Seeking STEM Success

Dr. Cheryl Schrader brings impressive track record of broadening participation in STEM disciplines for underrepresented groups to new role as Missouri University of Science and Technology chancellor.

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- Number of students learning online grows exponentially
- U.S. colleges exploring growth opportunities in India
That’s the consensus being reached by a growing number of higher education leaders here in the United States as the governments of both nations seek to strengthen their strategic ties and make post-secondary degrees a more common feature among their respective populaces by 2020.

However, in seeking Indian institutions of higher learning with which to partner, experts warn that caution must be exercised. Just because an Indian college or university has achieved accreditation or some other stamp of approval doesn’t necessarily mean that quality or infrastructure is there, specialists say.

Such are some of the pros and cons being articulated as of late by higher education leaders who’ve recently visited India and experts who regularly facilitate higher education partnerships between institutions in India and in the United States.

The points were made repeatedly during a series of presentations on higher education in India in February in Washington, D.C. at the annual conference of the Association of International Education Administrators.

“There is clearly a huge fascination for American and foreign education among Indians,” said Rahul Choudaha, an Indian higher education expert at World Education Services, a New York-based “international education intelligence” firm.

Choudaha made his remarks during a workshop titled “Institutional Collaborations with India: What Works, What Doesn’t?”

“There is a huge demand for engineering, management, whatever can get them the right job fast,” Choudaha said.

However, one drawback is that India’s regulatory system sometimes is challenged itself when it comes to distinguishing between quality institutions and those of questionable caliber.

“Clearly, there is a very incoherent quality assurance framework in India, which will pose a lot of challenges and risks, depending on who you’re partnering with,” Choudaha said.

Choudaha also related that as India’s middle class expands, so will rise the nation’s demand for higher education abroad.

“Foreign education is a big phenomenon in India,” Choudaha said, showing a display of study abroad advertisements within an Indian newspaper.

“A foreign-return tag can really increase the prospects of an individual in terms of social hierarchy.”

Room for growth

However, American colleges and universities need not idly wait for Indian students to get their student visas to come to America.

As the government of India seeks to expand its higher education capacity to reach 20 percent of its growing youth population by 2020, institutions of higher education in the United States will find a growing number of opportunities to do business in India.

Among those who see vast opportunity in India is professor David Finegold, senior vice president for lifelong learning and strategic growth initiatives at Rutgers University.

Along with several other higher education leaders, Finegold participated in a study tour of India in February led by the New York-based Institute of International Education.

“One of the big takeaways (from the trip) was a lot of people might say since India hasn’t passed the foreign universities bill and, therefore, you can’t offer degrees there, they might think, ‘We should
Left: Students studying in a classroom at University of Delhi. Above: Dr. David Finegold (left) thinks that there are various opportunities for U.S. universities to partner with schools in India. Finegold is joined by Dr. P.J. Lavakare (center), an expert on Indian higher education; and P.R. Ramanujam, former pro-vice chancellor at Indira Gandhi National Open University.

just hold off. There isn’t much point in going,” said Finegold, whose responsibilities at Rutgers include overseeing all offsite, online, international continuing and executive education programs.

“But what we saw with every institution we met with (in India), there was huge interest in collaborating and finding ways to work together,” Finegold said. “There’s a number of routes you can go and cooperate, and that would be a win-win short of those big legislative reforms.”

For Finegold, an example of such a potential “win-win” is a joint center that Rutgers launched in the fall with Tata Institute of Social Sciences, or TISS, located in Mumbai and considered one of India’s leading institutes of higher learning.

The center was launched officially at the US-India Higher Education Summit held at Georgetown University in October.

To help secure more dollars for the joint center, last fall, Rutgers — like a number of other U.S. colleges and universities seeking to forge ties with their Indian counterparts — applied for the maximum of $250,000 over three years through the Obama-Singh 21st Century Knowledge Initiative, or OSI.

The stated objective of OSI — a U.S. Department of State competitive grant program announced in New Delhi in July by Shri S.M. Krishna, India’s minister of external affairs, and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton during the second annual meeting of the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue — is to strengthen collaboration and build partnerships between colleges and universities in the United States and India.

Projects can be in a variety of fields, from agricultural sciences to education reform to public health.

The joint center that Rutgers is collaborating with Tata on in Mumbai and in Rutgers’ home state of New Jersey seeks to accomplish those ends with a focus on applied research, education and training programs that involve student exchange, development of dual degree programs, and short courses for continuing and executive education, according to Finegold.

The joint center also will focus on capacity building to enhance governance and capabilities of India’s education and training institutions through research fellowships for new and prospective Indian faculty members, administrators and higher education policymakers.

Searching for dollars

While Rutgers awaits word on whether it will secure additional funding under OSI — a decision expected in late March — some university officials stress the need to secure nongovernmental funding streams.

“What doesn’t work is overreliance on government funding,” said Dr. Nicole Ranganath, director of the Global Study Program at the University of California, Davis.

“You have to be very creative in your funding strategy,” Ranganath said. “Look for internal sources as well.”

Ranganath warned that if a particular global studies program runs out of money, faculty are unlikely to re-dedicate themselves to the program. For that reason, it also helps to have faculty members who have a long-term investment in a particular program’s cause.

“You have to have champions,” Ranganath said.

Another area of opportunity lies in helping India cultivate the estimated 1 million new faculty members that it will need for its college and universities if it is to meet the government’s goal to offer a higher education seat to 20 percent of all of India’s youth by 2020.

“The number of Ph.D.s being produced by the current Indian [higher education] system falls far short of meeting this need,” says a report that Finegold wrote, titled “Will They Return: The willingness of potential faculty to return to India and the key factors affecting their decisions.”

“The most promising way to fill this gap is to recruit back many of the more than 100,000 Indians who are studying in the US each year to obtain a graduate degree and the many others who are studying in other nations or who have completed their degrees and begun academic careers abroad,” the report says.

Finegold says other things can be done as well, from creating a post-secondary version of “Teach for India” (http://diverseeducation.com/specialreportsegment/14/1.php) or relying more on social media to connect with Indian students abroad about the benefits of returning home.

“Indian universities need good faculty,” said Bhushan Patwardhan, vice chancellor of Symbiosis International University in Pune, India.

“And that faculty we are not able to build upon our own. We need partnerships.”

Patwardhan said India has a particular need to develop more research universities and to better connect its universities with industry.

“Indian universities believe American higher education is mature enough, has the experience, (so that) sharing best practices will be mutually beneficial,” Patwardhan said.

He also said there is no substitute for making in-person visits. “Spending time at each other’s campuses is the key.”