CHAPTER EIGHT

"Same Same, But Different": Trans-Nationalizing Honors in a U.S. Branch Campus

Jesse Gerlach Ulmer
Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar

In July of 2013, I was appointed to lead the Honors Program at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts in Doha, Qatar (VCU Qatar), a branch campus of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. I attended my first National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) conference the following November. The location was New Orleans, Louisiana, a twenty-something hour flight from Doha, Qatar's capital city. My goal was simple: to engage with honors directors like myself who were running honors programs outside the United States. Jet-lagged beyond belief, I stumbled through the conference in a stupefied, nine-hour time difference haze, rarely straying far from the coffee table. I managed to meet a number of individuals in a position similar to mine, but overall they were few and far between. I tried to attend

every session that included the word "international" in its title, but by the end of the conference, I realized that the notion of "internationalizing honors" in the context of NCHC denoted study abroad, wherein American honors programs dispatch students outside the U.S. for temporary periods of study. While interesting and valuable, discussing study abroad was not going to help me tackle the specific challenges of leading my program in Qatar. While disappointed, I should not have been surprised. I was attending a conference in the United States dedicated largely to honors education in the United States. Branch campuses of American universities in far-flung locations like Qatar are rare. Even rarer is for them to house honors programs.

In fact, according to my research, of the approximately eighty or so U.S. satellite campuses currently in existence, less than ten percent include some type of honors education. Within this select group, honors tends to assume the form of departmental, thesis-driven programs. In terms of fully developed programs, I can count them on one hand, with a finger or two to spare.[1] Their scarcity, however, should not dismiss their value. Given the recent expansion of honors education outside the United States, a trend of which VCU Qatar is part and parcel, much can be learned from such programs, which live, rather than study, abroad. While honors has historically been an American phenomenon, it now exists and flourishes in locations as diverse as Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Mexico, The Netherlands, and Singapore. The internationalization of honors is a notable development in the field because it raises the question of what "honors" might mean when situated and practiced in cultural, social, and institutional contexts that are markedly different from those that operate across the U.S. This fresh vantage point offers useful insights that can, in a global feedback loop, enrich and redefine the meaning and practice of honors in the U.S. I posit in this essay that an important challenge faced by any institution running an honors program outside the U.S. is how to draft a program that operates effectively and meaningfully within its local context while also identifying and retaining the salient aspects of its American roots. How can programs in other countries practice honors in a

way that incorporates the best of what the U.S. model has to offer while leveraging the strengths and opportunities of their local settings? I will address this question by reflecting on a recent effort to revise VCU Qatar's honors curriculum in collaboration with the VCU Honors College in Richmond, Virginia. The goal of this project was to refigure the curriculum in a way that would allow VCU Qatar to create a distinct identity within the context of its unique setting in tandem with preserving the academic excellence of, and vital relationship to, the honors college on the home campus. This "same same, but different" approach, as I term it, was conducted through a close, sustained collaboration that, rather than attempting to duplicate the program of the home campus, developed a flexible framework that emphasized equivalent rather than cloned outcomes, a subtle distinction that proved to be a powerful agent in concocting an effective synthesis of the branch and home campus programs.

Many higher education professionals are cognizant of the international branch campus phenomenon; however, few are familiar with it beyond a cursory awareness. Therefore, providing some historical and contextual background to set the stage for this discussion of some of the challenges and opportunities of an international branch campus like VCU Qatar, particularly in terms of honors, will be useful. A comprehensive understanding of this development is also important because, as an expression of the globalization of higher education, this trend is certain to continue. It also merits attention from stakeholders in honors as an avenue of future growth. International Branch Campuses, or IBCs, have been growing steadily over the past few decades. The most recent report, produced in 2015 by the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) in collaboration with the Cross-Border Education Research Team at the State University of New York at Albany and Pennsylvania State University, documented the existence of 249 international branch campuses, with an estimated 180,000 students enrolled worldwide (Garrett et al. 11–12). The report defines an IBC as "an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider;

and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider" (Garrett et al. 6). The two most commonly cited reasons for universities to open branch campuses are to boost revenue and enhance status, thereby increasing their share of the global higher education marketplace. Howard Rollins, former director of international programs at the Georgia Institute of Technology, remarks: "Where universities are heading now is toward becoming global universities." He adds: "We'll have more and more universities competing internationally for resources, faculty, and the best students" (qtd. in Lewin). Institutions also open branch campuses to boost their rankings in publications such as *U.S. News and World Report*, and the *Times Higher Education* in Great Britain. While more nuanced motivations vary by institution, what seems clear from this landscape perspective is that many American universities are eager to globalize, and one very literal, direct way to accomplish this goal is to open a satellite campus in a foreign country.

