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# Introducing Global American Higher Education: A New Public Diplomacy Resource [1]

***Note from the CPD Blog Manager:*** *The author is a CPD Research Fellow (2022–24), whose project "Global American Higher Education," identifies, analyzes, and visualizes American higher education institutions outside the fifty states from 1860 to the present.*

The link between international education and public diplomacy is well established. The United States and the Soviet Union both used student exchanges to grow their spheres of influence during the Cold War. Since then, soft power rankings have employed the number of international students a country hosts as a key metric in their methodologies. Today, many countries have nationwide education internationalization strategies. And even those who do not, still dedicate national resources to international education. In the United States, for example, the Department of State has a bureau dedicated to international education situated

within the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy. That is because international education is the world's most reliable bridge to what Edward R. Murrow called "the last three feet."

In general, and especially in the context of public diplomacy, international education is associated with student exchange. But international education is about more than student mobility. Universities, too, can cross borders. My own institution—Northwestern University—operates a campus in Qatar, where it accompanies a handful of other American universities that offer academic programs for Qataris and students from throughout the region. These outposts of American higher education afford the United States an unparalleled advantage in reaching foreign audiences. According to the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT), the United States (86) has twice as many international campuses as the United Kingdom (43), the second largest exporter.

The branch campus boom is a modern manifestation of a time-honored tradition. America's higher education institutions have been abroad since the middle of the 19th century. Of course, the first movers were not direct extensions of established stateside colleges like we see today. Instead, Robert College in Istanbul (1863), the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut (1866) and dozens of others throughout the eastern Mediterranean and China were independent expressions of American higher education. Their boards of trustees, administration and faculty were comprised of American citizens. Many of these colleges even operated under state government charters.

Over time, the motivations, forms and participants for these undertakings evolved and adapted to the needs of their local environments. Today, the global landscape for American higher education is comprised of both independents and branch campuses. There are even newer forms, too. Microcampuses allow U.S. universities to operate degree-granting programs on the grounds of a partner institution. International joint universities result from the partnership between a U.S. institution and a foreign university. There are also foreign universities that U.S. regional accreditors recognize as offering American-standard education.

Even though America leads the world in overseas campuses, it can be hard for researchers and policymakers to contextualize them. How many American higher education institutions are there outside the United States? In how many countries do they operate? How many students are enrolled in them? Answers to questions like these would typically require original research or time-consuming literature reviews. There is some publicly available information on select institutions or regions or forms. The C-BERT, for example, is an invaluable resource for the study of international branch campuses. But it does not include other forms of international universities. As such, there has not been a reliable, comprehensive resource on the entire global landscape for American higher education intuitions overseas until now.

## *When practiced in foreign lands, American higher education has the capacity to influence and change the way people think about university education.*

Global American Higher Education is a new CPD-supported research initiative that identifies, analyzes and visualizes American higher education institutions outside the United States. The

website features an interactive dashboard with information on more than 300 American higher education institutions in 90 countries over 189 years. The database allows us to answer the questions posed earlier about the number, location and student populations of American higher education institutions overseas. Global American Higher Education shows that there are 262 active such institutions in 80 countries. Together, they enroll approximately 720,000 students. By comparison, the more than 6,000 stateside higher education institutions enroll 760,000 international students. That means American higher education reaches roughly as many students abroad as it does at home.

The website provides even more findings about these institutions' years of operation, revenue models and accreditation statuses. By hovering over a dot on the map, users can learn, for example, that the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani is an independent non-profit institution operating since 2007. Although it is not accredited in the United States, it offers accredited degree programs from the University of Arizona microcampus that it hosts. The site also features the first in a series of research briefs that utilize the database. The first paper from Saiansha Panangipalli examines China as a venue for American higher education institutions. Future papers will examine other countries, regions, and trends associated with American higher education abroad. The goal is to develop the site as a resource hub for educators, students, university administrators, researchers, policy analysts, government officials, entrepreneurs and anyone else seeking information on American higher education institutions abroad.

When practiced in foreign lands, American higher education has the capacity to influence and change the way people think about university education. Instruction in English, student-centered pedagogy, vibrant student life and other customary features of American higher education can find their way into the regular practice of neighboring institutions. Because higher education is such an important economic, social and political institution, what goes on inside universities matters a great deal. An American business administration program can advance ideas favorable to capitalism. An American liberal arts curriculum can encourage democratic citizenship.

The potential for American institutions to disseminate values makes them a flashpoint for critics and proponents alike. Is the preponderance of American universities abroad evidence of American imperialism or neo-colonialism? Or do these institutions represent the best of what America has to offer the world? Regardless of one's orientation to these and other concerns, Global American Higher Education can facilitate the ability to investigate them.