



Are universities selling out to oil nations?

As big bucks beckon, Gulf campuses of American universities are booming

By HARVEY SILVERGLATE | September 25, 2008

I arrived on the Princeton campus as a bewildered, Brooklyn-born-and-bred public-school product, suddenly thrust into the Class of 1964. The first week, at dinner in the freshman commons, I glanced across the 12-man table (it was only men in those days) to see two austere, well-dressed, neatly bearded undergrads. Overhearing their conversation with another student, I learned that the two fellows bore the last name al-Faisal. “Any relation,” I naively asked, “to the dictator of Saudi Arabia?” Promptly, both stood up and exited. It turned out that they were indeed members of the royal family; one, Prince Saud al-Faisal, would later become the long-serving minister of state for foreign affairs of Saudi Arabia.

For better or worse, this type of encounter will become increasingly more rare in the United States. That’s because foreign potentates, especially those from oil-rich sheikdoms, no longer need to send their children to this country to hobnob with the heathens (and boors) in order to acquire world-class degrees. Enticed by seemingly bottomless petro-dollars, American universities are flocking to the Persian Gulf to establish satellite campuses. And these aren’t the traditional study-abroad programs — they are, rather, elegantly designed campuses with state-of-the-art facilities that bear such prestigious names as Harvard, MIT, Boston University, Carnegie Mellon, and New York University. Now, the well-born-and-bred children of well-heeled oil billionaires no longer have to wander far from the royal palace to do some learning — they can get an American degree right at home.

This development raises questions for universities involved in exporting education — indeed, whole campuses — to far-off very wealthy lands: how will a foreign branch affect the home campus? Will Western educational values clash with the very different cultures of these foreign states? Will certain subjects, such as humanities courses that challenge traditional views about academic freedom or gender roles, be taboo? Will earning a Georgetown degree in Qatar —

not DC — require the same intellectual rigor and hard work? And, most fundamental, what is motivating American academic institutions to set up remote campuses in such seemingly unlikely places where a culture of learning as we know it has not exactly taken root? The answer tells us much about the trend toward the corporatization of American higher education.

Testing the bona fides

Campus culture since the mid-1980s has looked increasingly like that of the profit-making corporation, and this dash to the Gulf sheikdoms — where the cash currently is piled up — is but one example. (As notorious bank robber Willie Sutton is claimed to have said, when asked why he robbed banks, “That’s where the money is.”) No one seriously argues that higher education should not be competitive, nor that American academic institutions should not continue a long history of hosting programs in some of the world’s major centers of learning — many far older than anything found in the United States. But we have entered an era when “the business of higher education” is more business than education. And the trend is likely to pick up as the length and breadth of America’s economic difficulties become more apparent — and the Persian Gulf remains awash in oil wealth.

This July, New York University’s Office of Public Affairs announced that 17 students from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had been chosen “as the inaugural class of the ‘Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed University Scholars Program,’ ” described as “a major initiative of the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute, which will be established in the fall of 2008 to jump-start academic and intellectual activities while the NYU Abu Dhabi campus is being developed.” Remarkably, the first course for these select scholars — on the subject of religion and government — will be taught this semester by none other than NYU president John Sexton, a lawyer who also holds a doctorate in comparative religion. Sexton will absent himself from his day-to-day duties in Manhattan to teach once every two weeks, entailing over a half-day of travel in each direction. Presumably, it will be worth it, since the press release dubs the new campus, aimed at “enhancing the intellectual and scholarly culture of Abu Dhabi,” as “the first comprehensive liberal arts campus to be operated abroad by a major American university.”

It’s hard to blame Sexton. After all, he personally solicited a \$50 million gift from the Abu Dhabi government, turning down other investors who couldn’t match the crown prince’s deep pockets. “It’s like earnest money: if you’re a \$50 million donor, I’ll take you seriously,” Sexton unabashedly told the *New York Times* on February 10. “It’s a way to test their bona fides.” With such an investment of time, personnel, and credibility, NYU officials are obviously expecting great returns. The July press release terms the new campus “a key part of NYU’s extensive and expanding global network, which includes nine NYU academic facilities on five continents.”

