



Susan Cochran
Telephone: (510) 987-0887
Email: susan.cochran@ucop.edu

Chair of the Assembly of the Academic Senate
Faculty Representative to the Regents
University of California

June 2, 2023

**THERESA MALDONADO, VICE PRESIDENT
RESEARCH AND INNOVATION**

Re: Five-Year Review of UC MEXUS Multicampus Research Unit

Dear Theresa:

At its May 24, 2023, meeting, the Academic Council approved the attached five-year review of the UC Institute for Mexico and the United States (UC MEXUS) Multicampus Research Unit (MRU). Following procedures outlined in the Compendium, the review was performed by a joint Senate review committee, led by the University Committee on Research Policy (UCORP) with input from the University Committee on Planning and Budget (UCPB) and the Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs (CCGA). We request that you forward the report to the UC MEXUS director.

As you know, in 2019, the University consolidated under the umbrella of Alianza MX three systemwide programs related to educational and research activities with Mexico: 1) the UC MEXUS MRU; 2) President Napolitano's UC-Mexico Initiative; and 3) Casa de California. The review committee noted that a key source of funding for UC MEXUS was not renewed during the review period, and that this, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, has hampered efforts to sustain and advance the MRU's activities.

UC MEXUS has been a productive program that administers important academic and cultural exchange programs between UC and institutions in Mexico, and funds graduate students and post-docs across the UC system. However, UC MEXUS does not conduct research and may no longer fit the technical definition of an MRU. In addition, the loss of funding from Mexico in 2019 has led to a decline in awards and cross-campus collaborations. UC MEXUS is an asset to UC that should be maintained, but it may not make sense for it to continue as an MRU on a five-year review schedule. The University should consider how to better distinguish UC MEXUS from Alianza MX and whether its current financial model will be the most effective in supporting the program over the long term.

The Academic Council appreciates the significant time and effort the review committee spent in preparing and writing this report. In particular, I want to recognize the substantial contributions and outstanding leadership of UCORP Vice Chair Susanne Nicholas, who led the review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan Cochran". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Susan Cochran, Chair
Academic Council

Cc: UCORP
Academic Council
Campus Senate Executive Directors
Executive Director Lin

Encl.



UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON RESEARCH POLICY (UCORP)
Cynthia Schumann, Chair
Email: cschumann@ucdavis.edu

University of California
Academic Senate
1111 Franklin Street, 12th Fl.
Oakland, California 94607

May 17, 2023

SUSAN COCHRAN
CHAIR, ACADEMIC COUNCIL

RE: Five-Year MRU Reviews of the Institute of Transportation Studies and UC MEXUS

Dear Susan,

I am submitting to the Academic Council the reports from the two five-year MRU reviews that were conducted this year. The UC Institute of Transportation Studies (ITS) and UC MEXUS were reviewed as specified by the Compendium, with UCORP as the lead committee and with the participation of members of UCPB and CCGA, who consulted with their respective committees. (Note that ITS did not have a liaison from UCPB.) The five-year review is meant to assess the unit's activities with regard to its stated purpose, present functioning, funding record, future plans, and continuing development to meet the needs in the field.

UCORP would like to thank Kathleen Erwin and Anna Ward from the Research Grants Program Office for their support leading up to and during the reviews.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Schumann
Chair, University Committee on Research Policy

Enclosures:

Review of the Institute of Transportation Studies (May 17, 2023)
Review of UC MEXUS (May 17, 2023)

UC MEXUS Five-Year Review

Conducted on behalf of the Academic Senate by the University Committee on Research Policy (UCORP), with input from the University Committee on Planning and Budget (UCPB) and Coordinating Committee on Graduate Affairs (CCGA)

May 17, 2023

OVERALL IMPRESSION

Alianza MX (“Alianza”) exists to cultivate binational research collaborations and to support research and exchange between scholars in the US and Mexico. The most recent period has been one of major transformation and challenge. In particular, UC MEXUS was incorporated into Alianza and a key source of funding was lost. The integration of UC MEXUS into Alianza and the near-simultaneous reduction in financial support from Mexico/CONACYT imposed organizational and operational challenges that, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic, may have hampered efforts to sustain and advance the MRU’s activities in the past 5 years. While the new Alianza is now fully established, staffed, and operating, the funding cuts limit the amount of research project awards Alianza can make – less than in the past. Even so, its leaders have demonstrated considerable flexibility and ingenuity, through which this MRU maintained an impressively multi-faceted and impactful program of research, education, and outreach.

Overall, UC MEXUS appears to have been highly responsive to the prior review, and is positioning itself well to continue its mission as an integral part of Alianza. However, it is not clear whether new funding can be found to replace the lost funding from the Mexican government to allow the number of awards to return to prior levels. It is important to note, that even if fewer projects are supported, Alianza provides valuable support and infrastructure to enable research across the two countries. Thus, its structure, governance, and resources are appropriate and effective to accomplish its mission.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS AND SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS

Strengths

- Although the five-year self-report submitted at the beginning of the year lacked sufficient detail to distinguish between UC MEXUS and broader Alianza accomplishments, the slide presentation in February clarified the research & education accomplishments of the past 5 years. This is an impressive record of work, especially given the COVID-19 conditions and reduced funding contribution from Mexico.
- The communications & outreach efforts had a notable uptick in 2022, reflecting a comprehensive multi-media and multi-platform approach to dissemination and public engagement.
- In particular, the unit funded many valuable scholarships and developed new research collaborations addressing policy relevant topics.

