

# The Journal of Big Bend Studies

Volume 15

Center for Big Bend Studies  
Sul Ross State University



2003



## The Mexico-North Research Network: Origins of a Binational Consortium

*William L. Merrill*

*The Mexico-North Research Network is a non-profit consortium of universities, museums, research institutes, and cultural centers located in Mexico and the United States. It was founded in 1998 to promote innovative projects in research, education, and outreach based on collaboration that transcends national, cultural, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries. During the first three years of its existence, Mexico-North's ability to pursue this mission was challenged by a series of infrastructural and logistical problems, but these were resolved by early 2002. The consortium was then able to initiate a wide array of programs and activities and to develop the resources required to undertake them, entering a period of steady growth that has continued to the present. The history of Mexico-North's origins provides insights into the diverse processes that accompany the formation of new international non-profit organizations, serving as a case study of the creation of such organizations.*

The relationship between Mexico and the United States entered a new era during the last two decades. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—conceived in the 1980s and negotiated and ratified by the governments of Canada, Mexico, and the United States between 1990 and 1993—is perhaps the most visible marker of this new era. However, the growing impact of Mexico and the United States on one another extends far beyond the strictly economic sphere into areas ranging from the environment, health, education, and human rights to language, culture, and the arts.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the increased transborder flow of people and ideas, facilitated by recent advances in communications and transportation technology, has reinforced longstanding ties and created the conditions for the emergence of new kinds of interconnections and structures that will continue to transform the relationships between the two countries. The potential implications of these transformations have only begun to be explored.

Because their futures are so closely linked, Mexico and the United States share a compelling interest to understand one another better. Indeed, a number of effective programs have been established to develop such an understanding, but these have tended to focus in each case on specific themes, academic disciplines, time periods, or geographical regions and to involve the

participation of researchers or other specialists affiliated with only certain kinds of institutions. To design new approaches to common problems, U.S.-Mexico collaboration needs to be enhanced in ways that bridge temporal, geographical, and disciplinary boundaries and to be based on the exchange of knowledge and ideas among individuals drawn from many different sectors of society.

The Mexico-North Research Network was created in 1998 to begin addressing these needs. Organized as a consortium of diverse Mexican and U.S. institutions—universities, museums, research institutes, and cultural centers (see Appendix)—Mexico-North promotes the development of binational, transdisciplinary perspectives on a wide array of shared concerns and the formation of partnerships between its member institutions and governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. It is incorporated in the United States as a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization and in Mexico as an *asociación civil*, the Mexican equivalent of a non-profit organization, where it is known as México-Norte, Red de Investigación y Educación, A.C.. The missions and the boards of directors of these two organizations are identical, allowing them to function as a single entity to pursue shared objectives. It coordinates its activities through offices located in Mexico and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to provide a history of Mexico-North from its conception in 1997 through the annual meeting of its consortium members in early 2003. Although primarily a chronicle of the organization during the first years of its existence, the essay also illustrates the challenges and rewards that accompany the creation of a new international non-profit organization and thus can serve as a case study of this process.

### **Beginnings, 1988–1998**

The chain of events that led to Mexico-North's creation in 1998 began a decade earlier, when Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) decided to establish an undergraduate program in anthropology in the northern state of Chihuahua, which borders on Texas and New Mexico. Between November 1988 and May 1989, a commission of six anthropologists and historians developed a detailed plan for this new

initiative, and in July 1990 INAH's Director General and the Governor of the State of Chihuahua officially inaugurated the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia–Unidad Chihuahua (ENAH-Ch).<sup>3</sup>

By 1994 ENAH-Ch had developed to the point that its faculty members were beginning to explore various options for its students who were interested in continuing their education at the Masters and Ph.D. levels. Given the number of outstanding graduate programs in anthropology at U.S. universities located relatively near the U.S.-Mexico border, Dora Valdés, the director of ENAH-Ch at the time, and Juan Luis Sariago, a professor who had played a major role in its creation, asked me to contact representatives of these programs to determine if they would be willing to accept applications from ENAH-Ch students following the completion of their undergraduate studies. Without exception the responses were affirmative and, although a flow of students from ENAH-Ch into these programs did not materialize, these universities became the core group of U.S. institutions that joined with ENAH-Ch and other Mexican institutions to create Mexico-North.

The next series of events directly related to the formation of Mexico-North took place between late 1996 and the fall of 1997. In December 1996, representatives of the Smithsonian Institution and Mexico's Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes met in Mexico City to establish an agreement upon which a series of collaborative projects were to be based. I was a member of the Smithsonian delegation and during the course of conversations with Teresa Franco, INAH's director general, I learned that INAH was contemplating establishing an archeology program at ENAH-Ch the following year. In April 1997, I mentioned this possibility to Andrew Darling, who had recently completed his Ph.D. dissertation on Mexican archeology at the University of Michigan and was beginning his tenure as a Smithsonian post-doctoral fellow. We decided to travel to Chihuahua the following month to meet with ENAH-Ch's faculty to find out more about this program.

