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GLOBAL CLASSROOMS

U.S. Universities Rush to Set Up Outposts Abroad

By TAMAR LEWIN

When John Sexton, the president of New York University, first met Omar Saif Ghobash, an investor trying to entice him to open a branch campus in the United Arab Emirates, Mr. Sexton was not sure what to make of the proposal — so he asked for a $50 million gift.

"It's like earnest money: if you're a $50 million donor, I'll take you seriously," Mr. Sexton said. "It's a way to test their bona fides." In the end, the money materialized from the government of Abu Dhabi, one of the seven emirates.

Mr. Sexton has long been committed to building N.Y.U.'s international presence, increasing study-abroad sites, opening programs in Singapore, and exploring new partnerships in France. But the plans for a comprehensive liberal-arts branch campus in the Persian Gulf, set to open in 2010, are in a class by themselves, and Mr. Sexton is already talking about the flow of professors and students he envisions between New York and Abu Dhabi.

The American system of higher education, long the envy of the world, is becoming an important export as more universities take their programs overseas.

In a kind of educational gold rush, American universities are competing to set up outposts in countries with limited higher education opportunities. American universities — not to mention Australian and British ones, which also offer instruction in English, the lingua franca of academia — are starting, or expanding, hundreds of programs and partnerships in booming markets like China, India and Singapore.

And many are now considering full-fledged foreign branch campuses, particularly in the oil-rich Middle East. Already, students in the Persian Gulf state of Qatar can attend an American university without the expense, culture shock or post-9/11 visa problems of traveling to America.

At Education City in Doha, Qatar's capital, they can study medicine at Weill Medical College of Cornell University, international affairs at Georgetown, computer science and business at Carnegie Mellon, fine arts at Virginia Commonwealth, engineering at Texas A&M, and soon, journalism at Northwestern.

In Dubai, another emirate, Michigan State University and Rochester Institute of Technology will offer classes this fall.

"Where universities are heading now is toward becoming global universities," said Howard Rollins, the former director of international programs at Georgia Tech, which has degree programs in France, Singapore, Italy, South Africa and China, and plans for India. "We'll have more and more universities competing internationally for resources, faculty and the best students."

Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, internationalization has moved high on the agenda at most universities, to prepare students for a globalized world, and to help faculty members stay up-to-date in their disciplines.

Overseas programs can help American universities raise their profile, build international relationships, attract top research talent who, in turn, may attract grants and produce patents, and gain access to a new pool of tuition-paying students, just as the number of college-age Americans is about to decline.

Even public universities, whose primary mission is to educate in-state students, are trying to establish a global brand in an era of limited state financing.

Partly, it is about prestige. American universities have long worried about their ratings in U.S. News and World Report. These days, they are also mindful of the international rankings published in Britain, by the Times Higher Education Supplement, and in China, by Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

The demand from overseas is huge. At the University of Washington, the administrator in charge of overseas programs said she received about a proposal a week. “It’s almost like spam,” said the official, Susan Jeffords, whose position as vice provost for global affairs was created just two years ago.

Traditionally, top universities built their international presence through study-abroad sites, research partnerships, faculty exchanges and joint degree programs offered with foreign universities. Yale has dozens of research collaborations with Chinese universities. Overseas branches, with the same requirements and degrees as the home campuses, are a newer — and riskier — phenomenon.

“I still think the downside is lower than the upside is high,” said Amy Gutmann, president of the University of Pennsylvania. “The risk is that we couldn’t deliver the same quality education that we do here, and that it would mean diluting our faculty strength at home.”

While universities with overseas branches insist that the education equals what is offered in the United States, much of the faculty is hired locally, on a short-term basis. And certainly overseas branches raise fundamental questions:

Will the programs reflect American values and culture, or the host country’s? Will American taxpayers end up footing part of the bill for overseas students? What happens if relations between the United States and the host country deteriorate? And will foreign branches that spread American know-how hurt American competitiveness?

“A lot of these educators are trying to present themselves as benevolent and altruistic, when in reality, their programs are aimed at making money,” said Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican who has criticized the rush overseas.

David J. Skorton, the president of Cornell, on the other hand, said the global drive benefited the United States. “Higher education is the most important diplomatic asset we have,” he said. “I believe these programs can actually reduce friction between countries and cultures.”

Tempering Expectations

While the Persian Gulf campus of N.Y.U. is on the horizon, George Mason University is up and running — though not at full speed — in Ras al Khaymah, another one of the emirates.

