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The Right To Learn

Students around the world are demanding access to higher education. But it's not always easy to provide.

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In America, higher education has long been considered not a privilege but a right. The 1862 passage of the Land-Grant Colleges Act brought education to the people by establishing universities in every state, geared toward providing not only liberal-arts education but training in pedagogy, agriculture, engineering, the law, medicine and other professions. After World War II, the GI Bill further democratized access to higher education, turning it into a basic right worthy of public funding. Since 1972, millions of low-income college students have paid for their educations with more than \$150 billion in federal Pell Grants. Now that same concept of education as a right is spreading throughout the world. Even the citizens of states still in transition from their colonial legacies or emerging from war and civil strife demand that their homelands provide university-level education. Individuals increasingly recognize that their lot in life depends on their level of education and training. And states view free or affordable higher education as essential to their modernization and successful participation in the global marketplace. Many countries have tried to meet this growing demand by establishing as many institutions of higher education as possible. But creating a quality university system is easier said than done; though good schools can solve social ills from poverty to unemployment, a thousand practical problems and policy constraints stand in the way of developing them.

Indeed, simply establishing a school is not the same as having the requisite personnel, equipment, material, technological know-how and finances to sustain it. In developing nations, there may be enough political will for equal opportunity in higher education, but not enough resources for excellence. There are other challenges as well: in developing parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America, some of the best universities are under pressure to admit students from across the continent, in part--as in the United States--to increase their prestige and revenue. Often, this provokes debate within the university and the society at large about whether a nation should reserve its limited educational resources for its own population, or welcome students from across the region in the hope of promoting solidarity with neighboring states.

Some have turned to "virtual universities" or distance learning to help solve the problem. Widespread access to the Internet has made this feasible. But it also raises a number of concerns: to what extent, for example, does personal interaction with teachers matter? How much does mixing with other students contribute to an understanding of different ethnic groups, races and ideologies? What about the whole environment created by being part of a learning community over the course of four years?

A first-rate faculty is key to building a successful university. But strapped for cash, time and expertise, many institutions simply import visiting professors or rely on part-time graduate students to teach. Such hires usually remain outsiders among the university community, receive few benefits and are often neither adequately trained nor highly skilled. The opposite extreme--hiring academic "stars" in order to gain prestige but then leaving empty the coffers needed to hire young, high-quality professors--is also a recipe for institutional weakness. Ironically, universities

suffer further when governments, along with local and international corporations, raid their best and brightest teachers.

In many globalizing markets, student expectations far outstrip the capabilities of fledgling university systems. China, for instance, has made remarkable efforts to provide ample educational opportunities for its talented young people. Yet everyone wants a top degree; students who attend second-tier universities eagerly pay extra to have their degrees bear the name of a better university--and have been known to riot when denied that opportunity. Some recent Chinese college graduates have refused to move out of their dormitories after failing to find either jobs or affordable housing.

Similar frustrations are evident in other developing countries, where a science degree is no guarantee of a job in that field. Underemploying a country's best-educated citizens is counterproductive, demoralizing and devastating to the yearning for upward mobility. A physicist working in a customs house is a symbol of national stagnation, not advancement. It also makes painfully clear that the right to an education does not automatically translate into the right to a suitably challenging, high-paying job.

Still, the clamor for higher education does not necessarily mean that students expect--or want--to be subject to rigorous coursework or held to high standards. In many countries, the trend is toward "fair" tests that give more students a chance to pass their classes and earn their degrees. To some extent, this is a reaction to the kind of centralized, high-stakes exam practices developed by the former Soviet Union, France and other states to identify talent and "manage" their citizens' aspirations--in effect, designed to ensure that while everyone may get a chance, only a certain percentage will succeed.

Even when universities do everything in their power to provide excellent, high-quality education, the need to respond to the forces of globalization by developing technology or building international ties often leads them to neglect their own nation's social agenda. If a nation is to progress, it needs well-educated teachers, doctors, lawyers, social workers, journalists and business leaders, among others. And these individuals must be not only trained but retained, requiring incentives to keep them at home. Otherwise, we see, for example, an exodus of trained health-care providers from developing nations to Western hospitals. Britain has been a huge beneficiary of nurses emigrating from Malawi. Similarly, the United States has eased its shortage by welcoming nursing graduates from the Philippines. Namibia, meanwhile, cannot provide the financial incentives to keep its nurses; 30 percent of its nursing slots are vacant.

Taking these trends together, one conclusion is clear: throughout the world, the role of the university is critical to national development and central to the progress of society. And as such, it will continue to be the engine of change for every nation; all citizens, from the richest to the poorest, will look within its walls for the keys to their future. And not just their economic future: the main aim of higher education in a globalized setting must be for human beings and societies to develop a deeper understanding of each other's values, traditions and cultures. In essence, while governments are busy creating economic trade agreements, universities must not only provide the requisite expertise but also work to foster cultural exchanges of ideas, wisdom and knowledge--the truly precious currency of humankind.