Of the top five originating countries of IBCs, the U.S. ranks number one. With 78 campuses, the U.S. accounts for nearly one-third of the total number of IBCs in existence. Second to the U.S. is the United Kingdom, with 39 overseas programs, followed by Russia, France, and Australia. On the receiving end, there are 76 host countries, the top five being China (32), the United Arab Emirates (31), Singapore (12), Malaysia (12), and Qatar (11), which is the host country of my own institution. Together, these countries host 39% of the world's total branch campuses (Garrett et al. 14–20). While IBCs attracted extensive media attention in the 2000s—dubbed by pundits as the "gold rush" period of IBC franchising—they actually started appearing as early as the nineteenth century. In this period, the University of London established partnerships with select institutions scattered throughout the British Empire. If students could pass a standardized exam invigilated by the partner institution abroad, they received a University of London degree (Garrett et al. 9). In the modern era, the U.S. has been the leader in overseas higher education. In the early twentieth century, Parsons Fashion School in New York City established a branch in Paris, France, to

increase its proximity to the international fashion industry. More recently, in the 1960s, Johns Hopkins University opened a branch in Rome, Italy, and in 1970, Florida State University established a campus for the study of international relations in the Panama Canal Zone. In the 1980s, a large number of U.S. representatives rushed to Japan to establish branches, but only 30 followed through, and of those, only two—Temple and Lakeland College—remain open today (Garrett et al. 9).

The case of Japan in the 1980s underscores an important factor in the branch campus equation: risk. The stakes are high for universities in terms of money, resources, and reputation. While the rewards can be substantial in the right situation, there are many ways IBCs can fail. The resulting damage to the institution can be significant, as some highly publicized closures like Michigan State University and George Mason University in the UAE demonstrate. Algonquin College in Saudi Arabia reportedly lost 4.6 million dollars when its branch campus closed because the two parties failed to reach an agreement that would meet the financial goals of the home campus (Redden). An insightful example of branch campus failure is Tisch Asia, a branch of New York University's (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts, established in Singapore in 2007. The campus closed its doors in 2015, citing financial woes, a common cause of branch campus failure. Then, in 2016, three former students filed a lawsuit on behalf of their peers, alleging "subpar" faculty, facilities, and equipment compared to their counterparts in New York City. One NYU representative countered: "Many Tisch Asia courses were taught by New York-based faculty and all were taught by highly qualified faculty. Students had excellent facilities and equipment, and graduates received a Tisch School of the Arts degree. Artistically, the school was a real success, with a number of students winning awards" (qtd. in Yang). Tisch Asia is an illuminating case study because it exposes a potential fault line running underneath almost any branch campus: the extent to which it can live up to its promise, explicit or implicit, to provide an education that is equivalent to that of the home institution. This fault line is even more sensitive in the context of honors, the foundation of which

is academic excellence itself. I will re-visit this fault line and the delicate balance required to keep it in check in more detail when I discuss the process of revising VCU Qatar's honors curriculum. In any event, to date, Garrett et al. have documented forty-two cases of branch campuses closing or changing status (11).

While there is much to lose when a branch campus closes, the numbers reveal that the successes far outnumber the failures. Closures attract publicity, and given the media's negativity bias, concluding, as many skeptical academics and administrators have, that IBCs are little more than profit-driven scams that are rigged to fail would be easy. Yet like universities everywhere, some IBCs are better than others. Many dedicated and talented faculty, administrators, staff, and students work tirelessly to make branch campuses thriving communities of learning and research. Measuring the overall quality of education at a given institution is difficult; it is even more difficult to compare the quality of campuses located in such disparate contexts. Academic standards, as well as broader socio-political issues like academic freedom, freedom of speech, and the humanitarian records of certain host nations, remain crucial, unresolved questions in the branch campus debate.

The institution that would become VCU Qatar was established during the gold rush period of the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it did not start as an official campus of VCU. At that time more than 150 foreign campuses opened their doors, with Asia and the Middle East becoming major players by offering generous government subsidies. Specific countries like Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and certain Asian nations created high concentrations of IBCs in designated higher education zones (Garrett et al. 10). A prime example of this trend is Qatar's Education City, which houses VCU Qatar (est. 1998) and five other U.S. branch campuses: Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar (est. 2001), Texas A&M University at Qatar (est. 2003), Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar (est. 2004), Georgetown University in Qatar (est. 2005), and Northwestern University in Qatar (est. 2008). Such a large concentration of IBCs in the Middle East is a historical outcome of the region's rocky path toward modernization. According to Lisa Anderson, former

