem by many sectors of Mexican society.

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 are essentially products of the 1960s and 1970s. During these early years,

research in the sciences and the humanities essentially took place at 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 and knowledge creation were secondary to the professional degree orientation of UNAM in the opinion of the government, the public, and the university itself.

### The University as a Contested Autonomous Space

Alongside its centrality in the academic, social, and economic life of Mexico, UNAM plays a critical role as a symbol, a site, and an instrument in relation to state political contests (Ordorika 2003a; Pusser 2003). In part, this function of UNAM emerged from the university's defiant stance toward the populist governments of the revolution. Since that time, while UNAM has by no means been a monolithic political entity, various constituencies within the university have been awarded a certain degree of leniency by the state despite their defiant stances and critical discourses at crucial political moments (Ordorika forthcoming). The university has also served as a central public sphere, which Pusser (forthcoming) has described as "a space that is at once physical, symbolic, cultural, political and semantic, not in relation to the State or the broader political economy but as a site of complex, autonomous contest in its own right." This concept of UNAM as a critical oasis in the midst of state contest further increased its legitimacy among vast segments of Mexican society. The role of the university as a public sphere is another defining characteristic of state-building universities. While it has been argued that a number of flagship universities have served as key public spheres at various historical moments (Pusser forthcoming), this characteristic is decidedly more prevalent at state-building universities. However, over the past four decades state-building universities and flagships have faced new and significant challenges to their autonomy.

### THE END OF DEVELOPMENTALISM IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

The radical exercise of critique and the rebellious stance of university students in Mexico in the 1960s foreshadowed a coming crisis of developmentalism and a loss of legitimacy for the authoritarian political system. 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 of a massive protest movement at UNAM, Instituto Politécnico Nacional, and other higher education institutions, where students challenged the foundations of the authoritarian political system (Gonzalez de Alba 1971; Guevara 1990; Martinez della Rocca 1986; Ordorika 2003b). The ferocious repression exercised by the government against students, faculty, and university buildings alike shattered the relationship between the *universitarios* and the Mexican state. 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 policies profoundly impacted public higher education<sup>12</sup> 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.

Over the past 25 years, efforts to impose structural adjustment policies and efficiency models have dominated the state-university relationship at UNAM and at state-building universities around the world (Ordorika 2004). During this period, traditional sources of legitimacy and prestige have been challenged, and, like many other public institutions, UNAM has become the object of neoliberal challenges. Under the guise of critiques of the efficiency and quality of the university, the traditional role of the institution has been called into question.

### The State-Building University in Crisis

The past two decades have introduced a unique period of crisis for state-building universities, one that emerges from the end of developmentalism. The shift from developmentalist policies to neoliberal restructuring has entailed changes in form, process, and discourse that challenge the historical centrality, autonomous space, and distinctiveness of state-building universities. As these institutions increasingly emulate flagship universities, these shifts have also altered the relationship between the state and state-building institutions.

This crisis is clearly evident in the case of UNAM. Since the 1970s, in response to external demands, dominant groups within the university have redefined institutional priorities (Muñoz Garcia 2002; Díaz Barriga 1997b; Ordorika 2004). Research for economic development and elite professional education have been framed as the most appropriate objectives of UNAM. Though the university continues to serve vast numbers

of students, undergraduate education has become secondary to research institutes and centers that have been redefined as the core of the university. Over the past decade even the hegemony of traditional research practices at UNAM has been challenged by demands for entrepreneurial postsecondary organization. As is the case at postsecondary institutions around the world, a rather nebulous discourse of efficiency and productivity has been adopted, with emphasis placed on commercial knowledge production, competitiveness, excellence, and economic development at the expense of undergraduate studies, democratization, and social justice (Marginson and Considine 2000; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

Along these lines, Mexican university administrators have established faculty evaluations and merit pay systems modeled on those used by successful flagships (Ordorika 2004; Bensimon and Ordorika forthcoming). Research has been privileged over teaching, and faculty members have been driven into intense competition for their salaries and research funds. Articles published in international journals have been more highly valued than those placed 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 (Díaz Barriga 1997a; Canales Sánchez 2001; Acosta Silva 2004).

Under the banner of increasing quality, admissions regulations were changed and access to UNAM restricted. Calls for “financial diversification” were immediately translated into proposals for significant tuition increases. As the historical record demonstrates, state-building universities do not respond willingly to state coercion. The attempted transformations at UNAM generated intense conflicts in 1986, 1991, and again in 1999. After protracted public contest, tuition increases were reversed three times in response to student movements and prolonged strikes (Ordorika 2006).

