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A Missionary for the Liberal Arts



Peg Peoples

Faculty members from Al Quds Bard Honors College and Al-Quds U. cooperate to solve a mathematical puzzle at a faculty-development workshop offered on the university's West Bank campus by Bard's Institute for Writing & Thinking.

By Karin Fischer

Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.

From an early age, Leon Botstein's life was shaped by two powerful forces: fascism and education. His parents fled Nazi persecution in Poland and, after World War II, settled in the United States. Mr. Botstein's mother and father eventually joined the faculty of Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in New York, leaving an indelible impression on their young son. "My family owes everything to the dynamism of American universities," he says.

Today, Mr. Botstein is president of Bard College, and his past has influenced the liberal-arts institution's singular approach to international engagement.

Mr. Botstein is quick to say that the college's overseas projects are very much an institutional effort. But under his leadership, Bard, whose bucolic campus hugs the Hudson River some 90 miles north of New York City, has championed liberal education in countries in the midst of societal shifts, like post-apartheid South Africa. In parts of the world that make headlines for their strife and volatility, such as Russia and the Palestinian West Bank, Bard has helped found new colleges and programs rooted in the liberal arts.



Mikhail Lagotsky

Students in Bard College's dual-degree program with St. Petersburg's Smolny College graduated in June. Speakers included (from left) Alexei Kudrin, dean of the faculty; Leon Botstein, president of Bard; and Sergey Igorovich Bogdanov, vice rector of St. Petersburg University.

Its ambitions and efforts at institution building set it apart from most of its small-college brethren, which have ventured abroad in more modest ways, such as faculty exchanges or study abroad. And unlike better-known global efforts, like New York University's, Bard has eschewed popular international-education hubs in the Persian Gulf and East Asia.

Though Mr. Botstein and the other architects of Bard's strategy would be likely to protest this characterization, it is, in a word, missionary.

That mission, the set of values that directs the college's international work, is the conviction that education—and the liberal arts, with its emphasis on critical thinking and the open exchange of ideas, in particular—can be a force for freedom and democracy.

“Education isn't an insurance policy for democracy,” says Bard's president. “But it's hard to create democracy without it.”

Bard's first foray internationally—running a 1980s-era program that found short-term posts at American colleges for dissident scholars from then-Communist Eastern Europe—was borne out of a similar impulse.

Not long after the Iron Curtain fell, the college was approached by a group of so-called perestroika professors at St. Petersburg State University who were interested in reforming Russian education. What started as a collection of interdisciplinary courses open to St. Petersburg State students and faculty members became a full-fledged liberal-arts college within the university, Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the first such institution in Russia, admitting students beginning in 1999.

Smolny, which today is the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State, set the template for the partnerships that followed.

Bard would not act as a consultant-for-hire, giving advice and leaving town. Nor would it follow a franchise model, replicating itself abroad. Instead, it would work with its partner to develop a curriculum largely from scratch. Unlike graduates of another high-profile joint project, the liberal-arts college started by Yale University and the National University of Singapore, Smolny students would receive an American degree. But the new program would also seek home-country accreditation.

“It's not the standard U.S.-university approach,” says Andrew Wachtel, president of the American University of Central Asia, in Kyrgyzstan, another Bard partner. Mr. Wachtel knows something of the standard model—before coming to AUCA he was dean of the graduate school at Northwestern University, which has an outpost of its journalism school in the Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar.

“It's not about parachuting the American version of education into another place,” Mr. Wachtel says of Bard's style. “It's not, ‘You should do this, you should do that.’ We are not the junior partner.”

Jonathan Becker, Bard's vice president for international affairs and civic engagement, compares the approach to a marriage. “You've got to have compromise,” he says. “It's not like dating. You can't just walk away.”

In practice, what does that mean? If each partnership is a marriage and the resulting program a child, just how much Bard DNA is in it?

The answer is, quite a bit, but sometimes in ways not readily obvious.

