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Higher Education Collaboration in North America: A Review of the Past and a Potential Agenda for the Future

By Fernando León García, Sergio M. Alcocer,
Taylor Eighmy and Santa J. Ono

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Higher Education Collaboration in North America: A Review of the Past and a Potential Agenda for the Future

Fernando León García, Sergio M. Alcocer, Taylor Eighmy and Santa J. Ono¹

When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into fruition in the early 1990s, there were high hopes and expectations on what this emerging economic block could achieve. Although the agreement involved extensive conversations that led to regulations that facilitated trade across the region—the main intent of NAFTA—the same was not true for the higher education environment. Critics have argued that NAFTA's heavy focus on trade left little room for similar harmonization on issues like higher education. From this perspective, it is evident that if efforts to improve higher education are to gain traction in the trilateral relationship, they must be linked with regional trade and competitiveness. Yet even though NAFTA was not the vehicle for further cooperation on higher education, colleges and universities across Canada, Mexico, and the United States did embrace the opportunity and enthusiastically engaged in conversations that prompted trilateral collaboration.

This article follows the key agreements that influenced and guided the early stages of NAFTA collaboration among higher education institutions, as well as developments that kept engagement across the three countries active. It also provides an initial list of areas in which future collaboration might focus.

The First Twenty Years of Educational Collaboration, 1993–2013

To understand the historical of trilateral educational cooperation in North America, it is important to look at the foundational statements and key programs that formed the basis of cross-country engagement. Several critical statements or declarations established arenas for collaboration and triggered key programs and initiatives involving all three countries.² These initiatives, however aspirational, have all experienced problems and faced limitations that are worth investigating in greater detail as well.

The Foundational Statements

In September 1992, a key group of educators met at the Wingspread Center in Racine, Wisconsin, to discuss higher education collaboration in North America. The conversations held at this conference resulted in the development of the Wingspread Statement on trilateral cooperation in higher education. The main objectives of the statement were to develop a North American dimension in higher education, with a focus on collaboration and information exchange. Greater mobility of students, academics, and related professionals was a central topic, as was improved relationships among higher education institutions, government, business, and other organizations that have a stake in the quality of higher education. Notably, current and emerging information management and transmission technologies were highlighted as a means of supporting the objectives of the Wingspread Statement.

Two main immediate actions resulted from the Wingspread discussions. First, North American higher education institutions made efforts to develop an inventory of existing resources and partnerships that could provide a basis for expanding trilateral cooperation in higher education. Participants in these efforts included the Institute of International Education (IIE) in the United States, the Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (ANUIES) in Mexico, and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) in Canada). In addition, an 18-member Trilateral Task Force on North American higher education institutions was developed, with 6 representatives from each country.

Just one year after the release of the Wingspread Statement, the Vancouver Symposium took place in Vancouver, British Columbia, in September 1993. This symposium led to the publication of the Vancouver Communiqué, which summarized the existing linkages between universities in North America and made recommendations to coordinate and enhance trilateral cooperation. The communiqué also recommended the expansion of North American studies programs at universities. As a follow-up to Wingspread, a report on collaboration across the three countries was developed, with the most important highlights being as follows:

- In the United States, 109 institutions (3.2%) had linkages with Canadian institutions and 182 (5.3%) with Mexican institutions. Only 56 had links with both Canada and Mexico. Also, most U.S. students participating in exchanges with Canada (67%) and Mexico (90%) were in programs sponsored by their home campus, rather than by the government, nonprofits, or private businesses.
- In Mexico, more than a third of ANUIES member institutions surveyed had linkages with the United States (193) and Canada (22).
- In Canada, close to 40 percent of AUCC member institutions showed linkages with the United States (68) and Mexico (33).

The symposium recommended a number of actions to promote educational collaboration across North America. Among these recommendations were programs to enable faculty and administrators from all three countries to meet and develop trilateral higher education collaborative activities and support trilateral exchange, research, and training for students. The Vancouver Communiqué also suggested that institutions establish a trilateral mechanism to examine the mobility, portability, and certification of skills across national borders.

The Wingspread Statement and the Vancouver Communiqué led to initiatives that promoted collaboration across North America. Some pivotal efforts involving student mobility were the Regional Academic Mobility Program (RAMP) and the Program on North American Mobility in Higher Education (NAMHE), as well as greater institutional cooperation through the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC). (These programs are discussed in greater detail below.)

