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# Effective Communication in English: Preparing Undergraduate Students in the United States-Mexico Border

# Comunicación efectiva en inglés: preparando estudiantes de licenciatura en la frontera Estados Unidos-México

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the perspectives of 15 undergraduate students in terms of their choice of an academic program. The approach of this study was conducted through the qualitative case study. The results suggest that participants believe that improving their communication skills in English will facilitate their integration into the economy of the United States-Mexico border region. The novelty of this finding is that it prioritizes English as a second language for undergraduate students, perhaps at the level of discipline-specific program characteristics. The main limitation of this study was its focus on one side of the border.
Keywords: 1. cross-border, 2. education, 3. English, 4. United States, 5. Mexico

RESUMEN

El propósito de este estudio fue examinar las perspectivas de 15 estudiantes de licenciatura en términos de su selección de programa académico. El estudio se llevó a cabo a través del método de caso cualitativo. Los resultados sugieren que los participantes consideran que desarrollar la habilidad para comunicarse en inglés facilitará su integración en la economía de la frontera México-Estados Unidos. Este hallazgo es original ya que coloca al inglés como prioridad para estudiantes universitarios a la par con los contenidos específicos del programa académico. La principal limitante de este estudio es su enfoque en un solo lado de la frontera.
Palabras clave: 1. transfronteriza, 2. educación, 3. inglés, 4. Estados Unidos, 5. México

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## INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders in the state of Baja California, Mexico, made important efforts to improve the quality of higher education in the region, which contributed to reducing the asymmetries in the labor market between skilled workers in Mexico and the United States (Moctezuma, Ocegueda, Mungaray, Ocegueda, & Estrella, 2013). These asymmetries include, for example, an 80% wage disparity between Mexican workers who reside in the United States, and commuters from northern cities in Mexico (Orraca Romano, 2015). Also, college-educated Hispanics in the United States earn less than their non-Hispanic white counterparts in the country (Sánchez Soto, Bautista-León, & Singelmann, 2018). Even more pressing, the working conditions of Mexican immigrants in the fields of California have been described as sub-standard and serves to make the case for increased migrant rights (Posadas Segura, 2014).

The unfavorable working conditions of migrant workers in agriculture will do little to deter them from seeking employment in the United States, considering that agricultural workers can expect to earn four times what they make in Mexico by going across the border (Lara Lara, 2017). While the majority of Mexican migrants in the United States no longer work in the fields because of newfound employment in the services and manufacturing industries, they still are the minority group that is most likely to remain among the poorest segments of the population due to lack of a college education (Levine, 2006). This becomes a self-sustaining cycle because a higher probability of Mexican workers migrating to the United States means lower expectations of obtaining a college education (Sánchez Soto, 2017).

Rather than continue to deal with gaps in talent pools on the border, which leads to missed opportunities among young, college-educated individuals, steps can be taken to elevate the quality of the workforce, and the organizations they serve, by helping students on both sides of the border obtain the kind of education they require to compete successfully in the binational labor market that characterizes the region. This can be achieved by creating conditions where students complete their college education while ensuring that the type of learning that takes place in higher education institutions is relevant to those who intend to participate in the economic and social context of the border region.

A key barrier for this could be migration in the region. Acosta Rangel and Caamal-Olvera (2017) noted that the children of parents who migrate to the United States and send money back to Mexico through remittances tend to enroll in higher education since they do not migrate. These children can grow to occupy high-paying jobs in Mexico and contribute to increasing the standard of living (Garza-Rodríguez, 2016).

The key is to empower these individuals to stay in Mexico and not be placed in a position where they must take low-paying jobs in the United States, compromising their ability to enroll in college. As noted before, it is those young individuals who migrate to the United States searching for work who are the least likely to obtain a college degree (Levine, 2006).

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In the 1990s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed and implemented, producing accelerated industrialization and economic development. During this time, demand for skilled workers in Tijuana, the largest city in Baja California, increased, but the wages remained relatively low (Ghiara & Zepeda, 2001). Mendoza Cota (2017) argued that as the integration of the economic region in the United States-Mexico border took place, it held the promise of alleviating important social pressures that concerned the quality of life of its inhabitants. Unfortunately, along with increased liberalization, development, and demand for skilled labor, social inequality in the Mexican border cities increased, revealing some of the negative aspects of economic integration (Burgos & Mungaray, 2008; Aguilera Fernández & Castro Lugo, 2018).