president of the American University in Cairo and senior research fellow at NYU Abu Dhabi, governments across the Arab world established national universities in the mid-twentieth century to produce civil servants to staff new nation-states. Over time, many of these new governments devolved into dysfunctional institutions, and the universities disintegrated along with them. As a result, Lisa Anderson asserts that Arab governments ended up "failing to meet the needs of a fast-growing population," particularly the younger segment, the unemployment rate of which is estimated to be around thirty percent, the highest in the world (2). One consequence was that many Arab governments turned to the private sector. Anderson estimates that of the roughly six hundred universities in the region (77% of which were created after 1990), 40% are private (2). In this phase of development, she notes, in order to quickly establish their legitimacy, "many of the private universities in the Arab world advertised themselves as attached to, modeled on, or otherwise associated with international establishments" (Anderson 2). The confluence of fossil fuel-rich Gulf nations eager to modernize their society with the desire of U.S. institutions to globalize and tap new revenue streams has resulted in a high concentration of international branch campuses.

The growth of U.S. higher education abroad has been attended by the expansion of honors education abroad. While the U.S. remains the center of the honors world, many honors programs now exist beyond its shores. Specific honors programs in Australia (Barron and Zeegers), Brazil (de Souza Fleith et al.), Chile (Skewes et al.), Mexico (Khan and Morales-Menendez), The Netherlands (Wolfensberger et al.), and the United Kingdom (Lamb) have been extensively documented in honors scholarship. To expand this body of knowledge, I have conducted research on honors programs in my own backyard of Qatar. Gathering exact information was challenging because no governmental or nongovernmental institution officially tracks honors education in IBCs. Nevertheless, I made an earnest effort to collect information through websites, face-to-face interviews, and email with institutional leaders. Not every institution had data readily available, some did not respond

to queries, and some offered incomplete information. More comprehensive, accurate, and publicly accessible information would be valuable in creating a clearer picture. Nevertheless, my data offer the best account to date and should be regarded as a starting point for further research. I should note that these caveats also apply to the research I conducted on honors programs in U.S. branch campuses mentioned in the introduction. In any event, Qatar, a country the size of Connecticut, is home to a large number of higher education institutions. Of these, I identified four universities that featured some form of U.S.-style honors: Qatar University, VCU Qatar, Georgetown University in Qatar, and Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar. Qatar University (QU), the country's national university, established its program in 2009, and it supports the largest honors program in Qatar in every measurable way (Okour). In its requirements and structure, QU's program meets the criteria of a fully developed honors program as defined by NCHC ("Definition"). VCU Qatar also offers a fully developed honors program that was established in 2005, making it the oldest honors program in Qatar and in the region more generally (Yyelland 108–9). Georgetown University in Qatar, which opened in 2005 and specializes in international affairs, has offered departmental honors since 2009 (Barth). Lastly, Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar offers a departmental honors option. Although only four universities offer some form of honors in Qatar, in the broad scheme of things, they comprise a notable cluster of honors programs residing in a single geographically small country outside the United States.

Honors programs serve an important function at branch campuses in developing countries like Qatar, where the primary and secondary education system is still in the process of modernizing. In 2001, the Qatari government commissioned the RAND Corporation, a California-based global think tank, to assess the state of Qatar's K–12 education system. The resulting report, published in 2007, concluded that while teachers in the existing system were "enthusiastic and wanted to deliver a solid education," systemic reform was badly needed: "There was no vision of quality of education and the structures needed to support it. The curriculum

in the government (and many private) schools was outmoded, under the rigid control of the Ministry of Education, and unchallenging, and it emphasized rote memorization" (Brewer et al. 2). As the report indicates, in the early 2000s, the K–12 educational system in Qatar was in no shape to produce graduates prepared to meet the demands of an American university, which required comparatively higher academic standards, more advanced levels of literacy in English, and, crucially, the ability to think critically and independently. As Charles E. Thorpe, then Dean of Carnegie Mellon in Qatar, explained in 2008, "As recently as six years ago, the elementary reader in Qatar was the Koran, so students learned beautiful classical Arabic, but they had no experience with questions like 'What do you think the author meant by that?' or 'Do you agree or disagree?'" (qtd. in Lewin). While many reforms have since been implemented, primary and secondary education in Qatar still faces a number of challenges. Because of this developing and rather uneven educational landscape, a typical classroom in VCU Qatar will feature students who vary considerably in their academic abilities. The result is a large gap between experienced, well-prepared students and relatively inexperienced, underprepared ones who have not benefitted from expansive educational opportunities. This gap is difficult for faculty to effectively bridge in the classroom. For better or worse, faculty are compelled to spend a large amount of time and energy helping underprepared students, which means that students who are more advanced and seek a deeper challenge are left to their own devices. Trapped in this situation, they often feel bored, unchallenged, and/or understimulated. While this phenomenon is common in the United States, it is even more pronounced in IBCs in developing countries. Consequently, in a small school like VCU Qatar, an honors program is critical to offering ambitious and well-equipped students from across the university an opportunity to join a community of like-minded peers, a space where students can connect and learn from other high-achieving students.

