

Higher Education Research Centers: A Case Study and Broader Patterns

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This paper focuses on several related themes. One is to reflect on the current status of the American higher education research system. The second aim is to focus some attention on the international higher education research system because the Boston College Center for International Higher Education in the past has done some research on the organizations and networks that serve the research and teaching community in higher education. The paper also provides a brief discussion of the development of the Boston College Center for International Higher Education, one of the oldest such centers in the world and which has played a role in the development of international higher education as a field of study. Indeed, along the RIHE, Hiroshima university and the center in Kassel, Germany established by Professor Ulrich Teichler, CIHE is one of the few still existing pioneering institutions.

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Higher education research in the United States

The US Higher Education Research System is very large and quite diverse. The US higher education research system doesn't care largely about what's happening in the rest of the world. There are perhaps 100 higher education programs in American universities that provide professional degrees to students interested in working in administration and some in research in American colleges and universities. The faculty in many of these programs also engage in research, but this is almost exclusively related to domestic issues. In addition, many of the large number of organizations, mostly based in Washington DC, which represented various interest groups in higher education, such as graduate education and private colleges, do some research but again with a domestic policy interest. Most Americans, including most academics and even university leaders, if you ask them what's important and what's going on in global higher education, they will not be able to tell you. Indeed, one of the reasons for starting our CIHE in 1995 was to sort of bring to an American audience some understanding of what's going on in the rest of the world.

And of course, there is significantly more knowledge now as the US is more engaged in student mobility, internationalization of all sorts and so on. But still, it's a pretty closed system. There are lots of players in the US Higher Education Research System. And it has a very long history. The first course on higher education was presented actually in Worcester, Massachusetts at the end of the 19th century.

The development of higher education training programs in universities all around the US led to a professionalized administrative cadre for US universities, and to significant research production. Most of the research done in the US now is probably not carried out in higher education departments or centers but in other kinds of organizations, government agencies at the state level and the federal level, including the very huge number of higher education organizations representing a range of special interests. Within most American universities, there is a lot of research which is referred to as "institutional research" – data and analysis relating to student numbers, academic productivity, management issues, and much else that is used for planning, statistical collection, admissions strategy, and much else. And such statistics are involved with university development further on and many other kinds of statistics are important for fulfilling the many requirements of governmental regulations that are now so much a part of the

higher education system. The increase in government demands for research and evaluation of higher education to satisfy legal requirements has been a significant stimulus for higher education research. Thus, the American higher education research system, is very large, very diverse, and very much inwardly focused both at the institutional level and at the national level.

Some global reflections

Let's focus on the global higher education research system because our center here at Boston College over the years has been quite interested in developing and working on understanding that global network. Between the year 1999 and 2014, we did four inventories of higher education research centers, relying in those pre-computer days for the most part, on working with colleagues, to help us get a sense of what kind of institutions exist around the world. In 2014, which was the last time we did such an inventory, we located about 450 Graduate Programs in Higher Education worldwide, that is, departments and programs, most of which located in faculties of education, around the world that were educating people for careers in higher education, half of them in the United States. Our research was of course biased toward the Anglophone world, although we did make efforts to try to make sure we found programs and colleagues in other countries.

China is an interesting example. In the China case, we had to ask our Chinese colleagues if they would be so kind as to select the top 20 such higher education programs, because we were aware that even several decades ago there were hundreds of higher education centers located in universities around the country, most of which were quite small and just involved in credentialing and training people for higher education administration in China. We found that there were about 280 publications. And again, we had to limit the number of Chinese publications we included in our listing, because most of them were very local and not widely circulated. We only included what our Chinese colleagues' thought were the most influential of the Chinese journals. Of the journals we found, about half were published in the United States. It is likely that the number of journals has significantly increased – and that most of the new publications are from outside the United States. It would be quite useful to undertake a new journal inventory.

We also located 217 higher education research centers around the world – a number which is likely higher in 2022.

This is a summary of the field as of 2014. Since then, global enrollments in higher education have greatly expanded, and the need for administrative personnel, research, and in general the professionalization of academe has increased. The traditional pattern of academic administration, where professors were simply asked to take on administrative function, has in many countries been replaced by a trained administrative cadre.

Now in the 21st century, there is a huge, huge infrastructure of administrators and professionally trained academic leaders. We've seen an increase in the number of university presidents and rectors who have the degree preparation in higher education, although still the normal path to university president, vice chancellor, or rector is through the academic system itself.