NAFTA delivered clear increases in trade between the three countries involved, but that the compatibility of the United States and Mexican education systems remained low, while the much tighter relationship between the United States and Canadian systems continued to thrive (Sá & Gaviria, 2012). This key point was reflected through the concerns noted by Moctezuma *et al*. (2013) when they noted that institutions of higher education needed to continue evolving in order to meet the standards implied by the integration to the North American market. Not to mention that this would provide companies access to wider, more prepared talent pools (Göhlich, Engel, & Höhne, 2014). The connection between the development of the economic relationship between the three NAFTA countries and their education systems was articulated by then-president Barack Obama when he spoke at the North American Leaders' Summit in Toluca, Mexico in 2014:

> […] And so, we have every incentive to make this work. And so a lot of our conversation has focused on how do we reduce any continuing trade frictions; how do we make sure that our borders are more efficient; how do we make sure that the educational exchanges between our young people are expanded so that our young people understand their opportunities will be brighter and expanded if in fact they've had the opportunity to study in Canada or to study in Mexico, if they know Spanish, if they know French (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2014, p. 3).

To acknowledge the social and economic realities of the North American region, CETYS Universidad created the International Business Global Program (IBGP) as part of its undergraduate degrees. The purpose of the IBGP is to help develop a college-educated society that can meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities that the border region presents. In alignment with the work published by Despagne and Jacobo Suárez (2016), the IBGP was designed to help undergraduate students in the border region develop their communication skills in English and Spanish, as well as to embrace diversity while they learn the discipline-specific subject matter.

For Mexican workers, being able to communicate in English facilitates participation in cross-border labor markets and integration in the overall binational community. Previous studies have made similar claims (Vásquez, 2002; Mungaray, Escamilla, Ramírez, &

Aguilar, 2014). Because of the lack of focus on the part of educational institutions in Mexico to enhance the opportunities for large segments of the population to access robust English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, students have had to engage in economically challenging alternatives (Rocha Romero & Orraca Romano, 2018). Studying in U.S. higher education institutions requires significant financial resources and strong academics, which is not possible for most of the student population on the Mexican side of the border, so students living south of the border are left with limited options.

For that reason, the design and implementation of undergraduate programs that can help prepare students in Mexico to compete in the regional labor market is a must. The purpose of this study was to examine whether the motivations of 15 IBGP students were consistent with the institutional expectation of developing college-educated individuals who can engage in the binational labor market of the border region. The research question that guided this study can be stated as follows: What do the 15 undergraduate students in the sample aim to achieve by completing the IBGP? This study is innovative because it examines the thoughts of participants who enrolled in an undergraduate program designed specifically to develop the learning competencies valued in a region that is known for cross-border collaboration and opportunity.

To present the full analysis, this article is organized as follows: the first part reviews documented examples of cross-border educational experiences in Mexico and other parts of the world that aimed to help students become competitive in the ever more global labor marketplace. The second section shows a description of the IBGP. The third part describes step by step the data-gathering and analysis phase. The fourth, and last section, reports the results, followed by a discussion of key takeaways and recommendations that may be useful to educational leaders, the private sector, and policymakers engaged in cross-border education and labor markets within the Baja California-California region. Limitations and final remarks are presented in the concluding section.

## CROSS-BORDER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

The Baja California-California region demands a change in the educational paradigm to fully utilize the potential of its citizens. This signals a need for "a multilingual, multicultural education that is mediated by the latest information technology" (Vásquez, 2002, p. 42). From an economic and labor perspective, Smith and Murillo (2015) pointed out that there is a market for bilingual teachers, healthcare providers, entrepreneurs, and law enforcement agents on the border. In spite of this, the U.S. education system has failed to incentivize bilingual education in the region (Torrente Paternina, 2013), and increased scrutiny on cross-border commuters and economic downturn have created impediments for United States-born individuals living in Mexico who wish to engage in higher education (Vargas Valle, 2012).

These problems have been partially addressed through the work of certain individuals. For example, Dematthews and Izquierdo (2017) documented the lived experiences of one school

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principal working in the United States-Mexico border. This principal realized that the community of Mexican American students was underserved by faculty and staff. This was especially harmful given the fact that several of these students were English learners, which meant that their ability to communicate effectively and get the most out of their education was limited, to begin with.

After some time working and becoming an agent of change among families, students, and faculty members in the community, the principal managed to implement several strategies, such as the creation of a bilingual program that led to a more just and egalitarian educational environment.

In recognition that there is an information gap about cross-border education, Vargas Valle (2015) called for the development of mixed methods studies on the issue. Consistently, Rocha Romero and Orraca Romano (2018) examined census data and the narratives of seven undergraduate students who commuted from Tijuana to San Diego to study and eventually obtain their degrees. Their findings indicated that living in Mexico and studying in the United States was something that a small percentage of the population achieved, and that economic and academic conditions played a fundamental role in their decision and success. Moreover, the students in their sample engaged in challenging commutes to and from school, which placed great pressure on them.

