

# Threats to International Higher Education in the Wake of COVID-19

The Border Legislative Conference (BLC) hosted a binational virtual legislative exchange focused on international higher education on October 30, 2020.

Hosted by California Assemblymember Jose Medina, chair of the BLC, former educator, and chair of the Assembly Higher Education Committee, the session opened with key questions faced by legislators: “How do we support these important [education] programs? How do we fund our schools, meet enrollment needs and address the challenges of the digital divide, safely and equitably?”

Panelists included:

- Joseph I. Castro, Ph.D., M.P.P., President, California State University, Fresno
- Onésimo Mariscales Delgadillo, Undersecretary of Secondary and Higher Education of the Secretary of Education and Culture of Sonora
- Dr. Manuel Valenzuela Valenzuela, Director of Internationalization Educational Innovation at the University of Sonora

Through presentations and dialogue, there were several key takeaways, including:

- Along the U.S.-Mexico border, students have the linguistic and cultural capacity to navigate each country. As many colleges shift to online learning, however, transborder students face unique challenges such as travel restrictions, visa moratoriums and delays in school scheduling. Despite these challenges, the education systems in California, Sonora,

and New Mexico shared much in common and during this discussion, presented more on the opportunities rather than the threats.

- The California State University (CSU) system was the first in the U.S. to announce a primarily virtual learning service delivery in the fall 2020 and spring 2021. This advanced announcement allowed time for effective planning and preparation to develop an engaging learning environment. To bolster efforts, more than 60 percent of the total teaching force across 23 campuses engaged in over 250 thousand hours of professional development on virtual teaching and learning during the summer break.
- Contrary to trends across the U.S. during the pandemic, CSU Fresno experienced its largest enrollment rate in history.
- One challenge experience at CSU Fresno involved internet accessibility for currently enrolled students, many of whom are undocumented citizens. As a result, the University invested \$18 million to ensure connectivity and access through portable tablets and hot spots.
- Dr. Castro, who will be new Chancellor of the California State University System in January, is the first Californian and first Mexican American to hold this position. In his remarks, he highlighted that the CSU system “prepares a new generation of leaders from all different backgrounds, that will elevate California and will also strengthen the United States and deepen our connections to other countries, including Mexico.”

- Similar to the CSU system, Sonora was one of the first states to immediately halt all education on March 17, a day after COVID-19 was announced in Mexico. Their efforts preceded the federal government's mandated closure of the education system several days later.
- In response to the pandemic, the Secretary of Education and Culture in Sonora worked with both private and public school systems to focus on preparing for students to return to class, to safeguard the integrity of students abroad, to finding alternatives of international study opportunities, and establishing the Arizona-Sonora Interuniversity (ASI) Alliance.
- The primary goal of the ASI Alliance is to promote the development of research projects around issues related to clean energy and sustainability, regional economy, migration, and health. The ASI Alliance plans to expand on the knowledge of the Sonora-Arizona region, its challenges, and potential for development; promote the creation of binational research networks and collaboration between faculty among institutions; and boost the interdisciplinary, multidimensional, and binational analysis of transborder issues. The cancellation of in-person visits carried out by researchers working on both sides of the border created a challenge, but also revealed opportunities presented by virtual learnings which can offer online courses at a low cost.
- Sonora and Arizona universities launched a pilot program titled *The Era of Active Learning* where hundreds of teachers had access to best practices for online learning. Sonora has been looking at ENLACE, a bi-national summer research program at the University of California San Diego, which brings students from Baja California, as a model for international education exchange and collaboration.

- Like most of the world, New Mexico has seen a significant economic decline due to impacts on the gas and oil industries, which are major contributors to state revenue. As a result, education funding is one of the most urgent challenges for the states. Beyond the fiscal impact to the education community, the pandemic has also impacted areas of student experience such as athletic programs and general social interactions gained during a formative year of the student's life.
- Western New Mexico University has been working closely with Arizona and Sonora to provide students with matched degrees, allowing students to complete their studies at one university and receive certifications of graduation from both.
- Western New Mexico University has also made a concerted effort to secure scholarships for indigenous populations in Mexico to ensure access to higher education.

Chairman Medina concluded the session by emphasizing the importance of the work universities are pursuing in the wake of the pandemic and the relief that COVID-19 has not obstructed student learning along the border region.

Did you miss the binational discussion on the threats to international higher education? An on-demand video of the session is available on the CSG West website. Interested in additional sessions? Be sure to visit the [Legislative Exchange Series](#) page for upcoming virtual gatherings.