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HIGHER EDUCATION

Florida colleges setting up campuses in China

Florida colleges, and others nationwide, are setting up shop in China, hoping to grab a share of the fast-growing education market there.

BY NOAH BIERMAN

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In a busy corner of Beijing, three Chinese University of Florida employees have been setting up an office, preparing to award forensic science degrees to Chinese students within a few years.

But the UF students who earn the degrees may never see a Gainesville swamp or know the joy of a slice of Leonardo's pizza.

Seventy miles away from Beijing, Chinese government workers are building the 20th floor of a tower that will house a hospitality campus for Florida International University, with classes taught in English by FIU-trained professors.

Even Florida Gulf Coast University -- a Fort Myers school less than a decade old -- signed an agreement in September to offer joint business degrees with Nankai University.

At this rate, Chinese students may someday have as many Florida universities to choose from as Floridians do. And they won't have to leave China to become Gators or Golden Panthers. China-fever, which began in such major universities as Johns Hopkins and Michigan, has filtered to schools in Florida.

"They asked Willie Sutton, why did he rob banks. He said `That's where the money is.' The 21st century is the Asian century," said Jerry Haar, professor of international business at FIU.

University presidents are viewing China and its quickly emerging economy in the same light as car company CEOs and basketball commissioners in America and Europe. They see a billion-plus potential customers, eager for Western goods, culture and services. And they see a market that American students have to know just as well.

It may seem an odd strategy for Florida's public universities, which are constantly strapped for cash and rejecting students back home for lack of space. University leaders, including UF President Bernie Machen, argue the exchanges will afford Floridians opportunities to conduct more research and business in China and study in that nation's universities. FIU administrators expect to turn a profit. All three Florida schools also include plans to send American students to study in China.

'ECONOMIC POWERS'

"In the next 25 years, China will become one of the world's greatest economic powers," said Machen in an e-mail interview. "Our college grads interested in business had better understand and be ready to work with this sector."

Many Chinese travel abroad to get an American or European education. In fact, more Chinese students are enrolled in Florida universities than are Colombians, Jamaicans or residents of any other countries with closer geographical and cultural ties to the state. Only India sends more students to Florida colleges than China, according to the annual "Open Doors" report from the Institute of International Education released in November.

But not every Chinese student can afford to travel to America. And tighter immigration rules curtailed visas after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. At the same time, Chinese colleges can neither fit all the students who want to attend nor offer the same courses as American schools.

For example, FIU has a top-tier hospitality and management college. China needs to train thousands of service professionals in Western standards in time for the 2008 Olympic games, said Lee Dickson, associate dean of FIU's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management.

He said officials from the Tianjin University of Commerce chose to invest more than \$25 million in building an FIU branch in China, after first visiting well-known programs at Cornell University and in Switzerland. The Chinese want to be a world tourism center in the next two decades, and FIU's hospitality school expects to turn a profit while building a brand name in China's fourth largest city.

Wenbo Huang, 40, is among eight Chinese hospitality teachers who have spent most of the past year studying at FIU in Miami in anticipation of a September opening. "Most of the programs [in China], they pay more attention to the theoretical research and many of them have little or no experience in the tourism industry," said Huang, who is interning at the Miami International Airport Marriott with one of his FIU professors.

Huang invested his own money to study at FIU, figuring it will be worth the salary bump he will get when he is hired to work for FIU in China. Dickson said FIU professors in China will earn less than their American counterparts, but probably a little more than the average Chinese professor.

Chinese students, Huang said, will be eager to pay about \$4,000 in tuition to get an American education at FIU's China campus -- about a third more than Florida residents pay, but less than FIU charges out-of-state students.

AN ANOMALY

Johns Hopkins University was an anomaly when it opened the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and

American Studies in 1986. But the exchange program, which at first offered a certificate but no degree, has grown and is planning to offer a masters of international studies and is expanding in Nanjing.

In the last few years, as China's economy has boomed, other American schools have followed suit. But few are entering China on their own, instead choosing to affiliate with Chinese schools, said Peggy Blumenthal, executive vice president of the Institute of International Education in New York.

"That's a way that is a little bit lower risk because the Chinese government has already approved those institutions," Blumenthal said.

U.S. schools learned a lesson during a similar education boom in Japan in the 1990s, when many went bust because they failed to win approval to offer degrees from Japan's Ministry of Education, she said.

UF signed an agreement last month with Capital University of Medical Sciences in Beijing to offer a joint forensic sciences master's degree, said Sherman Bai, director of UF's Center for International Studies in Beijing.

The school plans to rely on a combination of Chinese and traveling American faculty. Like FIU, UF will charge a tuition somewhere between Florida's in-state and out-of-state rate, or a few thousand dollars per semester.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Bai, like others working with Chinese universities, downplays questions about academic freedom. But the Chronicle of Higher Education has documented several chilling incidents in the past two years, including one professor fired for criticizing restrictions on free speech. In May, the Chinese government canceled a democracy conference co-sponsored by U.S. and Chinese universities, the Chronicle reported.

Many new American programs in China focus on business and other practical fields that tend to draw less controversy. Still, some schools may be ignoring important concerns in their race to enter a new market, said Orville Schell, a China expert and dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley.

Schell cautions the new zeal -- reflected in industry as well as academia -- may be around only until the next big thing comes along.

"In many ways, China is impressive in terms of what it's done in the last 10 years," Schell said. "It's also something of the flavor of the month. We see these little kind of storms of interest brew in one corner of the world or another, and China is obviously an area on the march."

Miami Herald staff writers Carli Teproff and Douglas Hanks III contributed to this report.

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