The Boston College Center for International Higher Education

Because it is one of the oldest existing internationally-focused higher education research centers, the Boston College Center for International Higher Education is worth some discussion. We, along with Teichler's center in Kassel, and the Research Institute for Higher Education at Hiroshima, are among the oldest higher education centers, university-based higher education centers. The Xiamen University Center in China, which established the field of higher education studies in China, should be added as well. We were established in 1995, when I came to Boston College as a professor. And it was my interest at that time when at least in the US and I think largely around the world, and it would be interesting to hear other people's comments about this, there was very little, at least in the US, very, very little interest in international issues in higher education and very little understanding of what was going on in the rest of the world.

Burton Clark in the 1990s asked a number of global scholars to come to UCLA where he was at the time, to think through what was going on in the world and to try to stimulate higher education research and thinking on an international scale. The concept of globalization basically had not been invented in those days. International was the commonly used term.

And as Simon Marginson has pointed out, that thinking has appropriately changed in more recent times. The Boston College Center was an effort to begin some thinking for both international and especially an American audience on

what was going on globally. CIHE had the support for 15 years from the Ford Foundation, which was highly unusual in the world of US philanthropic foundations, because Ford recognized in those days exactly what Burton Clark was interested in – the development of research capacity and consciousness. And that is, how the rest of the world functioned and might be interesting and might even be relevant to the United States. So, the Ford Foundation funded three or four different higher education programs in US universities in different areas to develop infrastructure in that area. Boston College is a Jesuit institution and the Jesuits themselves are an international organization. BC leaders resonated with our ideas of founding a center. And we have also over the years taken an interest in Global Roman Catholic Higher Education too to meet the needs and interests of our sponsoring institution.

From the beginning we were interested in networking. We were particularly, and this was highly unusual at the time, in networking with colleagues from the global – again, we didn't refer to as the Global South then, this part of the world was still called developing countries. But from the beginning, almost all of our research included colleagues and topics that were of interest to the emerging economies around the world. We were interested in communication, because at the time there were few networks. There were few journals focusing on international higher education issues – *Higher Education*, which has been mentioned, is perhaps the first. CIHE established *International Higher Education*, which still exists after 30 years, and is now published in five different languages – it is one of the oldest continuing publications in that field.

Communication and networking have always been an interest at CIHE. And we chose our research topics that we ourselves thought were interesting, because we were not dependent on outside funding.

The Center at Boston College has always been very small and continues to be very small. For its first decade or more, the Center had one full-time, full professor, and three or four graduate students, some funded by Ford and some by our university. We were and still are part of the higher education administration training and research department at Boston College, providing it with an international point of view, which again among American universities is highly unusual. But we have always been quite small. Now there are two full time faculty.

CIHE always been involved with collaborative research around the world. And that was necessitated both by our commitment to global collaboration and also to our small size. If we wanted to do anything, we had to do it with colleagues elsewhere. We've worked with Shanghai Jiao Tong University. We've worked with the Fulbright Program in the United States. And most recently, over the last 8 years which unfortunately has now come to an end because of the Russian war in Ukraine, with the Higher School of Economics in Moscow with which we have sponsored eight collaborative research programs with colleagues from all around the world. That's a little bit about the center and its role. CIHE has, as the British say, has over the years punched above its weight, given its small size.

Conclusion

A few comments on higher education research centers in general are appropriate. A university base is quite important – providing some autonomy and stability. A university base provides some autonomy and objectivity. That has been a very important benefit to CIHE. It has permitted CIHE to think about key issues that are not necessarily what everybody else is thinking about. CIHE has had the ability to do research on topics which seemed important to us, which were not necessarily important to others at the time. CIHE made a significant contribution, often including topics for which external funding was unavailable. One small example is CIHE's recently completed research and a book on family-owned universities around the world. This is a totally under-researched but highly important topic. Many of the universities in the rapidly growing private higher education sector are indeed family enterprises, some for profit, some not.

With our networks and given the kind of work that we do, we were able to do it ourselves. Stable funding is central. Depending on grants, contracts, government, largesse and so on is often problematical in terms both of stability of the center and the kind of research that can be done.

It is also very helpful to have doctoral students. They are useful for the work that we do. They learn a lot from us and from each other. And they are, of course, the next generation of researchers, teachers, and administrators in the higher education sector. CIHE has over the years had quite a number of students at the Master's level and at the doctoral level, who've gone into this new industry of international higher education in academic institutions and in various agencies around the world. And I think I've made a significant contribution, both to

research to some extent and also to the practice of internationalization, which needs a lot of attention because it's now quite a big industry.

Globally, the number of university-based research centers has probably a bit declined. More centers are in government or other places. I think it's especially important and very much under-resourced at the moment to have research and knowledge and ideas coming from higher education centers in the Global South, of which there are still very few.

In Africa, for example, in our 2014 research, there were only three higher education centers – there are more now, but the number is quite small. And around the world, in many countries, even countries with rapidly expanding higher education systems, there is very little research base in those countries about what's going on.