As it turned out, INAH did not pursue the development of the archeology program and, although ENAH-Ch was in favor of its creation, it lacked the resources to launch the program on its own. In fact, at the time of our visit, its faculty members were in the

process of designing a strategy to generate support for their existing programs to complement the resources provided by INAH. Over the next few days, Darling and I met with ENAH-Ch's faculty to discuss this strategy and their overall plan for the school's future.<sup>4</sup>

The initial vision for Mexico-North emerged from these meetings. The point of departure for discussions was how to strengthen ENAH-Ch and anthropological research in Chihuahua, but the group soon concluded that these objectives might be best pursued by establishing an organization that would promote exchange and collaboration among institutions that shared an interest in all of northern Mexico and adjacent areas of the southwestern United States. The assumption was that ENAH-Ch would play a central role in developing this organization and that the inter-institutional linkages and activities that would be created would enhance ENAH-Ch's programs and further its goal of becoming a major center for anthropological education in northern Mexico.

The shift to this broader perspective is reflected in the names proposed for the new organization. The group considered a number of alternatives—the Sierra Madre Institute, the Center for Northern Mexican Studies, the Northern Mexican Research Network, and various permutations of these and other combinations of terms—before deciding that the organization's name should clearly indicate that it would be a network that promoted research focused on Mexico and regions to the north. The elements “network + research + Mexico + north” became the “Mexico-North Research Network,” with the hyphen added to render the name grammatical or, perhaps more accurately, to render its ungrammaticality less obvious.

From the outset, Mexico-North was intended to be international. This orientation reflected primarily the group's view that northern Mexico and the southwestern United States shared so many characteristics and were so closely interconnected that neither could be understood in isolation from the other and, furthermore, that a more profound understanding of this vast, complex region depended upon increasing collaboration among institutions on both sides of the border. That the group itself was international also suggested that such an orientation could be effective. Only four of the ten members were Mexican by birth, and of these only one, Luis Urías, was a native of Chihuahua;

Rodolfo Coronado and Francisco Mendiola were from Mexico City, and Mónica Iturbide, an independent anthropologist based in Chihuahua who joined the group later in the fall, was from Guadalajara. Although the other six members had spent many years and, in some cases, most of their adult lives in Mexico, they originally were from other countries: Françoise Brouzès was from France, Eugeni Porrás and Juan Luis Sariago from Spain, Augusto Urteaga from Peru, and Andrew Darling and I from the United States.

All the members of the group continued to develop the concept of Mexico-North during the summer and fall of 1997 and began contacting individuals whom they knew at institutions in Mexico, the United States, and Europe to invite them to participate in a meeting the following spring to create the network. During the same period, Darling focused on establishing a legal framework for the organization, a task he had completed by early January 1998. On January 14, Mexico-North was incorporated as a non-profit organization in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and during the last three days of the same month, the members of the group met in Chihuahua to decide who would serve as its officers and the members of its board of directors.

Four members of the group indicated that they preferred not to be considered: Sariago and Urteaga because they were completing their doctoral degrees at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa in Mexico City; Porrás because he was contemplating a return to Spain to continue his graduate studies; and Mendiola because of his duties as director of ENAH-Ch. It had already been determined during previous meetings that Darling would be responsible for the organization's operations as its executive director, and in this late January meeting he was officially appointed to this position and also elected as Mexico-North's secretary. The remaining members of the group became, along with Darling, Mexico-North's founding board of directors: Rodolfo Coronado and Luis Urías served as general board members while Françoise Brouzès was elected as vice-chair, Mónica Iturbide as treasurer, and I as chair.

### **The Organizational Meeting, May 1998**

The principal task at hand for Mexico-North's new board was to organize the meeting of representatives of the institutions that

had expressed an interest in establishing the network. This meeting was held on May 24–30, the first three days in the capital city of Chihuahua and then in the Sierra Tarahumara, on the edge of Chihuahua's spectacular Copper Canyon at Areponápuchi. The sixty-eight participants were affiliated with twenty Mexican institutions, fourteen U.S. institutions, and the two largest indigenous societies in the Sierra Tarahumara, the Rarámuri and Ódami.

The meeting began with discussions focused on the fundamental question at hand: Was there a need to create a cross-border network of institutions in the northern Mexico-southwestern U.S. region? The participants first considered the state of research and education in the region and then identified five significant problems that they believed such a network might help resolve:

- The relatively small number of research projects currently underway in northern Mexico and the almost total absence of projects that encompassed both northern Mexico and the southwestern United States.
- The tendency for institutions and individuals to develop their projects in isolation from one another, resulting in competition and duplication of efforts.
- The limited opportunities in northern Mexico for professional training and graduate education and for students and professionals from other countries to learn about northern Mexico.
- The failure of scholars to address problems of concern to the communities in which they conduct their research and to ensure that the results of their work are made available to these and other non-specialist audiences.
- The inclination of government agencies and other organizations to rely on regionally inexperienced consultants who design their projects with minimal input from local specialists and members of the communities where these projects are implemented.

Based on these discussions, the meeting participants concluded that this network should be created, and by the end of the meeting they had defined four objectives for it to pursue:

- To promote exchange and collaboration among institutions, professional scholars, students, and the members of local communities on projects in research, education, and outreach focused on northern Mexico and the southwestern United States.
- To facilitate the coordination of these and other projects and to ensure that the results are made available to broad, diverse audiences.
- To increase opportunities for training and education at all levels.
- To cooperate with government agencies, other organizations, and local residents in improving the social and cultural conditions in the region.

