“Performing American: The Globalization of Higher Education and the American-Style University”

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This paper examines the American-style university in terms of how it performs national identity within the logic of globalized consumer culture. Drawing from Judith Butler’s studies of gender identity, which have recently been developed by Catherine Rottenberg to demonstrate how “Americanness” functions as a performative identity, the paper evaluates curricula, campus layout, and student activities in order to show how “Americanness” is performed outside of North America by institutions, faculty members, and students. The process of “performing American,” I argue, allows, on one hand, institutions who brand themselves “American” to offer an appeal to legitimacy, and on the other hand for students and parents to contain potentially subversive elements of what “American” can represent in the Middle East region.

The paper calls attention to how the American-style model of higher education replicates practices of North American institutions and thereby calls attention to the disavowal of local culture seen in the way North American universities construct their brands to attract students from national and now international markets. The investigation contributes to recent studies of the tensions, opportunities, and transformations that exist as the American university has shifted from a repository of national culture to a player in the global economy, and what that means to the profession.