George Mason, a public university in Fairfax, Va., arrived in the gulf in 2005 with a tiny language program intended to help students achieve college-level English skills and meet the university's admission standards for the degree programs that were beginning the next year.

George Mason expected to have 200 undergraduates in 2006, and grow from there. But it enrolled nowhere near that many, then or now. It had just 57 degree students — 3 in biology, 27 in business and 27 in engineering — at the start of this academic year, joined by a few more students and programs this semester.

The project, an hour north of Dubai's skyscrapers and 7,000 miles from Virginia, is still finding its way. "I will freely confess that it's all been more complicated than I expected," said Peter Stearns, George Mason's provost.

The Ras al Khaymah campus has had a succession of deans. Simple tasks like ordering books take months, in part because of government censors. Local licensing, still not complete, has been far more rigorous than expected. And it has not been easy to find interested students with the SAT scores and English skills that George Mason requires for admissions.

"I'm optimistic, but if you look at it as a business, you can only take losses for so long," said Dr. Abul R. Hasan, the academic dean, who is from the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology. "Our goal is to have 2,000 students five years from now. What makes it difficult is that if you're giving the George Mason degree, you cannot lower your standards."

Aisha Ravindran, a professor from India with no previous connection to George Mason, teaches students the same communications class required for business majors at the Virginia campus — but in the Arabian desert, it lands differently.

Dr. Ravindran uses the same slides, showing emoticons and lists of nonverbal taboos to spread the American business ideal of diversity and inclusiveness. She emphasizes the need to use language that includes all listeners.

And suddenly, there is an odd mismatch between the American curriculum and the local culture. In a country where homosexual acts are illegal, Dr. Ravindran's slide show suggests using "partner" or "life partner," since "husband" or "wife" might exclude some listeners. And in a country where mosques are ubiquitous, the slides counsel students to avoid the word "church" and substitute "place of worship."

The Ras al Khaymah students include Bangladeshis, Palestinians, Egyptians, Indians, Iraqis, Lebanese, Syrians and more, most from families that can afford the $5,400-a-semester tuition. But George Mason has attracted few citizens of the emirates.

The students say they love the small classes, diversity and camaraderie. Their dorm feels much like an American fraternity house, without the haze of alcohol. Some praise George Mason's pedagogy, which they say differs substantially from the rote learning of their high schools.

"At my local school in Abu Dhabi, it was all what the teachers told you, what was in the book," said Mona Bar

Houm, a Palestinian student who grew up in Abu Dhabi. “Here you’re asked to come up with your personal ideas.”

But what matters most, they say, is getting an American degree. “It means something if I go home to Bangladesh with an American degree,” said Abdul Mukit, a business student. “It doesn’t need to be Harvard. It’s good enough to be just an American degree.”

Whether that degree really reflects George Mason is open to question. None of the faculty members came from George Mason, although that is likely to change next year. The money is not from George Mason, either: Ras al Khaymah bears all the costs.

Nonetheless, Sharon Siverts, the vice president in charge of the campus, said: “What’s George Mason is everything we do. The admissions are done at George Mason, by George Mason standards. The degree programs are Mason programs.”

Seeking a Partnership

Three years ago, Mr. Ghobash, the Oxford-educated investor from the United Arab Emirates, heard a presentation by a private company, American Higher Education Inc., trying to broker a partnership between Kuwait and an American university.

Mr. Ghobash, wanting to bring liberal arts to his country, hired the company to submit a proposal for a gulf campus run by a well-regarded American university. American Higher Education officials said they introduced him to N.Y.U. Mr. Ghobash spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the company’s fees, talked with many N.Y.U. officials and paid for a delegation to visit the emirates before meeting Mr. Sexton, the university president, in June 2005.

Mr. Sexton said he solicited the $50 million gift to emphasize that he was not interested in a business-model deal and that academic excellence was expensive. Mr. Ghobash declined to be interviewed. But according to American Higher Education officials, $50 million was more than Mr. Ghobash could handle.

So when the agreement for the Abu Dhabi campus New York University was signed last fall, Mr. Ghobash and the company were out of the picture, and the government of Abu Dhabi — the richest of the emirates — was the partner to build and operate the N.Y.U. campus. The Executive Affairs Authority of Abu Dhabi made the gift in November 2007.

“The crown prince shares our vision of Abu Dhabi becoming an idea capital for the whole region,” Mr. Sexton said. “We’re going to be a global network university. This is central to what N.Y.U. is going to be in the future. There’s a commitment, on both sides, to have both campuses grow together, so that by 2020, both N.Y.U. and N.Y.U.-Abu Dhabi will in the world’s top 10 universities.”

