



## PEOPLE

## New Leader of NYU Shanghai Has Built Other Bridges to China

By MARY HENNOCK

BEIJING

**T**HE AMERICAN ACADEMIC chosen to lead NYU Shanghai, a liberal-arts campus expected to serve up to 3,000 students, is already working in China. **Jeffrey S. Lehman**, soon to become vice chancellor, founded a law school in the country in 2008, the first to award Chinese and American law degrees in one program.

Running NYU Shanghai is “a dream opportunity to extend the work I’ve been doing for the last five years in China,” said Mr. Lehman, speaking by phone from his office at Peking University School of Transnational Law, which is based not in the Chinese capital but in Shenzhen, on the Hong Kong border. “It is a chance to bring a great university to China, which is a country I’ve come to care for, and to help to develop a new model for education.”

He will be steering the new institution jointly with Yu Lizhong, president of NYU’s local partner, East

China Normal University. In line with rules on academic joint ventures, Mr. Yu will be the chancellor and will play a major role in government relations. Mr. Lehman, as vice chancellor, will have free rein in academic affairs. The first students will arrive in fall 2013, the majority of them from China.

Before he went to China, Mr. Lehman, now 55, was dean of the University of Michigan Law School and then president of his alma mater, Cornell University. He quit in 2005, after just two years, because of disagreements with its Board of Trustees over how to realize the university’s long-term vision.

His next project, the law school in Shenzhen, reflects his strong belief in globalized education, which dates back to his junior year in Paris, and his excitement when he observed first-hand the rise of China, during a 1998 trip there with a State Department-backed lawyers’ delegation. His efforts to build academic bridges to China led Peking University to invite him to create a

cross-cultural law school.

When NYU’s president got a similar invitation from Shanghai city officials, Mr. Lehman was an obvious person to call. **John Sexton**, NYU’s president and a longtime friend of Mr. Lehman’s, sought the Shenzhen law-school dean’s advice early on. Mr. Lehman served first as an informal consultant, then on the project payroll.

The talks with Chinese officials “never had the feel for us of dealing with a different side. It was a very organic process, and Jeff fit in beautifully,” says Mr. Sexton.

Mr. Lehman says his disappointment over his time at Cornell has taught him to make sure his vision of an institution is aligned with other people’s.

But many partnerships have foundered after promising beginnings.

How does he plan to avoid the common pitfalls of overseas offshoots, which are often less popular with local students than is going abroad to study, or are derailed by the difficulties of retaining high-

quality tenured faculty?

“It needs to be a place that people want to go, and Shanghai meets that test,” he says. Stellar staff at NYU and “astonishing” people from elsewhere have already expressed interest, he says.

Mr. Lehman expects to be splitting time 50-50 between Shanghai and New York for the next year as he crams “to learn NYU” by meeting faculty.

Academic freedom in China is curtailed by red lines around such sensitive subjects as political reform or Tibetan independence. NYU’s agreement is that all campus discussions be unfettered. The law school in Shenzhen has had “absolutely zero problems,” Mr. Lehman says, even when guest lecturers gave controversial civil-rights classes. But, he says, “I expect there will come a moment when there will be a disagreement.”

Potential sources of friction are student activism (foreign students must realize they are not exempt from Chinese law, he warns) or the



NYU SHANGHAI

Jeffrey S. Lehman

pragmatic materialism behind China’s leaders’ enthusiasm for innovation and the liberal arts.

When Mr. Lehman told Premier Wen Jiabao at a recent meeting that his current crop of law students were “magical, like young Harry Potters,” he says, the premier laughingly replied that he’d prefer to hear China’s youth compared to young Steve Jobs. ■