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Cross-border school enrolment: Associated factors in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines students who live in Mexico but attend school in the U.S., and looks into the factors associated with their decision to study abroad. Based on Mexico's 2015 Intercensal Survey, cross-border students are described in terms of their number, location, educational level and socioeconomic characteristics. Subsequently, the study estimates probit models to analyze the factors associated with studying in the United States. Cross-border students are mainly U.S.-born and concentrated in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. The probability of being a cross-border student is positively associated with age, household income and having a household member who was born in the U.S. or is a cross-border worker. Cross-border students come from high-income households with strong ties to the United States. The decision to study in the U.S. is likely taken due to the higher quality of the country's education system and to facilitate an eventual transition into the U.S. labor market.

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1. Introduction

Since the demarcation of the international border separating Mexico and the U.S. after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo at the end of the 1846–1848 Mexican-American War, the U.S.–Mexico border region has been characterized by its uniqueness, where two very different cultures, languages and education systems meet and blend. Differences between Mexico and the U.S. are largely driven by the fact that the disparity between the two economies is greater than for any other border in the world (Mora, 2006). Northern Mexico is more urban and developed than the rest of the country.[1] Nevertheless, the secondary and higher education systems in the southern U.S. border region have a clear advantage over their Mexican counterparts in both enrolment rates and quality.[2] In Mexico, a significant portion of the border region's population expe-

[1] For example, while in 2014 the poverty rate in Mexico was 46.2%, it was considerably lower in all six northern border states: Baja California (28.6%), Chihuahua (34.4%), Coahuila (30.2%), Nuevo León (20.4%), Sonora (29.4%) and Tamaulipas (37.9%) (CONEVAL, 2016).

[2] While high school education became compulsory in the U.S. in the 1930s, this was only incorporated into Mexico's basic education plan in 2013. Moreover, according to the Program for International Student Assessment, in 2012 U.S. students ranked significantly higher than their Mexico-based counterparts in mathematics, reading and science (OECD, 2014). Regarding higher education, according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2015–2016, 137 of the 600 top universities in the world were located in the U.S., while only two were in Mexico (THE, 2016).

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riences cross-border relations as they frequently cross the U.S. border in order to work, study, purchase goods and services, engage in leisure activities or visit friends and relatives (Alegría, 2002). This study seeks to better understand the dynamics of education in the U.S.-Mexico border region by examining cross-border or *transfronterizo* students who live in Mexico but attend school in the United States. Cross-border students are described in terms of their number, location, stage of education and socioeconomic characteristics, while the factors associated with studying in the U.S. are also explored.

Transfronterizo students journey between two cultures, two languages and two nations (Brown, 2012). Each morning, they leave Mexico for a short period and cross the international border in order to go to school in the United States. After their school day ends, they once again cross the border and return home. Nonetheless, since school districts generally require physical residency for enrollment purposes, some cross-border students do not return to Mexico during the school week. Instead, they often stay with guardians in the U.S. (Duarte & Huicochea, 2012; Tessman, 2016).

The literature on *transfronterizo* students in the U.S.–Mexico border region is limited and is primarily composed of qualitative studies that focus on different issues related to the topic. Based on ethnographic research, Tessman (2016) analyzes cross-border students attending school in Arizona. The author examines the narratives of *transfronterizo* students and their parents regarding their experiences with U.S. schools. Relaño (2007) focuses on cross-border students from Tijuana who cross the border to attend private and public schools in San Diego, and examines how they construct their identity in daily interactions with their classmates in U.S. schools. Falcon (2013) conducts a series of interviews with undergraduate students who live a cross-border lifestyle in the Tijuana-San Diego metropolitan area. The study explores the essence and structure of a hybrid identity development process in these students by identifying the factors that influenced the phenomenon. Chávez (2006) explores how the formation of binational cultural capital empowers *transfronterizo* students with a sense of belonging to both cultures. Cueva-Esquivel (2015) focuses on a group of cross-border students from the same family. The author analyzes how *transfronterizo* students perceive the border, the way they interact with their environments at home and school, and the strategies they use to pursue their education. Finally, a series of studies have focused on the literacy practices of *transfronterizo* students (see, e.g. de la Piedra and Araujo, 2012; Esquinca, 2012; Mein, 2012).[3]

Additionally, there is vast literature on transnational students, i.e. students who go to school in Mexico but who previously attended school in the U.S. or study part of the academic year in each country (Borjian, Muñoz, van Dijk, & Houde, 2016; Sanchez-Garcia, Hamann, & Zuniga, 2012; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009). There are likely hundreds of thousands of transnationals students in Mexico, most of whom expect to ultimately return to the U.S., although not necessarily permanently (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009, p. 329). *Transfronterizo* students can be considered a type of transnational student because they move internationally when they cross the U.S.–Mexico border, develop binational social networks, and in their daily activities, they acquire human capital in both countries. However, *transfronterizo* students are a particular type of students because they are not migrants; they cross the border on a daily or weekly basis while living in Mexico and are immerse in transborder strategies of life.

The research questions this study attempts to answer are: "What is the size of the cross-border student population and how is this population distributed along the U.S.–Mexico border?", "What are the socioeconomic characteristics of *transfronterizo* students and how do these differ with respect to those of students who attend school in Mexico?" and "What are the individual and household-level factors associated with undertaking cross-border studies?".

We contribute to the literature mainly on two fronts. To our knowledge, this is the first study that uses a large and national representative dataset to quantify and describe the cross-border student population residing in Mexico and attending school in the United States. Furthermore, it is the first study that examines the individual- and household-level variables associated with being a *transfronterizo* student and provides statistical evidence on the topic using regressions analysis.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 describes student motives and benefits of cross-border study. Section 3 provides background information on students in the U.S.–Mexico border region. Section 4 presents and describes the data. Section 5 outlines the empirical specification. Section 6 discusses the results. Section 7 concludes.

2. Student motives and benefits of cross-border study

Human capital theory distinguishes between a general or universally applicable type, and another type that is country-specific (Becker, 1962; Chiswick & Miller, 2009). Like students who engage in international mobility, *transfronterizo* students constitute a special case that allows the acquisition of both country-specific and internationally pertinent human capital (Kratz & Netz, 2017). For example, studying in the U.S. greatly improves levels of English language proficiency, which have been found to have a strong positive effect on earnings across all ethnic groups in the U.S. (Chiswick & Miller, 2010a; Tainer, 1988). Furthermore, an empirical regularity that has emerged in the literature is that the effect on earnings of an additional year of schooling is lower among those who studied in a foreign country relative to those who studied in their

[3] A growing literature has also examined the population that lives in Mexico but is employed in the U.S. (Alegría, 2002; Escala & Vega, 2005; Orraca, 2015). Referred to as transmigrants, commuters or cross-border workers, this group optimizes the socioeconomic resources available to them on both sides of the border. On the one hand, in the U.S. they have access to shorter workweeks and better remunerated jobs. On the other hand, in Mexico they enjoy lower living costs and better housing conditions while maintaining family and cultural ties. Similarly, Mora (2006) and Mora and Dávila (2011) analyze cross-border workers who live in the U.S. but work in Mexico.

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