

Smart Power and the Ivory Tower

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DURHAM- Every election year, an idealistic Presidential candidate promises to support more foreign exchange programs to improve America's image in the world. The U.S. State Department's Fulbright scholarship program, Rotary Foundation scholarships, and numerous other initiatives facilitate valuable opportunities to flex America's soft power by sending American students abroad and bringing foreign students here. The goal is simple. If they only knew us, they couldn't help but begin to like us.

However, recent trends in the American education business mean that candidates can be even more ambitious in 2008. Our own colleges and universities are going global, not only offering classes and degree programs abroad, but by opening up entire campuses around the world. We now have the potential to exchange much more than just people, but rather entire institutions with our friends and rivals across the globe. While the benefits of selling iPods and High School Musical lunchboxes to foreigners is often touted, we overlook the fact that American universities are among the most enduring of our iconic brands. Moreover, there are several reasons to believe that the intellectual and social environment facilitated by American style higher education has greater potential than any consumer product to transform our image in the rest of the world.

Duke University, the institution where I teach, was among the first universities to experiment with global education programs. Duke's Fuqua School of Business established the Global Executive MBA program in 1996, comprised of students from 11 countries and leveraging innovative technologies to facilitate distance learning. Other universities are not far behind, their eyes set on China, India, Dubai and other emerging hotspots. My alma mater Cornell University has opened up an entire medical school in Qatar, after reaching a \$750 million agreement with the Emir's private foundation in 2001. UC Berkeley, Stanford, and the University of Texas at Austin recently signed a deal with Saudi Arabia which will fund millions of dollars of research at their home campuses as well as at the new King Abdullah University of Science and Technology.

These developments will dramatically scale up the number of foreign students who are exposed to an American style education. With over 500,000 foreign students currently in the U.S., there are millions more at home who are eager for the opportunity to study at an American institution. These students will begin to earn American university degrees and naturally imbibe some of our values, without ever having to leave home (a critical point in a post 9/11 world where U.S. student visas are harder to obtain). Most importantly, they will often have the opportunity to begin a dialogue with their American classmates who, after all, are clamoring for the same valuable opportunities to learn about the rest of the world. Rather than solely focusing on increasing the small number of American students who study abroad (only 1% per year), supporting these global education programs can multiply any positive effects from international exchange several times over.

Of course, there will also be challenges. Critics like Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) argue that this sort of “public service to foreigners” can only compromise our national security and harm American competitiveness. However, extensive research on this topic demonstrates that the Congressman need not worry. The large majority of students in these global education programs will be studying subjects like business, economics, and medicine, not nuclear engineering. And while some students might use their newly acquired skills to start companies in Dubai instead of Silicon Valley (where immigrant entrepreneurs have been generating jobs for years), their American educational experience could lead to increased trade with and investment in the U.S. over time.

The more fundamental question is about how we design these programs. While many of these partnerships contain provisions for gender equality, non-discrimination, academic freedom, and free speech in the classroom, what will be our responsibility to carry these values and norms into the broader society? Will this be a “town vs. gown” problem on a global scale? For example, NYU President John Sexton has faced criticism over his university’s new campus in Abu Dhabi, a wealthy Arab emirate where homosexuality is illegal, Israelis are forbidden from visiting, and ubiquitous migrant workers are treated harshly.

These issues make it clear that university Presidents will have to make tough decisions in designing their programs and engaging their adopted communities. The temptation may be to paper over our differences and adjust our educational values to suit the local market, borrowing a strategy employed by consumer products companies like Proctor & Gamble to compete in foreign nations.

On the other hand, we should never forget the duty of an educational institution to the community in which it resides. We should view these initiatives as an opportunity to stand firm on our core values, which underpin an educational system that is the envy of the rest of the world (while admittedly unaffordable to a disturbing number of our own citizens). Schools like Duke, Cornell, and Berkeley have powerful brands to leverage, so much so that they can attract students without compromising their integrity on thorny issues on or off campus. Most importantly, if we deliver a challenging, open and enriching educational program to students around the world, more than a few of them will begin to see the nation that nurtures our institutions more positively.

After all, while some have believed in our recent history that foreigners could be plied with blue jeans, Coca-cola, and Baywatch, I am confident that far stronger connections can be developed in a classroom. Having taught in these programs at Duke, I am convinced that if more young people around the world could see us at our very best, they might just begin to like us.