

**Abstract**

Conventional wisdom about American campuses abroad suggests that they are typically vanity projects for cosmopolitans. This view reflects only a partial reality. A new database from the Global American Higher Education initiative shows that the landscape is more diverse and inclusive than commonly understood. These institutions are largely unknown in the United States but extend the American higher education footprint into 80 countries around the world.

Under the Radar: American Universities Abroad

Kyle Long and Saiansha Panangipalli

Media coverage of international campuses—meager though it may be—is dominated by only a handful of institutions. The few headlines that they garner in the US press typically highlight the overseas ventures of well-resourced institutions like Duke University, New York University, and Yale University. Reporting usually conveys bad news like academic freedom or labor law violations, or an impending campus closure. The concentration of the public's limited attention on this small group gives the impression that US higher education overseas is elite and frivolous.

But this view obscures reality. Hundreds of lesser-known institutions provide access to US higher education abroad. In addition to branch campuses, there are independent institutions, microcampuses, and international joint universities offering US-degree programs. They differ in size, offerings, and quality. In fact, the US higher education landscape is as diverse overseas as it is at home. The Association of American Universities, composed of the country's leading 65 research universities, only accounts for 1 percent of all higher education institutions in the United States. It should come then as no surprise that a great majority of US higher education institutions abroad also fly under the radar.

Global American Higher Education

There are, of course, name-brand branch campuses educating thousands of students across the globe. But it is the institutions beneath that visible top layer that really extend the United States' global presence. Webster University, for example, a regional private university in Missouri, operates 10 international campuses in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Europe. The American International University-Bangladesh has over 10,000 students in a wide range of programs. SUNY Empire State University offers full-degree programs on the campuses of a half dozen institutions, mostly around the Mediterranean. These universities may not be world-class, but they bring US higher education classes to the world.

A new publicly available dataset from the [Global American Higher Education \(GAHE\)](#) research initiative now enables interested parties to explore the entirety of this population of institutions. The GAHE dataset shows that there are 262 active American higher education institutions in 80 countries. Together, they enroll approximately 720,000 students. By comparison, the roughly 6,000 higher education institutions in the United States enroll 760,000 international students. This article adds nuance to stereotypes about US universities abroad by highlighting some of its more representative institutions.

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Independent Institutions

Over the past two decades, the branch campus has become the industry standard for international higher education institutions. Before that, the prevailing model was the independent institution. The earliest of these free-standing colleges were established by American missionaries in the eastern Mediterranean and China during the second half of the nineteenth century. Like the flagship American University of Beirut (est. 1866), independent US universities abroad typically use "American" or "United States" in their names. Even after the missionary period, the model persisted. During the 1960s, entrepreneurs from the US started establishing independent American colleges in Western Europe. After the Cold War, free-standing US colleges began to appear in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and later became the prevailing model.

But independent colleges do not always get credit for being first movers. For example, Weill Cornell Medicine in Qatar (est. 2001), a partnership between Cornell University and the Qatar Foundation, describes itself as the first American medical school outside the United States. While it may be the first branch campus of a US university to offer medical education outside the country, the distinction of being the first ever US medical school outside the United States belongs to the American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine, which began its offerings in 1980 and has been operating continuously in the region since the mid-1990s. A host of others followed.

The Caribbean case is representative of independent US universities abroad more generally. There are legitimate concerns about quality. At US medical schools in the Caribbean, residency placement rates are low and student debt load is high. This is consistent with the quality situation for independents globally: Only a third are accredited in the United States. Half of them operate for profit. That percentage is even higher in the Caribbean, prompting the introduction of legislation in the US Senate to improve accountability of foreign medical schools receiving federal student aid.

Still, these institutions in the Caribbean educate a disproportionate number of physicians of color who work in the US. Indeed, independent US universities have a long legacy of educating marginalized populations even though their role as refuge for the overlooked is routinely unheralded. The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, for example, has enrolled hundreds of refugee students from Syria and Afghanistan in recent years. The independent model of US higher education often goes where branch campuses will not. To wit, the American University Kyiv opened in fall 2022.

Branch Campuses

Among the United States' active international branches campuses, only six of the 67 are affiliated with institutions ranked in the top 50 by US News. The City University of Seattle operates five degree-granting international branch campuses: one in Greece and four in Canada. Washington state is also home to the for-profit DigiPen Institute of Technology, which operates degree-granting branches in Singapore and Spain. The mention of

a for-profit in this context is not an anomaly. A higher percentage of US international branches belong to for-profit institutions than the percentage of those affiliated with institutions ranked in the top 50 by US News.

Branches in hubs draw the most attention. Qatar's Education City and South Korea's Incheon Global Campus, for example, each host multiple prominent US universities. But data shows that US branch campuses more commonly operate in isolation in North America or Europe, not the Middle East or Southeast Asia. Some critics see the branch campus boom as nothing more than a cash grab. Indeed, institutions in Qatar receive substantial subsidies from their hosts. But most US institutions' branch campuses depend on tuition from modest enrollments, often with fewer than a thousand students.

Small, solitary campuses offering specialized degree programs are the norm. Berklee College of Music (Spain), Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (Germany), Parsons School of Design (France) are typical. The distinctively US liberal arts college is less commonly branched but there are still notable manifestations in Germany (Bard College), Hungary (McDaniel College), and Spain (Saint Louis University). This model has allowed US higher education—including humanities and social science programs—to persist in environments otherwise hostile to democratic values. When Hungary's regime forced the independent Central European University into exile in 2018, McDaniel was able to remain because it was a branch of an institution with programs in the United States.

The GAHE dataset also includes information on relevant microcampuses, international joint universities, and foreign institutions accredited in the United States. When added to the mix, they further underscore the capacity, diversity, and obscurity of global American higher education. ▲

Kyle Long is founding director of the Global American Higher Education research initiative. E-mail: longkylea@gmail.com.

Saiansha Panangipalli is a Science and Innovation Officer at British High Commission, India. E-mail: saiansha@yahoo.co.in.