Slightly less than 10 years after Wingspread came the Calgary Recommendations for North American Higher Education Collaboration. These recommendations were the product of the eighth CONAHEC Conference held in Calgary, Alberta, in October 2002. The consensus at the event was that the three countries were inextricably linked by growing economic ties. At the same time, local and regional prosperity depended largely on the global competencies of future professionals who

were then students and education leaders. In addition, there was a perception that higher education needed to take a more aggressive role in offering opportunities to students to gain international experience and expertise, particularly in the North American context. Accordingly, the Calgary Recommendations included a proposal to create a permanent North American trilateral commission to provide sustaining infrastructure, strategic direction, and funding for initiatives that would foster North American higher education collaboration. Other recommendations forced on educational and professional mobility, including trinational course and program equivalencies, promotion of second- and third-language acquisition among North American students, and standardization of occupational certifications for quality assurance. Reflecting on the changes in the global security landscape following the September 11th attacks, the conference noted that North American institutions would need to review regional immigration regulations and assess how these regulations might affect student and professional mobility. As with the Wingspread Statement and the Vancouver Communiqué, the Calgary Recommendations noted the importance of proper financial support for the necessary electronic information bases and clearinghouses that would facilitate future knowledge-sharing activities.

Some Key Initiatives

Following the Wingspread Statement and the Vancouver Communiqué, higher education institutions and partners implemented several major initiatives to promote educational collaboration across North America. One of the early initiatives involved the Regional Academic Mobility Program.³ Administered by the IIE, the focus of RAMP was to encourage student mobility between NAFTA countries. According to an IIE report, during the first 10 years of the program participants included 17 Canadian, 14 Mexican, and 7 American institutions.

A major (and perhaps the most long-lasting) initiative involving trilateral collaboration was the North American Mobility in Higher Education Program, referred to as NAMHE in the United States and Canada or PROMESAN (Programa para la Movilidad en la Educación Superior en América del Norte) for Mexico.⁴ Administered by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education in the United States, Human Resources Development Canada, and the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico, the program provided grants for up to 10 trilateral projects per year. Central to this initiative was that all proposals required at a minimum of two partner institutions from each country, so that a common baseline was to have a consortium of six institutions promoting some form of student mobility. From 1995 to 2004, the program supported 78 consortia involving a total of 512 institutions (176 from the United States, 173 from Canada, and 170 from Mexico). From a discipline perspective, the majority of the consortia were in business and economics (20.8%), social science and public policy (19.5%), and environmental science (19.5%). During that period, the consortia involved the mobility of over 1,150 students from the three countries, with more than half of those from Mexico.

The Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration was founded in 1994 with the support of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education.⁵ Created explicitly to promote cooperation among institutions from the NAFTA region, CONAHEC has been an essential force in strengthening the trilateral relationship and has held 19 conferences, including the inaugural one in Baja California, Mexico. Six of the conferences have been hosted by U.S. institutions, five by Canadian institutions, and seven by Mexican institutions, with one conference

cohosted by the United States and Mexico (San Diego and Tijuana). The current membership involves more than 60 institutions from Mexico, 30 from the United States, and 10 from Canada. With varying degrees of success, CONAHEC has kept on the agenda the main points proposed by the Wingspread Statement and the Vancouver Communiqué, while at the same time incorporating other important themes as necessary.

A Snapshot of Progress and Limitations

While there was undoubtedly progress in higher education collaboration between the pre-NAFTA period and the NAFTA years, the results during the first 20 years were mixed at best. Mobility did increase, particularly for students; all three countries showed greater enthusiasm for institutional cooperation; and colleges and universities considered ways to formalize and provide a more solid structure to internationalization efforts in the region. An extremely positive outcome of this period was that the pursuit of trilateral collaboration brought about as a by-product an increase in bilateral collaboration. There were many more bilateral partnerships involving the United States and Canada, Mexico and Canada, and the United States and Canada than there were before NAFTA.

Nevertheless, the notion of a North American higher education common space, as was attempted in the European Union, has seen little progress. Although student mobility within North America increased dramatically in the past three decades, and to some extent research collaboration also was successful, no overarching project on the scale of Erasmus or Horizon 2020 has been implemented to support the trilateral relationship. Distance education (later referred to as online education) gained greater acceptance, but these efforts were mostly individual and had no formal regional dimension. Numerous conversations regarding professional credentials and mobility had no visible results. Professional mobility as a state-specific operation and prerogative has been a marked source of frustration, particularly on the Mexican side, as U.S. states have failed to implement the mutual recognition required for professional mobility.

In terms of quality assurance, the provincial-based agencies in Canada, the regional accrediting agencies in the United States, and the Federal Ministry of Education in Mexico all kept operating and pursuing their own agendas. Nonetheless, a handful of institutions from Canada and Mexico sought and achieved institutional accreditation in the United States. Involvement on the part of business and industry was mostly visible as part of some of the trilateral grants that involved attempts at internship placements.

The results achieved during this period were a tribute to the efforts by the governments of Canada, the United States, and Mexico in terms of grants, as well as individual institutions willing to invest in this new arena for international cooperation. However, as the financial support of one or more of the North American governments dissipated or disappeared, so did the intensity of and outside interest in trilateral initiatives. An approach involving only governments will not be successful, as each of the three countries operates its respective education system differently. For example, Mexico's SEP is the main authority of a highly centralized system, whereas in the United States and Canada, states, provinces, and the institutions themselves operate independently. More extensive higher education collaboration requires the development of industry-government-academic partnerships by providing balance and increased redundancy through the involvement of more stakeholders.