In the process of setting these goals, the meeting participants decided that the initial disciplinary focus of Mexico-North's projects should be the social sciences and humanities, but they expressed the hope that scholars in other disciplines would soon become involved and that the network would facilitate the development of cross-disciplinary approaches to research and education. Because membership in Mexico-North would not be limited to institutions with interests solely in northern Mexico and the southwestern United States, they also expected that the network's geographical focus would eventually expand beyond this region.

During the last two days of the meeting, the participants discussed a wide range of activities that Mexico-North could develop. They recommended priority be given to projects and programs that were innovative yet practical, contributed to the advancement of theory or method in both research and education, built upon on the strengths and compensated for the weaknesses of the network's members, and were most effective if based on extensive collaboration among scholars on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border as well as the members of local communities in the region.

A number of specific projects in both research and education were proposed and several meeting participants agreed to take the lead in launching them. These included the organization of a conference on the archeology of northern Mexico, the creation of

a database on archival resources for the study of the social and cultural history of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States, and an inventory of projects in applied anthropology that had been conducted or were underway in the region. In the area of education, they suggested the network should concentrate on promoting exchanges between its Mexican and U.S. members but also should begin developing, as soon as possible, its own education program, oriented toward undergraduates, to complement those of its members. There was enthusiastic support for the idea of establishing a binational program in museum studies and of offering courses in which the members of local communities, especially indigenous communities in Chihuahua, would provide instruction focused on their societies, cultures, and languages from their own perspectives. The indigenous participants in the meeting felt that their communities would be very interested in collaborating with Mexico-North on such courses and suggested that the network consider, as a form of reciprocity for their participation, working with them and the relevant state and federal agencies as well as other organizations to enhance educational opportunities for indigenous people in the region.

### **Developing the Organization, 1998–2000**

The concept and plan for Mexico-North that emerged from this organizational meeting guided its development during the subsequent five years. Immediately following the meeting, Mexico-North's board members began to implement this plan and to create a basic infrastructure for the network's operations, setting up an office in rented space in Chihuahua City, designing a logo and webpage, initiating planning for a 1999 summer course and other specific projects, and incorporating the network as a non-profit organization in Mexico.

Soon, however, several board members became disenchanted, concerned by the demands on their time and by the fact that the organization was not developing as quickly as they had hoped or in the directions that they had originally envisioned. In July 1998, Françoise Brouzès and Rodolfo Coronado resigned from the board, an especially unfortunate turn of events because they were the only board members affiliated with ENAH-Ch. Along with other ENAH-Ch faculty members, they had begun to doubt that Mexico-North would directly benefit the school and, although

relations between Mexico-North and ENAH-Ch remained cordial, the original objective of supporting ENAH-Ch through Mexico-North had to be abandoned for the time being.

Even before the May 1998 organizational meeting, the fact that ENAH-Ch was not an independent institution but rather a part of INAH had complicated somewhat its participation in the development of Mexico-North. Teresa Franco, INAH's director general, supported the participation of ENAH-Ch and other INAH units in the May meeting, but other top INAH officials in Mexico City were perturbed that ENAH-Ch had not consulted with them before beginning the planning of Mexico-North and had not involved the staff of INAH's regional center in Chihuahua in the process. They also were concerned that Mexico-North, once established, would initiate activities that were more properly within INAH's legislated purview. These concerns were addressed in a series of meetings with INAH's directorate in August 1998, and later that fall Mexico-North and INAH's Chihuahua regional center began collaborating with the University of Arizona and Arizona State Museum to organize the conference on northern Mexican archeology proposed at the May meeting. The relationship between ENAH-Ch was reestablished in 2001, when INAH as a whole joined the consortium.

During the May organizational meeting, Susan Deeds, a professor of history at Northern Arizona University, was elected as the representative of consortium members on the board of directors, and following Brouzès' resignation, the board selected Urías to serve as Mexico-North's vice-chair. It also discussed possible candidates for the two board positions vacated by Brouzès and Coronado, but decided that getting the organization up and running should take precedence.

By November 1998, the Mexican non-profit had been established under the name México-Norte, Red de Investigación y Educación, A.C.<sup>5</sup> and by March of the following year, twenty-two institutions had become members of the consortium, in the following order: Northern Arizona University, the University of Arizona/Arizona State Museum, Hampshire College, the Smithsonian Institution, the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Our Lady of the Lake University, Sul Ross State University, and the nine universities and six medical centers that formed the University of Texas System,

which joined as a unit.<sup>6</sup> Alliances were also being established with several other organizations, including the Inter-University Program for Latino Research, Terralingua: Partnerships for Linguistic and Biological Diversity, the Chihuahua campus of the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM-Ch), and the Centro Alameda, a U.S. Latino-focused cultural center in San Antonio, Texas.

