

Panamanian
Higher
Education:
Globalization
Abroad

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Higher education refers to education that occurs after compulsory education has been completed. With many jobs in the current economy requiring a college degree there is a push across the world to have as many universities as possible and to offer a breadth of possible degrees that enable them to be able to find jobs. Each institution varies in how they fulfill that role and there are thousands of universities and colleges throughout the world thus nearly infinite variations. Each one offers a unique perspective of the world and when combined can lead to a student who is well-rounded and contributes towards the globalization of higher education. Is Panamanian higher education similar to its government and economy insofar as is it globalized? The brief answer is that it is globalized to some portions of the Panamanian population, mainly those who have well connected families or those who have the finances to do so whereas there is an entire population without resources is being left behind in a country aimed towards meeting increasing globalization needs, but its entirety can become globalized with some steps.

My paper will be broken into several sections to provide clarity and cohesion. In my first section, I will provide factual background information on Panamanian higher education and what it currently looks like as well as provide some background knowledge of socioeconomic issues in the country. In section two, I will utilize the background information provided in section one as it relates to my thesis as well as demonstrate that within that structure students are not obtaining a globalized education. Furthermore, I will argue what a globalized higher education could potentially look like in the Panama's future. In section three, I will entertain and respond to the counterargument that by living in Panama students are obtaining a globalized education because the country has a globalized economy that is very present in their day to day lives. In the conclusion of my paper I will reiterate my argument while also stressing the importance of Panama embracing its globalization theme within its higher education system.

Background Information

Panama is home to at least more than 20 universities in their country ranging from Universidad de Panamá to Universidad Cristiana de Panamá (“Top Universities...”). This number of choices gives students a seemingly ample choice of where they may attend after completing their general education requirements. Students are able to get a higher education, but while in Panama we learned that Panama does not even have a robust program to train persons how to operate the Panama Canal, the lifeblood of their economy right now (Morgan and Morgan Group). This begins to give an outsider a glance into an educational system that might appear to be good, but is hiding a significant problem.

Higher education is a topic which receives public attention throughout the world as it is one of the most important decisions a student makes after reaching adulthood and every university is looking to market that they produce the best students in a field or in general. This, however, presents a problem for a globalized Panama. Its ranking, according to the World Economic Forum's "Global Competitiveness Report" for 2010-2011 showed a ranking of 128 for quality of the higher education system in the country (Schwab 2010-2011). However, this report included only 139 economies. Two years later in the 2012-2013 Report improvement was made in the quality of Panamanian higher education: they were ranked 112 out of 144 economies included in the report (Schwab 2012-2013). Although it is an improvement, is it one to be proud of? It still shows that there is a long distance to go in order to improve the quality of higher education in Panama.

However, the country itself is facing a serious problem in overall education within the country as well, without consideration of other countries. Because of the rapid development of the economy in recent years there has been a significant gap expanding between those with

money and those without money (Morgan & Morgan Group). This gap is still growing, especially with efforts to expand the canal. Those outside of La Ciudad de Panama simply stand in the shadow of the ships unloading money at the Canal receiving virtually none of the benefit gained by city dwellers. Economic disparity is a noticeable problem in this country. This issue becomes ever clearer if the lives of the indigenous population are included. They are, by far, some of the poorest persons in the country. While in Panama for our “fun day” at the San Blas Islands I noticed that my driver specifically would give them some of our foodstuffs for the day. At the gate to get in, we lost a two liter of soda and at the dock before we drove away we distributed our leftovers. The indigenous population receives donations like this often, especially when a tour group is coming through because Panamanians know that the indigenous need it.

A Globalized Higher Education System

Panama is a country with a canal that stands to connect the east and the west. It allows for better shipping methods that result in more efficient trade between countries. However, Panama is so much more than simply a canal; it is an entire country. It is filled with approximately 3 million people, not all of which live within Panama City, where the canal is located. It does as other countries must do and these responsibilities include education policy, a topic of conversation in every government. But the topic of higher education is less spoken to in public; until now.

Panamanian higher education ought to reflect the theme of the country: globalization. It is an important time of students’ lives and it ought to be treated as so. In order to prepare persons for life in Panama it is necessary to have them participate in and learn of the globalized world while they are in an educational setting. This can range from an assortment of options, but for the terms of this paper, globalization in higher education is to be understood as having an experience

outside of ones' own country i.e. studying abroad. Immersion is an effective manner of education and furthermore provides a working model and experience of globalization from other countries perspective to complement the Panamanian one.

However in the previous section it was denoted that there is income inequality within Panama. This inequality is not just a smudge on reports of Panama's economy but also ensures a significant barrier in education in Panama. Primary education inequality is a problem admitted to by all Panamanians we spoke to while there but it also presents a significant barrier to ensuring a globally educated student ("Economic Growth Is Not Enough."). In the cases in which a student or a student's family finds it difficult to effectively fund a student's primary and secondary education it presents a significant barrier in entering higher education, much less a globalized higher education. There are some students who are structurally unable to, because of their socio-economic status, obtain a globalized education. Those who are able to are the persons who are benefitting from the canal's existence or those who already had money before the economic boom. The situation in Panama now is that only those with money can be globalized in a globalizing economy.