As NAFTA began to move from the first two decades to the third decade, numerous articles, reviews, and publications identified particular issues that were still affecting collaboration among higher education institutions. Among these were cultural differences, financial asymmetries, language obstacles, and academic asymmetries.⁶ Some experts have questioned the extent to which North America truly is integrated. Indeed, just as there are differences across the three countries, there are also differences within each of the countries across states, from north to south and from east to west, and from the major urban areas to rural ones. All of these differences have made it even more difficult to overcome inertia in order to further integration.

The Next Ten Years of Educational Collaboration, 2014 and Beyond

Although NAFTA continued to provide the benefits of an integrated economic region, the same was not entirely true for higher education collaboration in North America. What did emerge, though, was a greater awareness of the possibilities and prospects for further bilateral cooperation among colleges and universities. One of the initiatives was known as 100,000 Strong for the Americas, while another was the U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Forum on Higher Education, Innovation, and Research (known by its Spanish acronym as FOBESII). In addition, a smaller and more focused program, ConTex, enabled the University of Texas system and Mexican institutions to build stronger research networks and support emerging scholars.

Under the banner of 100,000 Strong for the Americas, the United States launched an initiative intended to promote collaboration with Latin America in general and Mexico in particular. Supported by the U.S. government, in partnership with international foundations, companies, and a select group of collaborating countries, this effort has to date launched 27 competitions and awarded 211 grants involving 385 institutions across 25 countries.⁷ The top five countries in terms of awards are Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, and Peru. The focus has been primarily on student mobility but with an increasingly targeted approach. Relative to NAFTA-related efforts, this initiative has been very successful in terms of private sector support, with commitments from corporations and foundations such as Exxon Mobil, Santander, Coca-Cola, MetLife, Sempra Energy, Televisa, and Chevron.

The U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Forum on Higher Education, Innovation, and Research (or FOBESII) was created in 2014 to “expand opportunities for educational exchanges, scientific research partnerships, and cross-border innovation to help both countries develop a 21st-century workforce for mutual economic prosperity and sustainable social development.” FOBESII has four key pillars: academic mobility, language acquisition, workforce development, and joint research and innovation. FOBESII’s unprecedented relevance can be attributed to the personal involvement and direct oversight of then U.S. and Mexican presidents, Barack Obama and Enrique Peña Nieto. Their involvement marks the first time that higher education had the visibility of both countries’ presidents, underscoring the importance of executive branch support for higher education initiatives and potentially explaining why previous efforts were not as fruitful as this one.⁸ It is important to note that 100,000 Strong and FOBESII are not parallel; FOBESII is the strategic framework developed by Mexico and the United States on education, research, and innovation.

From the larger framework of FOBESII emerged *Proyecta 100,000*, Mexico's own initiative to reinforce bilateral collaboration with the United States. As the counterpart of the American 100,000 Strong strategy, *Proyecta 100,000* sought to have 100,000 Mexicans involved in some form of mobility to the United States while also setting a goal of having 50,000 from the United States engaged in mobility to Mexico. Unlike 100,000 Strong, which aimed to have a total of 100,000 U.S. students abroad, including in Mexico, *Proyecta 100,000's* initial goal was to have 100,000 Mexican students in the United States at one time. However, the financial constraints of the Mexican government made it impossible to achieve this goal, and so the program shifted to further align with the U.S. program by increasing the number of Mexican students in the United States by the end of President Peña Nieto's term. In conjunction with this effort, Mexico also launched *Proyecta 10,000*, specifically intended for collaboration with Canada.

In addition to student mobility, progress was made in other arenas, such as institutional collaboration (more than 100 memorandums of understanding) and the presence of U.S. institutions in Mexico (through representation offices or setting up full-fledged campuses). A number of select cross-border research-related initiatives also came to fruition, such as the Mission Foods Texas-Mexico Center and the Cali Baja Center for Resilient Materials and Systems.

In 2016, the University of Texas System and Mexico's National Council of Science and Technology established ConTex, a joint initiative to support bilateral efforts to enhance academic and research collaborations between Texas and Mexico, expand cross-border partnerships, and create opportunities to share knowledge of common interest to both countries.⁹ ConTex has a number of programs, including grant programs, graduate fellowships, and postdoctoral scholarships. It offers grants of up to \$100,000 for 12 months for binational collaborative research teams involving University of Texas System and Mexico-based researchers that contribute to the economic development and welfare of Mexico and Texas. Up to 30 graduate fellowships per year are provided for Mexican citizen students seeking to pursue doctoral studies at a University of Texas institution. Fellowships cover tuition and fees, a monthly stipend, and health insurance for up to five years. In addition, postdoctoral scholars seeking to pursue research at Mexican or University of Texas System institutions receive annual salary and health insurance for up to a 12-month period. These fellowships are open to all areas of study, but high-priority areas may be defined. Applicants must have completed a Ph.D. and must be either a Mexican citizen (for research fellowships at a University of Texas institution) or have graduated from a University of Texas institution (for research fellowships at a Mexican institution).