You won't see, for instance, many courses from Bard's home campus in course catalogs in Bishkek or East Jerusalem. While each partnership has a joint faculty oversight committee, Bard professors aren't saying yay or nay to specific courses or signing off on syllabi. In most cases, the two partners have to reach consensus on hiring decisions. Though Bard sets guidelines, admissions is done locally.

Bard does sometimes say no, declining, for example, to award its degree to business students at Central Asia, on the grounds that the major is too applied. But its style is not to micromanage.

Rather, Bard's influence is in the pedagogy—a commitment to interdisciplinarity, critical thinking, and discussion-based learning. But lest that seem too abstract, Bard insists that the partnerships adopt what it calls the “four pillars,” an educational structure that's distinctively of the liberal arts and unique to Bard. The pillars include a Great Books-style first-year seminar and a senior project, as well as “moderation,” Bard's unusually intensive process for choosing a major.

New students, both at Bard and its partner campuses, must also complete “Language and Thinking,” a three-week crash course on writing and critical thinking. The course is a demanding one for all students, but it can be especially challenging for those educated outside the United States, says Rebecca Granato, a Bard alumna and assistant dean at Al Quds Bard Honors College, Bard's Palestinian project. Her students come from high schools that emphasize rote learning and, she points out, are being asked to tackle complex subject matter in a second language, English.

It's not just students who must adjust to an unfamiliar approach to education. Faculty members, too, have a learning curve. Consequently, much of Bard's work focuses on rewiring the teaching style of professors overseas. The director of Bard's Institute for Writing and Thinking actually spent two years at American University of Central Asia, training the faculty there.

Robert W. McGrail, an assistant professor of computer science and mathematics, sits on the advisory committee for the AUCA partnership. Much of the committee's monthly meetings are devoted to troubleshooting problems his Kyrgyz counterparts encounter in the classroom. “They want to know,” he says, ““What do you do at Bard to deal with this?””

As American higher education has increased its international footprint, accreditors in this country have signaled that they will be taking a closer look at overseas projects, particularly when college credit is awarded. So far, however, Bard's relatively nonprescription approach has been OK'd by its accreditor—the Middle States Commission on Higher Education reaccredited Bard, along with all of its current partners, in 2012. And Bard trustees have been among some of the biggest supporters of its global ventures.

The seeming lack of extra scrutiny strikes even some supporters as unexpected. “I'm surprised,” says Mr. Wachtel, the AUCA president, “that Bard hasn't had to defend giving out its degree.”

Though Bard now trumpets its international network, it didn't set out to create one. Instead, its relationships were opportunistic and often built on personal connections. Bard's work with Al-Quds University, for instance, came about when Mr. Botstein, who has a second career as a conductor, was in Israel to lead the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra and was introduced to Sari Nusseibeh, then president of the Palestinian university. Mr. Nusseibeh, Mr. Botstein recalls, initially was cool to working with Bard, preferring a more name-brand American partner.

Visibility is less of an issue these days. As Bard's global reputation grows, it is increasingly being approached by potential partners. Its latest dual-degree program, Bard College Berlin, came about after Bard was asked to take over the fledgling liberal-arts college by its founders.

With greater prominence, Bard has become choosier. While it is exploring doing work in Myanmar, it has thus far resisted joining the rush of American colleges setting up programs in China.

As it moves beyond what Mr. Becker, the international vice president, terms its "crazy start-up phase," Bard is focusing on building stronger linkages between its partners. It hopes to encourage more collaborative research and this fall will offer a joint class, on the theme of hate, at four of its five campuses.

And the college is trying to emphasize that all connections need not run through New York. St. Petersburg State, for example, has taken on more of an advisory role with the American University of Central Asia, with which it shares a common language as well as an educational culture inherited from the Soviet Union.

While Bard is seeking to build stronger bonds between its partners, perhaps even more important are the links each program develops within its own educational system and society. After all, a central goal of Bard's work is to effect just that change.

