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Fall of Libyan Regime Brings New Opportunities for American Universities

By David L. Wheeler

The images of Libya that linger in many minds are of tanks, black smoke rising from buildings, and militia members brandishing submachine guns. But for academics, those images may soon be replaced by one of a Libyan campus with a big "open for business" banner.

Optimists among Libyans say the country has a chance to go from chaos to a cornerstone of stability in the region. They are eager to build the higher-education connections needed to support program development in a range of areas, including vocational education and leadership training. Although the U.S. Embassy building was destroyed during the rebellion against the Qaddafi regime, and embassy personnel are scrambling to replace such basics as visa-issuing equipment, they see establishing academic cooperation with Libya as a top priority. They and other Western observers say opportunities abound for higher-education collaboration in medicine, engineering, English-language instruction, archaeology, and other fields.

"It's a new country with a new relationship to the United States and with open possibilities," says Samuel Werberg, a cultural-affairs officer with the U.S. Embassy in Morocco who just did a stint in Tripoli.

Libyan oil, and the cash that comes with it, means that Libya and the United States could work as partners, not as one country doling out resources to the other. "I didn't get a sense from anyone that they were looking for a handout," says Mr. Werberg.

Many senior Libyan professors were U.S.-trained in the 1970s and are eager to strengthen a relationship that started warming up after the U.S. Department of State, in 2006, ended Libya's status as a "state sponsor of terrorism." Libyan academics have "great affection for American higher education," says Kirk E. Simmons, director of global relations and promotion at Pennsylvania State University. He visited Libya in 2010 with a group of U.S. university leaders who

attended a Libya-sponsored conference where the government sought advice on a plan to become an education hub for Africa.

These days, the first question many potential visitors to Libya have is about how safe it is. Libyans and Western visitors say the peace is being kept without the presence of heavily armed patrols. Most cities do not look bombed out, basic telecommunications are functioning, and the public mood is largely energetic. "For the first time in my travels, I have noticed that people are smiling in the streets," says Tamim M. Baiou, a Libyan-American who runs AlRakiza Training, a Libya-based education, training, and consulting company. That said, Westerners should not expect all of the infrastructure they have at home, such as broadband Internet access and ATM's on every corner.

Democracy in Training

Mustafa Abushagur, deputy prime minister of Libya, is on leave from the Rochester Institute of Technology, for which he served as president of the Dubai campus. He says the interim Libyan government, in place at least until the elections scheduled for late June, has many problems to solve, including strengthening security, getting medical care for those wounded in the war, and creating totally new army and police forces. "We are building a nation from scratch," he says. He is in the middle of "democracy in training," he says, and spends two to three hours a day talking with people who are demonstrating outside government offices or complaining about unsolved problems.

He says the government wants to develop Libya's 17 public universities, which enroll about 350,000 students and have many shortcomings. "The quality is not great," he says. The universities share the problem, common in the Middle East and North Africa, of enrollments that swamp facilities. The University of Tripoli's medical school, for example, has 20,000 students, about the same as the freshman classes in all U.S. medical schools combined.

Many former Libyan students say they have longed for a classroom experience that would let them play a more active role in learning. Miyoti Kilani, who studied at the University of Garyounis in Benghazi, says that while her professors were qualified in their disciplines, she was not taught how to write research papers, make presentations, or respond to case studies. "It was all about having lectures and going home to study what the professor said," she reports in an e-mail.

Libyan academics say they are interested in updating their undergraduate curricula, developing budgeting systems, adding social and cultural activities for students, finding ways to set up

quality control at universities, and improving language education. The study of languages, including English, has generally been separated from professional education, leaving Libyan professionals isolated from their international peers.

The Qaddafi regime did not encourage the creation of private businesses other than those that benefited the dictator's family, so Libyans and potential Western partners alike say a new educational emphasis on management and entrepreneurship will be needed.

A Post-Qaddafi Libya

In the 2009-10 Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum, Libya was ranked 133rd in the world for the quality of its management schools. "There's lots of petroleum engineers, but they may not have a well-rounded business perspective," says Charles (Chuck) Dittrich, head of the U.S.-Libya Business Association, which helps American companies doing business in Libya.

