

To Build Anew



Aided by the work of a distinguished faculty member and a worldwide consortium of institutions, UMass Boston takes a leadership role in the reconstruction of Haiti's higher education system.



Alix Cantave (l) with an INAGHEI student who participated in a summer research seminar sponsored by UMass Boston.

BY LESLIE LIMON

Alix Cantave was in his UMass Boston office on January 12, 2010, when his phone rang. His wife, Bernadette, was calling. “Have you looked at the news?” she asked. The news to which she referred was horrific: A massive earthquake had struck Haiti—triggering what for the Cantaves and many others would be a long, agonizing wait for word about family, co-workers, and friends. Alix, the Haitian-born associate director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute for the Study of Black Culture, worried about colleagues at Institut National d’Administration de Gestion et des Hautes Etudes Internationales (INAGHEI), the business school of the State University of Haiti. Since 2008, he had forged close relationships with INAGHEI staff and faculty through that institution’s working partnership with UMass Boston.

Funded by Higher Education for Development (HED), an organization contracted by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the partnership aims to strengthen INAGHEI’s business administration degree program and increase its relevance to Haiti’s workforce needs. The program was a natural fit for Cantave, who earned a PhD in public policy from the McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies in 2006. His

interest in advancing Haiti's system of higher education goes back to 1986, when he was asked to assess Haiti's prospects after the ouster of President "Papa Doc" Duvalier. In 1989, Cantave founded the Haitian Studies Association (HSA) as a forum for thought and discussion about Haitian culture and the nation's future. HSA is now led by prominent Haitian scholar Marc Prou, professor of African studies and director of the Haitian Institute at UMass Boston.

Devastation—and determination

The January earthquake decimated Haiti's colleges and universities. All 119 institutions of higher education located in and around Port-au-Prince were affected; in addition, only two of the State University of Haiti's 13 buildings were usable after the quake. Jean-Vernet Henry, the State University rector, reported that about 350 of its students, 20 professors, and 20 staff members perished in the quake. It wasn't until the plane carrying Cantave and the rest of his delegation touched down in Haiti three weeks later, however, that the magnitude of the disaster hit him. "My first reaction: all the landmarks I grew up with, gone. It just went on and on." Arriving at INAGHEI, the delegation—which included Marie St. Fleur, then state representative for the Commonwealth's Fifth Suffolk District—learned that school officials could not account for all students. School records were too unreliable.



Above: INAGHEI students attending a first-year seminar months before the earthquake.

Right: A temporary classroom constructed after the earthquake. The main INAGHEI building is damaged and is not suitable for classes.

One might have understood if, at that point, the group had thrown up their hands and returned home. Instead, they turned to the UMass Boston registrar's office to help INAGHEI develop a better record-keeping system. Cantave's determination to continue with the project was fueled by his conviction that at this one school UMass Boston could make a difference in a way that could be replicated throughout Haiti. He reasoned that sending Haitian university students abroad to build a critical mass of analytical and leadership skills would not lead to much-needed capacity building, since even if the students were required to return to Haiti after graduation, chances are they would not stay. In his mind, the only solution was "to invest in the institutions and the human resources in Haiti."

When Rector Henry wrote to Chancellor Motley requesting UMass Boston's assistance in rebuilding, the university agreed to offer support on the condition that the State University provide its vision for both its needs and UMass Boston's role. "We can't try to raise millions to rebuild buildings without thinking about all the issues," said Cantave. "It's not, 'Let's build an information technology lab and then figure out how to use it.' We need them to say, 'Here is how we want to use the space to improve teaching and learning, and these are the tools we need, to be able to use it that way.'"

Going global

The challenge lies in deciding how to support the rebuilding of higher education in Haiti without duplicating others' aid efforts or reestablishing old dysfunctions. Cantave sees in this challenge an opportunity to engage Haitian academics worldwide. Under the aegis of UMass Boston's leadership, he has accepted the role of project coordinator for a consortium of institutions in Haiti and elsewhere that would simultaneously address the short-term needs of Haitian higher education and





A view of students inside the INAGHEI library before the earthquake.

collaborate on long-term rebuilding projects.

Pulling together this consortium and identifying funding sources occupies much of Cantave's time and energy, and he is grateful for the support he has gotten from UMass Boston and the Trotter Institute. In July, the consortium's planning committee, which includes more than two dozen representatives from higher education and government agencies in the United States and Haiti (HED among them), began working out the details of a late-October conference in Haiti. The event would convene representatives of higher education worldwide, Haitian groups committed to the rebuilding effort, financial institutions, Haitian government officials, and appropriate nongovernmental organizations.

UMass Boston provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs Winston Langlely, who co-chairs the planning committee, was pleased with the July meeting. He notes in particular that the participation of Haitians and U.S. citizens of Haitian heritage "presented us with a number of views that can be fruitfully used for future planning purposes."

When Cantave returned to Haiti in August, he met with the higher education director at the Haitian Ministry of Education and requested ministry involvement in the consortium, a long-term goal of which is to help that office build capacity to oversee Haitian institutions of higher education. "What's frustrating is that we know how to build universities," says Cantave. "Why things haven't been done has to do with human factors." He stresses that his role as a member of the Haitian diaspora, and the role of institutions such as UMass Boston, is to support that process. "The people of Haiti have to want to do this," he says. "We cannot do it without them." His normally gentle, musical voice rises a notch as he expresses concern that Haiti is losing international goodwill because of its government's apparent unwillingness to articulate a vision for the contributions of the global community.

Optimism—and skepticism

Cantave's vision of the future of higher education in Haiti blends optimism with healthy skepticism. He is encouraged by the degree of

engagement among institutions outside Haiti that have not previously been involved with Haitian issues. He is confident that, within the next year, he will see partnerships among consortium members that yield a unified effort to rebuild higher education in his native country. His intention is not "to reproduce in Haiti what we have here [in the United States], but to create a system for the intended beneficiaries of that system, the university students," he says. And he hopes to see serious discussion about restructuring the State University of Haiti, the only Haitian institution of higher learning to accept qualified students regardless of ability to pay. Much of his skepticism stems from his concern that expediency could trump thoughtful planning, particularly in light of mounting criticism over a perceived lack of progress in rebuilding the country.

St. Fleur, now chief of advocacy and strategic investments for Boston and a member of the consortium planning committee, also voices optimism about the future of Haiti's system of higher learning. She is fully behind UMass Boston's lead role in the rebuilding effort, citing the university's unique commitment to Haiti, its culture, and its people. As evidence she points to the number of Haitian Americans the university graduates, as well as its model Haitian studies program.

St. Fleur also believes Massachusetts is uniquely equipped to help Haiti restore the high quality that characterized its colleges and universities decades ago. The foreign-policy clout of its congressional delegation gives the Bay State not only a unique vantage point on the rebuilding of Haiti, she says, but also unmatched ability to get the quake-ravaged nation the resources it needs: "What other place has all this convergence and all this really good energy and influence to be able to make a real difference in Haiti right now?"

And who better than Cantave to harness that energy and influence in a way that will enable UMass Boston to help make that difference?

Leslie Limon is a freelance writer who specializes in higher education.