As if economic, academic, and travel pressures were not enough, the resurgence of anti-migrant practices are hurting the career expectations of young people on both sides of the border (Vargas Valle, 2012; Camacho Rojas & Vargas Valle, 2017). Unfortunately for these families, having limited resources affects their quality of life in Mexico. For example, young students who were formerly enrolled in schools in the United States found it hard to cope with the bureaucratic, social, economic, and cultural barriers they encountered when they tried to enroll in public schools in Mexico (Jacobo-Suárez, 2017; Camacho Rojas & Vargas Valle, 2017).

Experiences like this can prompt young individuals to quit school and seek opportunities in low-paying jobs in the United States to help support their families. This condition explains the findings noted by Sánchez Soto (2017) on the negative correlation between a college education in Mexico and the tendency to engage in cross-border migration. The implications being that cross-border migration leads to a reduction in higher education.

More broadly, international education has been on the agenda for several researchers from different parts of the world (Raffe & Croxford, 2013; Youssef, 2014; Hou, 2014; Bermúdez Rico, 2015; Banks & Gutiérrez, 2017; Wilkins & Juusola, 2018). Witte (2010) argued that academic programs designed to serve international students should aim to promote the development of cognitive, behavioral, and critical learning competencies that are essential for people who thrive in the changing and diverse global environment of today. This was consistent with a study sponsored by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) which concluded that global businesses needed educational institutions

to engage in a globalization strategy that included the internationalization of the quality measures and characteristics of the curriculum, and the development of global partnerships (Bruner & Iannarelli, 2011).

Such ideas are proportional to the recommendations set forth by Vásquez (2002) regarding the modernization of the Tijuana-San Diego region and its educational institutions. On this issue, Lutz (2004) specifically noted the importance of helping Latino students master the English language if they want to succeed in the United States. Baja California residents would seem to be ideal candidates to take advantage of a college education in the United States, given the fact that it shares a border with the state of California; however, a lack of effort on the part of the government authorities and academic leaders have led to a very small share of the student population engaging in cross-border education (Rocha Romero & Ocegueda Hernández, 2014).

Along with the limited share of cross-border students, the educational systems in the United States and Mexico vary considerably, contributing to important asymmetries in terms of the competencies of skilled workers on both sides of the border, a situation that helps sustain the disparities in the standard of living between Baja California and Californian workers. Thus, in order to reduce the gap in the standard of living of the citizens on both sides of the border, it is important that key economic actors in Baja California continue to develop the commercial infrastructure of the municipalities of the northern border, and provide access to quality education to its citizens (Mungaray *et al*., 2014). This goal may take a long time to achieve, but small steps may be taken to gradually address the issue.

Consequently, quality education aimed at promoting cross-border economic development could be described as one that (1) increases the share of college-educated workers in a society leading to overall higher incomes (Pereira-López & Soloaga, 2015), and (2) promotes the development of relevant work competencies for students who will be expected to engage in international contexts (Pandit & Alderman, 2004; Huang, 2017). The role of the government on that matter would be to find ways to provide educational institutions the resources needed to fulfill these expectations, with the help of educators who understand the local and regional forces that will shape the performance of students and workers (Mungaray *et al*., 2014).

The problem of socio-economic disparities along the border region cannot be readily addressed yet because important gaps still exist in the literature regarding cross-border opportunities in education and well-paying jobs. Part of the reason for this is that the subject matter includes many variables. For example, Martínez Curiel (2013) argued that the sons and daughters of Mexican migrants in the United States are hard to profile because their belief system is developed with the influence of two cultures. Specifically, the author noted that the academic expectations and achievements of this group of students depend on factors regarding their past experiences in school, demographic background, upbringing, and educational environment in the country of destination. Nonetheless, it is important to take steps to fill these knowledge gaps.

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## THE IBGP, ITS AIMS, AND CONSIDERATIONS

In the mid-1990s, CETYs Universidad developed the International Business (IB) program as the North American trade zone was being formalized through NAFTA. Students who enrolled in the IB program were required to accredit the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and complete at least one curricular course in English, in case they needed help to develop their English skills they had to enroll in ESL co-curricular classes. Also, students had the choice of participating in a double degree program, which meant they could take their coursework at San Diego State University (SDSU) and obtain a second undergraduate degree in business.