As the above examples show, by and large, there has been an increase in collaboration across North American higher education. These efforts have been a major accomplishment, but there is still much to do compared to what other regions, such as the European Union, have been able to achieve. Figure 1 illustrates the flow of students between Canada, the United States, and Mexico from 1995 to 2017.

Figure 1. North American Student Mobility

North American Student Mobility			
Mobility	1995	2013	2017
Students from Mexico to the United States	9003 ¹	14199 ⁶	16835 ⁶
Students from Mexico to Canada	167 ²	5370 ³	6920 ⁵
Students from Canada to the United States	22747 ¹	27357 ⁶	27065 ⁶
Students from Canada to Mexico	170 ²	226 ⁴	226 ⁸
Students from the United States to Mexico	4715 ¹	3730 ⁴	5736 ⁷
Students from the United States to Canada	573 ¹	12065 ³	11350 ⁶
Total Student Mobility	37375	58931	68132

Reference: 1. 1996 Open Doors Report On International Education Exchange by IIE. 2. North American Mobility in Higher Education. 2002. Evaluation Report 1995-1997. 3. A World of Learning. 2014. Canadian Bureau for International Education. 4. Maldonado, A. (2017) Pattani: Encuesta mexicana de movilidad internacional estudiantil. ANUIES. 5. International Students in Canada. 2018. Canadian Bureau for International Education. 6. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Project-Atlas/Explore-Data>. 7. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/US-Study-Abroad/Destinations>. 8. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?queryid=172#>.

Beyond the numbers per se, there is an alternative way of looking at the status of student mobility: the percentage of students from North America going to each of the partner countries (United States and Mexico to Canada; Canada and Mexico to the United States; and Canada and the United States to Mexico) relative to the total number of foreign students. Indeed, a recent review points out that of 370,893 foreign students in Canada, 4.6 percent were from North America (United States and Mexico); of 1,078,822 foreign students in the United States, 4.1 percent were from North America (Canada and Mexico); and of 20,322 foreign students in Mexico, 22.1 percent were from North America (United States and Canada).¹⁰

As the traditional way of measuring mobility has focused primarily on fee-paying, year- or semester-long students, it is highly likely that mobility across North America is underrepresented. A growing trend suggests that shorter term, more flexible arrangements between institutions are mostly overlooked, yet are more highly valued and promoted by developing countries such as Mexico. For example, mobility in the United States (according to the IIE) counts if a student is registered for one or more semesters; however, Mexican students were found to not be as willing to study abroad for one semester, instead preferring to spend a summer in the United States to focus on English language or technical skills. As such, the IIE does not account for this short-term mobility, which likely has affected statistics on higher education mobility. This trend should not be overlooked in the future.

Looking at the top five source countries for international students in North America, there is an area of opportunity for further collaboration within the region. Mexico does not rank in the top five countries sending students to study abroad in Canada or in the United States. Canada makes it in the top five countries sending students to study in the United States, at fifth place with 26,973 students. For Canada, the United States ranks as the country sending the fifth-most students to study abroad, totaling 12,915 students. In the case of Mexico, only the United States ranks within the top five countries sending students abroad. The United States comes in first place for the country sending students abroad with 4,213 students going to Mexico. Below is a table with the top five sources of international students for the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Table 1. Top Five Sources of International Students

United States		Canada		Mexico	
China	350,734	China	132,345	United States	4,213
India	186,264	India	76,530	Colombia	2,805
South Korea	58,660	South Korea	21,345	France	1,864
Saudi Arabia	61,287	France	20,790	Germany	1,282
Canada	26,973	United States	12,915	Spain	1,231

Source: IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact, *A World on the Move: Trends in Global Student Mobility*, March 2018.

There have also been other efforts over the past few years intending to promote trilateral or multilateral collaboration achieved under FOBESII. A specific case in point is the Association of Public Land Grant Universities (APLU), which boasts more than 200 member institutions from the United States, 8 from Canada, and 5 from Mexico. Another example is the Inter American Organization for Higher Education (IOHE), involving more than 350 members, encompassing more than 50 from Mexico, over 20 from Canada, and less than 10 from United States. Since 2010, IOHE has been organizing the Conference of the Americas on International Education. Similarly, in Tijuana, Mexico, in June 2017, ANUIES convened a roundtable to revisit collaboration across North America. For the occasion, ANUIES brought in the American Council on Education (ACE), APLU, the American Association of Community Colleges, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) from the United States. In the case of Canada, representation included AUCC/Universities Canada, CREPUQ, and CICAN.

