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Image from poster for "Universities in a Dangerous World" conference

# Protecting Values in Overseas Ventures

Universities that set up shop globally should work to uphold principles such as academic freedom, gender equity and freedom of speech -- but they sometimes compromise, scholars argue.

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By Elizabeth Redden

MONTREAL -- Bard College offers dual degrees in cooperation with universities in Kyrgyzstan, Russia and the West Bank. In a panel discussion last week, Jonathan Becker, Bard's vice president for academic affairs and director of its Center for Civic Engagement, began his remarks by discussing another of the college's locations.

"So this is a place where we offer a Bard degree," Becker said. "But the government there places limits on what we can teach. For example, we can't offer classes on terrorism. They reserve the right to screen assigned readings, they must approve all faculty, they limit students' access to the internet and they even occasionally suspend our faculty. One faculty got suspended this year for six weeks for bringing a phone to class."

For all the questions American colleges have faced about whether they are compromising their academic values in establishing programs or campuses in authoritarian countries, Becker was not referring to an overseas location, but rather the Bard Prison Initiative, which operates in prisons in the United States. Becker brought up the private New York college's prison education program to highlight what he described as "the challenge of bringing liberal education to societies and environments which are difficult, where it's not familiar, where you're not used to doing this type of education and where you might have creeping authoritarianism."

"We at Bard are constantly weighing the challenges," said Becker. "We don't want to compromise our core values or, worse, be a stooge for an authoritarian regime. On the other hand, we don't want to let

the perfect be the enemy of the good."

The challenge of upholding values like academic freedom, equitable access and social responsibility in international partnerships was a central theme at the biennial gathering of the Scholars at Risk Network held at McGill University here last week. Scholars at Risk is an international network of universities, headquartered at New York University, that arranges for temporary academic positions for threatened academics, monitors academic freedom violations and campaigns on behalf of wrongfully persecuted scholars around the globe.

The threats posed to individual scholars who face loss of their academic positions, imprisonment or worse for their academic work were extensively discussed at the Scholars at Risk event, for which the theme was "Universities in a Dangerous World: Defending Higher Education Communities and Values." Kenneth Prewitt, of Columbia University, said it is important the network is also trying "to broaden the conversation to what happens when the principles themselves are at risk."

"We talk about persecuted scholars. We have to also talk about persecuted practices and principles in higher education," Prewitt, the Carnegie Professor of Public Affairs and the vice president for Columbia's global centers, said during one of several sessions at the congress that addressed values in international partnerships. Columbia has centers in Brazil, Chile, China, France, India, Jordan, Kenya and Turkey.

"Universities are promising that they're going to be global universities for the 21st century. That's the mantra. Well, what if the things you believe in at home aren't welcomed when you get abroad?" asked Prewitt, who cited as examples principles of gender equity, academic freedom and freedom of speech. "What happens when you move across borders with these sets of principles and encounter situations which are not as hospitable?"

"It really has two dimensions, one of which is self-inflicted wounds," Prewitt continued. He said he was "certain" that as American universities, including his own, have ventured abroad, "they've compromised. They've cut corners. They have actually said, yes, we believe in X, Y and Z, but you know it's not so easy to do it sometimes the way we would like to."

"And then there is the situation, the more familiar one, [in which] the outside forces are such that we can't do what we want to do. The local governments are controlling, containing, regulating, shrinking the space for the principles that we believe in." Prewitt noted for example that the crackdown on media and academe in Turkey since Columbia established a center there means "Istanbul is a less hospitable place today for the kind of work we want to be doing there."

What to do about all this? Prewitt pledged that Columbia will create "a very high-level faculty committee which has the responsibility of first seeing whether we are violating any of our own principles" overseas. He said he can see working toward a system in which faculty members who work overseas annually sign a statement, similar to a conflict of interest statement, in which they report whether they have "engaged in anything which they think is less than the academic principles and human rights principles we believe in at home."

"We're going to have to put in place some kind of way in which we have to self-report on an annual basis about our international activities," said Prewitt, who added that the second step after that will be to publicize the issues at hand and what the university is doing to address them.

"We do that in the spirit of trying to build case law," Prewitt said. "There will be hard calls to be made constantly in this arena, but we've got to build case law about what's the right call and how do they

add up and so forth." He argued that universities with branch campuses and centers in foreign countries have "a different order of responsibility" than universities with less formal collaborations, because "by being there, we by definition are legitimating that regime, because we are saying that we can be here and do our work."

