1+1 equals less than 2: Sustaining overseas programs

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Blog: The World View [1]

Another overseas programs appears to be biting the dust. The University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) is not renewing its contract with the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). This brings into question yet again why universities pursue these overseas ventures when they are rarely profitable and difficult to sustain.

At the very least these initiatives demonstrate the complexities of cross-border, cross-culture activity. Putting two countries together is not necessarily the neat sum of the parts. Typically, the sending country and the receiving country operate on very different models for higher education. Models differ not only in program design and structure but also in the distribution of financial obligation between student and government. Sadly, at a time when Republican ideology is fervently anti-tax, US universities (both public and private) are continually searching for new sources of revenue. Support from foreign governments can be very alluring. Too often university administrators pursue this revenue without careful consideration of the long-term implications. Foreign governments are not interested in subsidizing US higher education in order to make up for deficits of the anti-tax US environment; they have objectives of their own. The objectives of the foreign government are too often overlooked or under-valued by a US institution.

So should anyone be surprised that UNLV is finding that they will not be able to accommodate rising costs in the future or cover expenses when the subsidy from the Singapore government ends? For some time, Philip Altbach and others have been warning that most of these overseas projects are not sustainable, but institutions continue to pursue them, seduced by the promise of a new source of much-needed income. Additionally, there is the hope that these overseas initiatives will contribute to an institution’s international visibility and in the best of circumstances, attract more full-tuition paying students from abroad to the home campus. Best of all, the investment comes from taxes paid by citizens of someone else’s country.

The UNLV experience also underscores another problem with overseas initiatives — what UNLV wants to offer isn’t necessarily what Singapore wants. UNLV wants to launch a 2+2 program in engineering, a program that “hooks” students in Singapore into finishing their degree in the US, which (of course) means paying tuition to the home campus for two years. The Ministry of Education in Singapore doesn’t seem to be buying it.

UNLV is not the only foreign institution running into difficulties in Singapore. Not by a lot. Johns Hopkins and the University of New South Wales have also packed up and left. And many other universities are encountering their own challenges. Like UNLV, NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts proved to be short of cash when the Singapore government’s subsidy ran out. Yale confronted a serious clash of academic cultures when faculty on the New Haven campus objected to the collaboration in light of different attitudes about academic freedom and human rights in Singapore.

The continuing expansion of US institutions abroad reflects a trend that although promising in theory, repeatedly runs up against challenges that should not surprise anyone who studies international education. Methinks the people launching these initiatives need to be talking more frequently to those of us who research these trends and who might offer them important lessons from experience to inform their decisions. Maybe before they have to pack up and go home.

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