The archeology conference, focused on “The Ceramics of Chihuahua,” was held June 25–26, 1999, at the Museo de las Culturas del Norte in Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, and a summer internship project in museum studies was organized in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution. Initial steps also were taken to launch a multidisciplinary research and conservation project focused on the biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the Sierra Tarahumara of southwestern Chihuahua. Scholars affiliated with several of Mexico-North’s member institutions and the allied organization Terralingua prepared an preliminary concept for this project, and Mexico-North began negotiations with ITESM-Ch to establish a Center for Biocultural Diversity Studies on its campus.<sup>7</sup> During the same period, discussions were underway with the Centro Alameda regarding the creation of a multi-sited program in museum studies in conjunction with the museum and museum studies program that it was developing in collaboration with the University of Texas at San Antonio and the Smithsonian Institution.

These successes were accompanied by several setbacks. The 1999 members meeting, scheduled for May 27–30 at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, was postponed because representatives of only a few member institutions planned to attend, apparently at least in part because these dates coincided with Memorial Day weekend. Also, due to a series of logistical problems that could not be resolved, Mexico-North’s summer course “Exploring the Borderlands: The Rarámuri Indians of Northern Mexico,” planned for July, was canceled. The summer course was repackaged as a conference on borderland environments, organized in June 2000 in collaboration with the Inter-University Program for Latino Research, but the 1999 meeting of Mexico-North’s member institutions was never rescheduled; in fact, the next members meeting did not take place until 2001.

The most serious challenge that emerged during this period was the lack of financial resources required to launch new programs, develop membership, and cover basic operating expenses. Mexico-North's operations in 1998 had been sustained by grants from the Smithsonian Institution,<sup>8</sup> supplemented by the dues paid by the consortium's founding members, but revenues and cash assets steadily declined during 1999. Despite a concerted effort by Darling to attract new members, only one institution, the Centro Alameda, joined in the second half of 1999, and grant proposals to a private foundation and a federal government agency, primarily to support the development of the Center for Biocultural Diversity Studies, were not submitted until the fall of that year.

To design a fundraising strategy, Darling initiated in mid-1999 a planning project directed toward developing a strategic plan for Mexico-North. He was assisted in this endeavor by Sunday Eiselt, an anthropology graduate student at the University of Michigan, and by several people with experience in non-profit organizations whom he invited to provide advice on the process. It was decided that filling the vacancies on the board of directors should be postponed until this strategic plan was completed, but despite some progress the project was suspended in 2000, in part because Mexico-North was facing a severe financial crisis. The two funding requests submitted in 1999 were not approved, and several network members had decided not to pay their annual membership fees. The organization's inability to support a full-time Executive Director led Darling to seek alternative employment, and in June 2000 he accepted a position at the Cultural Resource Management Program of the Gila River Indian Community, headquartered in Sacaton, Arizona.

Before leaving Mexico-North, he and Eiselt coordinated the conference "Exploring Diversity Through Innovative Research and Education in Borderland Environments," held in Chihuahua on June 13–16, 2000, in which sixty scholars affiliated with thirty-two U.S. and Mexican institutions participated. They also assisted with the organization of a parallel meeting on June 16–18 that was directed toward establishing partnerships between indigenous communities and scholars at Mexican and U.S. institutions in the creation of the project on the biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity in the Sierra Tarahumara. Twenty Sierra

Tarahumara residents and twenty-two scholars formed the core participants in this meeting, with an additional nineteen individuals attending as observers.

### **Restructuring and Consolidation, 2000–2003**

During Darling's tenure as executive director, Mexico-North had been established as a legal entity in both the United States and Mexico and the groundwork for several of its future programs had been completed. He submitted his resignation as executive director effective June 30, 2000, and resigned as secretary and a member of the board of directors the following October. The board was now reduced to three members: Susan Deeds, Luis Urías, and me. Mónica Iturbide, who stopped participating in board activities during 1999, had resigned from the board in January 2000.

Given these circumstances, the remaining board members completed a thorough review of Mexico-North's situation and concluded that the future was not entirely bleak. The Rockefeller Foundation had approved a grant for the project on diversity in the Sierra Tarahumara, which became the focus of Mexico-North's program in "Humans and the Environment," and representatives of the Centro Alameda indicated that funding to establish a project in San Antonio seemed likely, although the focus probably would be Spanish colonial missions rather than museum studies. The board also was convinced that the vision and role defined for Mexico-North at the 1998 organizational meeting was still quite valid, a view shared by the representatives of Mexico-North's members. These representatives were contacted over the summer of 2000, and although most expressed dissatisfaction with Mexico-North's performance to date, all were willing to continue as part of the consortium.

The board then devised a strategy, consisting of three elements, that it hoped would ensure the organization's survival. The first element was to cut operating costs as much as possible. The Chihuahua office would be moved from rented to free space, which Urías had arranged with the Sociedad Chihuahuense de Estudios Históricos, and no salaried employees would be hired and no projects implying infrastructural costs would be initiated until Mexico-North could be established on a solid financial basis. The second was to develop mechanisms for increasing

communication with consortium members to receive their guidance in charting Mexico-North's future and to promote the network to prospective members. The third was to strengthen the board of directors by inviting scholars from disciplines not already represented on the board to fill the existing vacancies. During the implementation of this strategy, the board assumed responsibility for all of Mexico-North's operations.

