

Strategies for Successful International Education Partnerships in Latin America

Remarks by Dr. Salme Harju Steinberg, President Emerita of Northeastern Illinois University during HACU's 27th Annual Conference, October 26-28, 2013 at the Hilton Chicago Hotel in Chicago, Illinois

Buenos días. My remarks this morning will focus on three strategies to build international education partnerships between the United States and Latin America. We face similar challenges in several areas such as a changing university student population, learning to use technology at home and globally, and our special opportunities in a common language. Clearly, these are also the areas for mutual growth and strength. About 15 percent of all international students currently in the United States are the combined numbers from all Latin American nations, Central and South America. This number includes almost 14 thousand students from Mexico and about 9 thousand from Brazil in the last academic year. For context, keep in mind that students from China account for 25.4 percent of all international students in the U. S., a total of 194,000 in 2011/12.¹

In the late 1960s, just as some Latin American universities attempted to introduce various internal reforms and retain their independence, their

¹ Institute of International Education, [Open Doors: 2012 Report on International Educational Exchange](#), and see data tables and resources online at www.iie.org/opendoors.

emerging authoritarian governments cracked down. Various public universities experienced funding reductions, threats to their autonomy, and challenges that they would be hard pressed to meet over the ensuing decades.² Jorge Balán says that when the autocratic governments could not get satisfaction from universities they sought to “build new institutions rather than support reforms of those over which they had no control.”³

Today, we are indeed living in a new era—one in which the expansion of democracy and rapid economic development has fostered quantitative and qualitative growth in countries like Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Peru. There are important counterparts with United States Hispanic Serving Institutions. Just as we in the U.S. have seen the growth and expansion of institutions serving the formerly underrepresented populations, there is a parallel development in Latin America and comparable concerns. In fact, Jorge Balán states, “Rapidly increased enrollments in higher education with slower growth in public and private resources—as was the case with primary and secondary education earlier—may be held responsible for a decline in quality, including lower graduation

² Jorge Balán, Introduction, “Latin American Higher Education Systems in a Historical and Comparative Perspective,” in Latin America’s New Knowledge Economy: Higher Education, Government, and International Collaboration, edited by Jorge Balán, New York: Institute of International Education, 2013, p. xiv.

³ Ibid.

rates and longer term-to-degree periods among those who do graduate.”⁴

Balán claims that this “quantitative expansion with a loss in quality is perhaps the most widespread burning issue of education at all levels in Latin America...”⁵ Moreover, the issue is not simply underfunding; it is “the lack of focus on learning outcomes and accountability.” He cites the study prepared by the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in Latin America (PREAL, Washington, DC, 2006). While external measurements are basically about pure research and outputs, other reports also reiterate the familiar theme of “low graduation rates, the relatively small percentage of students in science and technology, the quality of teaching and learning, and the competencies and skills of graduates.”⁶

There has been significant progress over the last forty years, however. The World Bank provides comparative data on secondary education completion in Latin America and East Asia: In 1960, 7 percent completed in Latin America versus 11 percent in East Asia nations. But in 2000, the gap dramatically widened: secondary completion in Latin America was 18 percent in contrast to East Asian completion of 44 percent.

⁴Balán, p. xv.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. xvii.

These same assertions are often levied against us in HACU colleges and universities. We know the challenges, and we know our successes. We also know there is little reliable data across institutions to show where our drop outs often find new academic homes and in fact, do graduate. There is also tremendous skepticism about the value of the education we provide. Many of us feel short-changed by our national leaders no less than the media where we read false assertions linking academic quality to time to degree, for example. Every so often we encounter a big surprise. In 2012, Northeastern Illinois University, a four-year public HSI in Chicago, was ranked number 6 in the nation for “best investment” outstripping Stanford, Harvard, MIT, Princeton in the top 10. This, of course, is a rarity. The established metrics usually do not corroborate the value we provide. That is an area we must work on in public discourse.