- Efforts are underway to secure additional novel sources of funding to sustain research programs, with the goal of compensating for the reduced Mexico/CONACYT commitment.

Weaknesses

- No major weaknesses are noted; the presentation in February addressed the previously noted lack of clarity in the review report.
- The lost Alianza Mexican government funding required reductions in the number of awards.
- The pandemic resulted in restricted operations.

MULTI-CAMPUS OPERATIONS

Strengths

- Much attention has been given to cultivating relations in Mexico with the government and other entities with the hope of acquiring funding to replace the lost funding. These efforts are ongoing.

Weaknesses

- While the report reflects visibility across multiple campuses, as well as effective interaction with related units, more attention might to be given to this, especially if continuing and new operations have been rebranded under the 'Alianza' title.
- Less attention has been given to cultivating relations across the UCs given the focus on cultivating support in Mexico

FUTURE GOALS

Strengths

- Alianza MX/UC MEXUS is clearly a great benefit to UC, and the collaborative research and training relationships between the US and Mexico.
- The MRU staff have suggested several pathways for moving forward amidst the clear program challenges that have befallen UC MEXUS, both internally and externally (e.g., loss of funding from CONACYT; COVID-19 pandemic).
- Proposed actions (“new approaches”) were briefly mentioned, including collaborative grant programs, cooperative agreements, scholars in residence programs, and short research stays.
- A call for virtual joint courses between UC and Mexican institutions seems highly beneficial if implemented.
- The proposed funding plans, albeit with reduced budgets, in light of the reduced budget of UC MEXUS, may be a good adaptive strategy for keeping programs active, albeit smaller and impacting fewer graduate students, post-docs, and faculty.

Weaknesses

- The COVID -19 impacts contributed to delays in program renewals, discussions, and evolution, and transitions to virtual review formats were necessary.

- However, the removal of funding from CONACYT, the traditional co-funder of UC MEXUS, is a clear, top crisis to this MRU's future.
- In light of this uncertain future due to funding gaps, the report was light on planned research activities, public service, engagement, administrative planned activities, and planned outreach activities details.
- More details would be useful for the binational, multi-campus working groups and the action research models descriptions of collaborative grant programs. Specifically, information on budgets, whether there are formal calls for these programs, and how they might be developed further would be useful.
- Plans for cooperative agreements could also use more details or descriptions.

BUDGET

Strengths

- The MRU has been highly effective at distributing funds while the CONACYT partnership was in place. It has a 20-year track record of funding graduate students and postdocs from across the UC system.
- There is clear explanation of the variations in the budget over the past five years.
- The unit has been successful in collaborative research grants.
- The administrative cost has been gradually reduced over the past five years.
- So far, the reserves (carry forwards) look healthy.
- The new Alianza organization has several built-in efficiencies
- Although not ultimately successful, the leadership made many efforts to garner new financial commitments of support from the Mexican government

Weaknesses

- The glaring weakness of the current MRU model is the lack of replacement funding for CONACYT.
- Discussions are underway with individual institutions in Mexico to step in with funding, but currently these funds are insufficient to replace the funding lost through CONACYT. This negatively affects the educational and research mission of the MRU. Furthermore, it will be hard to justify the large expenditure on operations and staff without added funding for the core mission.
- It was unclear how the MRU would function without funding from Mexico, and how UC MEXUS fits into the overall initiative structure.
- A central question is whether UC should step in with funding to make up for the lost CONACYT funding. Is there a plan to keep trying to engage CONACYT in the future?
- Additional UC funding may be needed to help compensate for the CONACYT's funding if the unit can't find other funding source. Additional support for the Doctoral Fellowships program is most critical for the unit. This would benefit the UC system and the money would be well spent. But it obviously needs to be balanced against other funding priorities in the UC system.
- UC MEXUS budget can no longer be distinguished from the Alianza budget.

ADMINISTRATION AND GOVERNANCE

Strengths

- Alianza has a strong and competent leader. Specifically, the program director is very well qualified and has done a good job establishing Alianza.
- The MRU has admirably acted upon the previous recommendations to integrate itself into other UC efforts to engage with Mexico (i.e. UC-Mexico Initiative and Casa de la Universidad de California en México).

Weaknesses

- Due to the success of the creation of Alianza and its subsuming UC MEXUS, the distinction between UC MEXUS and Alianza is confusing. It does not seem to make sense to treat UC MEXUS as a separate MRU within Alianza. Either Alianza should assume the mantle of the MRU or the MRU designation should be dropped entirely.
- Some of the staff are brand new; so it is not yet possible to evaluate their work.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is clear the UC MEXUS provides important services to UC, but this is not related to the conduct of research.
- As a result of the change in funding, either Alianza should assume the lead for the MRU or the MRU designation should be dropped.
- It is not clear that Alianza should be characterized as an MRU in future reviews.