The resistance at UNAM has come at a great cost. Attacks by government officials and the business community have increased throughout these contests. However, efforts to introduce the entrepreneurial model of postsecondary organization have contravened the historical understandings of UNAM as a state-building university with commitment to access and the redress of inequality. Knowledge creation and research, as a new source of prestige, is not immediately appealing to broad segments of the Mexican population. As the social responsibilities and aims of an institution like UNAM are redefined so that the institution becomes a site for state interaction with markets and global development, the historical centrality of the institution as the harbor of the aspirations of those traditionally excluded

from higher education has been diminished. For a variety of reasons, the effort to move to a flagship model has alienated many of UNAM's constituencies, just as the move from developmentalism to neoliberal restructuring has alienated many constituencies on the periphery.

### Flagships and the Future of Higher Education on the Periphery

The future of higher education institutions in the peripheral societies of a globalized world is unclear. Nascent adaptations to globalization and neoliberal restructuring have diminished the legitimacy of state-building universities. The purported benefits of the flagship model loom large in postsecondary planning on the periphery, yet we are reluctant to predict the evolution of state-building universities into flagships, and even more reluctant to predict success for such transformations. There are two fundamental reasons for caution. First, the flagships themselves are changing rapidly, moving in an intense drive for prestige toward ever-more-elite undergraduate training, professional credentialing, and commercially focused research (Geiger 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). In the process, public and private flagships have lost a considerable degree of the "public" character and legitimacy that could be traced, in the case of the publics to their land grant origins, and in the case of the private flagships to their role in the development of the political economy in the United States after World War II. As they have turned increasingly to private sources of funding, higher tuition, the commercialization of academic work, and demands for greater institutional autonomy, the flagships have also reduced their legitimacy as public spheres (Pusser forthcoming). Taken together, these shifts move the flagship model farther from the historically central and distinct projects of the state-building universities, broad access, the redress of inequality, and knowledge production for the benefit of society.

Our second caveat with regard to the transformation of state-building universities into flagships emerges from our understanding of historical centrality and distinctiveness as keys to understanding higher education on the periphery. We have argued 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, society, and the state in the political, economic, social, and cultural realms. It is the perception of its contribution to the public good at the national and the individual levels that has sustained the power of

UNAM as a state-building university. Although higher education institutions at the periphery have historically faced demands to conform to visions and models from the dominant countries, state-building universities have led the resistance. While their future is undoubtedly linked to the success of emerging political-economic forces pressuring states on the periphery, history suggests it is the distinctive character of state-building universities and their ability to serve as sites of contest that have enabled them to transcend pressures for adaptation across various epochs.

There is no doubt that UNAM remains the most important research institution in Mexico, as do other state-building universities in their respective contexts. The relevance of UNAM in this regard is widely recognized nationally and internationally.<sup>13</sup> However, the connection between postsecondary research, knowledge creation, and the public good for a peripheral country in the context of globalization is unclear. Prestige derived from international recognition of disciplinary excellence and significant external research funding is not enough to maintain the legitimacy of an institution like UNAM.

As sociohistorical products, legitimacy and prestige are not static concepts. UNAM and other state-building universities 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. Of more immediate concern, there is an intense contest over how to define the legitimate activities of these institutions. The dominant contemporary administrative approach, a comprehensive effort to emulate the flagship model, has had two distinct and negative effects. Demands for conformity to a flagship model have increased internal conflict, and they have weakened the internal cohesion of the university. In the case of UNAM these conditions have been exacerbated 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 balance, efforts to conform to the goals of the flagship model have widened the distance between UNAM and its traditional constituency, the Mexican people.

Nevertheless, UNAM and the other state-building universities face considerable pressure to emulate flagships. Without remarkable changes in the initial pattern of demands for adaptation, there is little likelihood for success in such a transformation. In pursuit of flagship status, UNAM and other state-building universities would be expected to increase their reliance on private funding and industry support. They would be encouraged to enhance their infrastructures to compete for partnerships with private

commercial ventures, emphasize research with the potential for patent and licensing income, and establish partnerships with Mexican and multinational corporations for research and development. Revenues would have to be reallocated, shifting funds away from undergraduate and professional education in favor of investments in graduate studies and commercial research activities. Greater financial resources would need to be devoted to the hard sciences and technology development to the detriment of the social sciences and the humanities. Tuition would have to be increased. Student admissions practices and enrollment guidelines would need to be revised to increase selectivity and institutional prestige. As we have argued throughout this work, these policies run counter to the essential historical purposes and commitments of state-building universities.