But NYU is not alone. Technology powerhouse Carnegie Mellon University has set up a branch in Qatar, another of the Gulf emirates throwing in billions of petro-dollars to create what it has dubbed its “Education City.” Cornell has set up a branch of its medical school in Qatar. And 200 miles south of Qatar, the UAE’s educational future appears heavily dependent on Boston-based institutions. Harvard Medical School is preparing to launch a facility in Dubai for post-graduate medical education and fellowships in 2009. The school is located in Dubai’s “Healthcare City,” a government-backed initiative aimed at attracting world-class health-care and medical research by offering companies and universities tax-free benefits.

Back in Abu Dhabi, MIT is helping to build the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology. It plans to be the “first institution dedicated to research-driven graduate programs in the region,” when it opens in the fall of 2009, according to an MIT press release.

Boston University, too, had hoped to launch its College of Communication in Qatar’s Education City, but lost a highly competitive race this past year to Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. It certainly wasn’t, however, the host nation’s academic culture that sparked such competition among premier US communication programs — Qatar formally lifted censorship just 13 years ago and continues to control most of its broadcast media. Nonetheless, the 39-student Class of 2012 at Northwestern University in Qatar began classes late this past month — nine time zones away from Evanston, Illinois.

Despite the setback, BU continued to push its international initiative. Just five months after losing the bid for a communications program, BU announced that Dubai Healthcare City would be welcoming its postdoctoral dental program the following summer. BU edged out an estimated 20 other schools’ applications to establish its dental program in Dubai’s 500-acre “free-trade zone,” joining the Harvard Medical program. And in July, the Boston University Institute of Dental Research and Education in Dubai welcomed its first class of 14 residents.

Yet the same enticements these local institutions saw in Dubai — namely, the economic-frontier mentality — has attracted a far less desirable crowd: counterfeit drug smugglers. In 2006, nearly one-third of all counterfeit pills confiscated in Europe came from the UAE, the *New York Times* reported. In a place where tariffs are nonexistent and regulatory oversight is at a minimum, both corporations and counterfeiters — and now universities — see dollar signs.

The symptoms of American universities behaving more like profit-making corporations than nonprofit institutions of higher learning have been evident since the mid-1980s, when campuses started to be run by administrators and lawyers more than by educators. The alliances between American universities and Persian Gulf sheikdoms, however, are relatively

new. Certainly, these American schools have long had foreign-based programs in major learning centers around the world. But they've been adjunct programs, not entire campuses built and run in full collaboration with foreign governments. Furthermore, even these limited programs have generally been located in areas deemed part of the traditional world of learning — cities such as Paris, London, Moscow, Cairo, and Beirut. It makes perfect sense to locate an American educational program in such a place, given the critical mass of scholars, academic culture, and available research materials.

But a major liberal-arts university like NYU creating a new campus in the Gulf region — which has not only an authoritarian government but also the look and feel of a veritable Monopoly board plunked down in the middle of a desert, suddenly abloom with seven-star hotels and gaudy office spires — has raised eyebrows. To be sure, higher education is a relatively new endeavor for the Gulf; UAE University, the emirates' oldest institution, is just 32 years old. Similar questions would be asked if a university were to open a campus at, say, a theme or amusement park. Indeed, the accommodations are comparable. The approximately 200 students at Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar, also part of Education City, enjoy both chauffeur and maid services. And their elite status is not forgotten; a sign on one university door reads: STUDENTS, PLEASE REMIND YOUR MAIDS THAT THEY ARE NOT ALLOWED BEYOND THE ENTRANCE.