In early November, the Centro Alameda secured, on Mexico-North's behalf, a major grant from the City of San Antonio to support a series of activities focused on the Spanish colonial missions. By this date, three scholars had joined the board: Dr. Gabriela Chavarría of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Dr. Henry Ingle of the University of Texas at El Paso, and Dr. Cecilia Sheridan of the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social. A meeting of the new board was held on November 11 at the Centro Alameda to review Mexico-North's status and to develop plans for the upcoming 2001 members meeting, which had been scheduled for late February in San Antonio.<sup>9</sup>

The board then began a search for someone to coordinate Mexico-North's activities, especially the missions project, which had now become the principal initiative within the more general program area of "History and Culture." Greta de León, who had served as assistant director of the Mexican Cultural Institute (Instituto Cultural Mexicano) in San Antonio since 1996, was selected for this position in mid-January, but because she was a Mexican citizen on a diplomatic visa, she could not be hired until April 2001, when a U.S. work visa for her was approved. In the interim, the Mexican Cultural Institute detailed her to help organize the 2001 members meeting, in collaboration with Dr. Robert Hard of the University of Texas at San Antonio and Mexico-North's board members.

This meeting took place in San Antonio on February 22–24 and was attended by thirty-nine scholars affiliated with six Mexican and twenty-one U.S. institutions, including four institutions that had joined the Mexico-North consortium immediately before the meeting: the Instituto Cultural Mexicano in San Antonio, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the University of New Mexico, and the University of North Texas. Meeting participants selected Dr. Clara Bargellini and Dr. Robert Hard to serve

on the board of directors as representatives of the Mexican and U.S. membership respectively.<sup>10</sup> Their election implemented a recommendation made at the May 1998 meeting that the Mexican and U.S. members should be represented on the board by separate directors.

The majority of the meeting was devoted to reviewing Mexico-North's current status and setting priorities for future activities. The principal criticism of Mexico-North, widely shared among meeting participants, was that its activities were too focused on anthropology and history and Chihuahua. They recommended that this problem could be addressed by creating a new initiative in the area of U.S.-Mexican relations, and they identified a series of topics that could be explored, but they also suggested that Mexico-North first complete a survey of the extensive work already underway in this area to define what its contributions could be.

The second major concern was the disparity between the number of Mexican and U.S. members of Mexico-North's consortium: at the time of the meeting, only four of Mexico-North's twenty-eight members were Mexican institutions. The participants regarded Mexico-North's annual fee of \$2,000 per member as the main impediment to increasing Mexican membership, but they recognized that eliminating the membership fee altogether was not feasible because it provided Mexico-North with its principal source of unrestricted funds and thus was crucial to its operations. Like the participants in the May 1998 organizational meeting, when the membership fee was established, they did not favor creating a two-tiered system in which Mexican institutions would pay less than U.S. institutions, in part because the annual membership fee was not insignificant for U.S. institutions either, but more importantly because they believed that all Mexican and U.S. institutions should be members of Mexico-North on an equal basis. They also indicated that few Mexican institutions were aware of Mexico-North and suggested that holding the next members meeting in Mexico could be instrumental in resolving this problem.

The remainder of 2001 was devoted to setting up Mexico-North's U.S. Coordinating Office in San Antonio and to developing Mexico-North's program activities. Greta de León assumed responsibility for most of these activities as

Mexico-North's director of programs. In addition to establishing a new accounting system and other basic office operations, she redesigned Mexico-North's webpage and created a listserv to enhance communication between Mexico-North and its members. The lack of effective communication had been a perennial problem since Mexico-North's creation, and the original approach of channeling information about Mexico-North through the official representative of each member institution had not worked because these representatives either did not share this information with their colleagues and students or because their institutions lacked mechanisms for doing so. De León adopted the new approach of sending information directly to everyone who had expressed an interest in being kept abreast of Mexico-North's activities, often in the form of brief messages called "Mexico-North Notes."

Soon after the 2001 members meeting, Mexico-North created a Missions Scholars Advisory Group to provide guidance on its Spanish colonial missions project. The members of this group included scholars affiliated with all of Mexico-North's members in the San Antonio area and several member institutions located elsewhere, as well as representatives of other organizations involved in activities related to the local missions. During the course of the year, Mexico-North organized a roundtable and symposium focused on different aspects of the missions and a fall calendar of events on the theme of "Cultural Creativity and the Missions" that included living history demonstrations, public exhibits and lectures, concerts, teacher workshops, and bike and walking tours, produced by Mexico-North and a number of other cultural organizations in and around San Antonio.

These activities paralleled the development of a second initiative within Mexico-North's History and Culture Program. The first steps toward creating this initiative, which was directed toward enhancing an understanding of the Spanish colonial missions of Chihuahua and preserving the art and architecture associated with them, were taken in February 2000. In a series of meetings held in subsequent months, unprecedented partnerships for collaboration were established among the Chihuahua business community, the Catholic Church, federal, state, and municipal government agencies, local communities, and research and educational institutions, including several Mexico-North members. In November 2000, a group of Chihuahua leaders established the

non-profit organization Misiones Coloniales de Chihuahua, A.C., to coordinate this endeavor, and an alliance between this organization and Mexico-North was formalized in October 2001.

