

Columbia U. Opens First 2 International Research Centers

By AISHA LABI
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In what university officials say represents a new approach to the internationalization of higher education, Columbia University is building a network of six to eight research centers in capitals around the world. The centers are designed to engage faculty members and students from various disciplines to work together on international projects with universities, government agencies, and other organizations abroad.

Today Columbia's president, Lee C. Bollinger, and Barnard College's president, Debora L. Spar, will preside over the opening of the Columbia Global Center in Beijing. On Sunday, Mr. Bollinger will oversee the official opening of the Middle East Research Center in Amman, Jordan.

"The idea is to engage in serious research, working with local institutions and our own students and faculty, as well interdisciplinary groups," Mr. Bollinger said from Beijing. "The second big part of this is to try to connect them electronically, so groups in one region can work with groups in another, and make them all part of global studies."

Like a growing number of American universities, Columbia already has a strong international presence, including collaborations with a number of foreign institutions and several regionally focused institutes on its New York campus.

But with the centers, which will serve as regional hubs for project-based scholarship, Columbia is headed in a new direction.

"We're trying to figure out how to go from a series of very strong bilateral relationships and take that to the next phase, not replace it," said Kenneth Prewitt, director of Columbia's Office of Global Centers.

As the world becomes more interconnected, many of the most pressing issues of the day are best approached not within a bilateral framework, but by groups of scholars and researchers from diverse backgrounds bringing their expertise to bear in novel ways, Mr. Prewitt said.

For example, a program on global mega-disaster risk, preparedness, and response at the Beijing center will involve, among others, experts in geography, engineering, humanitarian relief, and public health from China and the United States.

The centers will also offer Columbia students new opportunities to study and work abroad outside of traditional semester-long programs.

In Beijing on Thursday, Ms. Spar suggested that Barnard's increased international visibility will help raise foreign student enrollments, which now stand at 4 percent of the student population. "Anything you do to generate recognition and build networks" helps, she said.

In addition to the mega-disaster project, Columbia will also use its Beijing center to ramp up an environmental and urbanization project called China 2049, led by Columbia's Earth Institute. Working with the Brookings Institution and China's National Development and Reform Commission, Columbia

will forecast what China's economy could look like in 2049 and develop plans for water management and other needs accordingly. The university's architecture school is also creating a Beijing design studio.

Getting Out There

Although Columbia officials declined to say how much they are spending on the centers, Mr. Bollinger said the money was coming entirely from private donations.

"We're trying to do this in a way that it doesn't involve sunk costs by the university," he said. "We're also trying to make it very flexible, in the event that something doesn't end up working out, it's easy to extract ourselves."

Ms. Spar added that they consider theirs a lower-cost approach than what some other universities have tried. "We're not spending lots of money on fancy campuses and luring American professors to teach abroad," she said. "It's the right model for this period in time."

In recent months, some American universities have had to scale back or pull out of their international projects because of the global recession. George Mason University is closing its branch campus in the United Arab Emirates at the end of this semester. And Harvard University recently delayed plans to open a Beijing office — its second in China — in order to save \$500,000 in annual costs, The Harvard Crimson reported last month. Like Columbia, Harvard hoped to increase its international presence through an expanded network of offices abroad, but has scaled back those plans considerably.

Safwan Masri, a former vice dean of Columbia's Business School, is the director of Columbia's center in Amman. For the past year, even before its official opening this week, the Amman center has been working on a project with the ministry of education in conjunction with Columbia Teachers College, providing training to improve the skills of teachers in Jordan, Mr. Masri said.

The opening remarks at Sunday's ceremony will be delivered by Jordan's Queen Rania, who along with her husband, King Abdullah, donated use of the building for the center.

Two other centers will be in Paris and either Mumbai or Delhi, with the goal of having a center on nearly every continent. The other sites have yet to be determined.

Although the global centers will be hubs for project-based scholarship and are not, at least at the outset, intended to provide a platform for new degree-granting programs, each center will play host to programs, conferences, seminars, and exhibitions.

"The sky's the limit in terms of the kinds of things that we will do and the kinds of opportunities that will become available by having these outposts," Mr. Masri said. "The idea is to have a base, provide the facility and the opportunities, and have it grow organically."

Mara Hvistendahl contributed to this article from Beijing.