

A Tale of Two Borders

Assisting Border Commuter Students

FOR ALEJANDRA URQUIDE, a senior at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), commuting daily across the U.S. border from her home in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, can be unpredictable, to say the least. During her first three years as a full-time border commuter student, Urquide endured a variety of challenges, from waiting in line for three hours on the busiest days at the U.S. port of entry to car searches and harsh questioning from border agents—including once being asked: “Where are your drugs?”

But the benefits of being able to live with her parents and pursue an enriching college education were worth the inconveniences and sometimes upsetting encounters, Urquide says, and she has become a stronger person for the experience. The daughter of two high school literature professors who passed on to their children an appreciation for education, Urquide will be the first in her family to graduate from a U.S. university.

“I was excited about attending college in the U.S. because I wanted to keep studying and because it would be a different experience for me—a different way to learn and a new adventure in my life,” says Urquide, who is pursuing a double major in media advertising and graphic design. “When you study in another country, your mind is challenged, your language skills are challenged, and your social skills are challenged. It makes you a stronger person.”

Like Urquide, many Mexican students from cities neighboring the U.S. border—and their Canadian peers in the North—are opting to live at home while pursuing their dream of a college education from a U.S. college or university. For some, the appeal and marketability of an international degree draws them to pursue a degree across the border. Others find significant cost savings through commuting (particularly Mexican students who qualify for in-state tuition rates through a Texas aid program called Programa de Asistencia Estudiantil, or PASE).

And they can still enjoy staying close to family and friends from home.

“I decided to study in the U.S. to stay close to my family, where I would have the support of my parents,” says Urquide, who has been able to reduce her commuting time (on most days) since obtaining a SENTRI card—a pass that allows frequent, low-security-risk travelers from Mexico to get pre-cleared for entry. “The cost of living in the U.S. is much higher than living in Juárez, so by staying in my home city, I could save money by not having to pay rent or other living expenses.”

Confusing Regulations

Prior to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, it was common for Mexican or Canadian students to live in their home countries while studying part time at U.S. colleges and universities located close to the border. In those days, very little was required in terms of immigration documents and student visas, and it such students would commonly commute to the United States as visitors. After September 11, however, security at all land borders was tightened, with more restrictions placed on travel into the United States, and the legacy Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) disallowed the practice of commuting to the U.S. in visitor classification to pursue part-time studies. Shortly thereafter, however, the U.S. government enacted a number of measures to accommodate “border commuter students” within the framework for the F student category.

■ First, INS amended its regulations to allow part-time border commuter students to enter as F-1 students. Under this regulation, *full-time* border

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commuters were admissible as regular F-1 students with full F-1 student benefits. Students admitted in F-1 status under the regulation as *part-time* border commuters, however, had conditions imposed on their admission, including a limitation on the duration of their I-20 immigration form, and a prohibition on on-campus employment and pre-completion practical training.

■ Second, shortly after INS issued its F-1 border commuter student regulation, Congress passed the Border Commuter Student Act of 2002. The legislation created a new F-3 category for Canadian and Mexican students enrolled as commuters.

■ Third, In 2003 the Department of State promulgated a rule to list the F-3 nonimmigrant visa category in DOS visa regulations at 22 CFR 41.12 [68 Fed.Reg. 47460 (August 11, 2003)].

However, neither INS nor its successor DHS has issued regulations to implement the F-3 category, nor has SEVIS been up-

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dated to accommodate the F-3 category. The existence of a valid statute and DOS regulation, but no DHS regulation or SEVIS functionality, has given rise to instances of part-time Mexican border commuter students sometimes being issued F-1 visas and sometimes F-3 visas, and both Mexican and Canadian part-time border commuter students sometimes being admitted in F-1 status and sometimes in F-3 status.

This has created complications and confusion at schools, consulates, and ports of entry. In fact, procedures at a single consul-

ate or port of entry may vary, depending on which officer is on duty.

Practices along the southern border also differ from those along the northern border.

“Along the southern border, there are students who are in F-3 status, but there are no F-3 regulations,” says Ellen Dussourd, assistant vice provost for international student and scholar services at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). “And on the northern border, Canadian students who need an I-20 but not a visa, are—on paper—being admitted as F-1 students.”

David Fosnocht, director of immigration practice resources for NAFSA: Association of International Educators, adds: “A lot of the problems are procedural. The schools want to know how to document their students, and they want consistency in how these students are being admitted at the ports of entry. A focus on standardizing things would definitely be in everybody’s best interests.”

