

By Elaina Loveland

## The Emergence of the Global Network University

An interview with New York University President John Sexton

**J**OHAN SEXTON, New York University's president since 2001, also is the Benjamin Butler Professor of Law and NYU Law School's dean emeritus, having served as dean for 14 years.

In addition to many other roles, Sexton is chair of the American Council on Education, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a past member of the Executive Committee of the Association of American Universities. He also serves on the boards of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Institute of International Education.

Sexton received a BA in history (1963) from Fordham College; an MA in comparative religion (1965) and a PhD in history of American religion (1978) from Fordham University; and a JD magna cum laude (1979) from Harvard Law School.

He has authored several books, numerous chapters, articles, and Supreme Court briefs.

He has served as the chairman of the board of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (2003-2006) and chair of the Federal Reserve Systems Council of Chairs (2006).

**IE:** In recent years, New York University has made many efforts to embrace internationalization. Can you describe how NYU's goal of becoming "the first global network university" is influencing the university community (students, faculty, administration, etc.)?

**SEXTON:** As greater numbers of existing and potential members of the NYU community come to understand the idea of a "Global Network University," they come to understand the enormous possibilities. Let me give you few examples. Schools and departments, for instance, see the potential advantage it gives them in hiring. Let's say, for instance, that NYU and other prominent universities are competing to hire a top mathematician from Mumbai. The reputation of the competing programs matter, no doubt, as do

the colleagues with which this scholar will be able to work on a daily basis. But so does location, which is an enormous advantage for NYU, based as we are in New York. But, at NYU, we can add something to the concept of location: we can also say to this scholar "In addition to working with colleagues at the Courant Institute here in New York City, you can also work one year or one semester in four in our Abu Dhabi campus, where we have a robust research program, and from there it is a relatively short flight to Mumbai to visit your family." Moreover, many of the students and faculty who are drawn to NYU very much see themselves as world citizens, as cosmopolitans in the best sense of the word: born in one country, educated in another, working in a third, with interests and scholarship that focus on transnational issues—for them, this kind of university structure is a very natural fit. And this illustrates another key aspect of the Global Network: its natural circulatory movement: faculty and students can move among the global sites and the portal campuses, creating new opportunities for teaching and learning and research, immersing themselves in new communities, all in a very natural way, all while remaining part of the larger NYU community. A key role of a university is to support faculty in pursuit of their scholarship; with a network of global sites as wide as NYU's, we see the prospect of constructing new mechanisms for supporting faculty when they are



**New York University President John Sexton**

conducting research abroad. And students understand that study away isn't some type of semester-long holiday: that it is an integral part of NYU, and an integral part of their education.

**IE: How does New York University's global expansion fit within its mission? How did these major internationalization efforts get underway?**

**SEXTON:** Albert Gallatin and his colleagues envisioned a very different kind of university in establishing NYU. Our university was not meant to serve only the elites, as other colleges were at the time, nor to be a cloistered enclave in a pastoral setting. It was explicitly intended to be “in and of the city,” and it has always abided by that founding idea. Over time, of course, New York City has changed; it has become arguably the most international of cities, and the world's capital. In its public schools are taught children from virtually every country on earth; it stitches together neighborhoods in which people from any corner of the earth would find the sights, the tastes, the language of their homeland. And, as New York has become more international—really, the first great experiment in cosmopolitanism,

in creating the world in miniature in a city—so has NYU become more global in its outlook. Initially, it had the effect of making NYU more attractive to international students. Over time, it has caused us to think of NYU as not only “in and of the city,” but also “in and of the world.”

**IE: The emergence of branch campuses has been a trend in the last several years. Tisch Asia was the first NYU campus to open outside of New York City. Why did NYU choose to focus on the arts as the first kind of degrees to offer outside of New York City, and why Singapore?**

**SEXTON:** The Global Network University, as we conceive it now, is something that developed over time. NYU has had a global orientation for a considerable time—we recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of one of our global sites in Europe. The point that we have gotten to now—with a second portal campus (NYU in New York, and NYU in Abu Dhabi) and 12 other sites, plus the possibility of a third portal campus in Asia and two new emerging global study sites (in Washington, D.C. (our first in the United States outside New York) and Australia (which means we will have sites on all the continents save Antarctica)—took years. At this juncture, our global efforts tend to be organized on the university level, taking account of the interests of our faculty and our students. Prior, many of the initiatives were organized on the school level, and the Singapore program was conceived at the school level—the Tisch School of the Arts saw a desire for the superb training it provides in the cinematic and performing arts in Asia, and created the program. Tisch Asia helped those of us at the university level think through what this kind of program might mean for the university.

**IE: NYU Abu Dhabi opened in September 2010. How is this campus different from earlier branch campuses?**

**SEXTON:** It is important to distinguish between different program typologies. We have Global Study Away Centers, such as Florence or Accra, Ghana—here our students travel from a portal campus (NYU

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in NY or NYU Abu Dhabi) and study for a semester or a year as part of their pursuit of their degree. We provide the classroom facilities and the student support and arrange for housing. We are also looking at these Global Study Away Centers to see how they might also be loci for faculty research, and the academic areas in which they might specialize. But no degrees are awarded there. Then there are branch campuses, such as TischAsia—these campuses offer degrees, but in confined disciplinary areas, such as filmmaking. The portal campuses—of which there are currently two, NYU in NY and NYU Abu Dhabi—are comprehensive, liberal arts, research university campuses. When fully realized, NYU Abu Dhabi will offer—as NYU in New York does now—undergraduate degrees in a wide range of majors, as well as graduate degrees. We have already started a robust research program in Abu Dhabi.