In the final analysis, state-building universities differ from one another, and from flagships, in many of the same ways as the states from which they have emerged differ. The crises faced by state-building universities, and by flagships, reflect state crises in their respective national contexts. At the beginning of the 21st century the cradle of global flagships, the United States, faces exceptional political polarization and uncertainty over the future of public and private institutions of all sorts. As the flagships struggle to maintain their prestige and their historical commitments to public and private goods, they reflect the uncertainty at the center of globalization projects (Wallerstein 2004).

Postsecondary institutions that are distinctive, are historically central, and resist demands for conformity as they serve as sites for contest succeed by establishing themselves in mutually supportive relationships with the state. States that foster the centrality of public higher education, privilege the creation of critical discourse and knowledge production, nurture universities as public spheres, and are dedicated to the redress of social, economic, and political inequality can foster a symbiotic relationship with a state-building university. This sort of collaboration can be sustained for universities at the core and on the periphery. As the case of UNAM demonstrates, state-building universities on the periphery offer an important historical lesson for the flagships at the core. Despite repeated challenges from authoritarian regimes and a variety of internal and exogenous shocks and crises, UNAM has persisted by relying on its historical commitment to serve the people of Mexico and to build the Mexican state. When a state moves away from its commitment to support the missions of its essential institutions, it reveals its own crisis and moves away from its own history and sources of legitimacy. Our hope for the future is that the prominent institutions of higher education on the periphery and at the core will

remain committed to those beliefs and activities that have long provided their legitimacy and sustained their centrality. We hope also that institutions of higher education and their respective states endeavor to serve as sites for critical inquiry and contest at this essential juncture and remain mindful that one cannot succeed without the other.

#### NOTES

1. *Máxima casa de estudios* can be translated as the “highest house of studies” or the “highest institution of knowledge.”

2. This title can be translated as the “nation’s university.”

3. The nation and the people.

4. From the Louisiana State University, National Flagship Action Agenda, [http://appl003.lsu.edu/acadaff/flagship.nsf/\\$Content/Action+Plans+&c+Outcomes?OpenDocument](http://appl003.lsu.edu/acadaff/flagship.nsf/$Content/Action+Plans+&c+Outcomes?OpenDocument).

5. See *The University of Edinburgh annual report 1999–2000*, [www.cpa.ed.ac.uk/reports/annual/1999-2000/index.html](http://www.cpa.ed.ac.uk/reports/annual/1999-2000/index.html).

6. The *Academic Ranking of World Universities* produced by the Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (in 2005) as well as the *Times Higher Education Supplement World University Rankings* (in 2004).

7. In the Mexican case, baccalaureate (or preparatory) refers to a secondary degree that is required to move into the higher education system. This component of the secondary process is labeled Educación Media Superior (middle higher education) in the Mexican education system.

8. Enrollment figures are estimated based on data for UNAM provided by the Dirección General de Planeación (Sistema Dinámico de Estadísticas Universitarias, UNAM 2003, [www.estadistica.unam.mx/2004/docencia/pob\\_escolar\\_2003-2004.html](http://www.estadistica.unam.mx/2004/docencia/pob_escolar_2003-2004.html)) and national enrollment data provided by Secretaría de Educación Pública ([www.sep.gob.mx/work/appsite/princif2003/Princif2003.pdf](http://www.sep.gob.mx/work/appsite/princif2003/Princif2003.pdf)).

9. Calculated 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, [www.conacyt.mx/dap/INDICADORES\\_2004.pdf](http://www.conacyt.mx/dap/INDICADORES_2004.pdf)). Data on doctoral degrees awarded by UNAM in 2003 data provided by Dirección General de Planeación (Sistema Dinámico de Estadísticas Universitarias, UNAM 2003, [www.estadistica.unam.mx/2004/docencia/pob\\_escolar\\_2003-2004.html](http://www.estadistica.unam.mx/2004/docencia/pob_escolar_2003-2004.html)).

10. See sources in note 9.

11. This is the term used to refer to members of the university—it includes faculty as well as students.

12. Between 1982 and 1988 federal funding for all levels of education decreased 43.65 percent; UNAM’s budget was reduced by 49.47 percent between 1981 and 1987 (Martínez Della Rocca and Ordorika 1993).

13. UNAM was ranked among the top 100 universities by the *Times Higher Education Supplement*. According to this benchmark UNAM is the first institution in Latin America and also among the Spanish-speaking universities of the world. In 2004 UNAM was ranked among the top 200 universities in the world in the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* of 2004, by the Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai

Jiao Tong University. According to this ranking UNAM is first among Latin American universities and second among universities from Spanish-speaking countries.

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