Partnerships between U.S. institutions and Latin American universities are emerging. The American Council on Education in partnership with the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) created HED, Higher Education for Development. Last year, HED provided funding for a “three-year higher education partnership aimed at promoting sustainable

manufacturing and economic growth in Latin America.”⁷ This program “integrates business, engineering, and environmental education as a collective response to the need for technically innovative skills training in industry across the Americas.” The Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) is in the academic network along with the NY Institute of Technology, comparable institutes in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, universities José Simeón Cañas in El Salvador, and San Ignacio de Loyola of Peru. This is the beginning. IIT will be expanding the partnership to Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Distance education offers a potential new way to even the playing field. For about two decades, the higher education community has engaged in many varieties and definitions of distance education. Terminologies and technologies have changed. With the personal computer, we saw the emergence of interactive teaching and learning through WEB enhanced coursework. We have seen pretty general support for the emergence of a mixed model dedicated to meeting the needs of student learning and faculty at many of our institutions. The debates over issues of effectiveness

⁷ There were assurances that there would be no cuts in the operating budgets for the active projects between U. S. and foreign colleges during the recent partial government shutdown; however, USAID will close the partnership with ACE in 2015 and work directly with colleges. See Karin Fischer, “Colleges’ Global Partnerships Get Temporary Reprieve from Budget Cuts,” [The Chronicle of Higher Education, International](#), September 20, 2013.

between asynchronous and synchronous delivery modes continue. The web lends itself to imaginative partnerships between institutions and creates new opportunities for international educational interchange that can positively impact all of our institutions. For example, students from institutions in two different nations can take parallel courses and link up with others in team research projects. Encounters between classes thousands of miles apart can be scheduled in courses. Some years ago, one of our history department faculty members used this tool effectively to bring together rural and urban points of view in a religious history class in a small denominational college in a rural community and at our urban university, Northeastern Illinois. Many stereotypes were shattered and a new openness to learning resulted.

There are short-range challenges for distance learning. First steps can include faculty using new technologies to address planning opportunities with world wide academic colleagues in cooperative ventures. A fascinating recent example shows how two students who are place bound can interact in a software class with a global partner. In this example, one student presents the specifications that need to be included in a new software program to a student in another nation by email or Skype. That student then develops the software for the first student's review and dialogue begins. It is

clear to see how many factors in global learning can and will emerge through common goals, language, style of learning, and cultural sensitivity. These are indeed the nuts and bolts of learning how to do business in a global marketplace without leaving one's own nation.

I believe in the value of pilot projects. They are nonthreatening, and they are experimental. They have a beginning and an end. There is potential for funding particularly for joint public and private efforts. And, it is often from successful pilot programs that we can demonstrate our successes and move to the next level.

Based on my experiences in global education opportunities for our students at Northeastern Illinois University and my engagement with HACU over the years on the International Commission, it is clear that positive, electrifying partnerships can and do emerge with HACU institutions. In Illinois about twenty years ago early pioneers used regional consortia to develop various partnerships with international study colleagues among many other strategies. My university used the grant platform for rich and meaningful partnerships with universities worldwide. Moreover, we developed a successful model for short term study abroad. Of course, there were

skeptics. We were scoffed at, but ironically many of the skeptics are now engaged in copying the models we developed and short-term programs (8 weeks or less) and one-semester programs represent just over 96% of all study abroad U. S. students.

There are two technological models that are capturing attention these days. One is the MOOC, the mass open online course, free for the time being and available world wide as long as one has access to a computer. If you go to the *www.coursera.com* website, you can sign up for a course and test it out. The unique quality of the MOOC is that the course is completely standardized or as one critic says, **McDonaldized** worldwide.⁸ But, in any case, this is a beginning, isn't it? The amazing feature to me is that in nation-states where there is a generally weak infrastructure, you can enroll in a course if you have a live internet connection. Your nation may be deficient in railways, mass transit, or in any number of ways, but you can leapfrog over these limitations on the internet. It is noteworthy that mainstream universities in Spain offer more MOOCs (79) than any other nation in Europe.⁹ This certainly is an area to explore with partners.

⁸ Jason Lane and Kevin Kinser, "MOOC's and the McDonaldization of Global Higher Education," The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 28, 2012.

⁹ Carmen Paun, University World News, 18 October 2013, Global Edition Issue 292.