Neither side will put a price tag on the plan. But both emphasize their shared ambition to create an entity central to the intellectual life not just of the Persian Gulf but also of South Asia and the Middle East.

“We totally buy into John’s view of idea capitals,” said Khaldoon al-Mubarak, chairman of the Executive Affairs Authority. “This is not a commercially driven relationship. It’s a commitment to generations to come, to research. We see eye to eye. We see this as a Catholic marriage. It’s forever.”

It is also, for New York University, a chance to grow, given Abu Dhabi's promise to replace whatever the New York campus loses to the gulf.

"If, say, 10 percent of the physics department goes there, they will pay to expand the physics department here by 10 percent," Mr. Sexton said. "That's a wonderful opportunity, and we think our faculty will see it that way and step up."

Mr. Sexton is leading the way: next fall, even before the campus is built, he plans to teach a course in Abu Dhabi, leaving New York every other Friday evening, getting to Abu Dhabi on Saturday, teaching Sunday and returning to his New York office Monday morning.

"The crown prince loved the idea and said he wanted to take the class," Mr. Sexton said. "But I said, 'No, think how that would be for the other students.' "

Uncharted Territory

While the gulf's wealth has drawn many American universities, others dream of China's enormous population.

In October, the New York Institute of Technology, a private university offering career-oriented training, opened a Nanjing campus in collaboration with Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, and dozens of American universities offer joint or dual degrees through Chinese universities.

Kean University, a public university in New Jersey, had hoped mightily to be the first with a freestanding undergraduate campus in China. Two years ago, Kean announced its agreement to open a branch of the university in Wenzhou in September 2007. Whether the campus will materialize remains to be seen. Kean is still awaiting final approval from China, which prefers programs run through local universities.

"I'm optimistic," said Dawood Farahi, Kean's president. "I'm Lewis and Clark, looking for the Northwest Passage."

In fact, his negotiations have been much like uncharted exploration. "It's very cumbersome negotiating with the Chinese," he said. "The deal you struck yesterday is not necessarily good today. The Chinese sign an agreement, and then the next day, you get a fax saying they want an amendment." Still, he persists, noting, "One out of every five humans on the planet is Chinese."

Beyond the geopolitical, there are other reasons, pedagogic and economic.

"A lot of our students are internationally illiterate," Dr. Farahi said. "It would be very good for them to have professors who've taught in China, to be able to study in China, and to have more awareness of the rest of the world. And I think I can make a few bucks there." Under the accord, he said, up to 8 percent of the Wenzhou revenues could be used to support New Jersey.

With state support for public universities a constant challenge, new financing sources are vital, especially for lesser-known universities. "It's precisely because we're third tier that I have to find things that jettison us out of our orbit and into something spectacular," Dr. Farahi said.

Possibilities and Alarms

Most overseas campuses offer only a narrow slice of American higher education, most often programs in business, science, engineering and computers.

Schools of technology have the most cachet. So although the New York Institute of Technology may not be one of America's leading universities, it is a leading globalizer, with programs in Bahrain, Jordan, Abu Dhabi, Canada, Brazil and China.

"We're leveraging what we've got, which is the New York in our first name and the Technology in our last name," said Edward Guiliano, the institute's president. "I believe that in the 21st century, there will be a new class of truly global universities. There isn't one yet, but we're as close as anybody."

Some huge universities get a toehold in the gulf with tiny programs. At a villa in Abu Dhabi, the University of Washington, a research colossus, offers short courses to citizens of the emirates, mostly women, in a government job-training program.

"We're very eager to have a presence here," said Marisa Nickle, who runs the program. "In the gulf, it's not what's here now, it's what's coming. Everybody's on the way."

Some lawmakers are wondering how that rush overseas will affect the United States. In July, the House Science and Technology subcommittee on research and science education held a hearing on university globalization.

Mr. Rohrabacher, the California lawmaker, raises alarms. "I'm someone who believes that Americans should watch out for Americans first," he said. "It's one thing for universities here to send professors overseas and do exchange programs, which do make sense, but it's another thing to have us running educational programs overseas."

The subcommittee chairman, Representative Brian Baird, a Washington Democrat, disagrees. "If the U.S. universities aren't doing this, someone else likely will," he said. "I think it's better that we be invited in than that we be left out."

Still, he said he worried that the foreign branches could undermine an important American asset — the number of world leaders who were students in the United States.

"I do wonder," he said, "if we establish many of these campuses overseas, do we lose some of that cross-pollination?"