Presenters at the Scholars at Risk congress repeatedly stressed the diversity and types of international partnerships. Laura Rumbley, associate director of Boston College's Center for International Higher Education, said they range in scale from individual faculty-level collaborations to institutional, national and associational (in terms of professional or university associations). Becker, of Bard, drew attention to the diversity in terms of the types of joint research or teaching projects that can be pursued and the different potential actors involved (academic institutions, public or private, and/or governments), as well as the range of possible motivations: possible goals for partnerships he cited include promoting internationalization, enhancing learning, making money and building a brand.

The commercialization of higher education and the financial motivations underlying many international partnerships came up a few times during the panels. Sijbolt Noorda, president emeritus of the University of Amsterdam and current president of the Magna Charta Observatory, a Bologna, Italy-based organization that cooperates with more than 800 universities worldwide that have signed a statement on core university rights and values, said he has observed a shift in the European context away from values of international solidarity and international capacity building toward one in which short-term financial benefits are "main drivers" of international partnerships.

"In Europe we see individual universities as well as national systems nowadays precisely calculating in financial terms what the short-term benefits of international collaborations are and acting and setting their priorities on the basis of such figures," he said.

Noorda cited numerous examples of other kinds of values-based questions universities should be thinking about in regard to their international partnerships -- questions like whether the partnership will lead to brain drain and brain gain; if the focus is on sharing resources and building up capacities or if it's one-sided; if access for students is merit based, without favoritism or exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, religion, political association or gender; whether tests and degree awarding will be done fairly and transparently; and what procedures are in place to process complaints. "All these questions imply value judgments," he said. "Yet usually these questions are first asked only in cases of actual conflict and rarely discussed in a general manner and at an early stage."

Noorda argued that any university that wants to maintain its values in an international context needs to begin by looking deeply into its values base at home. "Values that seem to be easy in general terms can become too hot to handle in practice, and if we don't discuss them, if we don't make clear where we are going to stand at home, how can we deal with these values in an international context?" he said.

"And a last word on working in these international contexts: we should not forget that while we bring our own contexts and value systems, your partner is doing exactly the same, so engaging in partnerships implies defining common ground and shared objectives. It also implies compromise," Noorda said.

"It implies balancing priorities, so for both sides involved, negotiating partnerships implies defining what you find acceptable and what not, how far you are willing to go along, where you draw the line. One cannot simply dictate conditions, and engaging in international collaborations implies being prepared to take one's partner seriously, including their values and cultures and their priorities and the

social system they are part of."

The asymmetry of many partnerships between universities in the developed and developing world and the need for mutuality emerged as another key theme in the panel discussions.

Simone Sarmento, a professor of modern languages at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, in Brazil, addressed this topic. "We have the impression that whenever we are approached -- and this is my feeling and my personal experience -- by 'the most important countries, the rich countries'" -- she used air quotes -- "that we are looked at as a market and not as partners. Most often I am approached and people want to sell things, either English language courses or types of programs to 'help us out' or to sell us the solutions without even knowing what the source of the problems really are," she said.

"I think as developing countries, we have a lot going on in terms of research, so perhaps we should be looked at as partners, important partners, and not only as markets," Sarmento said.

James Otieno Jowi, founding executive director for the African Network for Internationalization of Education, picked up a similar theme. "Africa is at quite an interesting and awkward position, because every part of the world feels they know where Africa has to go. And it's really difficult to be in such a situation where everybody feels that they have a way to show you," Jowi said.

"But this is not to say that partnerships do not have a role," added Jowi, who teaches comparative and international education at Kenya's Moi University. "It has contributed greatly to the growth of higher education in this part of the world and the time where we are sitting now there are quite a lot of opportunities."

Others highlighted the potential pitfalls of international partnerships. During a question-and-answer period, Alvin Cheung, an affiliated researcher with the U.S.-Asia Law Institute at the NYU School of Law, objected to what he described as what "seems to be a common assumption [among speakers] that access or dialogue automatically leads to leveling up -- a rising tide lifts all boats, the Reaganomics of education. It doesn't work that way."

Cheung cited several problems, including the phenomenon of what he said "actually happens when occidental, if you like, institutions send people overseas -- you have faculty or administrators who may be parachuted in, they give a lecture for two or three weeks, they return, or you have administrators who don't speak the local language, and then they say with a completely straight face, 'we have complete academic freedom,' while their local counterparts are undercutting them at every turn."

Cheung further expressed concerns about universes exploiting their brand names abroad, leaving the impression that "there is a more or less consistent experience whichever campus you're at. My concern with that is that whichever institution it is, is sailing under false colors overseas and even worse, what happens is somebody might get the bright idea to import some of those worst practices back home. So this goes back to my concern about promoting values. The intention, which is of course a perfectly good one, is that everybody should level up. How do we make sure we actually do that instead of leveling down?"

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