The second technological model is collaborative online international learning or COIL. As Hans de Wit, a leading scholar of international education and a leader in EAIE (European Association for International Education) recently wrote, “while in MOOCs the teaching stays more or less traditional, using modern technology for a global form of delivery, in COIL the technology is used to develop a more interactive and collaborative way of international teaching and learning.”¹⁰ De Wit makes the point that the European Commission said that virtual mobility is “connected to a desire to focus on the large majority of students who are not mobile...how to make it possible for non-mobile students to develop an international dimension to their teaching and learning.”¹¹ This method can foster bilingual interaction between students in two countries. It is also interesting to note that a significant variant of this model “combines short study abroad with online learning.” Let me add a few words about globally networked learning which has immediate applicability to HACU institutions.

The Center for Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) at the SUNY Global Center in New York City is a key link in the prospects for globalization in learning opportunities. There are annual international

¹⁰ Hans de Wit, “COIL---Virtual Mobility without Commercialisation” University World News, 1 June 2013, Global Edition Issue 274..

¹¹ Ibid.

conferences; there is a COIL Institute whose working group partners come from 22 U. S. institutions who “develop globally networked programs with nearly 30 international partner institutions...” The list of partners is on the COIL website. It is good to know that there is one HACU HSI university member and three HACU Associate Members in this relatively small group.¹² Moreover, given the rising strength of COIL and tremendous interest, COIL has developed a fee-based program to assist campuses nationwide.

A third prospect to enhance U.S.-Latin American partnerships is a renewed national emphasis on foreign language competencies among U. S. students. Bilingual students learn third languages more easily than monolinguals as has been documented, and as I know from personal experience coming from a bilingual home. Our heritage speakers also stand to gain a great deal from formal Spanish language study and just as our global partners seek to learn English.¹³ Let me cite one example of a former obstacle to partnerships with Chile: Up until 2011, most students in Chile did not have enough English proficiency so that they could successfully apply to U. S.

¹² University of Texas El Paso (HSI); San Jose State University, Texas Tech University, and National University, LaJolla, CA, Associate Members of HACU.

¹³ Barbara Wallraff, “What Global Language?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 2000, p. 56.

graduate schools.¹⁴ However, in 2011, the United States and Chile entered into a partnership on English-language programs. Moreover, the work of Chilean President Michelle Bachelet marked a major milestone thanks to the Becas Chile¹⁵ grants she launched to stimulate interest in studying abroad. In 2007, there were 200 Chilean students who studied abroad and by 2011, there were 5,809. The goal is 30,000 Chilean students abroad by 2017. When President Bachelet traveled to California in 2008 to sign the various agreements that would enable Chileans to study at the University of California, she affirmed what was a departure from the old ways and an entry into an equal partnership.¹⁶ In Brazil, too, there is a successful working model of including corporate partners into higher education partnerships. Moreover, Brazil created the Brazil Scientific Mobility Program for overseas study in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and math. This is an active partnership between the government, universities, and business. 75,000 Brazilian students are fully funded by the government and 26,000 funded privately.¹⁷ It is clear that our partnerships will offer mutual benefit as we learn from each other.

¹⁴ Marion Lloyd, "Latin America Hopes to Lift Global Profile," The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 18, 2010, p. 3

¹⁵ Chilean Bicentennial Fund for Human Capital Development (Becas Chile).

¹⁶ Marion Lloyd, p. 5.

¹⁷ Allan E. Goodman, "Cooperation is Key to Growth for Latin America," DiplomaticCourier.com, May 24, 2013.

When many of us in this room today were students, we occasionally met the privileged international student from another country. This student often enjoyed wealth, social prestige, and the ability to attend the university of his choice worldwide. It would be the rare experience for an American to meet a foreign student who had grown up on a farm or whose family worked in a factory. How different it is today. Just as we in HACU offer opportunity for a university education to first generation students in the U. S. so, too, we see our counterparts in Latin America reaching for the same dream and witnessing a tremendous growth in tertiary education for all classes, up and down the social ladder. This, then, unites us in HACU with the democracy of aspiration in Latin America. Gracias.