Although the focus has been almost exclusively on U.S.-Mexico collaboration, also worth mentioning is the systematic effort by Universia and Santander Universidades to promote collaboration and leadership development by supporting the presence of university presidents from Mexico and their interaction with counterparts from the United States at key conferences by marquee higher education organizations such as ACE, the Council of Independent Colleges, and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.

Moving Forward

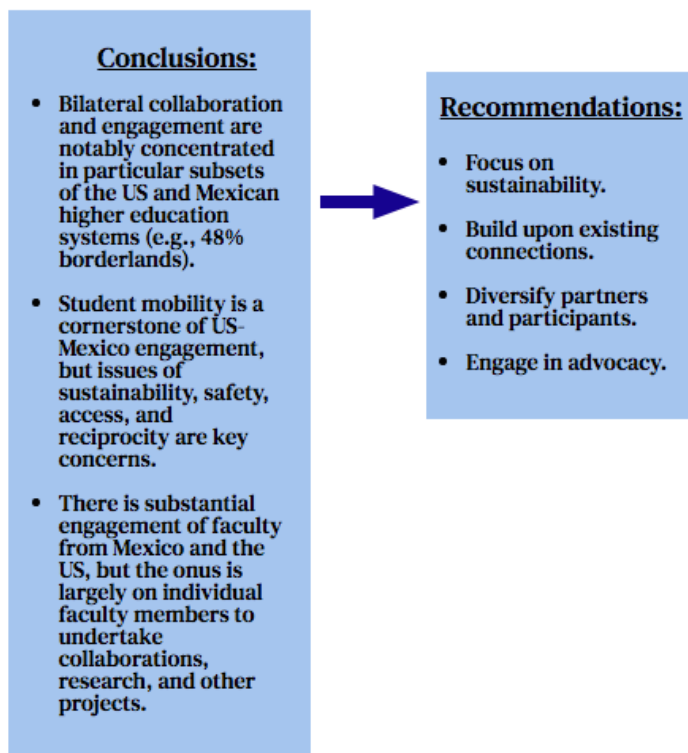
In July 2020, NAFTA was replaced with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). Much as when NAFTA was launched in the 1990s, higher education once again faces the challenge of having to align and support much as possible the intentions of improving the economic performance of all three countries, as a block and individually.

The launch of USMCA is a clear opportunity to both build upon what has been achieved in North America over the past three decades and to chart a common vision for a path forward. It provides a milestone whereby institutions should make reinvigorating key partnerships within the region a priority and should also explore richer collaborations beyond student mobility, such as new knowledge generation, grand challenges to research and development (global and pertinent to North America), trilateral investment in basic and applied research, hemisphere-focused growth of knowledge economies, regional economic development, workforce development, and efforts to address inequity by advancing educational equity. Some of this can be accomplished through interinstitutional partnerships, but true progress will require the involvement of “backbone” organizations such as Universities Canada, U15, ANUIES, AAU, ACE, APLU and CONAHEC, which constitute a powerful integrated group of more than 1,700 higher educational research institutions capable of further advancing bilateral and trilateral collaborations within North America. Beyond this, optimal progress will require the involvement of regional and federal governments. Institutions of higher education certainly appreciate their independent ability to establish cooperation agreements, and the continuation of FOBESII’s vision has been left at the discretion of the universities. It is anticipated that during this new era of trilateral collaboration, there will be a Competitiveness Council founded on talent and workforce development, which increases the likelihood that higher education and STI will be included in discussions within USMCA.

Many of the same asymmetries found over the past 20 years still exist. Nevertheless, higher education institutions have a different baseline upon which they can move forward. The data show that student mobility has increased, while institutional collaboration and partnerships have emerged and are still active. A select number of organizations have been set up to either focus on or periodically include themes pertaining to North American higher education. For a sustained period, governments have been willing to support for initiatives related to North American higher education cooperation. A select number of business and industry conglomerates have underwritten collaborative efforts. Recognizing some of these “wins” and acknowledging some of the limitations or shortfalls, as well as emerging themes, provide a good foundation upon which to discuss the future direction of North American higher education collaboration.

Some recent reviews point out that there is a predominance of “monoglots” in North America, meaning that in each of the regions (except for Canada), mostly one language is spoken.¹¹ Quality assurance and credit recognition continue to be a regionally based matter across and within the different countries. Even though North American governments have had moments of success in terms of coordination, by and large it has been limited. As government leaders change, so have priorities and funding changed. Research and development initiatives have tended to focus on country-specific issues. A recent review on collaboration between U.S. and Mexican higher education institutions provides the following conclusions and recommendations:

Figure 2. Conclusions and Recommendations



Source: Robin Matross Helms and Jermain Griffin, *US-Mexico Higher Education Engagement: Current Activities, Future Directions* (ACE-CIGE, 2017).