The IB program was eventually accredited by the *Consejo de Acreditación en Ciencias Administrativas* (CACECA) and by several accrediting agencies at the School and Institutional levels. With time, additional undergraduate programs within CETYS Universidad and other institutions of higher education started to develop students' global competencies through similar curricular and co-curricular activities to those in the IB program. However, in 2017, CETYS Universidad started with the first cohort of the IBGP.

Like the traditional IB program, the IBGP offers students a double degree option in the United States in partnership with City University of Seattle, as well as numerous internationalization curricular and co-curricular options in foreign countries. The main differences between them are that the entire curriculum, 45 courses, are taught in English. At least one international-curricular learning experience is required for graduation, and several courses are taught by foreign, visiting professors.

The IBGP was designed to serve students who were likely to spend at least part of their future and professional careers outside of Mexico, most notably in the United States. These students would typically have dual citizenship, speak English at least at an intermediate level, and be willing and able (financially) to travel as part of their undergraduate studies. The prerequisites to enter the IBGP were the same as the traditional IB program, except that students needed to prove sufficient command of the English language through the TOEFL.

Graduation requirements were remarkably similar as well, except that the IBGP students needed to prove sufficient command of the Spanish language through the completion of an institutional, co-curricular program. However, Spanish-language competency was not established as a requirement for enrollment in the IBGP. By the spring of 2019, there were two cohorts of students in the IBGP totaling 38 students. Two more groups are expected to join them before the first cohort graduates in 2021.

So far, the students seem to be developing their language and overall communication skills as expected, along with mastering the contents of their discipline. In accordance with the criteria established by the *Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs* (ACBSP), which accredited all the undergraduate and graduate programs of the School of Business and Administration at CETYS Universidad, the main components of the curriculum

include accounting, computer applications, quantitative reasoning, economics, global business, ethics, marketing, entrepreneurship, finance, and management (ACBSP, 2019).

The aims of the IBGP are aligned to help correct the asymmetries in terms of the skills of the labor force in the United States-Mexico border. Students who graduate from the IBGP will be competent in the areas of trade and business management, master the *de facto* language of international business (English), and develop their cross-cultural competencies by learning from a diverse group of faculty members in terms of nationality and experience.

However, it is too soon to tell whether the IBGP will be successful. Two more years need to go by before the first group of graduates joins the labor market as professionals. Nonetheless, it is important to start analyzing the work being done with these students, so that educational leaders in different parts of the border region can learn about this initiative, and begin to take part in developing innovative educational solutions to problems that affect people in the region. Thus, the development of the present study.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was developed following the qualitative paradigm through the case study approach which is often used when the researcher is interested in examining the lived experiences of the participants under specific circumstances at one point in time (Creswell, 2014). In this research, we focused on the perspectives of 15 undergraduate students enrolled in the IBGP. It was determined that understanding the perspectives of the participants would help confirm and expand some of the assumptions under which the IBGP was designed and deployed.

These participants were approached near the end of their first semester in the program. Twenty-three IBGP students were invited to participate, eight declined. Participation was voluntary. The students who accepted the invitation to participate as subjects agreed to reflect on their reasoning at the time they decided to enroll in the program. As noted in Table 1, seven of the participants identified themselves as having both United States and Mexican nationalities, which is not unusual among undergraduate students in Tijuana. Some of them had completed high school in the United States, others had recently moved to Tijuana, and one person commuted every weekday from Chula Vista, California to Tijuana.

Table 1. IBGP Participants in the Study.

| Participant | Age | Gender | Residence | Nationality |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 18 | Female | Chula Vista | Dual nationality (US/MEX) |
| 2 | 19 | Female | Tijuana | Mexican nationality |
| 3 | 19 | Female | Tijuana | Mexican nationality |
| 4 | 18 | Female | Tijuana | Mexican nationality |
| 5 | 18 | Male | Tecate | Mexican nationality |
| 6 | 18 | Male | Tijuana | United States nationality |
| 7 | 18 | Female | Ensenada | Mexican nationality |
| 8 | 18 | Female | Tijuana | Dual nationality (US/MEX) |

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| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9 | 18 | Male | Tecate | Dual nationality (US/MEX) |
| 10 | 18 | Male | Tijuana | Dual nationality (US/MEX) |
| 11 | 20 | Male | Tijuana | Dual nationality (US/MEX) |
| 12 | 19 | Female | Tijuana | Dual nationality (US/MEX) |
| 13 | 18 | Female | Tijuana | Mexican nationality |
| 14 | 19 | Female | Tijuana | Dual nationality (US/MEX) |
| 15 | 20 | Female | Tijuana | Mexican nationality |

Source: Elaborated by the author based on interviews to students.