Having a broad-based advisory group for the San Antonio Spanish colonial missions project had proven to be a very effective mechanism for guiding the development of this project and for involving scholars affiliated with Mexico-North's members in its activities. As a result, a similar advisory group was established to design the new initiative in U.S.-Mexico relations. This group decided that Mexico-North should develop this initiative as a new program focused on U.S.-Mexican transnationalism and, rather than organizing its own research projects, it should raise funds to support research on this theme by scholars affiliated with its members and should organize events within which they could exchange their knowledge and perspectives with one another and with policymakers in the United States and Mexico. In the early fall of 2001, the U.S. Department of State approved a grant to Mexico-North through the Council of American Overseas Research Centers to establish a fellowship program in transnationalism for U.S. scholars, and by late January 2002, de León had arranged a comparable grant from Mexico's Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores for Mexican scholars. A forum on transnationalism, in which key Mexican and U.S. policymakers would present their perspectives on this theme, was also planned for Mexico-North's 2002 members meeting.

This meeting was hosted by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City on February 19–22, 2002, and its format differed significantly from that of the 2001 members meeting. Two days were devoted to presentations by representatives of member institutions of the programs and projects at their institutions that they regarded as most relevant to Mexico-North's mission. The meeting also included two conferences. The first, which took place on February 21, was a "Forum on Transnationalism and Binational Collaboration," co-organized with UNAM's Centro de Investigaciones Sobre América del Norte. The second was a colloquium on the indigenous societies of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States, co-organized with UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas on February 25–26, following the members meeting.

As 2001 meeting participants predicted, having the 2002 members meeting in Mexico increased interest in Mexico-North among Mexican institutions. Direct contact was established with the representatives of a number of Mexican institutions, and over the course of 2002 nine became members of Mexico-North's consortium: the Colegio de Michoacán, the Colegio de Postgraduados, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the Instituto Politécnico Nacional, the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, the Universidad Iberoamericana, and the Universidad Latina de América, all headquartered in central Mexico, and the Instituto Cultural Mexicano in Washington, D.C.<sup>11</sup> Together with Southwest Texas State University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the Witte Museum, which joined between the 2001 and 2002 members meeting, they brought Mexico-North's membership up to forty institutions.

Key to the dramatic increase in Mexican representation within the consortium was a grant from the J. M. Kaplan Fund that allowed Mexico-North to cover the annual fees of new Mexican members. Also crucial was the diffusion of information about Mexico-North by the Consejo Mexicano de Estudios de Posgrado (COMEPO), a network of eighty-five Mexican educational institutions that offer master's and doctoral degrees. In May 2002, Mexico-North and COMEPO signed an agreement to collaborate on promoting U.S.-Mexico academic exchange and in the fall COMEPO encouraged its members to consider membership in Mexico-North. As a result, three additional Mexican institutions joined the consortium in early 2003: the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, and the Colegio Mexiquense. A number of other institutions sent representatives to Mexico-North's 2003 members meeting, which was held in San Antonio on February 28 and March 1, and immediately following this meeting the National Park Service became a member of the consortium.

Apart from this growth in its membership, Mexico-North consolidated its existing programs between the 2002 and 2003 members meetings and increased significantly the participation of its member institutions in them. By the spring of 2003, scholars and students representing a wide range of disciplines were involved in a number of different kinds of activities within the

framework of the projects on the biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the Sierra Tarahumara and the Spanish colonial missions of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States. Both of these projects were based on extensive collaboration with the members of local communities and both contributed to the expansion of Mexico-North's disciplinary and geographical emphases, as did other initiatives that were now underway. Especially notable in this regard was Mexico-North Program in Transnationalism. In 2002 and 2003, Mexico-North provided fellowships to sixteen U.S. and Mexican scholars for research projects in U.S.-Mexican transnationalism focused on diverse topics and regions across Mexico and the United States. The Fellows presented the results of their projects at a "Symposium on Transnationalism," held in August of each year at the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores' headquarters in Mexico City.

The increasing diversity of Mexico-North's programs was reflected in the increasing breadth of expertise within its board of directors. With the addition of Dr. Mario Melgar in 2002 and Dr. Peter Ward in 2003, the board included specialists in the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, and individual board members contributed directly to developing program activities within their areas of expertise. This crucial support from the board enhanced de León's ability to coordinate Mexico-North's programs and, in recognition of her skills and contributions, the board promoted her in February 2003 to the position of Mexico-North's executive director.

### **Analysis**

The history of Mexico-North's origins can be divided into three periods, each of about two years' duration. The first period, which began in 1997 and concluded by the spring of 1999, involved the creation of an initial vision for Mexico-North, the formation of a network of institutions that would support and benefit from its activities, and the establishment of the legal frameworks, infrastructure, and operating procedures for the organization. The second period, from 1999 through 2000, was devoted to operationalizing the vision elaborated by the participants in the 1998 organizational meeting. It was a period of experimentation in which alternative approaches to pursuing the organization's objectives were explored, but by early 2000 a

series of problems had emerged that presented serious challenges to its survival. Over the course of 2000, however, support for activities initiated the previous year became available, and with some restructuring Mexico-North was able to proceed to a third period. During this period, which took place between 2001 and early 2003, the upward trajectory that characterized the first period was resumed and the foundation was laid for a new period of consolidation and continued growth.