The Honors Program at VCU Qatar is small and diverse. In any given semester, the program includes, on average, 20–25 students, who represent anywhere from 9–15 nationalities. This size to

diversity ratio is expressed in VCU Qatar as a whole, which enrolls approximately 380 students who represent 36 nationalities; moreover, it employs 62 faculty who represent 18 nationalities. In terms of gender, the overwhelming majority of students in the school (and thus in the honors program) are female, a demographic driven by two factors. VCU Qatar was a female-only school from 1998 to 2005. While it has technically been a co-educational institution ever since, the gender imbalance persists, partly due to a common belief among Qataris that art and design are considered a "safe" or "appropriate" degree of study for females, as opposed to the more traditionally masculine-coded fields such as medicine, business, and engineering. The major difference between the demographic picture of the honors program and the university as a whole is the representation of Qatari nationals. Historically, despite constant attempts at recruitment, few Qatari students participate in the honors program. The school as a whole, however, maintains a large Qatari population, around seventy percent, the highest among the U.S. branch campuses in Education City. While the program usually includes a few highly motivated Qataris, most locals decline to pursue honors for a number of reasons, including demanding family obligations, a pervasive feature of Qatari culture. In the *JNCHC* article, "An American Honors Program in the Arab Gulf," former VCU Qatar Honors Program Coordinator Byrad Yyelland writes in detail about this specific cultural challenge while also providing background information on the state of Qatar, the history of VCU Qatar as an institution, and the evolution of the VCU Qatar Honors Program. For more in-depth information on these topics, readers should consult Yyelland's useful article. In any case, this cultural pressure often deters Qatari students from engaging in any university activities, such as honors, that are perceived to be overly demanding. Despite constant attempts to re-educate Qatari students that honors involves "different" rather than "more" work, most nationals whom I have spoken to over the ten years I have taught at VCU Qatar perceive honors as too much work. The program is managed by one administrator, who is also either a full-time faculty member, administrator, or both. Historically, this individual

has been a member of the Liberal Arts & Sciences Program who officially reports to the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs.

A large number of faculty teach honors students, anywhere from twenty to twenty-five per semester. They are members of all of the six major departments in the school: Fashion Design, Graphic Design, Interior Design, Painting and Printmaking, Art History, and Liberal Arts & Sciences. Not surprisingly, few faculty exchanges occur between the Doha and Richmond campuses, honors or otherwise. The two institutions are considered independent of one another in terms of employment, and the rate of student exchange is lower than one might expect. Occasionally, an honors student from Qatar will study abroad in Richmond, or vice-versa. This exchange rate remains low on both campuses for many reasons. For example, the majority of students on the Qatar campus are Qatari females, most of whom are prevented from studying abroad by their families, who believe it is unsafe for young Muslim females to live on their own, unattended by family members. In the other direction, among other reasons, most students on the home campus wish to stay immersed in the rich and vibrant art and design scene of Richmond in general and VCU in particular.

As for faculty, they teach honors students on a voluntary rather than compulsory basis. They are more or less selected based on course scheduling as well as on the needs and preferences of the honors students. In terms of the administrative relationship between Qatar's Honors Program and the VCU Honors College, admissions are jointly managed and evaluated. Each entity has its own, separate budget, and in terms of day-to-day operations, the Qatar administrator works closely with a designated academic liaison in the honors college in Richmond. Final decisions on all major programmatic issues in Qatar are subject to the approval of the dean of the honors college although such decisions are rarely if ever made without consulting the administrator on the Qatar campus. The dean of the honors college routinely participates in the spring commencement ceremony in Doha to formally recognize graduating honors students, and for a number of years, graduating students have also had the opportunity to travel to Richmond to participate

in the honors college ceremony on the home campus. Students who graduate from Qatar's program are formally recognized as graduates of the VCU Honors College.

