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Colleges consider 'Going Global'

Future Campus confab mulls academics abroad
 Sunday, November 02, 2008
 BY CHRIS STURGIS
 Special to the Times

PRINCETON BOROUGH -- The phrase "hands across the water" has developed a special meaning where higher education is concerned.

Colleges and universities in the United States have long looked at foreign students as a way to replenish declining college-age populations, and a group of academics gathered at Princeton University recently to contemplate the globalization of higher education.

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For example, Dawood Farahi, president of Kean University, said at the conference called Future Campus that his institution recognized the demand for an American-style education in China as more Chinese students attended his institution.

"Instead of the Chinese coming to you, why don't we go to China? We need the money; they have the students," he said. However, it's not as simple as putting Kean's curriculum into Chinese buildings, he said.

Creating a campus in a different culture under tight government control caused many surprises. "We would negotiate at night and they would change minds in the morning," he said.

The Chinese officials insisted the planning be put on hold during the Olympics and again because of the global economic crisis. Nevertheless, he said, the university plans to have 7,500 students on a Kean campus in northern China in five years.

A different set of issues surfaced when New York University decided to develop a campus in the Middle East.

Hilary Ballon, associate vice chancellor for the campus New York University is establishing in the United Arab Emirates city of Abu Dhabi, told the audience at Princeton University that they encountered many legal and cultural challenges.

She said fears that an American campus in an Arab nation would attract terrorism subsided as the university officials learned about the effectiveness of that nation's security forces.

"We will operate in an academic zone, but we don't know what will happen with certain things that can be expected to occur on a college campus. For example, it's a crime in UAE to have HIV. It's a crime to attempt suicide," she said.

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"We don't know how those situations would play out," she said.

Yet, the arrangement is attractive because the government has resources to invest in an impressive technological infrastructure. "We couldn't do this without this partnership," she told the participants at the forum that was held at Princeton's School of Architecture and hosted by Princeton-based architect RMJM Hillier's Global Education Studio.

In addition to the unique challenges of setting up campuses overseas, there are other problems confronting higher education closer to home. The falling stock market prices have drastically cut the value of the institutions' nest eggs, their endowments.

James Miller, the architect for George Mason University in Virginia, said his institution is facing a mandate to cut its budget by 7.5 percent and at the same time accept 5 percent more students. Miller said he fears the quality of instruction will suffer.

Goucher College President Sanford Ungar said his institution can't contemplate a foreign campus the way the larger institutions can, but his 1,500-student institution, based in Baltimore, is using globalization as a way to distinguish itself among the nation's 140 liberal arts colleges. All Goucher students must study abroad at least once in order to graduate.

"The idea behind this is that you can't really be an educated person without some knowledge of another culture," he said.

The panel discussion titled Going Global was moderated by Scott Carlson, a senior writer with the Chronicle for Higher Education.

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