**IE: In addition to having campuses outside of New York City, NYU also has several joint programs with foreign institutions, such a program for MBA students with the London School of Business and a master of laws (LLM) program with the National University of Singapore. How do joint programs like these benefit students? Are other similar programs planned?**

**SEXTON:** I don't have any plans that I can share at this moment. But these joint programs stem from the same fundamental set of understandings that for the foundation of the Global Network University idea: that we need to move beyond a conception of a university that insists on only delivering its education or conducting its research in its home city of origin; that enormous scholarly talent exists outside the United

States, and we risk damaging ourselves if we don't engage that talent in deep ways; that there is a flow of talent in the world, and we should immerse ourselves in that flow; and that while we are still in the era where U.S. higher education represents the "gold standard," we should be mindful that other nations are mounting challenges and recognize how much this system has propelled the United States' success and prosperity, and we should be careful about assuming that not changing the system that has brought us this far will be a successful strategy for the future.

**IE: How does NYU get its faculty, whether they are teaching in New York City, or abroad, to infuse an international perspective into what and how they teach?**

**SEXTON:** It's not really a matter of getting our faculty to do it. Because New York City is a world capital, because the people who are drawn to it tend to be interested in global issues as much as local issues, those global interests and relationships and collaborations are already in place. We have literally hundreds of faculty affiliated with one or another of our global sites because of their academic interests, and their participation helps inform our thinking and keep quality high. Particularly now, as the contours of the Global Network University emerge so clearly, the faculty—and for that matter, the students—who come to NYU self-select to be part of a university that embraces this kind of circulatory talent flow. The university's responsibility, then, is to create new opportunities for research, for collaboration, and for teaching-and-learning, so that the advantages of an education or a research effort that is global in scope are that much evident and accessible.

**IE: NYU has several international study sites, and recently added a tenth site in Tel Aviv. How do NYU's international study sites differ from other study abroad programs?**

**SEXTON:** NYU's Study Away program is fully a program of the university—a student can register for classes in, say, Shanghai, just as he or she would in Washington Square. We have faculty involvement to ensure quality. We design the programs so that students continue to make academic progress; we even have opportunities for students to study science; this is important—those following a pre-med track, for instance, have historically tended to be locked out of study abroad programs.

**IE: NYU recently broke ground in September on its first "study away" center in the United States in Washington, D.C. How is studying away from New York City, even domestically, valuable to students?**

**SEXTON:** You have to go back to the idea of the network, and the circulation within the network. First of all, we have a top-ranked politics department at NYU, and an outstanding school of public service—we already have scholars with research interests in Washington. We have students who are interested in internships with the federal government and elected officials, and who are pursuing studies in politics, economics, and journalism. So, as in the cases of the other sites, it starts with interest on the part of faculty and student. But while it might seem a "domestic" program for U.S. students studying at our Washington Square campus, it is not a "domestic" program for students studying at our Abu Dhabi campus. Imagine the opportunity we offer a student interested in politics: to study political systems in the United States in Washington



one semester, and to study European political systems in Prague the next semester.

**IE: NYU's expansion of global efforts must take considerable university support, funding, and resources. How has this been possible?**

**SEXTON:** I think this is a misconception that many people have. NYU Abu Dhabi is fully and completely supported by our partners in Abu Dhabi—no funds go from our Washington Square campus to Abu Dhabi. And the same is basically true of our other Global centers—they are structured to be self-supporting.

**IE: The American Council on Education announced that you are heading a Blue Ribbon Panel on Global Engagement. Can you comment on how the panel will assess universities' global engagement and after a final report is finished in fall 2011, what impact the final recommendations might have?**

**SEXTON:** I think it is only proper to wait until my colleagues and I have accomplished our work on this before I would speculate on the outcomes. What strikes me as noteworthy, however, is that this conversation is taking place at all. As I think about how quickly this kind of topic has grown, how much of my thinking and schedule it occupies now compared to when I first became president of NYU, and how often I hear similar sentiments from my peers, it is breathtaking. But it is also very encouraging: higher education is not always a nimble enterprise, and these are issues that need to be thought through, that need to be grappled with, and I am reassured by how much attention they are getting.

**IE: With the rapid pace of how the world is becoming increasingly interconnected across borders, what are universities' responsibilities to tomorrow's students?**

**SEXTON:** Some of our responsibilities are unchanged. We still have the responsibility

to be the locus where important ideas can be explored in depth, where sloganeering and shallow thought can and should be eschewed. We still have the responsibility to create a sacred space where ideas—even challenging ideas—can be freely explored and exchanged. We still have a responsibility to create new knowledge, and to transmit knowledge to a new generation of students. What has changed most is the expectations the students will encounter when they leave the university to pursue a career—will they be prepared to be citizens in a multi-polar world? Will they be able to lead in situations where the problems are complex and transnational? Will they have skills to be able to deal with diversity on a daily basis, given the miniaturization of the world in which we live? Each university will find its own answers to that question; for NYU, the emergence of the Global Network University is our answer. **IE**

**ELAINA LOVELAND** is managing editor of *IE*.

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