Discussions to develop an honors program at VCU Qatar started in 2004, and the program was officially launched in the fall of 2005. As Yyelland explains, "The impetus for creating the program lay in VCU's promise that students in Doha would have the same educational opportunities as students on the American campuses and this included an honors education" (108–09). This impetus is consistent with the language and spirit of the operating agreement between the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development—the funding body of VCU Qatar—and VCU (Nick Anderson). VCU Qatar's Honors Program was first proposed and developed by Christina Lindholm, then Dean of VCU Qatar, and Dr. Timothy Hulsey, then Dean of the VCU Honors College. The original idea was to create a program that would mirror, as closely as possible, the program offered on the home campus. In theory, and in the context of the operating agreement, this approach was logical. After all, branch campuses promise to deliver an education that is comparable to the home campus, and the most straightforward way to accomplish this task is to create identical curriculums. Yet, as many branch campuses have discovered over time, this duplication strategy does not always work well in practice. In fact, if interpreted too narrowly, this approach can paradoxically compromise the educational quality of the branch campus. This problem arises because of the rather obvious fact that the structures and settings of the two campuses are remarkably different: what works well for one will not, ipso facto, work well for the other.

In the fall of 2014, it became clear that VCU Qatar's honors curriculum was badly in need of revision. The requirements were causing problems that were unforeseeable when the curriculum was originally designed. When the VCU Qatar program was created, the VCU Honors College curriculum included the following requirements. Students were required to complete twenty-four credits of honors coursework, including eighteen credits of honors core

classes. Students needed to complete the honors writing sequence in addition to a number of honors core classes in different subjects. The remaining credits could be earned through honors electives, independent study, approved semester-long study abroad experiences, or approved graduate-level courses. The program also included a "Diversity of Study" requirement that ensured students received a well-rounded education. Students needed to maintain a cumulative GPA of 3.5 or higher, and to earn the distinction of graduating with University Honors, students submitted a dossier that detailed their undergraduate career ("Graduating").

When this curriculum was in place at VCU, VCU Qatar's program included the following components. Students were required to complete a total of twenty-four honors credits, eighteen of which needed to be in core courses in different subjects. Students were also required to complete three credits in their major, and they fulfilled the remaining three credits by taking an honors elective or participating in a semester-long study abroad program. The students also submitted a graduation dossier, which included an essay that detailed their undergraduate career (Yyelland 111–12). Table 1 below provides a side-by-side comparison of the aforementioned requirements for both programs.

As Table 1 clarifies, except for a few concessions to account for unavoidable differences, the two programs were designed to mirror one another in nearly every way. The adjustments were kept to a minimum and were only included because there was little choice in the matter. This arrangement is an apt example of the duplication approach to branch campus curriculum development, whereby the branch campus strives to copy and paste the curriculum of the originating institution in order to deliver on its promise of offering an American education in a foreign country.

But what happens when interpreting this promise in such a literal way undermines the quality of the branch campus education? Serious problems arose in trying to re-create the honors requirements of VCU at VCU Qatar. These problems are important to isolate and ponder because they flag a perpetual challenge of nearly any branch campus: how to devise an education on the satellite

campus that maintains the academic standards, rigor, and quality of the mothership while also accounting for major differences in size, structure, and cultural context. The ultimate problem did not lie in the content or subject matter of the courses themselves or in the notion of providing honors students with a well-rounded education in the liberal tradition; rather, it lay in the fact that the original VCU Qatar curriculum required students to take *specific* courses: rather than requiring students to take a 200-level English course,

Table 1. Comparison of Honors Requirements: VCU Richmond and VCU Qatar

VCU Honors College, Richmond, Virginia, U.S.A.	VCU Qatar Honors Program, Doha, State of Qatar
Admissions Requirements: –3.5 GPA –Submission of VCU Honors College Application, which requires a faculty/advisor endorsement, *CV*/Resume, and submission of a personal education paper.	Admissions Requirements: –3.5 GPA –Submission of VCU Honors College Application, which requires a faculty/advisor endorsement, *CV*/Resume, and submission of a personal education paper.
Required total honors credits: 24	Required honors total credits: 24
Required core credits: 18	Required core credits: 18
Core classes (honors-only courses): –HONRS 200: Rhetoric –HONRS 250: Expository Writing –HONRS MATH 230 –HONRS PHYS 215 –HONRS PHIL 230 –HONRS POLI/INTL 365	Core classes (honors variants): –Honors UNIV 112: Focused Inquiry II –Honors UNIV 200: Art of Inquiry and Craft of Argument –Honors UNIV 215: Textual Analysis –Honors ENGL 388: Writing in the Workplace –Honors PHYS 107: Wonders of Technology –Honors SOCY 100: General Sociology
Honors Electives (6 credits)	Honors Electives (6 credits)
Diversity of Study Requirement	No Diversity of Study Requirement
GPA Requirement: 3.5 or higher	GPA Requirement: 3.5 or higher
Honors Graduation Dossier	Honors Graduation Dossier

