

UC San Diego

UC San Diego News Center

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A delegation of 14 civic leaders and UC San Diego officials recently met with Vicente and Marta Fox, the former President and First Lady of Mexico (center) in the offices above his presidential library. (Photos by Carlos Solorio)

A Bridge to Mexico: UC San Diego Partners with Former President of Mexico Vicente Fox

At a time when cross-border relations are tense politically and socially, UC San Diego is expanding collaborations with partners south of the border, including a lively education exchange program coordinated with former President of Mexico Vicente Fox.

High school students from the United States recently headed to Centro Fox, a center for arts, leadership and civic education at Fox's presidential complex in San Cristóbal, Mexico, to attend presentations explaining the region's history, economy and population. The overall goal of the

program is to encourage a population that consists largely of potential first-generation university students to continue their education beyond high school.

As part of his effort to inspire the next generation to be compassionate leaders, Fox personally gives a seminar on leadership during the five-day curriculum. In exchange, Guanajuato students spend three weeks at UC San Diego as part of a decades-old summer residency program.

“Leaders must be curious and they must have compassion,” said Fox, who teaches a seminar on leadership as part of the program. “A leader is not only made by what they know from books. A leader is made out of the heart, the soul, your dedication.”



Vicente and Marta Fox, the former president and First Lady of Mexico, discuss ways to collaborate on an education exchange program with UC San Diego.

Fox’s library is a modern glass-walled building, but it is recessed into the earth behind weathered stone walls that blend seamlessly into the cobblestone streets and earth-covered plazas. From outside, visitors might suspect that it is a corral for horses and livestock. It’s only after you enter the gates that the facility becomes visible as if an excavation is taking place—except that the archaeological structure appears to be from the future. The interior courtyard is ringed by a stone patio dotted with benches that are used by music students practicing scales and recital pieces in the afternoon as part of a Fox music program that takes place year-round.

Hosting the exchange students in the only presidential library that exists outside of United States is not happenstance. The facility includes room-sized models of Fox’s presidential office, the United Nations Security Council Room, press conference podiums and official chambers that encourage students to see themselves as leaders. There is also a museum that celebrates Fox’s presidential legacy.

“The only way we can enrich ourselves as individuals and the only way we can see the whole picture is by visiting outside of our home states and home countries,” Fox said during a recent visit by a coalition of UC San Diego officials and civic leaders to Guanajuato.



A group of 14 leaders from San Diego related to government, health, education and community development attended the recent visit to Centro Fox. They were invited by UC San Diego Extension leaders who oversee the program in order to enhance the curriculum for students participating in the exchange from both the United States and Mexico. As part of the trip,

Visiting San Diego officials seen here with a group of students (and their families) from Guanajuato, who completed a summer program at UC San Diego.

officials brainstormed about workshops to address the role of public health in education, the need for diverse leaders in medical fields and the importance of maintaining inclusive, supportive environments for students.

Among those traveling to the state of Guanajuato to take part in this effort: National City Mayor Alejandra Sotelo-Solis; President and Chief Executive Officer of the National City Chamber of Commerce Jacqueline Reynoso; President and Chief Executive Officer of Reality Changers Tamara Craver as well as UC San Diego's Director of Early Academic Outreach Rafael Hernandez; Chief of Staff to the Vice Chancellor for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Frank Silva; Director of Raza Resource Centro Gerardo Arellano; Assistant Director of Admissions, Diversity Recruitment Roberta Camarena; and Executive Director and Associate Director of the School of Medicine's Center for Community Health Blanca Melendrez and Ramon Hernandez.

The first of four groups of high school students to participate in the visit from Southern California—including East Los Angeles and San Fernando Valley—arrived March 11 at Centro Fox.

The curriculum and venture was developed by UC San Diego Extension and Reality Changers, a nonprofit founded by UC San Diego alumnus Christopher Yanov. Through the exchange program, students from the United States discover a lesser traveled inland region of Mexico that is home to Latin America's largest logistics centers and a burgeoning economic state.

To date, no students have paid out of pocket for this experience. More than 50 Mexican high school students have received scholarships through UC San Diego Extension's Academic Connections, and each returns home to initiate and document a self-initiated community service project.



Parents from Guanajuato respond to questions from Christopher Yanov (left), a UC San Diego alumnus who lives in Mexico and helps coordinate education partnerships between both countries, regarding the summer exchange program their children took part in at UC San Diego.

“For our students to be global leaders they have to have these kinds of experiences that allow them to absorb and understand the greater community that they live in and understand how our community fits into a global context,” said Associate Dean of Education and Community Engagement for UC San Diego Extension Edward Abeyta, who co-developed the exchange program.

In 2011, Fox made a special visit to Reality Changers, a San Diego-based nonprofit that inspires first-generation college students and has had a 20-year partnership with UC San Diego. Over the past decade, these connections eventually led Fox, Reality Changers and UC San Diego to create this unique foreign exchange program featuring a former head of state.

Since 2016, students living in some of the poorest villages surrounding Centro Fox have come to UC San Diego for three weeks each summer to participate in Academic Connections, a full-immersion summer residential program. In turn, students from Reality Changers in the United States first took a course offered by Academic Connections at Centro Fox in the summer of 2018.

This ambitious exchange program caught the attention of Pathways in Education, a nonprofit travel company based near Los Angeles that provides experiential learning programs abroad. Pathways handles the registration and logistics for students traveling to Mexico, while educational support is still provided by UC San Diego Extension.

More than 130 students from the United States will attend Centro Fox between March and June 2020.



Morgan Appel and Ed Abeyta (right to left) of UC San Diego Extension led the San Diego delegation visiting Guanajuato. Here the group listens to exchange student presentations at Centro Fox.

“This kind of experience is absolutely empowering for everyone involved,” said Assistant Dean for Education and Community Outreach at Extension Morgan Appel. “For so many of us, that initial time at university is absolutely like entering a different country where you have to learn a new language, a new way of doing things, a new geography. And what this does, it prepares students to deal with the unexpected. It prepares students to be resilient problem-solvers.”

Fox, who was educated at prestigious universities in both countries said that he wants participants in the exchange program on both sides of the border to help “dispel the myth once and for all that the citizens of Mexico have

nothing to offer the United States.”

Fox said that the benefits of building bridges to promote cross-border relations are exponential, especially at a time when rhetoric of building walls is overblown.

Abeyta, Appel and Yanov organized the recent three-day trip to Guanajuato with interested partners from UC San Diego, Reality Changers and National City to explore ways to expand the exchange program. Among the ideas was adding opportunities for educators and parents to participate in the exchange.

This year, more than a dozen Mexican students who also participate in programs at Centro Fox will attend Academic Connections on UC San Diego's campus from July 5 to 25. The program welcomes hundreds of regional and international students to campus each summer.

Visit the [Academic Connections website](#) to learn more about this three-week residential program.

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