During the data-gathering phase, the researcher conducted a group meeting where the participants were informed about the nature of the study, the use of the data they were going to provide through interviews, as well as our commitment to ensure the anonymity of the participants. After the group session, all who participated received an e-mail in his or her institutional account with a brief interview protocol designed to collect demographic data and three questions regarding their motivation to enroll in the IBGP and expectations for the future.

The participants were encouraged to use the questions as prompts to "tell the story" about how they chose their academic program, and how this choice aligned with their future careers. Also, they were asked to submit their stories via e-mail one week after receiving the questionnaire. However, some students preferred in impromptu face-to-face meetings.

The researcher had an office on campus, which made it easy to conduct follow-up interviews during the data-gathering and analysis phase. This was useful when responses were not clear, and brief follow-up interviews were necessary. This also allowed for triangulation (Creswell, 2014) as a way to ensure the validity of the data. By conducting the study this way, the researcher could take into consideration different data sources, such as direct observation, e-mail documents, and interview transcripts. Direct observation of participants took place throughout the data collection process during the group meeting and one-on-one follow-ups.

During the meetings, the researcher noticed that the participants would switch from English to Spanish at different points of the same conversation. They would ask questions about the interview protocol and then state they needed to think about their experience before they could articulate it. It was clear that some of the students were eager to talk about their expectations. The documents were submitted through e-mails and served to provide direct quotes from the participants which were used for the analysis, as well as included on the manuscript. Subsequently, follow-up interviews served to clarify and expand on e-mail responses. To record the responses, the researcher took notes and later reviewed them as part of the analysis.

Dependability or reliability was established by carefully organizing the data through MS Excel and QDA Miner files. During the analysis phase, the researcher went back several times to look at the data from different approaches, using different analysis techniques and was able to maintain consistent patterns. The data collection and analysis processes

overlapped. Creswell (2014) noted that qualitative data analysis can be strengthened by saturation, which means that the data are sufficiently rich to the point where continuing to register more information would yield similar patterns to the ones identified. Data saturation, in this case, was promoted through the data-gathering phase, and it was concluded that 15 responses were enough.

Consequently, the software package QDA Miner, designed for qualitative data examination, aided the analysis coding phase, and allowed the careful classification of the data, which facilitated the emergence of themes. In agreement with the guidelines noted by Saldaña (2011), the coding process took place using InVivo codes, which allowed for word frequencies in the data to be identified and illustrated in table format. The initial output of the information, once analyzed, is noted in Table 2. Only codes and cases with five or more frequencies found during the data analysis phase were included in the findings. Based on the data in Table 2, four codes were retained for further analysis while eight were discarded.

Table 2. Initial QDA Miner Interview Data Output

| Code | Count | Code (%) | Cases | Case (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| English language | 19 | 35.80% | 14 | 93.30% |
| Work in the United States | 6 | 11.30% | 4 | 26.70% |
| Long-term plans | 6 | 11.30% | 5 | 33.30% |
| Entrepreneurship | 5 | 9.40% | 5 | 33.30% |
| To work for international companies | 4 | 7.50% | 3 | 20.00% |
| Travel and conferences | 4 | 7.50% | 3 | 20.00% |
| Career path in IB | 3 | 5.70% | 3 | 20.00% |
| Give back to the community | 2 | 3.80% | 2 | 13.30% |
| Independence | 1 | 1.90% | 1 | 6.70% |
| Security | 1 | 1.90% | 1 | 6.70% |
| Self confidence | 1 | 1.90% | 1 | 6.70% |
| Hardship from crossing the border | 1 | 1.90% | 1 | 6.70% |

Source: Elaborated by the author based on interviews with students.

## RESULTS

The results from the study suggest that the one overarching factor that motivated students to enroll in the IBGP was the chance to develop their ability to communicate effectively in English while they completed their undergraduate education. As noted in Table 2, the majority of the reported cases, in some way or another, support the claim that mastering the English language is of great concern to these students, perhaps even more so than discipline-specific characteristics.

Other aspects such as the possibility of working in the United States, specific long-term plans, and engaging in entrepreneurial activities were important considerations as well, but as will be described shortly, these aspects tend to relate to enhancing the ability of the participants to communicate in English. Other factors like the possibility of working for

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international companies, traveling, and attending conferences were considered insufficiently represented in the responses, so they were not used for further analysis.

