



Retrenchment or Expansion? The Future of US International Campuses

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For decades, economic, political, and academic motives have operated as complementary “push” factors in the internationalization of higher education. The rise of neoliberalism, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the maturation of international science accelerated education across borders. Indeed, the search for new markets, alliances, and knowledge brought the branch campus boom—with American institutions leading the way. According to the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT), the United States is the largest of 39 exporting countries, contributing roughly 30 percent of the 333 international branch campuses worldwide. A reactionary political movement in the country, however, signals the onset of a conflicting “pull” factor: isolationism. After leading on the global stage for nearly a century, worrisomely growing numbers of Americans want the country to turn inward. A recent and high-profile international branch campus closure—not for economic reasons, but ostensibly political ones—encapsulates this concern and has observers wondering if it is the canary in the coal mine. Earlier this year, Texas A&M University’s board of regents voted to close the institution’s 20-year-old, fully-funded branch campus in Qatar. The board cited heightened instability in the Middle East as a key contributing factor, but analysts have pointed to mounting political pressure on a university caught up in the state’s culture wars and ask, will others be next?

The prominence of the United States in the global landscape for international campuses renders the Texas A&M case a particularly useful lens for considering the future of the phenomenon more generally. Critics have been presaging the doom of international campuses for almost a decade now. But the reports of their collective death are greatly exaggerated. An international campus provides the educational framework, methodologies, and standards typical of higher education from one country to students in a different country. There will always be a market for that service. Still, we do see the United States’ international campuses caught in the middle of a national tug-of-war between isolationism and neoliberalism. We therefore expect intermittent closures and openings to continue while the United States electorate sorts out whether it wants to withdraw from or engage with the world. In the meantime, emerging markets and innovations in cross-border education will be worth watching.

Pull Factor: Politics

The forces that would bring the United States’ international campuses back to shore largely come from the political right. The political left, too, has problems with campuses that it considers neoimperialist outposts that uphold global power structures. But the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement has shown greater interest in curtailing higher education, which it fears is subject to malign foreign influence. During the Trump administration, the department of education investigated 19 universities—including Texas A&M—for failing to comply with a law that requires them to report foreign donations. During the Biden administration, right-wing scrutiny of universities’ foreign financial ties has persisted via conservative state governments and think tanks, where it has also dovetailed with support for Israel. At the end of 2023, a conservative pro-Israel group alleged that the Qatar Foundation’s support for Texas A&M’s campus in Qatar (TAMUQ) allowed the Gulf state undue influence on federally-funded research and therefore posed a national security risk. The university’s board of regents voted to shutter TAMUQ four months later.

Abstract

This article examines dual forces impacting international campuses of US universities: isolationist retrenchment and neoliberal expansion. It uses the recent closure of Texas A&M University’s branch in Qatar to explore how domestic disputes are playing out internationally. It argues that the overall landscape for international campuses remains favorable to expansion, while also acknowledging worrisome trends. The analysis underscores the importance of global engagement for fostering economic growth and international cooperation.

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The TAMUQ episode has drawn considerable attention but is not an isolated incident. Due to the expansion of a state law limiting public institutions' engagement with "countries of concern," Florida International University abandoned the international joint university it operated with Tianjin University (China) and terminated multiple dual-degree programs with other Chinese partners. Together, the cases demonstrate how fraught with political landmines the current environment can be for international cooperative ventures, at least from institutions based in states where legislative bodies and gubernatorial offices are dominated by isolationists. Sustaining transnational partnerships in these contexts now necessitates concerted cultivation of state political and opinion leaders through expensive and long-term lobbying efforts. In view of these growing difficulties and the prospect of a second Trump administration, which would further embolden isolationists, the decisions to retrench could prove prescient.

Push Factor: Economics

The forces that would push more United States campuses to foreign shores largely come from the established economic order and traditional higher education business model. Universities from the United States still dominate global rankings, and the postpandemic recovery of the United States as the leading destination for international students shows its institutions still hold great appeal. Meanwhile, new markets for international campuses continue to open. India, Greece, and Saudi Arabia have all passed recent legislation allowing international campuses. The Philippines may soon as well. Notably, domestic political discourse in these countries includes prominent voices that consider international branches a threat to national security, culture, and identity. Consequently, onerous restrictions have emerged in some locations that quell immediate growth. In India, for example, only two Australian universities—Deakin University and the University of Wollongong—have so far ventured to start campuses.

But as long as public subsidies are low and global demand is high, there will be suppliers for North American higher education abroad. And indeed recent headlines confirm that United States institutions still seek to launch new campuses overseas: Baylor College of Medicine has agreed to establish a medical college in the United Arab Emirates; Arizona State University intends to build a campus in Saudi Arabia; Georgetown University is considering one in Indonesia; and Temple University, long a stalwart in Tokyo, is adding a second Japanese site in Kyoto. While we should not expect public institutions from Florida or Texas to venture abroad anytime soon, other state universities are showing how the challenging terrain offers opportunity for innovation. The University of Arizona's microcampuses, which furnish partner institutions with onsite degree programs, could be poised for expansion in emerging markets like India, which is especially interested in US education. India recently surpassed China as the largest sender of students to the United States and microcampuses could reach them more efficiently than the full-fledged international campuses constrained by law. The University of Arizona's in-state neighbor, Arizona State University, has its own promising model, in which the university's for-profit subsidiary Cintana Education provides turnkey programming to independent institutions to help them startup faster. This is the model that got American University in Kyiv off the ground last year—even in the middle of a war.

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Looking Forward

Resurgent isolationism has destabilized the previously complementary relationship between economic and political goals, bringing these now rival forces into direct conflict: neoliberalism is pushing providers to find new markets, while isolationist attitudes are clawing them back to shore. In this sensitive political landscape, institutions—especially public ones—must be prepared for new challenges that make maintaining global higher education partnerships significantly more arduous. Meanwhile, the higher education sector is likely to see growth and disruption simultaneously. As each opening or closure of an international campus is unlikely to represent a broader trend, observers looking for clues should take a wide and long view extending past the upcoming presidential election. ▲