Mr. Dittrich says American universities interested in partnerships should look at what the training needs are for a post-Qaddafi Libya and follow those opportunities. Lots of new publications, Web sites, and other media have started up, he says. The support services that cluster around oil production—catering, transportation, restaurants, and schools—will thrive.

Many Libyan professionals will not be able to quit working to go back to graduate school, so professional certification will be needed in many fields, such as auditing, urban planning, cost accounting, construction management, working with building codes, and managing international partnerships.

Visa difficulties will be one barrier to immediate educational exchanges. The U.S. Embassy in Tripoli does not expect to be able to issue visas for another six months; participants in government-sponsored programs such as Fulbright scholarships are given support to travel to Cairo or Tunis to get their visas there. As Libyan consulates make the transition to a new government, they, too, are limited in their ability to issue visas.

A trickle of academics has been able to cross the Libyan border, in either direction. Abdulatif-A-Muhamed Shaban, Libyan dean of the University of Tripoli's College of Education on its Jazour campus, who has a British passport, visited Ball State University and nearby campuses to see how they train teachers.

Susan Kane, an Oberlin College archaeologist with a long-standing interest in Libya's rich trove of archaeological sites, is in Libya

helping to map Cyrene, a 1,000-year-old site near the coast that was once a Greek colony and is now a Unesco World Heritage site.

Such places were dismissed by Qaddafi as being unimportant to the country's heritage. Archaeologists convened by Unesco in Paris in October, just as the war was ending, expressed an interest in getting into Libya as soon as possible, and agreed that when they did gain access, they should assist Libyans in securing sites and mapping and documenting their conditions before resuming excavations.

Ball State, after the visit of the Libyan dean, is planning some workshops in Rome on curriculum development and teaching and technology, with a handful of Ball State faculty members and 30 or 40 Libyan faculty members expected to attend. Italy was chosen as a meeting ground that would be more easily accessible for professors from both countries.

Ball State is also preparing proposals to work with the University of Tripoli's education college more broadly and to provide online courses leading to advanced education degrees, which the Libyan dean saw as especially useful for female faculty members, who, because of local tradition, are not always able to travel outside of the country without being accompanied by male relatives.

More Libyans in U.S.

The Libyan government is eager to send more faculty members to Western universities for advanced degrees, since many Libyan professors have only master's degrees. In the next few years, the growth of the number of Libyans in the United States should continue a steep upward curve. The number of Libyan students in the United States increased from 38 in the 2005-6 academic year, when Libya's terrorist status ended, to 1,494 in the 2009-10 academic year. A 2010 education fair in Tripoli drew 8,000 attendees interested in enrolling at the 19 American universities that were participating, says Mr. Baiou, who runs AlRakiza Training.

For universities outside Libya interested in collaborating with universities there, advisers suggest that academics nurture as many Libyan contacts as possible. Government turnover is expected after the elections, and the government will also be reviewing university administrators and possibly purging those who were loyal to Qaddafi but had little interest in higher education. The Libyan contacts will largely need to be cultivated by phone, e-mail, and Skype until the visa situation improves, although many Americans, including some students, are eager to visit.

Steve O. Michael, provost at Arcadia University, near Philadelphia, who was also in the group of Americans who visited Libya in 2010, says students from Arcadia's peace and conflict-resolution program want to visit Libya. "They love to go to troubled regions and see how countries are healing their social systems," he says. Mr. Michael is eager to rebuild his Libyan connections and says he hopes that American universities work together strategically in Libya instead of individually setting up "one-off" programs.

Mr. Michael and many others with interests in Libyan academic exchanges encourage a long-term view, with appropriate expectations. In Libya, Susan Kane, the archaeologist and professor of art at Oberlin, wrote in an e-mail soon after her arrival there, "there is a lot of good work to be done here, but it is going to be slow and difficult until a proper infrastructure and more language training is in place."



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