UMass, hold the Amherst

In this era of college corporatization and globalization, no school wants to be left in the financial dust when oil money beckons. So, colleges across America are dropping regional “modifiers” to their official names — part of an attempt to polish their global brands, and perhaps attract offers from willing emirs. The *Boston Globe's* Peter Schworm reported on August 18 that a debate has erupted at the University of Massachusetts's “flagship” campus, UMass-Amherst. Alumni and administrators fear that the current hyphenated moniker will put the university at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis other state universities that have shed the location from their names — the University of Missouri-Columbia, for one, eliminated “Columbia” from its name to avoid a “regional connotation.” The issue goes beyond symbolism, administrators claim, and affects recruiting of faculty and students, as well as landing contributions. “More universities,” Schworm wrote, “have turned to branding and strategic marketing specialists to burnish their image.”

Is this development unrelated to branch campus expansion in the Gulf? Far from it. In the aforementioned race to establish a communication school in Qatar's Education City, one school that was passed over, despite having the country's oldest journalism program, was the University of Missouri — as mentioned above, then-known as the University of Missouri-

Columbia. About a year later, the “Columbia” tag was dropped. And though the PR office and professors alike claim there was no connection, there is undoubtedly a common thread: money. Corporate universities, whether through global partnerships or alumni donations, are looking constantly to pad their bottom line by enhancing their brand, their image, their connections.

Deep pockets, thin skin

Any perceived threat to a university’s financial standing is also now swiftly extinguished, regardless of academic consequences. The ringleaders in this endeavor are university lawyers (known as “general counsel”) who keep their institutions out of legal trouble by declining to take risks. Though this may sound like a no-brainer, an overly cautious approach has proven dangerous to the free exchange of ideas that characterizes academia. Some degree of risk is, after all, inherent in cutting-edge thinking and teaching. But the lawyers’ rationale is known in both the legal and insurance industries as “risk reduction” — avoiding pricey court battles that may sully the school’s reputation and purse. Thus, these lawyers are tasked with advising — often dictating — certain campus rules and practices that mimic the private corporate sector. For instance, virtually all major corporations have adopted speech and behavior codes to prevent employees or supervisors from causing even the slightest discomfort for fellow workers and subordinates on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation, among other categories into which humans are sorted these days.

So, too, have campus lawyers advised universities to adopt restrictive speech and behavior codes. Unlike business corporations, however, properly functioning universities produce not widgets but free and inquisitive minds. Hence, campus restrictions on student and faculty speech interfere with the main “product” of higher education, namely critical thought shaped in an atmosphere of free speech and academic freedom. In recent years, these general counsel (and their mode of thinking) have attained an increasingly important position on campus. It is no coincidence that the Harvard general counsel’s office is right next to that of the president.

Central to a robust academic environment, but what seems anathema to general counsel and overbearing university officials worried about public image, is unfettered student expression. Glossy alumni and other campus publications, produced by university “development” (read: fundraising) offices, are now the norm. Needless to say, they rarely report anything negative about the school. Even student-run campus newspapers and magazines that used to maintain some modicum of independence are mostly history. For all the questions raised as to the academic freedom on Persian Gulf branch campuses, the corporate mentality has, albeit in a different manner, threatened student speech at home.

The Heights, the independent student newspaper at Boston College, experienced the wrath of administrative censorship after publishing a “disappointing” opinion column in a 2006 Guide for Freshman Orientation. The column bemoaned the “[l]ong speeches, small group chats, and weird, random roommates” but concluded that students shouldn’t “fret if your OL [Orientation Leader] is a bit overbearing and you’re wondering what the hell you’re doing up here in Boston; I promise life at Boston College gets much, much better.” The school’s director of First Year Experience responded not by taking steps to improve orientation, but by trashing the approximately 3000 printed copies. After tempers settled, the director offered to reimburse *The Heights*, but refused the staff’s request to redistribute the Guide — deep pockets, but thin skin.