*Theme 1: Enhancing the Ability to Communicate in English to Reach Others*

This was the overarching result of this research. The narratives provided by the participants suggest that completing their undergraduate degrees, along with enhancing their ability to communicate in English, was an attractive factor at the time they made the decision to enroll in the IBGP. Here is what Participant 2 had to say about the advantages of enrolling in an English-taught undergraduate program:

> Honestly, I think there are a lot of advantages, and not only comparing it to the traditional International Business Program, but to any program that is taught in the students' native language. I want to start off by mentioning the fact that English is the second language that's spoken by almost all the people all over the world, and that it is a way to communicate with many others, especially for business. Besides this, the main point of studying IB is to engage with different cultures and establish relationships with them to do business, and […] the fact that social media and digital platforms connect us with others, [so] it is necessary for everyone to be able to communicate with each other […] [Therefore], studying the program in Spanish can be a barrier when it comes to speaking with people, especially since we live in the most visited Mexican border (Participant 2, personal communication, November 18, 2018).

The narrative provided by Participant 4 was consistent with the main points noted in the previous quote, which rests on the argument that studying an undergraduate degree in English holds more promise for the future than doing it in Spanish.

> There are too many benefits […] English is a prominent language throughout the world and in business, so knowing all these concepts about the career in this language seems to give me an advantage over the ordinary students of the Spanish language [program], since [we are] students of an international career, we have to be prepared to be able to develop outside of Mexico and for this it is clear that knowing the information perfectly in both languages automatically gives [us] more advantage (Participant 4, personal communication, November 19, 2018).

The participants' reason that the ability to communicate effectively in English can potentially lead to greater opportunities after graduation and empowers them to get more out of their education. This perspective is pragmatic in nature and does not imply that they do not value their culture or in some way compromise their national identity. On this matter, Participant 11 had this to say:

> I think that it gives an advantage over a regular business program because all the classes are taught in English. On the cultural aspect, most of the

> people traveling internationally communicate [in] English because it is a language that has become universal, meaning that a lot of countries teach English to their students […] The fact that the school is in Tijuana means that most students speak Spanish, we don't lose our main language but we also get the opportunity to practice our English. We also learn how the concepts and many terms are said in English […] [If] by any chance we do end up working in United States, we would know how to communicate properly in the business world (Participant 11, personal communication, November 12, 2018).

As the narratives started to accumulate through data analysis, it became clear that the participants valued diversity and the sense of belonging to a sort of binational society, which meant greater opportunities for growth, in the widest sense of the word. This conception has the potential to influence where the participants are going to live, work, and study.

*Theme 2: Communicating in English is as Important as the Choice of Academic Program*

An interesting finding that emerged from the analysis was that students placed great importance on developing their ability to communicate in English. In some cases, they selected their academic program based mainly on this criterion.

> My decision toward International Business Global Program was last minute. Since I was little, I've loved doing negotiations and everything that has to do with business, but psychology was more attractive. When I was on my junior year of high school I decided that I wanted to go study psychology at CETYS Universidad, the only thing was that I didn't want to study psychology because it was in Spanish so it was not a great idea because I wanted to work in the U.S. after I graduated and have bigger opportunities […], so I decided that if I was going to study psychology I would go to a community college in San Diego. Once I told my parents they went with my decision, but a couple of months later a person from CETYS Universidad went to my high school and told me about a new major they had which was International Business in English, and once they said that, I knew I wanted to go there, doing what I've liked since I was little and doing it in English because this was going to help me in the future. It was a total yes for me (Participant 1, personal communication, November 6, 2018).

It is worth noticing that Participant 1 had planned to study in Tijuana or San Diego and went through a period where she had to make this decision while getting support from her parents. The key part of this was that she weighed the options of getting her education in Mexico versus the United States. Participant 5 was clearer in terms of his professional goal. He wanted to study in Mexico but work in California after graduation. This is how he remembers deciding to enroll in the IBGP:

> I decided to enter the global program because I have always liked finances and business, and I am good at languages, so English would not be a problem for me. One of the most important reasons [for my decision to enter

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> the IBGP] was because my uncle has a company in Carlsbad, California, and as a personal goal, I [decided] to work with him or even to become the owner of the company. I want to be prepared for when that moment arrives (Participant 5, personal communication, November 19, 2018).

These narratives suggest that the participants have some level of expectation that they will eventually work across the border in the United States. It is worth noting that mentions of specific industries or functional roles within organizations were limited. The participants focused principally on *where* they wanted to work, which was north of the border or, as will be shown in the subsequent theme, on both sides of the border.