for example, the course *had* to be English 215: Textual Analysis, the required natural science course *had* to be Physics 107: Wonders of Technology, and so on. This curriculum was designed to follow the home campus curriculum as closely as possible. On the home campus, however, these required core courses were honors-only; that is, the entire class was populated by honors students. At the branch campus, because of a limited number of faculty and honors students, stand-alone honors courses were not logistically feasible. Therefore, VCU Qatar honors students took honors "variants" of non-honors courses that blended honors and non-honors students in the same classroom. In these courses, a certain percentage of the total coursework is dedicated to honors-caliber work (on average, between fifteen-to-twenty percent) rather than the entire course being designed specifically for a class of all honors students.

One of the major problems with this structure was that when a student needed to take a particular honors course at VCU Qatar, the course was sometimes not available because no qualified faculty members were available to teach it. As mentioned earlier, the school has a limited number of faculty, which means that when a turnover occurs (which, due to a largely expatriate labor force, tends to be frequent on international branch campuses), there was often no one immediately on hand to fill the gap. In the Liberal Arts & Sciences Program, for instance, one natural science faculty member teaches all the physics courses, one social science faculty teaches all the sociology courses, and so on. When one of these faculty members leaves, the honors students cannot take the required honors core course until another instructor is hired. The hiring process at an international branch campus can take significantly more time than on the home campus. Hiring local adjunct faculty may be a short-term solution or a necessary expedient; however, adjunct faculty may not be qualified to teach honors students, or, for various reasons, may simply not wish to work with honors students. As a result, VCU Qatar honors students often found themselves unable to take the specific courses they were required to take because of forces beyond their control. While well-intended from the perspective of upholding academic standards for both campuses, a

principle sympathetic to the university's operating agreement, this "same same" curriculum design did not work in reality.

Honors students at VCU Qatar also began questioning why they were required to take specific honors core courses if they were not honors-only courses like they were on the home campus. If they were not reaping the benefits of such courses, they argued, then they would prefer more variety and choice in course selection, greater freedom to design their own honors education. Rather than being required to take English 215 as honors, for instance, they wanted the option to take a different 200-level course, one that developed similar skills but perhaps in their major course of study, or perhaps in English, or perhaps in another discipline altogether. One could argue that the prescribed core course model offered the benefit of clustering honors students in specific classes so that they could collaborate and form a more cohesive honors community. In practice, however, many students did not take the honors courses at the same time or in the same order, thus the cohort theory rarely materialized. Another issue was that VCU Qatar is a branch campus not of VCU, per se, but of VCU's School of the Arts. As a school of art and design, VCU Qatar's culture is markedly different from the honors college in Virginia, which includes students from across the university. Many Qatar honors students were expressing a desire to pursue more interdisciplinary options, which are an important part of the ethos of art and design as well as other creative academic fields. The honors college on the home campus, on the other hand, serves the broader university, and thus has a broader remit. For these and many other reasons, including radically different cultural, social, political, and economic contexts, administrators on both campuses decided to rethink Qatar's honors program.

The design challenge was to re-form a curriculum that maintained the excellence of the honors college in Richmond while allowing the Qatar honors program to cultivate its own identity and take advantage of its unique opportunities and setting. Many lengthy, complex conversations between the two campuses were conducted through email, video conference, phone, face-to-face sessions at the annual NCHC conference, and on-site visits. Site

visits, in particular, were critical to the success of this process. When dealing with two such distinct places, no substitute can supplant intensive, on-the-ground experience. One of the ongoing difficulties was that both parties were naturally caught up in the day-to-day demands of their own programs, which inevitably meant that the priorities of the other campus would get sidelined. This problem was mitigated by both parties establishing and adhering to a consistent meeting schedule by using all the communication and organizational technologies at hand, which in the digital age are considerable. Key to the success of this endeavor was that the relationship was truly collaborative in nature; the participants never felt that the home campus was dictating, like a parent directing a child, to the branch campus what to do or how to do it. Rather, the relationship was an equal partnership in which both parties were united by a focus on providing a VCU Honors College education to VCU Qatar honors students by the best means possible. A common phrase I hear at the annual NCHC conference is, "you know your context; do what works for your program," and this attitude informed the approach the leaders in the honors college assumed. Our program was granted the necessary autonomy to tailor our curriculum to our unique context; at the same time, to keep the two programs connected, both parties agreed to work within a general, shared framework defined by outcomes rather than requirements.