The wealthy nonprofits

Other forms of message control aren’t so readily apparent, but — for that exact reason — are possibly more pernicious. Harvard Law School has long had an independent, student-edited newspaper, the *Harvard Law Record*, which could be counted on to report some of the shenanigans at that august institution. But a few years ago, the Office of Communication began to publish its own glossy in-house rag, the *Harvard Law School Bulletin*, and persuaded the “independent” alumni association to mail the *Bulletin*, not the *Record*, to its members as a benefit of paying dues. Now, fewer alumni read the independent newspaper — instead they are served such hard-hitting *Bulletin* investigative pieces as WHY HARVARD LAW SCHOOL NEEDS YOUR MONEY.

If that’s the case, they are surely stretching the bounds of “need.” Harvard’s endowment is by far the nation’s largest, increasing to nearly \$37 billion in the past fiscal year, according to a university financial report. This past year’s \$2 billion increase alone dwarfs all but a handful of universities’ entire endowments. Unlike similarly wealthy corporate giants, though, Harvard’s nonprofit status immunizes its massive endowment from taxation.

And when Massachusetts lawmakers proposed taxing Harvard and other state universities with endowments over \$1 billion, the powerful higher-education lobby descended on the State House. “Most lawmakers predicted the measure would quickly wilt against the universities’ political muscle,” wrote Schworm and Matt Viser in the May 8 *Boston Globe*. Representative Paul Kujawski, a Democrat from Webster, asked the million-dollar question: “When is a nonprofit not a nonprofit because of the wealth they are acquiring?” But by mid August, questions ceased and the predictions had come true. The measure, which would have reportedly produced more than \$1 billion in state revenue, had been effectively snuffed out by the lobbying efforts of well-endowed institutions such as MIT, BU, and BC.

The issue has also gained traction on Capitol Hill, as federal lawmakers question the accumulated endowments in the face of ever-increasing tuition. Republican senator Charles E. Grassley, of Iowa, has long supported a mandate for the wealthiest colleges to spend at least five percent of their endowments each year, the same regulations applied to private foundations. But even his advocacy appeared to wane, saying at a September 8 round-table discussion in Washington with college presidents and policy experts that fixing the problem would require “a massive amount of legislation” — a convenient excuse for not crossing the higher-education lobbyists.

Distorting the mission

Perhaps no more stark evidence of the corporatization of institutions of higher education exists than the trend — turning rapidly into a frenzied race — by which research universities are rushing their scientific discoveries to the Patent Office and then licensing their new technology to profit-making companies. Silicon Valley science and technology writer Janet Rae-Dupree wrote an op-ed for the September 7 New York Times that decried the phenomenon primarily because, she wrote, it “has . . . distorted the fundamental mission of universities.” “Today’s universities,” she warns, “function more like corporate research laboratories.”

This is a particularly threatening problem for the world of science, because, for the past century or more, much of the cutting-edge, basic scientific work has come out of the minds and laboratories of American academies. While corporate researchers were tasked with coming up with new, patentable products, such as pharmaceuticals and silicon chips, academic researchers were busy trying to design experiments to answer more fundamental questions, such as the basic nature of time, space, and matter. Indeed, researchers in the corporate world were able to build on the elementary discoveries by academic scientists and develop patentable commercial products. (The discovery of DNA’s structure in the 1950s by academic scientists James Watson and Francis Crick, for example, paved the way for a vast number of treatments and procedures in the commercial world, not to mention uses of DNA in law enforcement. Yet neither of the two discoverers ever sought to patent their ground-breaking discovery.)

The bottom line is that far too much campus-based scientific research is conducted by our universities not in a belief that it will further mankind’s knowledge of the physical world and universe, but rather because it holds out the possibility of making money. Is this a healthy development for either the academy or the state of knowledge?

Nice hotels, but serious education?

