

Ethics vs. Economics: Students & Faculty Oppose Lucrative Partnership Over Ethical Concerns

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Tags

Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Leadership and Strategy; Management and Operations; Partnerships; University/Higher Education

Setting

The main institution in this case, Western University, is a medium, private research university located in the United States. It is a 4-year institution with a student population of about 23,000, including approximately 6,000 graduate students. The school has a long history of academic excellence and a reputation of providing a quality education. The institution has multiple campuses and facilities, including in the Middle East and Central America, and agreements with over 200 universities and institutions around the world. The case takes place within the business college of the university, specifically the hospitality program. The hospitality program offers undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as professional certificates. While the case primarily involves the hospitality school's master's program, the particular individuals involved represent multiple departments across Western University.

Case

The institution considered creating a dual-degree program between one school of the institution and the business school of a large research university in China. The program would allow students at the Chinese university to complete an MBA as well as a master's degree from the U.S. university, hopefully attracting executives within the industry in China to attend. Chinese students would not take classes with the U.S. institution's students.

Western University faculty members would teach short-term courses in China and the United States, especially for the dual-degree students.

Once the partnership was proposed by Western University, it was immediately opposed by members of the institution's Faculty Senate and the Student Assembly. The Faculty Senate voted to oppose the proposed dual-degree program, but it was an advisory vote and therefore not binding. The Student Assembly also voted to halt the proposed dual-degree program.

The main issues the faculty raised were concerns about constraints on academic freedom on Chinese campuses and human rights violations by the Chinese government, specifically the treatment of the Uyghur minority, which has been labeled a genocide by Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The Student Assembly raised concerns that academic freedom and other student rights were not protected on the Chinese campus, a concern that was echoed by some faculty senators. The Student Assembly encouraged the university to reconsider and evaluate international partnerships on "stronger standards" that are consistent with institutional values and promote social good, keeping ethical concerns in mind. The Student Assembly also called for the suspension of programs in other countries where academic freedom might be questioned, as well as the creation of a committee specifically designed to oversee all of the university's programs in China.

The university declined to comment on whether the Chinese government or the Chinese university were guilty of legal or human rights violations but has committed to further discussions about the program although no final decision has been made. Administrators noted that the proposed program would be a new revenue source for the university, and other programs and partnerships with China have raised a significant amount for the institution in previous years.

Three years prior, another school on campus ended two programs with another Chinese university over similar concerns about academic freedom and the treatment of students.

Eight years prior, multiple Western University faculty members wrote an open letter in which they expressed concern about the treatment and freedom of a professor at the same Chinese university involved in the dual-degree proposal. At that time, the faculty voted to keep the program.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are the roles of faculty and students in determining international partnerships? Should faculty have the primary role in overseeing curriculum?
- How should an institution balance the need to generate revenue with issues of human rights and social justice?
- How should government policies and actions play into the ethical considerations of international partnerships? How should institutions weigh the actions of the individual partner against the political climate?

- Would the Chinese students in this custom program have the same learning experiences as their U.S counterparts if there is no integration with U.S. students? How would it be different?
- What, if any, difference would there be if the target student audience were American students instead of Chinese? Would it matter if the proposed program involved sending Western University students to China or welcoming faculty from the Chinese university to the United States?