Too often, efforts to root the liberal arts in foreign soil can result in "island" programs, disconnected from the rest of higher education, says Patti McGill Peterson, presidential adviser for global initiatives at the American Council on Education.

"The question is," says Ms. Peterson, the editor of a book on liberal education in developing countries, "can it become more than an extra appendage on the countries' educational system?"

Bard administrators say they have taken pains to avoid such pitfalls. The college has limited the number of Bard professors who teach at its partners so that local faculty members will feel ownership of the curriculum. Likewise, it was slow to allow its students to study within the network because it wanted the programs to be seen as native institutions, not study-abroad sites.

Bard's early decision to pursue a dual-degree strategy, however, may have had the most impact. While the Bard degree has given the college leverage in shaping the curriculum, the local degree has given the academic approach legitimacy. The ministries of education in Kyrgyzstan, the Palestinian territories, and Russia have all officially recognized the liberal-arts curriculum, meaning that other institutions, unconnected to Bard, can adopt it.

So far, this has only happened in Russia, but there are signs of the liberal arts' ripple effect. Al-Quds University is adding "Language and Thinking" for all of its students, not only those in the honors college, and with Bard now offers a master's degree in teaching, exposing West Bank schoolteachers to liberal learning.

In Russia, Alexei Kudrin, a well-connected former finance minister who is dean of the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State, has started an association for liberal-arts colleges, as well as a foundation to support new programs. "Critical thinking is important to grow in Russia," he says. "It's important to Russia's advancement."

Still, recent events in Ukraine and growing authoritarianism in Russia only serve as a reminder about how very difficult it is to bring about change.

Mr. Botstein is sanguine. "This is not a vaccination program," he says of Bard's work. "It's very long-term transformation."

But working in unpredictable parts of the world can come with controversy.

Last fall, for example, students at Al-Quds University staged a campus rally in which demonstrators toted fake automatic weapons, raised a traditional Nazi salute, and honored "martyred" suicide bombers. Two other American universities, Brandeis and Syracuse, severed ties with the Palestinian institution after they said top administrators there failed to condemn the protests. Despite criticism, Bard officials say they never considered ending the relationship.

Bard's ties with the financier George Soros have also drawn scrutiny. The sometimes divisive hedge-fund manager's Open Society Foundations have supported college's work in Kyrgyzstan as well as at the European Humanities University, in Lithuania, where Bard is helping rethink the curriculum.

Critics have called the college the education arm of the Open Society Foundations. But Mr. Becker says it was actually Bard that interested the nonprofit group in liberal education. And on campus the issue has had little traction.

Indeed, unlike the furious disputes that have marked international projects at institutions like Duke, Yale, and NYU, Bard's global work has been notable for the lack of controversy it has generated among faculty members. Some professors even say they came to Bard because they didn't want just another ivy-covered campus but an institution with a clear sense of its place in the world.

For Mr. Botstein, going abroad has reinforced Bard's core liberal-arts mission. "Being international has had a boomerang effect," he says, "of developing institutional self-awareness of what we stand for."

Making an Impact

Programs or colleges established by American institutions overseas can often become islands, disconnected from the local higher-education system. But Bard College, working with its foreign partners, strives to make sure its efforts have a broader reach. Here's how one partnership, with St. Petersburg State University, has had a wider effect on Russian higher education:

- 21** Russian universities attended a 2014 meeting at Bard on dual-degree programs
- 19** Russian institutions have attended conferences on liberal education organized by Smolny
- 17** colleges have received permission from the Russian government to offer the bachelor's degree in arts and humanities first created at Smolny
- 3** Russian institutions have participated in workshops on Bard's approach to teaching writing and critical thinking
- 1** private institution, the European University at St. Petersburg, offers a master's degree based on the Smolny model

Smolny faculty members have acted as consultants and trainers to newer Bard partnerships in the former Soviet Union