These inconsistencies often leave international offices unsure of how to advise border commuters—particularly in handling special situations, such as when a student drops a class or needs to take a leave of absence for a semester or two.

“The biggest issue for us is the uncertain environment in which we operate,” Dussourd says. “There’s a lot of ambiguity, and there is no guidance for a lot of situations that arise.”

Challenges for Students

Despite the appeal of gaining an educational experience with an international flavor while living at home or working full time, it’s not always an easy journey for Mexican and Canadian nationals to be students commuting across the border. One of the biggest hurdles they face is dealing with potentially long lines and extended wait times at the border crossings. No matter how much students plan ahead by leaving their home hours before their classes start, there’s always a possibility that security concerns or increased travel due to a holiday could back up traffic at the ports of entry, resulting in wait times up to three hours or more.

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And although the preapproved SENTRI cards (southern border) or NEXUS cards (northern border) issued by U.S. Customs and Border Protection may speed up the process, there’s always a chance for delays. Those situations can make them late to classes and cause a great deal of frustration.

A national tragedy, such as the recent Boston Marathon bombings last spring, also can spark a crackdown on security along the borders—causing more uncertainty and delays for students crossing the borders daily for classes. In early May, for example, federal agents were required to verify the SEVIS record of each person trying to enter the United States U.S. on a student visa. This action apparently came in response to the revelation that two friends of accused bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev may have been in the United States U.S. on student visas that were no longer valid. Right after the Boston bombing, border commuter students entering the country were subject to secondary inspections, which in many cases may add an hour or more to their typical commute times.

In late May, this is how Urquide described her experience of undergoing more time-consuming inspections to *IE* at that time: “I have to be at the bridge at least 30 minutes earlier than I used to be. I realize that there are fewer people [crossing the border] at certain hours of the day, so I try to cross at that particular time so it won’t take me long,” says Urquide, who is very frustrated with these recent developments and feels that border commuter students are being subjected to additional inspections unfairly. “I was starting to be late to work, so I had to talk with my boss and see if he could maybe change my morning schedule to another time—because the bridge is most crowded in the morning. Also I’m worried about getting to school on time for my morning tests. That’s why I’m planning on leaving my house at least one hour and a half earlier [than the tests start] so I can make it.”

When Urquide first learned of the new enhanced security checks, she admitted, “To be honest, I was really mad.” She thought that was unfair to international students. “The only people suffering with these checks were international students,” she says. “And

if we consider that in this city (El Paso) the bridges have to receive thousands of people daily, then why was it only us [international students] who were being checked?”

Since May, the Department of Homeland Security has implemented new protocols that appear to have addresses these extended delays that Urquide faced in May.

Most border commuter students plan to spend their whole day on campus to eliminate the need for multiple trips across the border, and they try to avoid peak hours. Sue White, a part-time border commuter student at Wayne State University in Detroit who lives in Windsor, Ontario, tries to ease the process of entering the United States by keeping her car neat and carrying only what she needs for classes. Even carrying fruit across the border could cause a problem, she says.

“Every now and then, the border officials will do car inspections—sometimes it’s just a random thing, and sometimes it’s because of heightened security concerns for issues we often don’t know about,” says White, a senior majoring in biology and minoring in chemistry. “I try to keep an organized car because I think they appreciate it when you make their job easier.”

“The southern border is a different situation from the north because of the economic disparity, the drug trade, cultural differences, and racial attitudes,” says Ken Kuntzleman, director of the International Students Program at Arizona Western College in Yuma, Arizona. “The border is a militarized environment. Near the southern border, we have a very large and active Border Patrol—at times beefed up by the National Guard—occasional violent incidents, and a rather overwhelming border fence. There is always a degree of suspicion present, which can discourage educational and cultural exchange.”

For students coming into the United States from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, personal

safety is another factor to consider. Over the last decade or more, the city has been plagued by violence largely resulting from the activities of drug cartels in the region. Though the situation in the embattled city seems to be improving, many students still take precautions and plan their schedules carefully to be as safe as possible.

“Juárez is the epicenter of the violence in Mexico, and the city has had a lot of issues to deal with,” says Carol Martin, assistant director of UTEP’s Office of International Programs. “A lot of our students try to cross the border in daylight hours because being out and about after dark isn’t always safe. So they typically are not here on campus studying in the library at night or attending events and activities that are happening in the evening. Things are improving, but for a while it was pretty traumatic for our students.”