Reflecting on the past, present, and future of higher education collaboration in North America, a renowned education expert stressed that we should acknowledge that there is no better or worse, only different, and called for a renewed role for higher education: to create globally minded and internationally able but locally engaged citizens.¹² In addition to governments driving changes at a national level, higher education institutions need to embrace the change themselves. Additional suggestions include looking at collaboration beyond mobility, promoting internationalization as a means for more relevant higher education, and moving from cooperation to collaboration.

Between the 1990s and today, what was then seen as sustainability mostly in environmental terms has now expanded to a broader, more comprehensive concept that is referred to and promoted as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹³ Higher education institutions have made increasingly concerted effort not only to promote greater awareness of these SDGs—a central theme in numerous conferences—but also to integrate as many of them as possible, as more and more colleges and universities find them relevant to their planning efforts. In fact, one of the more active and widely recognized organizations involved in rankings, *Times Higher Education* (THE), has just implemented the THE Impact Rankings, which include SDGs.

The agendas of the leading higher education organizations across North America feature some differences and some similarities. Using references from Universities Canada, the ACE, the AASCU, the APLU, the Association of Governing Boards, and a recent work by representatives of public and private universities called “Nuestro Futuro Compartido” (Our Shared Future), the comparative chart below includes potential priorities or issues to address, including the Top SDGs

by the Top 10 institutions in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, according to the *THE Impact Rankings 2020*.¹⁴

Table 2. Key Future Priorities and Issues

CANADA	USA	MEXICO	SDGs
Equity, diversity and inclusion Indigenous student education	Access Affordability Diversity and inclusion	Access Inclusion	
Research and innovation	Innovation Alternative credentials and providers	Innovation	
Global experience Skills and talent	International students Internationalization and Competitiveness	Collaboration	SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals
	Quality and Accountability	Quality and Accountability	SDG 4 Quality education
	Student success and mental health		SDG 3 Good health and well being
Social impact		Impact	
Copyright and fair dealing			
		Sustainability	SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities
		Tenacity and Resilience	

The chart presents the priorities and issues, with some degree of latitude in interpretation, that are of high priority across all three countries.

Numerous studies and publications have highlighted the need for higher education institutions to be more in tune with and open to what businesses and industries identify as the most relevant skills. At a higher education leadership seminar for university presidents, a Latin American expert proposed consideration of the 10 Most Demanded Skills 2022 as reflected in the Future of Jobs Report 2018 by the World Economic Forum (Figure 3).¹⁵

Figure 3. Ten Most Demanded Skills, 2018 vs. 2022

What?

10 most demanded skills, 2018 vs. 2022

Today, 2018	Increasing, 2022	Declining, 2022
Analytical thinking and innovation	Analytical thinking and innovation	Manual dexterity, endurance and precision
Complex problem-solving	Active learning and learning strategies	Memory, verbal, auditory and spatial abilities
Critical thinking and analysis	Creativity, originality and initiative	Management of financial, material resources
Active learning and learning strategies	Technology design and programming	Technology installation and maintenance
Creativity, originality and initiative	Critical thinking and analysis	Reading, writing, math and active listening
Attention to detail, trustworthiness	Complex problem-solving	Management of personnel
Emotional intelligence	Leadership and social influence	Quality control and safety awareness
Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	Emotional intelligence	Coordination and time management
Leadership and social influence	Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	Visual, auditory and speech abilities
Coordination and time management	Systems analysis and evaluation	Technology use, monitoring and control

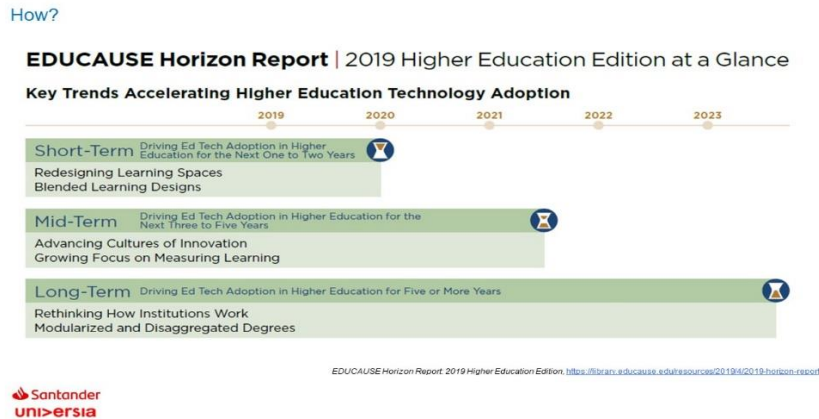
Source: World Economic Forum, *Future of Jobs Report 2018*.