*Theme 3: Choosing an Undergraduate Program is a Life-Choice*

In reading through the interview files collected during this research, it seems the participants were thinking about their careers several years into the future, well after graduation. This suggests that they understood that their responsibility was making sure they knew where they wanted to go, and then selected the academic program that fits that goal. This is how participant 14 articulated her vision:

> I strongly want to keep moving forward to succeed in life. Studying international business will provide me with insights into the global economic and business climates. That's what both international business global program and a traditional major in international business program have in common. However, many institutions strongly advise or require students like myself who major in international business to study a foreign language and to complete an overseas study or internship experience […] I strongly believe that being part of a global program gives me an advantage in the international business industry because I'm bilingual and I am required to have an international experience [and] because all my classes are fully in English. And even though being part of the global program is more expensive for students, it will certainly look good when companies are looking for new hires (Participant 14, personal communication, November 19, 2018).

Participants in this study were asked to reflect on their decision to enroll in the IBGP, so it was encouraging to know that they had thought carefully about the consequential decision they were making at such a young age. Participant 3 made it clear that her decision was not made lightly:

> At the beginning of choosing [my] career path, I was always inclined to a career that had the international aspect. At one point not too long ago, I was deciding amongst two career options: International Business and International Relations. That's when the research started! I looked up what each profession required and what courses would be taken for each program. I was always inclined to International Business, but as my friends knew about

> my doubts, one recommended [that I] go with her aunt, who happened to be a psychologist that specializes on vocational guidance. So, I did go and as it turns out after tests and sessions and talks and practices I came upon my decision, International Business. The main takeaway from this came to be what she mentioned to be, "*plan a futuro*," my future plan, that my decision of choosing a career would impact my life immensely (Participant 3, personal communication, November 12, 2018).

Participant 9 also engaged in a process that eventually led him to enroll in the IBGP. His reasoning exemplifies the relationship between engaging in this type of program and the bi-cultural nature of the region:

> When I first started high school […] I was really interested in International business [as a] career, it was in Spanish since there was no Global Program yet. I talked to my parents about it and they told me that it was a career for people that did not know what to do with their lives and that it had no labor opportunities for graduates and therefore was a waste of money and time. After investigating about the career, I proved my parents […] wrong and then they changed their minds about letting me study this career […] I wanted to study in Tijuana because of the opportunities it presents by being a border city with the United States of America and wanted to develop my education based on the culture that Tijuana has, [which] I find very similar to [that of] San Diego. I thought it would be a good start to focus on diverse cultures, societies, education, religions, etc. I gave myself the job to try to analyze the people of Tijuana and San Diego based on these factors that I thought, before applying for this career, that it would be very useful to learn and adapt if I was going to be a successful international business professional (Participant 9, personal communication, November 18, 2018).

By examining the narratives of the participants, one gets the sense that they are not interested in placing themselves on one side of the border or the other. Participant 14 exemplifies this:

> Once I finish my career, I hope to open my own company. I am not sure what my company is going to be based on, however; I do know why I want to open and manage my own company. I want to make a difference in this world, and I want to provide a better future for my family and myself. So, in five years, I see myself managing my own company here in Tijuana or perhaps in the United States. Meanwhile [while I am] building my own company I want to work in the United States embassy here in Tijuana. My goal is to help others in any way possible. Also, I want to [study] my master's degree in the United States (Participant 14, personal communication, November 19, 2018).

The three themes noted in this section suggest that the participants perceive the ability to communicate effectively as a necessary skill, to be able to reach people in different contexts, compete and succeed in the labor market, and leverage their cross-cultural education to enhance different aspects of their lives in the future. These themes would seem to answer the

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research question that guided this study: What do the 15 undergraduate students in the sample aim to achieve by completing the IBGP?

## DISCUSSION

The population living in the Mexican northern border develops their own, *fronterizo* identity through cross-border interaction and other contextual elements of the region (Holguín Mendoza, 2018). It should not be surprising that expectations of professional, academic, cultural, and social contexts are shaped by the exchanges allowed by the traditionally porous barriers that divide the United States and Mexico.

Perhaps logically, the participants in this study understand the world is not contained within their borders. They have grown to perceive countless opportunities in the diversity that surrounds them. They also understand some of the challenges associated with getting an education that promotes their ability to communicate effectively in English, such as paying relatively high registration fees or having to commute to school.

The studies conducted by Vásquez (2002), Lutz (2004), Vargas Valle (2012; 2015), and Rocha Romero and Orraca Romano (2018) are pieces of a conversation that together forms the argument that the asymmetries in social and economic development found in the United States-Mexico border can be reduced by improving the quality and relevance of education among young people on the Mexican side of the border.

Hopefully, this study serves to document one actual strategy that is being implemented to achieve that goal. The IBGP allows students to enhance their communication skills in English, which, in turn, empowers them to pursue ambitious career goals that can be more readily achieved by accessing opportunities on both sides of the border. Unfortunately, developing this skill can be challenging for students on the Mexican side of the border, since the ESL courses that are taught in most universities are not designed to allow learners reach a proficient level, where they can develop the confidence to communicate effectively in said language.

