

Why not Help Africa? American Universities should make a Civic Commitment to Strengthening Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Not long ago, the *New York Times* broke the scandal about New York University's (NYU) new Abu Dhabi campus, which had been launched with much fanfare by NYU President John Sexton. According to the *Times*, construction workers for the Abu Dhabi campus, most of whom were migrants, were required to pay high fees just to get their jobs and forced to endure substandard living conditions (Kaminer 2013, 2014).

NYU expressed regret for how the workers had been treated but suggested that it had no control over the contractor who hired the workers (Kaminer 2014). Later, it was discovered that the owner of the construction firm that built NYU's Abu Dhabi campus sits on NYU's board of trustees (Sorkin 2014).

This unseemly incident illustrates how several American universities involve themselves internationally. For the most part, American higher education institutions confine their foreign initiatives to two activities: establishing overseas branches at exotic locations like Abu Dhabi or Shanghai or sponsoring study abroad experiences for American students (Lewin 2008), which are often little more than European travel adventures for both students and professors to places like Madrid and Rome. I do not know how many students take out federal student loans to pay for their study abroad semesters, but I bet a lot of American students are funding their trips to the Great Wall with money they borrowed from Uncle Sam.

It is true, of course, that many American scholars make international contributions through such initiatives as the US State Department's Fulbright Scholars program. But how many American professors have presented papers at conferences in places like New Zea-

land, Hong Kong, or Britain just to take brief foreign vacations at their universities' expense?

American university leaders like to boast that our nation's universities are the envy of the world, but if that is true, does not that impose a civic obligation on our universities to help make the world a better place? And if so, why have not American colleges and universities made more of a contribution to strengthening higher education and building the economies in the world's developing countries—particularly Sub-Saharan Africa?

Right now, Sub-Saharan Africa is destabilizing (Anderson 2013). Boko Haram has captured school girls in Nigeria and burned children alive in a boarding-school dormitory (Adamu and Faul 2013). Kenya has suffered several recent terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists including an attack on a shopping mall in Nairobi. Uganda and Tanzania have been relatively free of terrorism in recent years, but a Catholic church was bombed in the Tanzanian town of Arusha in 2013 and people I talked with in Uganda think it is only a matter of time before Uganda experiences the same kind of terrorism that Kenya has begun to suffer (Anderson 2013).

East African universities are making a heroic effort to expand higher education opportunities for East Africa's young people. In particular, East African universities affiliated with religious denominations are growing and offering new programs designed to lead to good jobs for their graduates and to build stronger national economies. But they are severely under-resourced. They lack experienced faculty members, technology infrastructures, and adequate physical facilities. Often they also lack higher-education management expertise (Sulaiman 2013).

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Meanwhile, American universities have a surplus of capacity. We have too many laws and MBA programs and too many colleges of education for the current demand. Why do not American universities offer some of their programs, skills and expertise to aid African higher education?

If American universities would make a selfless contribution to strengthening higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa, they would help strengthen the economies of the countries in that region, as well as to raise education levels of the young people of Sub-Saharan Africa. They would be helping to bring prosperity to a region wracked by poverty and crippled by centuries of colonial exploitation and to foster the values on which Western higher education is founded—values dedicated to the search for truth and justice and equality among all the peoples of mankind. By strengthening higher education in Africa, American universities would help to stabilize a region that is rapidly destabilizing. They would be directly refuting the philosophy of nihilistic terrorism that has begun to infect Sub-Saharan Africa.

But perhaps helping Africa is too difficult for American universities. Instead, it is far easier to engage in self-indulgent study abroad programs and egotistical campuses in places like Abu Dhabi, and far more comfortable, and therefore: safer.

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