Because change seems to be the only constant at VCU Qatar, a state of affairs reflecting the dizzying development of Qatar in general, the VCU Qatar Honors Program needed to be able to adapt and evolve in a context of constant change while still maintaining a high standard of education that would parallel rather than mirror that of the home campus. We concluded that if students in Qatar's honors program could produce the same or a similar set of outcomes as those expected of students in the honors college and be held to comparable academic standards, then the path to producing those outcomes could safely diverge. Rather than requiring students to take specific honors core courses, VCU Qatar students would be given a "menu-style" core curriculum. The required number of credits, twenty-four, remained the same (i.e., the outcome), but rather than

requiring specific courses, several broad categories were conceived to encapsulate the skills and knowledge areas all stakeholders felt were relevant to cultivating well-rounded honors students, including Social & Behavioral Sciences, Natural & Physical Sciences, Literacy & Critical Thinking, and Research Methods. Qatar honors students would be required to complete a total of fifteen credits (three credits in each category) to fulfill their honors core course requirements, and each category would include a list of different courses students could choose from, depending on their intellectual interests, schedules, and career aspirations. This more de-centered core course curriculum ultimately provided students with greater flexibility but with similar outcomes in terms of the home campus core course requirements. This revision empowered Qatar honors students to design their own honors education yet in a way that maintained a sense of coherence for the program as a whole.

Moreover, in discussions between myself and Dr. Barry Falk, then Dean of the Honors College, we developed the idea to introduce a three-credit Experiential Learning Project. We reasoned that student-led experiences outside the classroom in Doha could significantly deepen and enrich undergraduate learning as well as positively impact a community, organization, or group. While the specific activities of the project would vary, all Qatar students would be expected to produce the same set of outcomes: a three-page proposal, a seven-to ten-page reflective essay, and a twenty-minute oral and visual presentation that would be open to the public to attend. To maintain a high and consistent academic standard, honors faculty and administrators on both campuses would jointly assess these outcomes. In addition, the project must fall within one of four categories: International Engagement, Service to Community, Interdisciplinary Research, and Action-Based Leadership. These categories were inspired by the University of Washington's Honors Experiential Learning component and adapted to VCU Qatar's context. Interestingly, the Experiential Learning Project is a requirement that does not exist on the home campus, suggesting that branch campus programs, if granted latitude and support, can serve as laboratories of innovation. The remaining six credits of

honors coursework can be fulfilled by completing courses inside or outside the major course of study.

As a whole, the process of revising VCU Qatar's curriculum was a successful, rewarding experience, and key to its success was the collaborative, transparent, and committed nature of the working relationship between the branch and home campus. Many aspects of this collaboration resonate with effective practices identified by Richard Garrett in case studies of branch/home campus management styles. Garrett isolates at least two common themes that characterize successful collaborations: institutional integration and collaborative leadership. Institutional integration means that "the IBC has strong support from the highest levels of the university and is integrated into the academic and administrative functions of the institution, as opposed to being siloed and wholly separate" (Garrett 15). Collaborative leadership, according to Garrett, refers to "a close relationship between home and branch campus leaders, with constant contact between the two," and "decision-making is often a collaborative process, with some IBC autonomy" (15). Both institutional integration and collaborative leadership played critical roles in the curriculum revision process detailed above.

Of course, not everyone agreed on everything all the time: miscommunication, disagreement, and setbacks occurred periodically. One of the most difficult hurdles was explaining to curriculum committees on the home campus, sometimes in excruciating detail, how and why the proposed changes to the honors curriculum were apt in the context of the Qatar campus. Fortunately, a few administrators in Richmond, including a key member of the committee, had worked on the Qatar campus and intervened as credible intermediaries at pivotal moments in the process to confirm how remarkably different the two environments were. After substantial dialogue, the proposed curriculum revision was approved. Because a close working relationship was maintained between the two campuses through regularized communication and organizational practices, as well as collaborative and transparent decision-making processes, the project as a whole was successful.

In "International Branch Campuses: Evolution of a Phenomenon," Kevin Kinser and Jason E. Lane observe:

> Some home institutions explicitly require that the academic programs at IBCs be the same as those on the home campus and follow similar approved processes. However, some exporting universities and host countries are beginning to see branches as having distinct identities that should not be a subservient child to the parent institution. (4)

Overall, the VCU/VCU Qatar honors relationship followed this trend. The two organizations worked as equal partners committed to a common goal and avoided a top-down, colonial model in which the home institution treats the branch campus as just that, a branch, rather than as an integral part of the tree. The ultimate function of a branch, after all, is to grow leaves that generate energy through photosynthesis. In that sense, branch campuses can, in the right configuration, provide the home campus with light and energy, rather than, in the wrong configuration, serve the forces of entropy. In the final analysis, I would propose that if honors programs at branch campuses are to be successful, they need to establish effective, pragmatic working relationships with the home campus through close, regular communication, institutional integration, collaborative leadership, outcomes-based curricula (rather than requirement-driven ones), and a reasonable degree of IBC autonomy within a general framework that upholds the promise that students will receive a fully developed honors education at home or abroad.