Throughout its history, Mexico-North's principal objective has been to become what its name implies that it already is: a network. Its consortium is a nascent network, a collection of institutions that vary widely in size, complexity, mission, and function but have overlapping goals and interests that make articulation among them possible. Because Mexico-North was founded to promote increased exchange and collaboration between Mexico and the United States, it has focused on establishing cross-border institutional linkages, but in the process it also has enhanced interaction among institutions within each country and even among scholars within the same institution, a role that was not originally anticipated. It also has endeavored to create contexts within which scholars, trained in different intellectual traditions and disciplines, can develop inter-disciplinary and post-disciplinary approaches to research and education and can exchange knowledge and perspectives with individuals in other sectors of society.

Establishing and strengthening linkages among the institutions that are members of its consortium is the simplest way to describe what Mexico-North does because these institutions have clearly demarcated boundaries. Ultimately, however, they are social organizations that are composed of and function through the social networks of their faculty, students, and staff, networks that crisscross internal divisions and extend beyond institutional borders. Mexico-North's basic strategy for developing inter-institutional connections is to extend these social networks further. At the same time, because its consortium members include tens of thousands of faculty and staff members and hundreds of thousands of students, each of whom participates in multiple social networks, the number of possible directions in which these networks could be extended is mind-boggling. The directions in which these networks are actually extended are determined

primarily by the individuals who participate in Mexico-North's activities, especially its annual members meetings.

From a strictly operational point of view, the representatives of Mexico-North's consortium members who attend these annual meetings become the organization's *de facto* board of directors for that year, and the legal board of directors, while responsible for the governance of the organization, functions as the executive committee of this larger board. Board members and the executive director evaluate the representatives' proposals in terms of the degree to which they can further the objectives of Mexico-North and its consortium and the likelihood that the resources required to undertake them will be available. Then they develop strategies to convert concepts into concrete activities, in collaboration with consortium members and other institutions and organizations.

Mexico-North has adopted two approaches to transforming its consortium into a network. In the first, it organizes large-scale projects—like those focused on the Spanish colonial missions and diversity in the Sierra Tarahumara—in which scholars affiliated with many different consortium members participate without all participants necessarily coming into contact with one another. In the second, it establishes direct contact among scholars at different institutions through meetings, academic exchanges, or simply informing them of shared interests, thereby promoting the development of individual networks upon which collaborative projects can be based but in which Mexico-North may not be involved. In both cases, consortium members play a crucial role: they provide the intellectual guidance required to design and implement these activities, they often identify potential funding sources for them, and frequently they supply significant logistical and infrastructural support as well.

The significance of their input is reflected in the fact that Mexico-North suffered in 1999 and 2000, when no annual meetings were held and interaction with members was low, and it recovered its momentum once interaction increased in the fall of 2000 and the annual meetings were resumed in 2001. Between the 2001 and 2003 meetings, consortium membership almost doubled, from twenty-four to forty-six institutions, and Mexican membership grew eight-fold, from two to seventeen institutions (see Appendix). This growth enhanced Mexico-North's ability to develop its programs and to generate revenues to support them.

These revenues increased by more than 50 percent between 2000 and 2001, from \$109,857 to \$166,316, and more than doubled between 2001 and 2002, when they totaled \$405,565. Over 90 percent of these funds were used to develop program activities, with less than 10 percent of each year's expenditures used to cover general operations.

### **Conclusions**

Such statistics provide an index of the progress that Mexico-North has made in identifying its niche and developing an appropriate mode of operation within it. It is most effective when it functions as a catalyst for activities designed to address complex but clearly defined problems that require the formation of inter-connections on multiple levels: inter-national, inter-cultural, inter-institutional, inter-disciplinary, and inter-personal. The ability to fulfill its role as an interstitial organization depends upon maintaining its flexibility so that it can evolve in response to changing circumstances and the shifting priorities of its members.

In the immediate future, Mexico-North will continue to develop its existing programs and, based on the recommendations of its member representatives during the 2003 annual meeting, it likely will begin two new program initiatives. The first will promote increased binational academic exchanges among U.S. and Mexican institutions and will be undertaken in collaboration with the Consejo Mexicano de Estudios de Posgrado (COMEPO), the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC), and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU). The second will be directed toward providing a forum within which Mexico-North's members can explore innovative approaches to communicating knowledge and transcending the boundaries between scholars and the larger world. This initiative will be part of Mexico-North's fourth program area, called "Knowledge and Practice," which will also involve establishing the binational program in museum studies that was proposed at the 1998 organizational meeting. Mexico-North is now in an excellent position to develop this program and to contribute to the advancement of museum theory and practice: its forty-six member institutions maintain over two hundred museums and galleries.

