

American Universities around the Mediterranean and Beyond: The Case for Support by the Obama Administration

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The balance of hard and soft power will inevitably shift with the Obama administration in Washington. Rebuilding US alliances abroad and restoring a more nuanced view of the United States in large areas of the world will necessitate a thorough review of the resources at our disposal. In the process, assets neglected and undervalued for the past decade will be rediscovered. One such asset is the network of accredited American colleges and universities around the globe that make up the Association of American International Colleges and Universities (AAICU). In this essay I outline the potential role of these institutions in shaping how the United States is seen in critical areas of the world and in serving as a beacon of American, private, nonprofit higher education. The essay also contains specific recommendations for how the new administration can strengthen the network of American institutions abroad without co-opting or using them as vehicles for US government propaganda.

Soft power and hard power are often reduced to *diplomatic* and *military* power, but the former, of course, covers a broad range of options, and education is central among them. American colleges and universities abroad are not newcomers to the scene and have played important roles in the perception of the United States. Many have substantial credibility from having shaped foreign elites for generations. The genesis for American educational outreach was the 1806 Haystack Meeting at Williams College, which led, in 1810, to

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the formation in Boston of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The resulting wave of seminaries, planted throughout the Middle East and southeastern Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, was accompanied by school and college building, and the latter's secular mission has survived and flourished. These schools today form the core of some twenty accredited American colleges and universities running from Kyrgyzstan through the Persian Gulf, Lebanon, Egypt, Greece, and on to Britain. Many of these institutions, like the American universities of Cairo and Beirut or the American colleges in Greece, are deeply embedded in local societies and for decades have shaped the elites of government, business, academia, and the arts. It is no secret that the largest single block of delegates assembled in San Francisco in 1945 to create the United Nations came not from Harvard, Oxford, or the Sorbonne but from the American University of Beirut. These institutions today form a network for the promotion of American higher education, covering Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

The point here is that many of these institutions have earned the high esteem in which they are held the hard way, by throwing in their lot with the countries and peoples that they serve for the long haul and throughout the most trying circumstances. Nowhere is this more true than in Lebanon, where the American University of Beirut, one of whose presidents was assassinated on the job, has kept hope alive by standing firm. Two American institutions were uprooted from Asia Minor in 1921, along with 1.5 million Greek refugees, and relocated to Athens and Thessaloniki where they continue to serve Greek youth. In Egypt, the American University of Cairo continues to have broad influence in the educational and social spheres. Moreover, American universities are playing a key role in educational innovation in countries like Afghanistan, Armenia, Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates. In the Balkans, they are providing a blend of business and entrepreneurial training, backed by case studies from the region, to jump-start the ravaged economies there. (A comparable MBA program in the United States, with the same accreditation, is five to ten times the cost, not including transportation and lodging.)

Numerous reports, including those by the Council on Foreign Relations, have pointed out that, for all the millions spent on public diplomacy, government spokespersons and programs are largely discounted by a skeptical

foreign public, whether in Cairo, Karachi, or Athens. Successive political appointees as undersecretary for public diplomacy in the US Department of State have tried without success to reshape the US image abroad, particularly in the Middle East. Others have proposed outsourcing this role to journalists and other nongovernmental actors. The potential role of American universities abroad, however, has been largely overlooked in the discussion. Over the long term, these institutions have created a fabric of human ties between their countries and the United States that is of inestimable value, particularly in times of misunderstanding and crisis. Graduates in academia, government, business, and the professions travel often to the United States and remain at home in both cultures. Thus, while presidents, administrations, and ambassadors come and go every few years, American colleges and universities are there for the long term and are viewed in a different perspective. This has been particularly true during the Bush administration, when the universities have been seen by many foreigners as “the America we want to believe in” as opposed to a perceived hostile force.