However, just as Panama's overall ranking of its higher education quality is increasing its globalization too can increase. It must be noted that this is a long term goal in which may show progress in a decade, but probably will take much longer to complete. Panama only recently began seeing some of the benefits of the canal but they perhaps have not been used to their maximum potential to make higher education globalized. In order to this Panama must take several steps to increase their quality of higher education in Panama whilst giving it a bit of Panamanian flare (i.e. providing a globalized education).

Recently the United States awarded Universidad Catolica Santa Maria la Antigua a \$25,000 amount as part of *100,000 Strong in the Americas* grant series in which the money goes towards “commitments by the universities to build capacity that increases study abroad to the United States and toward receiving students from the United States” (United States of America). This Panamanian university was one of ten Latin American countries to receive this grant and this is an example of the ideal of educational globalization this paper wishes to make a reality. There are governments and institutions that would like to fund study abroad capabilities. Panama should seek out more options such as this to find outside funding to assist in the initial development of infrastructure that can make study abroad a curriculum necessity.

Furthermore, this globalized higher education must be made available to persons of all income levels. Universities cannot become places where a study body is primarily of “upwardly mobile” but ought to become diverse (Panama Education). This helps Panama in two ways: firstly, a diverse mix of student population leads to a more well educated student who is able to function in a globalized world more effectively than someone who has not had such an experience with diversity. Secondly, it helps Panama as a whole through that diversity. Students exposed to their peers’ hardships will become more knowledgeable about the situation in Panama and be an educated voter when it comes to economic issues. If the income disparity is brought into the higher education setting, students will, through undergraduate camaraderie become more aware of it than Panamanians are currently and might reflect their newfound knowledge in the election cycle.

In turn, making higher education available and affordable to those who would not normally be able to take advantage it will provide a workforce for either Panama or the countries where they studied abroad. It allows for the opportunity for Panamanians to discover something

about themselves that in turn might lead to a discovery of untapped potential. Perhaps instead of being known only for the Panama Canal, the Panamanians can find another field where they can export their workers, their expertise, similar to the doctors for oil deal between Cuba and Venezuela. There is a lot of room for opportunity for the Panamanian people by improving their higher education and giving it spin of what globalization means to Panama.

Furthermore a constant influx of students abroad in Panama is also very beneficial to Panama and its people. There would be a constant influx of ideas and the persons having them in the country to study there. They will build camaraderie with other students both exchange and Panamanian which fits perfectly into the overall theme of globalization. Just putting students from abroad in the same room will create an energy that will be good for Panama. Not to mention that these students will assist with the economy by spending their money within the country. Tourism would potentially increase as well, with more and more students considering coming to Panama or coming to Panama. Also, there can be significant exchange of faculty between universities as well. There is already a precedent for this between Universidad de Panama and Faith University in the Republic of Turkey (*Agreement between...*). Imagine having person from across the world, including world renowned scholars offering lectures or an entire semester of classes at different universities occasionally. It leads to professional development of the faculty members as well as a more cultured educational component to the education being offered to the students.

Don't Fix it if it isn't Broken

Not all parties would agree that financing a large effort to have students go abroad at some point in Panamanian higher education would be necessary to provide a globalized education. Some would ask if there was even a need to do so. Panama is, after all, one of the

most well-known and cited examples of globalization. The argument is that students by virtue of going to school in Panama are experiencing globalization firsthand each and every day that they are in Panama. It provides no benefit to bolster a study abroad program out of the country when the country itself is a destination to study globalization. They would likely use the trip that the Garfield Scholars took as a prime example to argue their point. In order to study globalization we went to Panama. Panama is globalization.

This counterargument makes many good points about Panama and it being a globalized country. However, it fails to recognize several points in its argumentation. Firstly, the Garfield Scholars is a group at an American college comprised of no one who is a citizen of Panama to study globalization in the quintessential example of it. I do not claim that to be a negative experience for students, but it further demonstrates an earlier point that there needs to be more connection between other institutions and those in Panama to add to the globalization education occurring within the country. Where I differ is the inclusion of Panama as an educational experience in globalization for Panamanians. It will likely not result in the same benefit that it would to a student studying abroad in Panama. There is something missing from the experience if there is no abroad component. Yes, it will cost some funding in order to send students out of the country, but that cost is nominal to the informational and cultural benefit that will be gained by a Panamanian returning from a semester studying European Union integration in Belgium or other such examples. Knowing the status quo of current Panamanian globalization will not result in an evolution of Panama, but will result in its stagnation.

Conclusion

Panama is globalized because the world comes to it, but that can only go so far. Panama cannot remain as the seat of globalization but simultaneously must act to bring globalization to

itself and people of Panama. Higher education is one medium in which this can occur. Higher education is not very good in Panama currently, but it is on the rise. As it is rising, it ought to shape itself with the globalization theme of the country to enable students to graduate with an international perspective that will, in the long run, make Panama a more robust hub of globalized activity. Since the canal was transferred to Panama, they have skyrocketing in many fields: it is time to breed a higher education system unique to the unique connection between East and West.

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