<https://www.weforum.org/projects/future-of-work>

There is a clear migration from traditional skills required to be successful in the workplace arena to soft skills that provide more dynamic capacity in future graduates and will enable them to be

more flexible and adaptable in responding to multiple settings and circumstances (Figure 4). (See the Workforce Development Chapter by Earl Anthony Wayne and Sergio Alcocer for a more in-depth description and analysis of workforce development challenges and North American collaboration to address such challenges.)

Figure 4. Key Trends Accelerating Higher Education Technology Adoption



Regarding the challenges of further incorporating technology into higher education institutions, it appears that even though the short-, mid-, and long-term technology adoptions held true throughout 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic is liable to make the timeline move much quicker than anticipated (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Significant Challenges Impeding Higher Education Technology Adoption



Since the early part of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world in a dramatic fashion. It is in many ways a “black swan” event. While the full effect of the pandemic is still pending, several areas that will likely have a long-lasting impact across colleges and universities are online and hybrid education, competency-based education, and addressing the skills gap. One opportunity

that has been illustrated during the current pandemic is the enhanced ability to collaborate virtually in both pedagogy and scholarly contexts. Leveraging this opportunity by structuring cooperation via such technologies should be a strategic priority moving forward. Related to these will be an increased need to redesign curricula to be more flexible and aimed at preparing students to be adaptable to future changes, including and beyond the current pandemic.

All three countries have groups that advocate for a movement away from internationalization. Changes in border and immigration policies, withdrawal from support of international organizations such as the World Health Organization, only limited participation in international efforts such as the Paris Climate Agreement, and concerns about intellectual property and changes to government policies for international students all hamper potential initiatives to strengthen the trilateral relationship. To grow the relationship, it will be important for advocates in all three nations to engage with government leaders and make the case for a hemispheric approach to higher education.

In concept and spirit, at least modestly in terms of cross-border collaboration across the North American region, the European Union is a model to emulate, in particular with initiatives such as Erasmus Plus and Horizon 2020.¹⁶ Since the 1990s, more than 10 million students, faculty, and administrators have taken part in Erasmus-funded mobility, overwhelmingly within the European Union but also with the rest of the world. In 2018 alone, the budget was €2.8 billion. In the most recent fiscal year for Horizon 2020, which focuses on research and development, there were appropriations for €1.4 billion to support initiatives around four themes: (1) connecting economic and environmental gains; (2) digitizing and transforming European industry and services; (3) building a low-carbon, climate resilient future; and (4) boosting the effectiveness of the Security Union.

A Common Agenda for the Future Higher Education in North America

Based on an analysis of priorities and issues from a comparative perspective, a common agenda for North America would involve the development of well-rounded graduates, equipped with the most demanding soft skills required by business and industry, and capable of performing within their own country as well as in any of the other two countries pertaining to the region.

The North America Higher Education Agenda 2.0 might include the following points:

1. Convene an initial North American Higher Education Summit that eventually can become a recurring periodic summit. The ratified USMCA; the impacts of the global pandemic; and the ramifications of the severe economic recession on North America's national governance structures, communities, health systems, and economies all provide strong reasons to convene a recurring summit, especially one where higher education can critically advance its role in providing solutions to societal grand challenges.

To develop this summit, it will be vital to engage key organizations in the conversation of this new era in trilateral collaboration. Participants might include Universities Canada and U15 (Canada); ACE, AASCU, APLU, AAU (United States); ANUIES and FIMPES (Mexico); and CONAHEC. As student mobility is likely to continue to be high on the agenda, other relevant organizations in

each country might include IIE, the Canadian Bureau for International Education, NAFSA, and the Asociación Mexicana para Educación Internacional. The private sector will also be an important partner, not only for funding but also to close the breaches and gaps in talent and workforce development activities.

Key issues for discussion at future summits include diversity and inclusion, innovation and the knowledge economy, collaboration and global competitiveness, quality education, health and well-being, impact, sustainability, shared curricula and student mobility, and workforce development. These are common to virtually all of the collaborative programs led by Universities Canada, U15, ANUIES, AAU, ACE, APLU, and CONAHEC. It makes sense to align these issues, and new ones as they evolve, across the three nations as an ongoing platform.

Mobility will likely be a central topic in any ongoing conversations. Student mobility, faculty collaboration, value-added programs, institutional partnerships, and regionally relevant research and development that are focused on the needs and opportunities of North America 2.0 will all be relevant issues. Using as a point of departure traditional face-to-face degree-seeking mobility, there should be greater exploration of short-term options that include e-mobility and internationalization at home, internships, and service learning. These might include but not be limited to businesses and industries that have a presence across North America. The scope of faculty interaction and exchange might include teaching, research, and scholarship, as well as faculty preparedness and development in relation to technology and digital literacy. Value-added options might include badges and certificates and double and triple options, such as degrees on the same level, combinations of undergraduate and graduate degrees, degree-plus-certificate or degree-plus-badge qualifications, or any relevant combinations of the above. A North American Studies Certificate, for instance, could be delivered online and taken by any undergraduate student wishing to do so in any of the three countries. Options such as the ones mentioned above should embrace and exploit the changes that have taken place under the current “black swan” event of the COVID-19 pandemic, and promote hybrid, online, and other remote ways of interacting. The research and development agenda should involve recurring and emerging cross-border issues such as border and immigration, cybersecurity, health and pandemics, and intellectual property.

