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Educators Propose a Globally Focused 'Atlantic Trust' to Link American and British Universities

By Aisha Labi

The creation of a new Anglo-American organization that would support students, individual researchers, and teams of scholars through globally focused programs at American and British universities, as well as in service opportunities in the developing world, is the central recommendation of a new report published today. Programs underwritten by the proposed Atlantic Trust would encompass a more multilateral, network-based approach than existing programs like the Fulbright, Marshall, and Rhodes scholarships, the report's authors say.

The report, "Higher Education and Collaboration in Global Context: Building a Global Civil Society," was produced by a study group of 10 leading American and British educators. It was commissioned last year by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to explore the state of Anglo-American academic collaboration.

The panel—led by John E. Sexton, president of New York University, and Rick Trainor, principal of King's College London—tackled a broad set of questions relating to the role of American and British universities in an increasingly internationalized higher-education landscape.

If the two systems "are to continue to assert their primacy in the realm of higher education within this increasingly competitive global scene," the report says, "they will best do so collaboratively."

Underlying the study group's discussions "was the idea of pursuing a 'global civil society' by finding a global, multilateral emphasis to the longstanding bilateral links between American and British academia," said Mr. Trainor, an American who has spent much of his academic career in Britain and who is also the departing president of Universities UK, the lobby organization for British university chief executives.

"We need to move away from mere bilateralism," Mr. Sexton added. "We need to think more in terms of a network concept that would map university activity synchronistically with what we think is going to be the major intellectual and creative activity of the world."

Tackling the World's Problems

One of the group's goals in that area is to provide an international framework for teams of researchers to leverage their strengths in confronting the big multidisciplinary problems that the world is facing.

While British and American universities have long vied with each other, competing to lure international students as well as top researchers, they also have a long history of collaboration and friendship. "You could go into just about any British university and any department and pick any academic and they would have some sort of academic link with an American university," said Shaun Curtis, head of the UK Higher Education International Unit, a government-financed office that coordinates international activities in support of British universities. "The reverse would probably be true in an American university," said Mr. Curtis, who also served as Mr. Trainor's deputy for the study group.

Such deep connections are unparalleled elsewhere. Britain is part of the 27-nation European Union, which finances various programs to encourage mobility among university students and faculty members. The European Union's Erasmus program allows 200,000 students the opportunity to study abroad each year, but British participation trails that of other countries. "There are more British students going to the U.S. each year" than taking part in the entire Erasmus program, said Mr. Curtis. Training Britain's academic focus across the Atlantic rather than toward the continent is "not an either-or," Mr. Curtis said. "It just that everyone recognizes that the U.S. is the dominant partner for us and vice versa."

Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education, served on the panel, and doing so deepened her appreciation of the ties that bind American and British academe, she said. "At a time when global issues are so important and so increasingly central to our personal lives as well as to the economic life of our countries," she said, "the opportunity to combine our mutual strengths to work together and to work with third nations is an enormously valuable contribution to one another and to other parts of the world."

Mr. Brown started the project well before the extent of the current global economic crisis became apparent. "Even before the recession was fully unfolding last summer, there was a very clear realization that higher education was under financial strain in both nations, and that strain was keeping us from making contributions beyond our immediate institutional interests," Ms. Broad said.

The report envisions that the financing for the proposed Atlantic Trust will come from a mix of public and private sources. "The public-relations benefit from investing in the Atlantic Trust would be enormous," it says, and tax incentives should be offered to encourage private giving.

Still, the authors emphasize that at this stage, their focus is more on disseminating the ideas in the report than on generating money for its specific proposals. "The programs we envisage here don't have to be started at their full size to have an impact," said Mr. Trainor.

"What we want now is for leaders across sectors to embrace it, to begin to think about it, and perhaps even to improve on it," said Mr. Sexton.