

The Implications of Campus Closures

Daniel C. Kent

The announcement in August of 2021 that Yale-NUS College would be closing its doors permanently in 2025 sent shockwaves throughout Singaporean and international higher education circles (see also [Hoe Yeong Loke](#), “Closure of Yale-NUS College: Unclear Reasons, But Clear Implications,” in *IHE* #109). The class that had enrolled just weeks before would be its last, and by 2025, Yale-NUS would be fully replaced by New College—a reimagined form of Singaporean liberal arts education. Although not meeting the technical definition of an international branch campus (NUS controlled and operated all aspects of the institution rather than their international partners in New Haven), the incident nevertheless represents both the highest-profile and most recent instance of an international branch campus (IBC) closure. The move to allow current students to finish out their degrees under the auspices of Yale-NUS College rather than elsewhere, however, raises the question of how other IBCs and similar international tie-ups have treated their students upon announcing their closure. Given the high rate of IBC closures, with an average of around two per year for the last twenty years, this issue will likely have continuing relevance for international higher education administrators and observers alike.

Options after Closing

From a review of the available data, it seems that many closing branch campuses have allowed current students to finish out their degrees while simultaneously barring new enrollment. In Singapore, NYU’s Tisch branch campus announced their closure after years of finance-related scandals, calling a community town hall to announce in person to students the fate of the institution. As with Yale-NUS, the institution allowed students to finish out their degrees (though master of fine arts [MFA] programs are notably shorter than a four-year undergraduate degree) before closing for good. Given the rigid structure and distinct curricula of most MFA programs, transfer pathways do not seem to have been developed for students, and it is unclear if they were offered the chance to finish their degrees in New York rather than Singapore.

There remains a question, of course, as to whether allowing students to finish locally is the best option for students in all cases. How is the value of a degree impacted when a campus closes, especially from the perspective of local employers? Would it be better to facilitate transferring the students to other colleges that will outlive their original institution? How will the student experience change, as faculty and staff depart from a shuttering campus? And what is the psychological effect of being part of a higher education community that has announced its expiration date?

Administrators grappling with these questions simply cannot answer them, as the impact of closed campuses on degree returns and other effects on students is an understudied area. Alumni of shuttered branch campuses also lose out on the benefits of potentially valuable alumni support services and closer ties to home campuses in the form of institutional events, networks, and continuing professional contacts that often provide graduates continuing value from their degrees even after graduating. While institutions would likely claim their home campuses continue to serve these alumni just as well, it is hard to imagine that they could do so at the same level as a full branch campus without on-the-ground dedicated staff. For students, finishing locally, though surely the easiest option, is not as straightforward a decision as it may seem, and they may prefer to transfer elsewhere.

Other colleges with closing campuses have done just this, facilitating transfer to other nearby institutions, or offering students the opportunity to study at another branch

Abstract

Many international branch campuses, particularly those originating from the United States, have closed their doors in recent years. Understanding how institutions have accommodated students during a closure may help other campuses best serve their students even in their final days of operation.

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of the home university rather than allowing them to finish their degrees locally. Indeed, for IBCs announcing sudden or unexpected closures, transferring may be the only option for students. When the New York Institute of Technology in Manama, Bahrain closed, the few students remaining were offered the option to complete their degrees at other NYIT international campuses, though it is unclear if any of the students took up the offer. And when Suffolk University in Dakar, Senegal, shuttered, the remaining students were offered the opportunity to transfer to the home campus in Boston, of which approximately 100 did. George Mason University's Ras Al Khaimah campus in the United Arab Emirates closed in 2009 after the host government decided to change its financial support of the institution. Although efforts appear to have been made by the university to ensure that students could transfer elsewhere, there were no clearly established, guaranteed transfer pathways developed for students to other institutions other than studying in George Mason's home campus of Virginia. Students were notified that other local branch campuses had expressed "interest" in their enrollment—without confirming that their credits would necessarily transfer through preexisting agreements.

Facilitated transfers to other campuses, when available for students, would seem the optimal solution for at least some, given the uncertainty around the value of their degrees and lack of stability of a campus in the midst of closure. Of course, such transfers also involve upheaval for students' lives, moving to an unfamiliar campus and perhaps even country context that they did not sign up for. Similar academic programs, especially after transferring to another institution entirely, may not be available. And new administrative structures and institutional cultures can be difficult to manage, further imperiling students' likelihood of degree completion.

There are no readily documented instances of IBCs leaving students completely in the lurch, not allowing them to easily complete their degrees locally or elsewhere. However, such drastically sudden institutional closures have become almost commonplace in the past several years in the United States, particularly in the volatile for-profit higher education sector. It is not difficult to imagine that this scenario could take place in the rapidly changing administrative and financial context of IBCs in the future.

Closures on the Rise

Given the large proliferation of IBCs, a changing international context, and challenges in administrative and financial management, a small number of IBCs may continue to shutter year by year, as has been the case for some time (see also [Jana Maria Kleibert](#), "Optimistic Postpandemic Outlooks for International Branch Campuses" in *IHE* #109). For students at these closing campuses, the options are not ideal. They are losing a community, an academic program, and a campus that they have been a part of for anywhere from months to years. Understanding how other institutions have responded to closures, though, may help future administrators provide better ways to serve their students, even as they close their doors for good. ▲

Daniel C. Kent is a former senior admissions counselor at Yale-NUS College in Singapore and currently a program associate for research at a philanthropic foundation in New York, US. Email: dk@mellon.org.