The 9/11 attacks have, of course, changed the environment for international education and the role of American colleges and universities in a number of countries. American higher education remains the holy grail for many foreign students, and US universities continue to dominate listings of the leading world universities. Patterns have shifted, however, and the United States faces new competition for international students, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. Competing destinations—New Zealand, for example—have established themselves, while, among Muslims, perceived bias and the hassle of visa and security requirements have made regional and in-country options more attractive. Such trends represent opportunity for accredited institutions offering an American education abroad, fully equal to that in the United States. New challenges have arisen, however. A clear threat is the unchecked proliferation of self-proclaimed American universities, lacking accreditation or academic standing and often run for profit, which confuse the marketplace and detract from the image of American higher education. This is a problem particularly in countries without a sophisticated knowledge of the US system.

The Obama administration will want to strengthen the preeminent role of US higher education in the world and the continued flow of international students to the United States. This does not preclude, however, equal support

for American institutions abroad with full, independent accreditation in their own right from one of the seven regional accrediting bodies recognized by the US Department of Education. On the contrary, the network of American schools abroad can and does play a complementary role, vastly increasing the number of foreign students who have access to American education, as well as the number who can study in the United States. The latter occurs through increasingly common 2+2 agreements under which students at partner schools abroad can complete their junior and senior years at a US university or, in reverse, whereby US students complete their degrees abroad.

Study abroad is the reverse side of the coin, and the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation bill (H.R. 1469 and S. 991) establishes the ambitious goal of 1 million Americans studying abroad by 2020. Here too, the established US institutions abroad are uniquely placed to ensure academic quality and transfer of credits among US-accredited schools, while foreign institutions, particularly in the public sector, are often poorly set up to customize the study-abroad experience for a semester or single year. The American identity of a campus abroad is also strengthened by the presence of students from the United States; they enrich the experience of indigenous students as they themselves receive a global education and come to see the United States with the perspective of distance. The United States gains from educational exchange wherever there is free interaction between American and foreign students and a spirit of critical thinking and inquiry. The presence of American institutions abroad extends US outreach to social and economic groups that might not otherwise have had such access.

Many of the American colleges and universities abroad that today make up the AAICU network would probably not exist without substantial support over the years from the US government. They were bolstered by Marshall Plan funding in the post-World War II era and, through the 1980s, received up to \$40 million annually from the US Agency for International Development's (AID's) American Schools and Hospitals Abroad Program (ASHA). Today, however, the ASHA budget is less than half that amount, and competition for scarce resources is fierce among hundreds of claimants, with priority to sub-Saharan and conflict areas. Challenged as never before, the association seeks to encourage genuinely struggling institutions committed to quality American education, such as the American University of Kosovo, the American

University of Afghanistan, and Forman Christian College in Pakistan. It also stands behind member institutions in times of trouble, such as at the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University or Haigazian University in Lebanon.

The AAICU has the parallel task of protecting the good name of American education abroad against commercial vendors misrepresenting themselves as “American” and “accredited.” As a leadership organization of American international universities founded in 1972, whose members provide responsible delivery and quality assurance of American higher education outside the United States, the association requires that regular members, of which there are currently seventeen, have both full American accreditation as independent institutions and demonstrated nonprofit status. Associate members, of which there are eight, must show convincing progress toward these goals, as well as high academic standards and an American identity. Meeting at the American University in Cairo, 10–12 April 2008, the presidents, provosts, and chief academic officers of AAICU declared, in part, the following:

AAICU member institutions aim at a global standard of excellence by providing privileged spaces of intellectual exchange, academic freedom and responsibility. They also promote the pursuit of learning and of democratic values so their graduates are prepared for the rapidly changing needs of the twenty-first century. AAICU member universities are important contributors to research and development locally and internationally. With strong roots in their respective host countries—where they enjoy wide recognition—they are embedded in their international settings. AAICU members are therefore capable of bridging cultures and fostering dialogue among nations within the framework of the American liberal arts tradition. They are both expressions of and vehicles for the growing international acceptance of the US system of higher education and the increasing importance of English as the language of international communication. In the contemporary knowledge-driven world, with its global economy and trans-border social issues, they play a crucial role in establishing, embodying, and verifying standards of educational excellence.¹

1. See www.aaicu.org for full text of the 12 April 2008 AAICU Cairo Declaration.

To play a role in realizing these lofty objectives, the Obama administration will need to be considerably more supportive than its predecessor and to develop a clear policy in regard to US colleges and universities abroad. Education as a US service export is, after all, only slightly behind entertainment, and yet there is no Jack Valenti, no Dan Glickman, and no Motion Picture Association of America to stand up for American interests in this area. Instead, international education falls between the cracks of the departments of State, Education, and Commerce, and American ambassadors, eager to represent education constituencies in their countries of assignment, have often been frustrated by lack of guidance or priorities from Washington. At the accreditation level, as well, the seven regional accrediting agencies recognized by the Department of Education also lack guidance from Washington and have been unable to agree, following conflicting policies toward accreditation of American institutions outside the United States.