2. Create trilateral initiatives that build upon the work of FOBESII, Proyecta 100,000, 100,000 Strong in the Americas, and other initiatives in the North American space. These organizations can amplify the efforts of Universities Canada, U15, ANUIES, AAU, ACE, APLU and CONAHEC. The leadership of these organizations should organize around the general tenets of North America 2.0. As a starting point for these initiatives, considering the following possible options:

- Create a North American Student Mobility Bank integrated by universities from the three countries. This might be akin to the efforts made by CONAHEC over the past 10 years.
- Set in motion a North American Faculty Fellows Virtual Program. This would identify institutions that have select openings for faculty from North America to teach online courses and match those needs with faculty from across North America who are interested in teaching in a country other than their own.

- Establish a North American Online Sharing Consortium integrated by universities from all three countries. This could be in the spirit of the effort implemented by the Council of Independent Colleges or the SUNY COIL Initiative.

3. *Involve heads of state and relevant ministries from all three governments.* High-level involvement is essential if North America is to address its unique challenges within our hemisphere and to remain fully competitive in the global economy. Intentional work with individual government leaders will be needed to ensure that USMCA integrates higher education collaboration as a core priority. A specific head of state, for instance, may opt to sponsor an initiative and establish a recurring summit (as in the case of the North American Higher Education Summit) to ensure continued momentum. As has been the case with CONAHEC, such government “hosted” summits should occur annually and involve the creation of an action plan with targets. The recent creation of the u7+ alliance under the patronage of President Emmanuel Macron of France is a case study of this approach.

An upgrade and expansion of FOBESII with Canada, to be called FOTESII (where the “T” stands for “trilateral”), would include components like workforce development that would tie FOBESII-type efforts to USMCA and to its to-be-formed Competitiveness Committee. It would meet at least once a year and be supported by specific committees corresponding to agreed-upon pillars or strategies. The idea of such a mechanism is to coordinate the development and implementation of a higher education vision for North America, but also to coordinate the research, development, and innovation part, as well as to coordinate with the ad hoc committee on competitiveness to be formed per USMCA. This could be the “space” in which governments can track developments and identify problematic issues. The forum would not be a rigid, rules-based entity; rather, it would be a flexible organization in which all initiatives are welcome in order to fulfill the joint expectations and targets, with a scoreboard to keep track of achievements. FOTESII would include the U.S. Department of State, Mexico’s Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, and Education Canada as lead actors to coordinate actions within the three countries. FOTESII would coordinate the development of a NAHE observatory to report on progress and identify and solve critical roadblocks.

4. *Convene and secure the involvement of senior executives or representatives of Fortune 500 companies with a presence on key clusters across North America.* Common to all three nations are multinational companies with common interests in aligning their workforces, knowledge economies, and economic development. Large foundations and not-for-profits also are interested in advancing common interests in North America. To this end, the North American Competitiveness Council called for by USMCA may be a possible liaison for talent development within the private sector. This council might focus on the development of talent across the region with relevant soft and hard skills, practical experiences, and the well-rounded education required to develop more competitive graduates. Seed funding for North American higher education initiatives along these lines may be obtained under a matching scheme between governments and Fortune 500 companies.

5. *Promote a greater awareness of North American higher education plans and progress by partnering with and systematically communicating through recognized media outlets* such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Education*, and *University World News*. The

efforts by Universities Canada, U15, ANUIES, AAU, ACE, APLU and CONAHEC to coordinate around a hemispherical higher education agenda is a strategic opportunity to further align interests.

As the past has shown, if the efforts of institutions, governments, and businesses can come together in service of a common goal, a reenergized, more responsive and relevant, highly innovative, and competitive environment will benefit each of the three countries as well as the North American region as a whole. It also would enhance the prospects to promote North America from a hemispheric perspective to the rest of the world. Colleges and universities have provided continuity for dialogue and collaboration across all three countries, frequently in a bilateral format and sometimes through trilateral cooperation. North American university students deserve a world where they can travel freely and collaborate to achieve both personal and global goals. Institutions of higher education must embrace the responsibility of educating future global citizens who understand the critical importance of international collaboration and have adopted values of respect, tolerance, and inclusivity. It is time for North America's respective governments, businesses, and industries to engage with and support these goals.

¹ The authors would like to thank Alexandra Helfgott for her excellent research and editing assistance for this article.

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