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International Expansion of Programs

Opportunities and Pitfalls

International Expansion of Programs Opportunities and Pitfalls

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Demand for higher education worldwide is skyrocketing, especially as many developing countries are starting from such a low base of enrollments. In 1985, for example, only 0.9 percent of China's college-age population earned a bachelor's degree. In Asia, only Korea and Japan exceed a 10 percent rate of college completion in their populations age 25 to 34 compared to 30 percent for the United States, 37 percent for Norway, and 34 percent for Israel (NSF "Science and Education Indicator 2008" Report). Countries around the world are engaged in attempts to expand capacity and educate more citizens. With a massive building boom, China is nearing the 20 percent rate for college participation (about the same rate as India) and hopes to annually add between 500,000 to 900,000 students to the system (*Measuring Up* 2006, NCPPHE National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education).

Societies struggle to compete in a global knowledge-based economy, and families rightly see winners and losers in a high-stakes game where education is the starting point for ending on the right side of the sometimes Darwinian equation. Yet, the bottom-line is that even with more seats available, developing countries are unable to meet the needs of a huge pool of underserved students. The wealthy families will continue to send their sons and daughters to college in America, and the growing middle class in places like India and China will make sacrifices to do the same.

One doesn't need to have an enormous endowment to have meaningful and fruitful international initiatives. However, attention to detail needs to trump the seductiveness of travel and promise of net margins.

The Institute of International Education's (IIE) most recent Open Doors Report shows a 7 percent increase in international student enrollments in the U.S., with a 13 percent increase in Indian students, a 20 percent increase in Chinese students, and an 11 percent increase in South Korean students. At Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), we had 32 mainland Chinese students three years ago. Today, we have 230 of these students, a reflection of China's burgeoning middle class.

Among those left behind is an enormous population of students who desire an American degree and cannot study in the United States, primarily because of cost, but also because they cannot obtain a visa (and those two are often linked). British and Australian universities have aggressively sought to serve this market with outposts and partnerships in host countries (what they sometimes call offshoring). American institutions are increasingly entering the offshore marketplace, sometimes with remote campuses such as Suffolk University's campus in Dakar, Senegal, or Georgetown University's branch campus in Qatar. These are not the typical study abroad sites for American students, such as those commonly found in London and Rome. These branches or partnerships instead seek to serve the local population.

A variation on the branch campus is something called a "twinning" program, a term more common to the British and Australians. Most of us are familiar with 2+2 articulation agreements, in which foreign students complete the first two years of their education at home and the American partner institution accepts those credits when the student matriculates in and then completes the final two years in America, receiving an American degree. In contrast, in a twinning program, the American (or other foreign) institution works with an in-country partner institution to offer a partial or entire degree program. For example, SNHU was the first American institution in Malaysia to receive LAN (the Malaysian accrediting body) approval to offer all four years of its business degree in Malaysia.

In this case, HELP University, our partner, provides facilities, faculty, library resources (supplemented by ours), marketing, and student support services. Our SNHU on-site coordinator approves all faculty hires, evaluates faculty, ensures that the curriculum remains true to ours, helps faculty use our more student-centered learning models, manages any student issues, and approves all marketing. Our Malaysian students could never afford to come to the U.S.; however, in Kuala Lumpur, they get our degree at a fraction of the cost. We have a similar program in place in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania.

Distance education is providing yet another delivery mode for international students unable to attend class in the U.S. We have integrated it into our twinning programs to increase student exposure to American faculty and students. It is also emerging as an increasingly accepted way to gain the whole of the degree experience, a concept now readily embraced in the U.S. but still gaining acceptance abroad. Our three-person office in Beijing has worked for two years to bring our online programs into China, and we now have our first 70 students beginning their four-year degree programs. Some will seek to spend at least some time with us in the U.S.; however, many will complete the entire degree program at home.

Having recently served for six years on the Commission on Higher Education for New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), New England's regional accreditation body, I have seen a number of institutions enter the international marketplace. Often, these are smaller institutions, tuition-dependent (as is SNHU) and seeking new markets. Sometimes, they have had an opportunity come their way, often through faculty members who have ties back to their home country or institution, an alumnus doing business abroad, or through an unsolicited approach from a foreign institution seeking an American partner. If these institutions use recruitment agents to find inbound student enrollments or send their own admissions people abroad (we do both), proposals will inevitably make their way to the president's desk from those parties.

The promise in these opportunities is often multifold. There is the chance of improved enrollments with student who receive little to no financial aid. There is the diversity that these students bring to campus. (We have 71 countries represented in our student body now.) There are also opportunities for faculty exchange. The offshore programs are usually lower net, but require little to no capital investment (assuming one is not building their own branch campus), and the prospective partner often outlines very optimistic growth projections. Then there is the sheer glamour and pleasure of having an international network with prospects for interesting travel.

