Speakers Push for More Collaboration Among North American Universities

By Marion Lloyd

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When the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect in 1994, many scholars hoped it would herald a new era of higher-education collaboration in the region.

But Nafta is a long way from fulfilling that promise. At most, it has fostered piecemeal academic exchange with little long-term vision, delegates at a conference here said on Thursday.

"There is little or no broad-based sentiment of integration in any of the three countries at any level," said Jon Amastae, a linguistics professor and former director of the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. He was one of dozens of speakers at the three-day conference, sponsored by the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration.

"What we've got now," Mr. Amastae said, is internationalization "by pieces, by fits and starts, and we shouldn't discard it. It's got a lot of good things to it, but somewhere along the way, somebody is going to have to pull it all together."

He argued that the consortium, a regional organization known as Conahec that grew out of the 1994 trade agreement, could fulfill that role. But it would have to grow beyond its self-declared function as a "dating service" for potential collaborators to become a clearinghouse for best practices in higher-education partnerships in the region, he said.

Wider Destinations for International Students

The lack of a North American strategy for internationalization has become especially apparent since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the stricter scrutiny of foreign visitors that followed. The United States has significantly increased restrictions on foreign
student visas. And Canada imposed tougher requirements for Mexican students this year, sparking a diplomatic standoff between the two countries.

Such policies have led to stagnation in the number of foreign students studying in the United States and an increase in those choosing to study in Britain and Australia, said Adria Baker, executive director of the Office of International Students and Scholars at Rice University, where the conference is being held.

"I think we really woke up after 9/11 and said, 'Oh my goodness, this is not the only choice they have,'" she said of the foreign students. "Now we really need to get together and decide, Do we want to continue to pursue this?, and that we need to pursue it or we'll lose it."

Rice is working hard to attract foreign students, Ms. Baker said in an interview, and has doubled the share of its foreign undergraduates in the past two years, to 13 percent. It also has 745 foreign graduate students on the campus, and a record 535 foreign research scholars this year, double the number of a decade ago, she said.

That growth has occurred despite a budget that shrank by more than 50 percent over the past two years, Ms. Baker said. Her office managed to do "twice as much" in terms of fostering international events on campus by maximizing existing resources, she said. Examples included holding video conferences with counterparts in Chile, asking traveling faculty members to serve as liaisons with foreign institutions, and charging students small fees to attend events at Rice.

International education "is not just about bringing students in, but letting students while they’re here add to the international and cultural experience of U.S. students," she said.

**Alliances of Multiple Institutions**

Efforts to maximize resources is a major theme of the conference, which ends Friday and is titled "Innovation in International Higher Education Collaboration: Creating Opportunities in Challenging Times."

One solution proposed by participants was that of multi-institutional partnerships, such as the Puentes Consortium between Rice, the University of Arizona, and three private universities in Mexico, two in Monterrey and one in Puebla. The Puentes group, whose name means "bridges" in Spanish, has put together seven binational research teams to study
shared problems along the U.S.-Mexico border and to produce an annual "state-of-the-border report" that would go beyond the traditional focus on the drug war and illegal immigration, said David K. Vassar, Rice’s special assistant to the president for international collaborations.

In addition to sponsoring annual conferences, Puentes also plans to promote student research collaborations between the countries in hopes of enhancing bilateral understanding.

"It was an intentional turn toward Mexico as our closest neighbor and a place that we wanted to be more connected to," said Mr. Vassar, who was appointed in 2007 to oversee Rice’s international efforts.

**Low Priority on Regional Collaboration**

Despite the conference's focus on regional collaboration, however, few university officials appear to share that goal.

According to a 2009 survey by the Paris-based International Association of Universities, whose findings were discussed at the conference, interregional collaboration was not among the top three priorities of North American universities. In contrast, higher-education participants in Europe, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region put such collaboration as their top goal.

The study, which involved 745 top internationalization administrators in 115 countries, also found inequalities across regions. Eighty percent of international students worldwide were studying in just nine countries, while "Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East are of no geographic priority for anyone else except themselves," said Eva Egron-Polak, secretary-general of the university association.

The lack of interest in Latin American higher education is reflected in the attitudes of Canada and the United States toward Mexico, participants said.

"There's a lot of talk, but we are still reproducing the same asymmetries between Mexico and Canada and the United States," said Alma Maldonado Maldonado, a higher-education expert at the Center for Research and Advanced Studies, part of the National Polytechnic Institute in Mexico City. She gave the example of trilateral research grants that were created under
Nafta but are rarely awarded, for lack of funds from either the Canadian or U.S. governments.

"There are important efforts" on the university level, said Ms. Maldonado, "but there is no political will or resources to be effective."