Haitian Universities, Always Fragile, Languish Amid Wreckage

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all but about a dozen of the 300 students, pro-

fessors, and staff on site.

Two years after the quake struck, higher

education in the Western Hemisphere’s poor-
est nation is struggling to rebound. The al-

ways fragile sector has made only marginal

improvements, hamstrung by a lack of equip-

ment, qualified people, and space. What uni-

versities want most is money, but most inter-
national donors either have focused their ef-

forts on elementary and secondary education

or have been hesitant to hand over cash in a

country riddled with corruption and misman-

agement.

Professors’ salaries are low and often go

unpaid. Only a small percentage work full-
time. And university leaders are struggling

not just to find the means to reconstruct build-

ings but also to recognize the role of the uni-

versity in a nation with so few resources.

“The quake was the opportunity to re-

build the system as a whole,” says Béa-

trice Kébreau, regional administrator of the

Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, a

Paris-based group of international univer-

sities. “Governments in the past never sup-

ported higher education. The curriculum

was weak, and the funding wasn’t there. If

they are building buildings and not rethink-

ing the system that didn’t work in the first

place, then things will only go from bad to

worse.”

The 1-Percent Problem

The reconstruction process has been espe-
cially difficult because successive Haitian gov-

ernments never paid much attention to higher

education in this nation of 10 million people.

Only 22 percent of Haitians finish elementary

school, and only 1 percent have completed col-

lege, according to government figures. Some

39 percent of the population is illiterate, so the

top priority, however badly executed, has al-

ways been elementary education.

Soon after the quake, the country’s presi-

dent at the time, René Préval, created a pres-

idential task force on education, which was

charged with drafting a five-year “Opera-

tion Plan” for reforming Haiti’s education

system. It proposed expanding higher-ed-

ucation enrollments and raising more than a

half-billion dollars to rebuild and revamp

the system.

Haiti’s current president, Michel Martelly,

who took power in May, named the country’s

first-ever under secretary for higher educa-

tion, although he also emphasized that his fo-

cus is on bolstering elementary education.

So far though, grand plans have seen lit-
tle follow-through. Those in charge of higher

education at the education ministry say they

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By Andrew Downie

in Haiti, a Gleaming Campus, but No People

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in the Edge of the Haitian capital

is a large parcel of land onto which the

State University of Haiti, the

country’s largest public institution, wants to

move its schools and turn them into a uni-

fied campus. About 160 miles away, near

the coastal city of Cap-Haitien, is a new com-

plex built for the university by the Domini-
can Republic as a gift to its island neighbor.

At the former, administrators hope the
government will hand over $196-million to

build and equip the complex. At the latter,

they have no idea what to do with the new
building scheduled to open on January 12,
two years after a devastating earthquake.

The contrasting projects are indicative of
Haiti’s faltering process of rebuilding.
Some 87 percent of its biggest institutions
of higher education were destroyed or ren-
dered unusable by the earthquake.

But a shortage of cash means that few
universities have been reconstructed. When there is money, it is often spent without planning or consultation. And foreign aid mostly goes to projects involving such things as curriculum development or stu-
dent and teacher exchanges, not the bricks

and mortar that universities need and want.

“Most of them are still in need of infra-

structure,” says Bechir Lamine, Unesco’s

representative in Haiti. “If you don’t have

buildings, then you can’t have libraries.”

The State University of Haiti hopes to

bring together its 11 schools, and open

three more, on a large complex near its

agronomy school. The land has been set

aside, and workers are building a wall

around the area to keep out squatters. They

hope to soon evict subsistence farmers us-

ing the land to grow bananas, corn, sweet

potatoes, and green beans.

But there is a question mark about the proj-

ect’s viability. Jean Vernet Henry, the rector,
says he needs $96-million to build the com-

plex and an additional $800-million to equip

and ready it. He has been asking the govern-

ment for funds since June 2010, with no luck.

Although Mr. Henry is optimistic, few

people believe the project will ever come
to fruition.

“They have these big pie-in-the-sky

plans, and in terms of real action, not a lot

gets done,” says Josiane Hudicourt, a re-

searcher at the Foundation for Knowledge

and Liberty, an international organization

in Haiti, supported by the Open Society In-

stitute, that is focused on education. “There

is no trust in the Haitian government for

such large amounts of money.”

One project that did get done—without

Haitian government money—is at Limon-

ade, in the north of Haiti. The Dominican

Republic built a university 22 kilometers

from Cap-Haitien as a gift. But it did so

without consulting anyone in Haiti. (Offi-

cials in the foreign and education minis-

tries did not respond to repeated attempts

by The Chronicle to contact them.)

Haitian officials were not involved in
discussing details such as the size of class-

rooms, common areas, or green spaces.

It has no dorms, no hotel nearby, and sits

snug against the nearest highway.

And while officials of the state univer-
sity expect to turn the complex into the in-
sitution’s northern base, they don’t know

if there are enough academics in the area
to teach, or if it will be able to attract them

from the capital.