At the same time, there is considerable risk. From my vantage point on the Commission, and coming from an institution that has done international programming for almost 30 years (sometimes well and sometimes not so well), I would offer the following advice:

- Consider international opportunities within a strategic framework. Too often, institutions begin international initiatives in an opportunistic way and without an overarching set of goals. Think about mission, leveraging institutional strengths, the operating environment and variables within possible markets, good data, and how they all come together in a way that strategically advances your institution.
- Assess your institutional capacity for managing programs well. Distance is your enemy and partnerships abroad need constant monitoring. Agents need to be carefully vetted and managed. Twinning programs require a lot of attention if students are to get a truly American learning experience. Partners eager to make their enrollment projections can make promises in their marketing that are untrue (and often in a language you can't understand). Do you have:
 - The resources to have your own person in country (NEASC accredited institutions branch campuses are required to have a full-time administrator employed by the institution.)
 - The admissions, visa expertise, and, often, ESL support necessary to manage inbound foreign students
 - A campus culture and climate that welcomes and accommodates foreign students
 - A hard-nosed cost analysis that takes into account indirect expenses, including people's time away from the main campus and various scenarios

These are just some of the many considerations to take into account:

- Know that international partnerships take time and resources. To build a strong partnership with an international institution and expand programs requires relationship maintenance and an effort to build and maintain trust. This will require your time on long plane trips and time away from campus, as well as the time of other members of your staff and faculty. The seduction of the international junket can be hard for some to resist, and when you are away and abroad, too often you open yourself to such charges, no matter how important or substantial the work. Know who is going and what is getting done, and demand clear and detailed reports.
- Know your regulatory environment and be prepared for it to change. Start with your own accrediting body. (When I arrived at SNHU, I found that a number of our programs were out of compliance with NEASC standards. We closed down more than one program and spent some time and expense getting the others in order.) Then, carefully study the regulatory demands of the country in which you wish to operate and do not trust your partner's knowledge and interpretation alone. When you get everything in place, having followed the letter of the law, know that it can change overnight.
- Be prepared for ethical challenges. American politicians may be no less corrupt than their foreign counterparts, as newspaper headlines make too sadly clear. However, the forms of corruption one encounters abroad will often look different. Sometimes the corruption is more crude, such as the outright demand for a "consideration" in order to move an approval process along. Sometimes it is more subtle, such as a 10 percent "consulting or processing" fee often buried in a document. Sometimes there is a gray area, such as request for a senior administrator's son or daughter to get help "studying at your campus in America" or to give "special consideration" to someone's sibling when hiring staff in country. Unscrupulous recruitment agents take terrible advantage of students and their families and sully the reputation of the good ones in the process. Cash economies lend themselves even more to abuses. The president has to set the bar high and communicate those expectations to all concerned.

- Be patient. The issues I've mentioned simply require time. Knowing how to navigate a different culture and establish credibility and trust is essential. One Chinese university president commented to me:

Americans want to do business right away. If they do business for a long time, they may become friends. If they become good friends, they may exchange gifts on important holidays. In China, we start by exchanging gifts. Then we will see if we can become friends. And if we are friends long enough, we can then do real business.

So many guides to international business do not dig much below the surface of etiquette (how to greet someone, where to sit, how to toast). To be effective, one needs to understand the differences in how one's partner thinks, what defines success, what is negotiable, and what is untouchable. That takes time.

None of this is beyond the reach of any careful institution, and one doesn't need to have an enormous endowment to have meaningful and fruitful international initiatives. However, attention to detail needs to trump the seductiveness of travel and promise of net margins, because so much can go so wrong at a distance.

On the other hand, when we do international programming well, so much can go right. Whether recruited to our home campus for some or all of their degree programs or served wholly abroad, international students enrich our institutions well beyond the tuition they pay. They often come to us better prepared and more hungry for success than their American peers, truth be told. What has come to feel like an entitlement for many American students (despite the cost of education to them and their parents) is still a rare privilege for many of our international students.

With our degrees in hand, pathways to success for our graduates open up. SNHU international alumni include the former secretary of state for Malaysia, CEO of the largest communications company in Turkey, and key government officials in India and Tanzania. Our collective ability to educate the future leaders of countries around the world remains one of the best forms of foreign policy our country enjoys. Doing so well requires the leadership of the president in setting the strategy, insisting on careful execution, and being hands on when necessary.



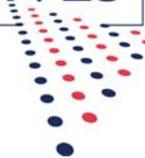
About the Author

Dr. Paul J. LeBlanc became President of Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) on July 7, 2003. He previously served as president at Marlboro College (Vermont) from 1996 to 2003. Under LeBlanc's direction, SNHU has become the first American university to bring online programs into China. Additionally, LeBlanc has expanded academic programs, including a nationally recognized MFA Program featuring writers like Russell Banks and Richards Rhodes; revitalized the SNHU campus with new buildings; and helped SNHU become the first carbon-neutral university campus in New Hampshire and one of the first in the nation.

At Marlboro College, LeBlanc oversaw a \$10-million campus revitalization program that included a new library wing and dance/music building. He successfully led a recently completed \$34 million comprehensive campaign and guided the college into graduate and international education. The *Princeton Review* recently ranked Marlboro College second in the nation for "Overall Academic Quality."

LeBlanc received a Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1990, a Master's of Arts degree from Boston College in 1982, and a Bachelor of Arts from Framingham State College in 1980.

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