Some Mexican middle schools and high schools offer bilingual or international programs, although their reach is limited and only a small percentage of the population benefit from them. As argued by Rocha Romero and Orraca Romano (2018), some students circumvent the problem by enrolling in Californian universities, despite the challenges that this implies. Another alternative for students is the IBGP described in this study, but then again, most young learners do not have these options available to them.

Consequently, young professionals are not adequately trained to perform consistently with the problems and opportunities that exist on the border. This problem exists on the U.S. side of the border as well, where steps are taken to address the issue. For example, in the Texas border, U.S. educators are helping immigrants and other groups learn to communicate in English and integrate themselves in all aspects of society (Romo, Thomas, & García, 2018).

Educational leaders in other parts of the border are doing their part as well. Hopefully, this will contribute to the creation of a more competitive, fair, and prosperous region. With this in mind, the following recommendations are set forth:

1. Theme 1: Enhancing the ability to communicate in English to reach others. Leaders in educational institutions, both private and public, may provide open university ESL courses at no charge or very low cost. Perhaps with the support of private donations or by linking ESL teaching and learning to social programs championed by local, state, or federal government officials. This could be part of wider efforts to train the workforce for the jobs of the 21st century.
2. Theme 2: Communicating in English is as important as the choice of an academic program. The IBGP is innovative in many ways, but its coverage is not sufficient, and it is not the only type of program that should be considered. There are already favorable results for college-level bilingual programs (Madrid Fernández & Madrid Manrique, 2015); however, these programs need to be expanded to impact a sufficiently large segment of the student population. Educational leaders can help change this by developing individual courses in English, bilingual programs, or even entire English-taught academic programs at undergraduate and graduate levels.
3. Theme 3: Choosing an undergraduate program is a life-choice. Students who are in the process of selecting an academic program or declaring a major to specialize in should consider the implications of this decision on their future. It is a matter of deciding where they want to go and what combination of knowledge, skills, and experiences can help them get there. Educational leaders on the border could develop workshops or build on existing career programs to emphasize the challenges and opportunities that students can expect as they develop, professionally and personally, in the United States-Mexico border.

These recommendations emerged from the themes discussed in the Results section and were meant to be within the range of action of educational leaders who work on the Mexican side of the border. The long-term goal for those involved should be to help the generation of working professionals in the region be better prepared to take advantage of the opportunities available to them, thereby reducing the economic, social, and educational asymmetries that exist between the citizens of Mexico and the United States.

By yielding these recommendations, in alignment with the infrastructure initiatives (i.e. the creation of a community college extension building in Otay Mesa) noted by Vásquez (2002), a wider segment of the population, especially individuals without the resources to invest in cross-border or private education, can make significant improvements in the development of relevant learning and work competencies.

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## CONCLUSION

Political, economic, and educational actors in the region are encouraged to take action to make ESL available for more people, to innovate by increasing the number of bilingual and English language programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as to assist young students understand the implications of selecting their academic program before they enter college. Specifically, new undergraduate students in the region who should understand the opportunities and challenges present on the border, and how they can leverage their communication skills to improve their chances of success after graduation.

These recommendations are less ambitious but consistent with those noted by Vásquez (2002). On the other hand, these suggestions should be taken with caution given that three clear limitations to this study exist. The first limitation is that the narratives from the 15 participants represent, primarily, their reasoning at an early stage of their undergraduate experience. The IBGP has not had a single graduate yet, so there is no real way of knowing whether the expectations under which the program was designed will be fulfilled.

The second one stems from the fact that the border region provides different challenges and opportunities to individuals from the United States and Mexico, however the focus of this study was on the Mexican side of the border only. Lastly, the participants in this study were all international business majors, which means they have a clear bias toward the ability to communicate in different languages, first among them English. Hopefully, researchers will find these limitations to be interesting areas for future research.

In sum, this study was developed to examine the motivations of 15 IBGP students, as well as to determine if they were consistent with the expectations of the institution, well-prepared individuals that compete and succeed in the binational market that characterizes the United States-Mexico border.

The findings reported that the main assumptions made by the participant students were that the border region is unique in terms of its challenges and opportunities. Moreover, it was reinforced that educational leaders, the private sector, and policymakers need to take steps to narrow the competencies and performance gaps between individuals in Mexico and their counterparts in the United States.

Also, based on their narratives, the claim that being able to communicate effectively in English is greatly supported since it represents an advantage and can help young professionals choose from a wider range of opportunities in the region.

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