

Dec. 9, 2011

To the Editor:

Your December 9 issue devoted considerable space to debate over branch campuses abroad, but your coverage was superficial. The only question you asked your writers to address was whether or not they thought that U.S. universities should stay away from “an authoritarian regime [that] cannot respect American academic values.”

I would have liked the *Chronicle* to have asked more far-reaching questions. What exactly is being exported — a university or a brand name? What is the quality control for the overseas branch campus? Will it be a home for advanced research and education in the liberal arts and basic sciences, or will it be merely a vocational institution? Will it have a real library (by which I mean a building full of books, not computers)? Will it bear more resemblance to the parent university in the U.S., or to America’s for-profit colleges of much lower quality?

Suppose you are an ambitious high school student in India. You can study intensely for the grueling university entrance exams, and if you succeed you can attend one of the world-renowned Indian Institutes of Technology. Your peers will be among the best-prepared high school graduates in the world, and you will be expected to study hard.

Alternatively, if your parents are sufficiently wealthy, they will be able to enroll you in one of the new American branch campuses. You won’t have to prepare for the Indian entrance exams; nor will you have to study hard once you enroll (especially if you’re in a field like business, where American students put little effort into their studies, as was recently reported in the *Chronicle*). You can go to parties and spend a lot of time on Facebook, just like an American student. Best of all, you’ll graduate with an American title, which in India, as in most countries of the Third World, enjoys exaggerated prestige and puts the best jobs within reach.

Some would say that this is a win-win situation. American universities get a new revenue source, and affluent Indian parents are satisfied with the return on their investment. But is this good for India? I don’t think so, and neither do most of my Indian colleagues, who believe that India should strive for more meritocracy and less class privilege.

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