“If organized correctly, it will relieve

pressure on Port-au-Prince and those going

abroad,” says Jean Claude François, newly

appointed under secretary of higher educa-

tion. “[But] the conditions in which this has

been done are not clear. I don’t have any

paperwork to define the terms or conditions

by which the university will be run.”

At the State U. of Haiti, the country’s best-known university, many students prefer to live in tents in dormitory courtyards rather than in

the damaged rooms. “We are in pretty much the same situation since the earthquake,” says Pierre-Richard René (left), a student leader.

It makes you realize how spoiled American students are when they complain the Internet is down.”

Florence Pierre-Louis, director of the high-
er-education sector at the ministry. “When I

need something we make a request for funds,

but it is rarely approved. I am very frustrated.

Every time I go to the government and ex-

plain our problems, I am rebuffed and told

the priority is primary education.”

Worse Off

There is little doubt that Haiti’s universities

are far worse off now than they were before

the earthquake. A study carried out imme-

diately after the disaster by the Interuniver-
sity Institute for Research and Development,
based in Haiti, found that 87 percent of the
country’s 32 largest universities had been either demolished or badly damaged.

The neighboring Dominican Republic has built a new campus for the university in the north of the country (see article on facing page), and university leaders have set aside land to build a unified campus for its Port-au-Prince faculties just north of the city. But at many universities, lessons take place in makeshift classrooms fashioned from wood and wire that the instructors call chicken coops. Other classes are held in open yards or under canvass tents. Some happen in the shade of tropical trees, an experience one teacher good-naturedly calls “very Socratic.”

Agronomy students at the university live in buildings with big cracks in the walls; a few are housed in tents in the faculty patio, surrounded by goats, chickens, and smoldering garbage. Even where buildings are intact, some students prefer not to enter, because of lingering traumas.

And at almost all of the country’s institutions, vital materials that were already in short supply, such as books, computers, microscopes, and audiovisual equipment, were lost.

“The quake destroyed a lot of what we had,” says Jean Monnel Fils-Aimé, a 37-year-old senior in the school of linguistics. “There isn’t enough space. There is no language lab. There is no space to put a library. We don’t have enough books. And those in charge don’t do anything about it.”

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example of how life goes on in Haiti. Stu-
dents and professors work in the three
ground-floor classrooms rebuilt with bricks
and wooden partitions. Classes take place
in windowless chambers filled with wood-
and-metal school chairs facing a white-
board or blackboard.

When there is electricity (it cuts out on
a daily basis), a fan buzzes away in the cor-
ner.

One recent afternoon when a profes-
sor failed to show—not an unusual occa-
sion—several students, many of whom have
nowhere else to go, sit at the back of the room
chatting. A few others sit outside with
their heads in their books. The lucky ones cram
themselves into what passes for a library, a
tiny room with a desk and two cabinets of
books.

Out back, against a makeshift wooden
wall, broken chairs and desks are piled up.
Occasionally an instructor will pass by and
almost apologetically wedge himself into the
equally tiny lounge.

“We didn’t have enough space before, and
now it is even worse. We do our best with
the little space we have, but it is more dif-
ficult than ever,” says Saintfurme Dorigil,
a language professor who was in the building
when it collapsed. He lost three fingers on his
right hand but says he was one of the fortu-
nate ones.

Although it educates an enormous number
of students, the university’s budget is almost
$10-million a year—a sum so small that ad-
ministrators say it makes rebuilding nearly
impossible.

“It was very difficult to restart because
we lost our labs and all our infrastruc-
ture,” says Jean Vernet Henry, the rector.
“We built some shelters to restart courses,
but the hands-on aspect is difficult because
you can’t practice in shelters. And teaching
conditions are very difficult. We have tried
to find funds and financing to rebuild, but
we can’t.”

Reluctant to Help

Haitian universities have no tradition of
planning ahead, and so foreign donors are
reluctant to offer help without a clear idea of
where their money is going to be spent. In
comments echoed by other administrators,
Mr. Henry says much of the assistance of-
ered by partner universities from abroad is
dependent on the Haitian institutions’ being
up and running again, something they can’t
do until they have new homes.

“We have received a lot of universities who
can help us, but they don’t have the resourc-
es to build.” he says. “They can help us with
The quake was the
opportunity to rebuild
the system as a whole.”

The main problem for the university’s 11
faculties is a lack of money, the rector says.
And while assistance from abroad was vital in
helping universities get through the weeks and
months following the disaster, longer-term aid
is less focused on rebuilding infrastructure.

Construction costs are just one of several
financial issues facing Haitian universities,
though. Around 80 percent of the State Uni-
versity of Haiti’s annual budget goes to pay
professors. And finding qualified staff who
will accept low salaries—which are frequent-
lly not paid on time—is a constant headache.

In Haiti, more than half of university pro-

The quake brought the attention of
the university world like never before,” says Mr.
Lumarque. “That is a paradigm shift. This is
a new trend and a great opportunity. We need
to take it.”

Gertrude Pierre, a nursing student at the State U. of
Haiti, lives in a tent made of tarps and wooden poles. “I’m finishing up this year,
but I still have a year or two more,” she says. “Hopefully one day my education will help me improve my situation.”