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India Attracts Universities from the US

By Somini Sengupta

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NOIDA, India --" It was an unusual university entrance interview. Late one recent evening here in steamy southern India, Vijay Muddana sat in a mercilessly air-conditioned room, leaning forward in his chair and talking to the wall. There, projected on a screen via videoconferencing equipment, were administrators from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where an early morning snowstorm had caused a power failure, delaying the interviews by an hour. The Indians found it funny that even in Pittsburgh, there were power failures. Mr. Muddana, 21, was among a dozen ambitious young Indians hoping to get a graduate degree in information technology offered jointly by Carnegie Mellon and a small private college here.

The exchange was one of the many ways in which American universities, eager to expand to markets abroad, are training their sights on India. Some 40 percent of the population is under 18, and a scarcity of higher education opportunities is frequently cited as a potential hurdle to economic progress. The American universities are just testing the waters, because the law here is still vague on how foreign educational institutions can operate. But that may soon change.

The Bush administration's envoy for public diplomacy, Karen P. Hughes, is visiting India this week with a half-dozen American university presidents to promote Brand America in Indian education. The United States wants an easing of rules under a draft law on foreign investment in Indian education, which is to be introduced in Parliament in April. If the law is approved, foreign institutions would be exempt from strict rules that currently apply to all government-accredited universities in India on fees, staff salaries and curriculums. The government has already proposed setting up an expert committee to review the standards and reputation of foreign universities that want to establish independent campuses here.

The growing American interest in Indian education reflects a confluence of trends. It comes as American universities are trying to expand their global reach in general, and discovering India's economic rise in particular. It also reflects the need for India to close its gaping demand for higher education.

Among Indians ages 18 to 24, only 7 percent enter a university, according to the National Knowledge Commission, which advises the prime minister's office on higher education. To roughly double that percentage — effectively bringing it up to par with the rest of Asia — the commission recommends the creation of 1,500 colleges and universities over the next several years. India's public universities are often woefully underfinanced and strike-prone. Indians are already voting with their feet: the commission estimates that 160,000 Indians are studying abroad, spending an estimated \$4 billion a year. Indians and Chinese make up the largest number of foreign students in the United States. Madeleine Green, vice president for international initiatives at the American Council on Education, calls India "the next frontier" for American institutions, many of which have already set up base in China. "The pull factor is the interest of India and the opportunity that India now presents," she said. "The push is from American institutions saying, 'There's a world out there and we need to discover it. It'll make our grads more competitive.' It's part of their push to internationalize."

At the moment, however, instead of setting up satellite campuses as was done in China, Singapore or Qatar, most American institutions are opting to join hands with existing Indian institutions. Columbia Business School, for instance, started a student exchange program earlier this year with the Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad. The institutions teamed up to write case materials devised to teach American students about doing business in India.

"For us it's market access; for them it's access to a bigger business school," said R. Glenn Hubbard, dean of Columbia Business School. Columbia is the latest of several foreign business schools to tie up with the Ahmedabad campus, reflecting what its director, Bakul Dholakia, sees as a growing appetite to train future executives about India. "Companies out there need managers now who have a unique Asian perspective," he said.

The Americanization of Indian education is following a variety of approaches. Champlain College, based in Burlington, Vt., runs a satellite campus in Mumbai that offers degrees in one of three career-oriented subjects that college administrators have found to be attractive to Indians: business, hospitality industry management and software engineering. A 2005 study commissioned by the government found at least 131 foreign educational institutions operating in India at the time, a

vast majority offering vocational courses.

However, Champlain's degrees are not recognized by the Indian government, something that is still typical here. One government official who looks after private education estimated that at least 100,000 students graduated from entirely unaccredited private institutions. The study found that students did not consider unaccredited college degrees to be a hindrance to getting jobs in the private sector.

California State University, Long Beach, has agreed to help start American-style, four-year degree programs at state-run Lucknow University in northern India. Its vice chancellor, R. P. Singh, said the California institution would help draft the curriculum and train faculty. Cornell University, whose president is among the American university officials visiting India in recent months, is seeking to expand research collaborations, particularly in agriculture and public health. Rice University envisions faculty and student exchanges, particularly in technology. "What's in it for us is opportunities for our students, opportunities for our faculty in terms of research collaboration," said David Leebron, the university president, who was in India in February. "At this stage we think we are best served by developing partnerships with Indian institutions."

For its part, Carnegie Mellon offers its degree in partnership with a small private institution here, the Shri Shiv Shankar Nadar College of Engineering. Most of the course work is done at relatively inexpensive rates here in India, followed by six months in Pittsburgh, at the end of which students graduate with a Carnegie Mellon degree. The arrangement circumvents most of the usual Indian government restrictions. The curriculum is devised in partnership with Carnegie Mellon, and students are chosen jointly by faculty from both schools.

There are no affirmative action requirements for student admissions, as there are in accredited colleges. Fees are not regulated by the state. It is expensive by Indian standards, though nearly all of the students are subsidized by scholarships financed by Shiv Nadar, the college's founder and chief executive of HCL Technologies, one of India's leading technology companies.

The applicants on the recent evening in Chennai were eager to please the gatekeepers from Pittsburgh. They addressed them politely with a series of "yes, sirs." Asked what they could contribute to Carnegie Mellon, some of them became flummoxed. One young man said he wanted to develop software designed for the "global citizen," by which he meant a way to transfer money across continents using a mobile phone.

Mr. Muddana, who had a bachelor's degree in information technology and had spent the past eight months as a software developer for an Indian firm, said he saw the program as a cost-effective ticket to an American degree and a chance to work for a few years in the United States. His father, he said, failed to grasp his ambitions. Why would he quit a secure, well-paying job to go back to school, his father wanted to know. Mr. Muddana said his father taught at a government school in a rural district in neighboring Andhra Pradesh State. He earns today roughly what his son makes fresh out of college. Mr. Muddana said his father was bewildered by his dreams and by how much it would cost to get a master's degree. "He's presently thinking only of the investment," Mr. Muddana said, "not the outcome."