Increasing Mexican membership will continue to be a priority for Mexico-North, with the ultimate goal of having about equal numbers of Mexican and U.S. institutions represented. It is hoped that additional U.S. institutions will also join the consortium and that Mexico-North's membership can be extended to Canada and possibly other countries as well. One avenue for establishing such broader linkages is the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC), a consortium of independent research and education centers located in Europe, Africa, and Asia. In February 2003 Mexico-North became the first and to date only member of this consortium in the Western Hemisphere. This affiliation will enable Mexico-North to provide the members of its own consortium with unparalleled opportunities to establish collaborative relationships, not only within North America but around the globe.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to Robert Mallouf and J. Tillapaugh for inviting me to write this essay and to present an overview of Mexico-North at the 9th Annual Center for Big Bend Studies Conference in November 2002. That this, the first publication on Mexico-North, should appear in the *Journal of Big Bend Studies* is most appropriate because Sul Ross State University was one of Mexico-North's founding members. I would also like to express my appreciation to Andrew Darling, Greta de León, Juan Luis Sariago, Cecilia Sheridan, J. Tillapaugh, and Luis Urías for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay and to Kelly García for her assistance in preparing the final version for publication.

### **Notes**

1. An extensive literature now exists on NAFTA and its place in the evolving relationship between Mexico and the United States. Key citations and perspectives on the processes involved can be found in David Brooks and Jonathan Fox, eds., *Cross-Border Dialogues: U.S.-Mexico Social Movement Networking* (La Jolla, Calif.: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2002).
2. Detailed information on Mexico-North is available on its webpage: [www.mexnor.org](http://www.mexnor.org).

3. An overview of the creation and development of ENAH-Ch between 1987 and 1997 is provided by Juan Luis Sariago Rodríguez, “La ENAH Chihuahua: La antropología vista desde el norte,” *Alteridades* 3 (1997): 451–467.
4. Luis Urías also participated in these meetings. Although he was not a member of ENAH-Ch’s faculty at the time, he had served as the coordinator of its Diffusion and Extension Program between 1992 and 1996.
5. “Educación” appears in the name of the Mexican organization because it was incorporated after the May 1998 organizational meeting, when it became clear that education would be one of Mexico-North’s principal activities. The word also was included to ensure that Mexico-North’s intention to engage in educational activities in Mexico would be officially acknowledged through the process of incorporating the organization and legally registering its name.
6. In June 1998, a private company, Grupo Imperial, sent Mexico-North a check for \$2,000, which was interpreted as indicating that it intended to join the consortium. However, none of its representatives participated in any of Mexico-North’s activities, and efforts to establish contact with them later that year proved unsuccessful. Its payment came to be regarded as a corporate donation.
7. The Chihuahua campus of the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey also became a member of Mexico-North’s consortium in 1999, contributing in-kind donations of facilities and services in lieu of the annual membership fee.
8. The Smithsonian’s Office of Fellowships and Grants provided a small grant to cover travel expenses of the indigenous participants and a few others in the May 1998 organizational meeting, but most of Mexico-North’s funding was linked to the Smithsonian’s efforts to increase U.S. Latino participation in research and educational initiatives, like Mexico-North, in which it was involved. Dr. Refugio Rochin, director of the Smithsonian’s Center for Latino Initiatives, ensured that Smithsonian support to Mexico-North furthered this objective and also was instrumental in establishing the alliance between Mexico-North and the Inter-University Program for Latino Research.
9. The officers of the organization also were changed during this meeting. Because of the need for a legal representative in

Mexico, Urías was elected as secretary for Mexico and Deeds, who continued to represent the consortium members on the board, was elected as secretary for the United States. Sheridan replaced Urías as vice-chair and Chavarría replaced Iturbide as treasurer.

10. Until this meeting, Deeds had served as the sole official representative of the membership on the board. However, all board members except Chavarría were affiliated with Mexico-North member institutions.
11. In 2002, the name “Instituto Cultural Mexicano” was changed to “Instituto de México.”

### **Appendix**

#### **The Mexico–North Research Network Member Institutions**

Acervo Histórico Diplomático, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores de México  
 Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla  
 Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social  
 Colegio de la Frontera Norte  
 Colegio de Michoacán  
 Colegio de Postgraduados  
 Colegio Mexiquense  
 Hampshire College  
 Instituto de México, *San Antonio, Texas*  
 Instituto de México, *Washington, D.C.*  
 Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia  
 Instituto Politécnico Nacional  
 Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey-Chihuahua  
 National Park Service  
 Northern Arizona University  
 Our Lady of the Lake University  
 Smithsonian Institution  
 Southwest Texas State University  
 Sul Ross State University  
 Texas A&M University  
 The Alameda  
 Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Iztapalapa

---

Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana  
Universidad Iberoamericana  
Universidad Latina de América  
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México  
University of Arizona/Arizona State Museum  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
University of New Mexico  
University of North Texas  
University of Texas System:  
    UT-Arlington  
    UT-Austin  
    UT-Brownsville  
    UT-Dallas  
    UT-El Paso  
    UT-Health Center, *Tyler*  
    UT-Health Science Center, *Houston*  
    UT-Health Science Center, *San Antonio*  
    UT-Medical Branch, *Galveston*  
    UT-Anderson Cancer Center, *Houston*  
    UT-Pan American, *Edinburg*  
    UT-Permian Basin, *Odessa*  
    UT-San Antonio  
    UT-Southwestern Medical Center, *Dallas*  
    UT-Tyler  
Witte Museum