While many international students struggle to feel connected on U.S. campuses, the problem often is compounded for border commuter students—particularly for the traditional-aged college students who likely desire close bonds with their peers. Though many international offices do host events on campus to help foreign students become acclimated to the culture, border commuter students are less likely to attend when facing the hassle of additional trips across the border.

“Since border commuter students live this double life—one in Mexico and one in the U.S.—sometimes we feel lost and don’t get very involved in the college culture,” Urquide says. “We have to go home and then come back to campus, so we have all these different dynamics [compared to students who live on campus]. I would like it if there were activities that the commuter students could participate in and share about their culture and why it’s important to have this bicultural education.”

Suraya Kassam of Vancouver, British Columbia, says she would love to spend more time getting to know her classmates outside the classroom, but her daily 45-minute commute to Western Washington University (WWU) in Bellingham, Washington, makes it difficult. After spending a full day on campus, the thought of delaying the long drive home is daunting.

“I don’t always feel connected,” says Kassam, who recently completed a post-baccalaureate program at WWU and is set to enroll this fall as a graduate student in the university’s Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. “I think I would be more involved if I lived closer to campus. Still, it’s nice to come home to my family and the friends that I grew up with.”

Making Sense of Uncertainty

Despite the frustrations of dealing with inconsistent regulations, many have found that simple, yet thoughtful, approaches to assisting border commuter students are effective. Many international offices, for example, post information and reminders about required documentation on their websites, in regular mailings, and through e-mail messages. They often post information about bridge delays or other potential problems on their department Facebook pages or other social media sites. Many international offices also report staying open past standard office hours—at least a few days a week—to accommodate students who commute after working all day.

Laryssa Petryshyn, director of the International Student Office at D’Youville College in Buffalo, New York, strives to keep open the lines of communication with officials at the Peace Bridge Port of Entry, located blocks from the college. D’Youville has about 125 part-time border commuter students and 200 full-time Canadian students, some of whom are commuters.

“I have the port supervisors’ e-mail addresses,” says Petryshyn, a U.S. citizen living in Canada who also crosses the border daily. “So when my students start encountering problems or getting different information from different border agents, then I can report back to the supervisors to get these situations resolved. It’s about reaching out to port supervisors and letting them know what our process is and trying to make sure things go smoothly for the students.”

UTEP’s Martin also tries to stay in close contact with border officials—even including them in fun activities on her campus, which has about 400 border commuter students. Her department has invited them to

judge at their international food fairs, and earlier this spring, UTEP held a recruitment fair at the U.S. Consulate.

“We try to keep an open line of communication with them,” Martin says. “We feel like we have a good relationship with the American Consulate.”

At Arizona Western College, Kuntzelman feels he can best help his border commuter students by advocating for them. Though Arizona Western’s population of border commuter students has declined to “less than a dozen” in recent years—for various reasons related to institutional and state-wide priorities—Kuntzelman expects to reverse this trend through targeted recruiting efforts. The college’s English as a Second Language (ESL) Program is a big draw for Mexican commuter students. To prepare for the influx of students, Kuntzelman has trained advisers on Arizona Western’s extension campus, which is located right along the border, about how to respond to questions from prospective students. He also has set up a “user-friendly” process for application and enrollment. The efforts already are paying off, as applications have increased.

“This helps to vitalize our international student program in a time when overseas student numbers are dropping fast at Arizona community colleges—although

increasing at the major universities,” Kuntzelman says. “I believe that building a strong border commuter program will have a positive impact on cross-border relations and would be a benefit to our college. It can be helpful in maintaining good relationships, good immigration policies, good economic productivity, and workforce development. All of these issues are important to our greater bi-national community.”

Despite the frustration over a lack of clear federal guidelines for border commuter students, international student advisers persist in finding creative solutions to ensure that these students have positive and enriching experiences on U.S. campuses. For Pam Chapa at The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), this is the ultimate reward of her job.

“I love what I do—it’s a passion,” says Chapa, who is director of UTPA’s Office of International Admissions and Services. “I love to see the students when they first come to school and to watch them mature and reach their goals toward the end. That is what I live for—getting them here and helping them to the end.”

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KAREN DOSS BOWMAN is a freelance writer in Bridgewater, Virginia. Her last article for *IE* was “Local Connections,” in the November/December 2012 issue, which explored how international students can integrate into their local communities both on and off campus.



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