

The Emergence of the American University Abroad

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For better or worse, US higher education's relevance and potential as a model for other nations is well known and reflected in the spread of its distinctive institutional forms (Altbach 1998). Still, the rapid growth of self-labeled American universities abroad is unexpected and even unsettling. My preliminary research suggests that there are at least 71 higher education institutions in 52 countries that self-identify as "American" by including that term in their names. Two-thirds have been established in the past quarter century, although they have roots extending into the middle of the nineteenth. Viewed against the historic purposes of the university for nation building (Schofer and Meyer 2005) as well as the well-chronicled shift toward the "global" in national higher education systems (Ramirez 2006; Wildavsky 2010), this emergent bi-national model represents a unique perspective through which to study the evolving purposes of universities in the twenty-first century.

The field of comparative and international higher education has addressed the recent global spread of related phenomena such as private higher education institutions and branch campuses (Buckner 2014; Lane 2011), but many studies simply take for granted the multiplicity of independent self-labeled American universities abroad. American studies and international relations scholars have attended to these institutions more often (Bertelsen 2012/2014; Kleypas and McDougall 2011; Lundy and Lundy 2016; Noori 2014; and Noori and Anderson 2013). While it attests to the significance of these institutions among diverse audiences, the literature available in these domains does not sufficiently explain their proliferation.

My dissertation utilizes the theoretical and methodological tools of comparative and international education to explore the growth of American

universities abroad over the past quarter century in three parts. First, I examine their global diffusion by tracking founding dates and conducting event-history analyses in order to see which national-level factors affect their establishment. Second, through the use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis, I investigate the motives of founders and see how they and other insiders (trustees, senior administrators, faculty, etc.) mobilize support for them. Finally, I inspect how key outsiders (accreditors, prospective donors, ministry officials, etc.) interpret how insiders have framed their initiatives. Through the use of leaked and declassified government records, I focus on the responses of US diplomats to the establishment of independent self-labeled American universities in their country jurisdictions.

Drawing on key concepts from neo-institutional theory, I hypothesize that in the latter part of the twentieth century a global organizational field emerged that helped to perpetuate the 'myth' that the legitimacy of the elite American University of Beirut stemmed from its "'American-ness," thereby rendering "American" a brand and model for emulation. Spurred on by the end of the Cold War, universities, US diplomatic services, philanthropic foundations, accreditors and other linked organizations propagated this myth through scripts—partnerships, reports, speeches, etc. that illustrated the virtues of American universities abroad and began to define standards for belonging. Further, support—material or coordinating—from the US government strengthens the credibility of a startup American university abroad, enabling it to persist beyond the idea phase and survive infancy.

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