The prominence of monetary concerns has not gone unnoticed by academics. “I have no problem with universities’ trying to make money,” Steven Pinker, a leading evolutionary psychologist at Harvard, wrote in an e-mail. “My concern is whether they will subvert the very mission of a university in doing so. Will the Gulf-state franchise campuses teach evolutionary biology, modern philosophy, comparative religion, accurate history? Will patent-generating molecular biology starve traditional ‘birdsy-woody’ biology (including evolution, ecology, and systematics), which is indispensable both intellectually and practically (e.g., in assessing the consequences of climate change)? Will the terror of ever getting sued turn administrations into cowards who are unwilling to stand up for the right to express unpopular beliefs?”

These are legitimate concerns. *The Chronicle of Higher Education (CHE)*, considered the authoritative newspaper covering American university life, reports that even many Arab scholars from traditional ancient centers of learning “dismiss the Gulf as an artificial Disneyland in the desert that is using high-profile education projects to gain international prestige rather than establish anything of intellectual merit.” (Interestingly, the same government-owned company that runs Dubai’s Healthcare City — Tatweer — is also building Dubailand, a massive entertainment complex.)

“They have nice hotels, fine,” Egyptian Professor Osama El-Ghazali Harb, former president of the Arab Association of Political Scientists, told the *CHE*, “but if you want serious education, serious research, serious intellectual discourse, that’s another story.”

While the financial enticements may appear attractive, recent history has shown that finding other resources vital to a “serious education” in the region can be an insurmountable challenge.

In 2005, George Mason University arrived in Ras al Khaimah, one of the UAE’s seven emirates, with a language program to help students gain college-level English proficiency. This, in turn, aimed to raise Ras al Khaimah applicants to the same admission standards of the Virginia-based university. But by 2007, branch campus enrollment was well below their intended target. The biggest problem in retaining qualified scholars, administrators admit, is that many, even after a year of the remedial language program, are not fluent in English. Thus, George Mason finds itself in a desert, stuck between a rock and a hard place — either lower standards to increase enrollment (but devalue the degree), or maintain standards and risk failure of the branch campus.

In April, Yale chose to forego such a risk. Despite the Abu Dhabi government’s willingness to foot the bill, Yale officials decided against establishing branches of its art, music, architecture,

and drama schools in the emirate. University officials cited a lack of quality professors and the difficulties attracting “students of the same caliber,” according to an April 12 *New York Times* article. They couldn’t justify giving the same Yale degree to those in Abu Dhabi as they do in New Haven, in view of the disparate standards. According to the school newspaper, the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, Penn also announced in April that “the University is not ready to open a degree-offering program on a satellite campus.”

Nonetheless, booming Gulf economies have continued to demand an educated workforce. “We need to quadruple our degree production,” Warren Fox, head of Dubai’s Higher Education Agency, told the *CHE*. Fox, who led the California Postsecondary Education Commission before going to Dubai in 2007, now regulates and encourages the growth of private and international institutions in the emirate. His priorities speak volumes to the goal of today’s corporate university — not education, but degree *production*.

Not all Emirati scholars sat idly by as foreign branches — with foreign priorities — came to their country. Mohammed al-Roken, a former UAE law professor, boldly criticized the Dubai government for encouraging not only satellite campuses, but also American officials to shape curricula at native Emirati institutions. For his outspoken dissent, he was banned from writing a newspaper column and stripped of his teaching position. Free speech, there is not.

These occurrences, combined with the academic concerns, have led some schools to think twice before expanding to the Gulf. The University of Nevada at Las Vegas — yes, the city of sin! — turned down an offer by the government of Dubai, reportedly “because of concerns about human rights,” according to the *CHE*. UNLV represents an important, even if surprising, objector to this money-trumps-all mentality, for at least one American institution of higher learning has realized that academic and political freedom might be a pre-requisite for serious Western-style scholarship and teaching — regardless of whether the host country’s check is sure to clear. It has realized that the corporate pursuit of profit and academic culture may not be the best mix. But we’ll have to wait to see how well ivy grows in the oil-soaked soil of the Persian Gulf.

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