NOTE

[1]Fully developed honors programs at U.S. satellite campuses include Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts in Qatar <https://www.qatar.vcu.edu/honors-program> and St. Louis University, Madrid, Spain <http://www.slu.edu/madrid/academics/degrees-and-programs/honors-program.php>.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Lisa. "International Universities in the Arab World: What Is Their Place?" *International Higher Education*, no. 88, Winter 2017, <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/view/10417>. Accessed 5 May 2018.

Anderson, Nick. "The Education City Contracts: A Case Study from VCU in Qatar." *The Washington Post*, 6 Dec. 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp//2015/12/06/the-education-city-contracts-a-case-study-from-vcu-in-qatar/?utm_term=.a220ecae1a0b>. Accessed 23 June 2018.

Barron, Deirdre, and Margaret Zeegers. "Honours in Australia: Globally Recognised Preparation for a Career in Research (or Elsewhere)." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 35–45.

Barth, Kai-Henrik. Personal interview. 19 Apr. 2018.

Brewer, Dominic J., et al. *Education for a New Era: Design and Implementation of K–12 Education Reform in Qatar*. Rand, 2007.

de Souza Fleith, Denise, et al. "The Tutorial Education Program: An Honors Program for Brazilian Undergraduate Students." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 47–53.

"Definition of Honors Education." *NCHC*, 19 June 2014, <http://nchchonors.org/directors-faculty/definition-of-honors-education>. Accessed 23 June 2018.

Garrett, Richard. "International Branch Campuses: Success Factors." *International Higher Education*, vol. 2, 2018. <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/view/10417>. Accessed 5 May 2018.

Garrett, Richard, et al. *International Branch Campuses: Trends and Developments, 2016 (Part 1)*. OBHE with SUNY, Albany and Pennsylvania State University, Nov. 2016. <http://www.obhe.ac.uk/documents/download?id=1049>. Accessed 3 June 2018.

"Graduating with University Honors." *Virginia Commonwealth University*, 20 June 2018, <http://honors.vcu.edu/academics/graduating-with-honors>. Accessed 4 June 2018.

"Honors Program at Qatar University." *Qatar University*, 2015, <http://qu.edu.qa/honors program>. Accessed 3 June 2018.

Khan, Mohammad Ayub, and Ruben Morales-Menendez. "Establishing a Latin American University Honors Program: The Case of Campus Monterrey, Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 73–100.

Kinser, Kevin, and Jason E. Lane. "International Branch Campuses: Evolution of a Phenomenon." *International Higher Education*, no. 85, 2016. <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/view9232>. Accessed 7 April 2018.

Lamb, Margaret. "'Honours' in the United Kingdom: More Than a Difference of Spelling in Honors Education." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 19–33.

Lewin, Tamar. "U.S. Universities Rush to Set Up Outposts Abroad." *The New York Times*, 10 Feb. 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/10/education/10global.html>. Accessed 24 May 2018.

Okour, Hassan. Personal interview. 27 Mar. 2018.

Redden, Elizabeth. "Canadian College Loses Millions on Branch Campus." *Inside Higher Ed*, 16 June 2017, <http://insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2017/6/16/canadian-college-loses-millions-branch-campus>. Accessed 15 June 2018.

Skewes, Juan Carlos, et al. "Honors in Chile: New Engagements in the Higher Education System." *Honors in Practice*, vol. 14, 2018, pp. 69–83.

Ulmer, Jesse. "Honors Program at VCUQatar." *Virginia Commonwealth University*, 12 June 2017, <http://bulletin.vcu.edu/undergraduate/arts/school-arts-qatar/honors-program>. Accessed 14 June 2018.

Wolfensberger, Marca V. C., et al. "Laboratories for Educational Innovation: Honors Programs in the Netherlands." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 149–70.

Yang, Calvin. "Ex-Students Sue NYU, Calling its Tisch Asia a Scam.'" *The Straits Times: Singapore*, 6 Oct. 2016, <http://straitstimes.com/singapore/education/ex-students-sue-nyu-calling-its-tisch-asia-a-scam>. Accessed 2 June 2018.

Yyelland, Byrad. "An American Honors Program in the Arab Gulf." *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 107–17, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal/357>. Accessed 2 June 2018.

Address correspondence to Jesse Gerlach Ulmer at ulmerjg@vcu.edu.