More specifically, the incoming administration should consider and adopt the following relatively cost-free measures to strengthen the existing network of American-accredited, nonprofit colleges and universities abroad and to ensure that they continue to project an image of American enlightenment and educational excellence:

- The next secretary of education should be given a specific mandate for American higher education abroad, including the strengthening and reinforcement of existing US-accredited institutions and defense against misrepresentation and dilution of the American brand.
- Federal regulations related to Title IV funds should be changed in such a manner that fully accredited American institutions abroad are not disadvantaged by being excluded from programs such as the Pell Grants, Academic Competitiveness Grants, Federal SMART Grants, Perkins Loans, and College Work Study. Given the current US priority attached to encouraging and expanding the number of Americans studying abroad, it is a significant drawback to these institutions that, because of their location abroad, American citizens and taxpayers are disadvantaged by being unable to receive federal funding from the US Department of Education simply because they are attending a university “not located in a state.” Even more unfair, students receiving Title IV

Funds who go abroad with their own university still have access to those funds simply because they are in a study abroad program and not a fully accredited American institution abroad.

- President Obama should ensure Senate passage of and sign into law the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act of 2007, which, at this writing, continues to await Senate action. The bill's goal of 1 million Americans studying abroad in the next ten years will insure the benefits of an international education to underrepresented student groups and strengthen American colleges and universities abroad.
- The administration also should work with US accrediting agencies to put in place a single accrediting body and one set of standards for all overseas American colleges and universities. This could be accomplished by the creation of a new accrediting group for overseas institutions, by establishing a consortium of the existing regional accrediting agencies, or by assigning the mission to some existing but unaffiliated organization. Such a single body could also be a needed interface for American institutions with foreign accrediting agencies, particularly within the European Union.
- ASHA grants through AID should be expanded to strengthen the network of American higher education abroad as a vital resource for economic competitiveness, security, and diplomacy. ASHA grants are one of the few AID programs that reflect continuity and have produced measurable results. Its budget of less than \$20 million should be at least doubled.
- Research support should be expanded through federal science and technology agencies like the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities.
- Educational and cultural exchange programs administered by the US Department of State should make wider use of AAICU campuses abroad as educational platforms to showcase American achievement in these spheres.
- Nongovernmental organizations receiving US government funding, such as the American-Mideast Educational and Training Services or the Fulbright Commission, should be encouraged to provide the same promo-

tion and counseling to foreign students with regard to accredited American institutions abroad as they do for those located in the United States. They should also include American institutions abroad in eligibility for scholarship programs as well as support for visiting faculty, researchers, and lecturers.

- Finally, rather than relying exclusively on NGO educational counseling offices, the US government should play a more direct and hands-on role in student recruitment for American colleges and universities, whether located in the United States or abroad. Growing competition from the UK, Canada, and Australia benefits substantially from proactive involvement by embassies and government cultural services abroad, including direct sponsorship of student fairs and promotional events.

The proposed measures above constitute a modest package to ensure that the existing network of accredited and nonprofit American colleges and universities abroad can contribute positively to the reappraisal of American intentions, standing, and alliances that will inevitably accompany the new administration. American universities abroad cannot and would not consent to be used for overt propaganda. Yet the presence of an American-educated elite in cabinets and boardrooms around the world is a priceless asset. The United States directly, and through foundations, should more significantly contribute to making the existing infrastructure of universities abroad a bulwark of American values and education in critical regions of the world. The \$2 billion price tag of a single stealth bomber, for example, would cover half a million scholarships around the world at institutions such as these.