



Planting a Branch Campus Abroad Can End Up a Boom or a Bust

BY LAWRENCE S. BACOW

TRADITIONALLY, OUR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES have been the receptacle waiting at the end of the rest of the world's brain drain. Other nations have sent their best and brightest to study in the United States, and many of these students have remained here following graduation, enriching our own human capital and global competitiveness.

To retain their own homegrown talent, some countries now are stepping up their investments in higher education. They are partnering with U.S. institutions, and in some cases, our institutions are building entire campuses abroad.

Qatar has been particularly active and generous, spending billions to lure such institutions as Carnegie Mellon, Cornell, and Georgetown. Dubai soon will host a branch of Michigan State. And Abu Dhabi will be the site of New York University's new liberal arts campus.

Such offers are tempting to American colleges and universities seeking to expand their influence and generate new sources of revenue. But boards should note that they are not without risks.

Most agreements to construct and operate a new campus are reached at the highest levels of our institutions. Presidents often are personally involved. Yet success requires the active engagement of the faculty who will design and deliver curricula, collaborate on research projects, and formally vote degrees. These same faculty may view the concept of a new campus abroad cynically, perhaps perceiving it as a purely presidential initiative.

Without faculty support, an institution may find itself unable to deliver on its promises of an American-style curriculum and educational experience, and the new campus or program may lose its essential character as an extension of the U.S. institution. Quality may suffer, and institutional reputation may be put at risk.

Other countries routinely embrace cultures and business practices that never would be tolerated stateside. In the United States, for example, we take for granted religious freedom, a commitment to diversity, freedom of expression, and guarantees of academic freedom. While countries that seek American partners may declare their intent to honor these freedoms, such guarantees should

be viewed skeptically. Once an institution puts its name on the door abroad, it better have complete control over every aspect of faculty and student life that could put the institution's name at risk.

One of the attractions of such partnerships is the opportunity to secure revenues for the home campus. But not all partnership deals are created equally. Both a share of future revenues and a promise of future funding may prove illusory, especially if the host country is doing the accounting. Further, when the original business plan proves inadequate and future funding is not forthcoming, the reputation of the home institution will suffer. The wise institution will give serious thought to an exit strategy if things do not go well.

There are excellent reasons to enter into international partnerships, though not all are financial in nature. Such partnerships can strengthen teaching and research on the home campus by significantly enhancing opportunities for students and faculty. By collaborating with foreign institutions, we can expose students and faculty to new problems, cultures, and research opportunities. Properly structured, such partnerships also can build the host country's educational capacity.

In some ways, the ideal partnership model already exists. In the 1960s, a consortium of nine universities led by MIT partnered with India to create a new university focused on science and technology. Today, the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur is a world-class institution. None of the U.S. universities that helped found the institution put their name on it, but all have benefited from its creation through educational and research collaborations that endure to this day. Any U.S. institution contemplating an international collaboration would do well to study this model.

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Boards should weigh the financial and other risks involved in opening an overseas campus and be certain of faculty support for the venture.