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A Common Higher-Education Framework for the Americas Is Envisioned, but Some Wonder Who Might Lose Out

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Calgary, Alberta

Some 700 university representatives from 40 countries have gathered here this week to work toward the creation of a common higher-education space of the Americas, similar to the Bologna agreement in Europe. Yet few of those attending have a clear idea of what such a system would entail, and some even question whether it is really desirable.

Proponents argue that greater regional integration is both inevitable and necessary. "We have to build this space, not to copy Europe, but for our own survival," said Raúl Arias Lovillo, president of the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education, one of three hosts of the first Conference of the Americas on International Education.

Skeptics—including many delegates from Latin America—argue that the Bologna Process is an unrealistic model for the Americas, given the enormous cultural, economic, and educational disparities between the two northern giants, Canada and the United States, and the rest of the region.

They also cite a lack of political will on the part of the Canadian and U.S. governments to subsidize greater academic exchange with their poorer neighbors, in particular with countries that aren't seen as rising economic powers.

A Mock Debate

To get such differences out in the open, the organizers set up a mock opening debate, in which several participants were asked to argue against their real views.

Among those playing devil's advocate was Francisco Marmolejo, director of the Consortium for North American Higher Education Cooperation, another conference host. He also [contributes](#) to *The Chronicle's* WorldWise blog.

"Research mobility? Do they mean more brain drain?" he said, provoking laughter from the audience. "Do they think that we've forgotten that Latin America, with 600 million citizens, which occupies two-thirds of the continent [hemisphere], which has been traditionally forgotten and ignored by the North, will suddenly be viewed as an equal partner?"

Alencar Proença, president of the Brazilian Council of University

Rectors and a fervent skeptic, was among those asked to defend the merits of greater integration. But he did so by arguing in favor of a common space based on mutual respect for each country's academic traditions.

"I'm against the goals of the congress which I am attending," Mr. Proença said in an interview before the debate.

He and other Latin American delegates argued in favor of first integrating their own universities to put the region on a stronger footing vis-à-vis the United States and Canada.

"The Americas is much greater than just Canada, the United States, and maybe Brazil and Mexico," he said. "Brazil has a privileged position now, but who's going to listen to Paraguay, or Costa Rica, or Puerto Rico? Nobody."

Caribbean delegates expressed even more reservations about the proposed higher-education space of the Americas, in part because they fear being left out.

"Don't forget the Caribbean, which is not included in the geographic definition but has many exchanges with the Americas," said Sheila Sealy Monteith, Jamaica's high commissioner to Canada.

She argued that Caribbean universities in particular could benefit from harmonizing credit systems and accreditation across the region because of the large number of students who move back and forth to the United States.

Passing Over the U.S.?

Despite concerns regarding U.S. dominance of higher education, however, delegates from the United States were notably scarce.

The Canadian Bureau for International Education, the main conference organizer, did not invite any of the international higher-education associations in the United States to co-host the event.

"I think it's a political decision," said Thomas M. Buntru, president of the Mexican Association for International Education. He argued that Canada was eager to expand its ties in Latin America, without so much competition from universities in the States.

Canadian representatives acknowledged they feel somewhat behind in the internationalization process.

"We don't have nearly enough partnerships between universities and colleges in North, Central, South America, and the Caribbean," said Jennifer Humphries, vice president of the Canadian Bureau for International Education. Besides, she said, "we have issues particular to the Americas that need to be discussed."

Other Canadian delegates argued the potential economic benefits that could follow academic exchanges with Latin America.

"There is a lot of interest in Mexico and Brazil because they are

large trading partners," said Ben Yang, executive director of international education and training at Canada's Georgian College, in Barrie, Ontario. "The students can afford [to come], the academic institutions are interested, and the academic level of development is more compatible and congruent" with Canada.

"There is a lot of potential to work together," he added, citing Mexico, for instance, as a country with a booming manufacturing sector in need of skilled labor. "Their training and education infrastructure does not sufficiently support that demand."

The Canadian government's sudden imposition of visa requirements on Mexico in 2009, however, had a negative impact on fostering educational links, delegates said.

"We have such longstanding relationships with Mexico, and I found it embarrassing," said Lorna Smith, director of international education at Calgary's Mount Royal University. Her ties with Mexico go back 20 years.

Recovery Efforts in Haiti

Another issue of concern to delegates was the crisis for universities in Haiti following the devastating earthquake in January. Haitian universities already suffered from chronic shortages of money, substandard facilities, and a lack of qualified professors, but now are in even [dire straits](#).

"It's a daily battle for survival," said Mackenson Doucet, rector of the École Supérieure d'Infotronique d'Haiti, which teaches computer science and business management, and is one of only eight Haitian universities recognized by the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, a Montreal-based international organization of French-speaking institutions. His university lost most of its campus in the quake, and is now trying to raise \$400,000 to rent a new facility.

Jacky Lumarque, rector of the private Quisqueya University, was forced to cancel his participation in the conference to help start classes at his university. Quisqueya, one of the country's most prestigious private universities, had just inaugurated a \$4-million new campus a month before the earthquake hit. All of the buildings were [destroyed](#) and nearly a dozen students, professors, and other employees were killed.

The conference also dealt with challenges facing the raft of new indigenous universities across the region. Many—such as the Amawtay Wasi Intercultural University of the Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples, in Ecuador—are struggling with new accreditation requirements that run counter to their mission to provide courses that respond to the particular needs of indigenous communities.

For such universities, a higher-education space of the Americas

seems like a pipe dream.

"I would ask the delegates here, have you resolved your problems at home?" said Luis Fernando Sarango, rector of Amawtay Wasi, who attended the conference wearing traditional Quichua indigenous garb and bowler hat. "It's very nice to dream," he said, "but racism, colonialism, and the intellectual dependence on Europe are still very much alive" in Latin America.

He added, however, that his university would like to create exchange programs with other indigenous institutions in Canada and Central America. "We are also interested in breaking down borders," he said, "but that doesn't mean adopting a sole paradigm of education that is far different from our own."

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