

## **The Future of Higher Learning and UP\*** **Maria Serena I. Diokno**

It might surprise you that a historian like myself has chosen to address the future rather than dwell on our past. My reason is straightforward. We have begun our second century! Invigorated by our first hundred years of achievement as the nation's university, the university of our people, we embark on our second century standing on solid ground, confident of our strengths, humbled by the lessons of past failures and yes, proud that despite our imperfections, we have been able to attract young Filipinos who, at least while under our guardianship, represented the promise of a bright future. It is this promise that in the main has kept us going. The future that has yet to unfold, the future we have some power to direct, is the university's logical orientation. We converse with the young who represent tomorrow's players and decision makers; we design programs with the future in mind; we produce knowledge that does not always have instant application but which we believe, or earnestly hope, will help create a better society and a more inhabitable world. That the university speaks to the future is the implicit backdrop of change in the academe: standards become more rigorous with time; curricula are updated and advanced; knowledge is constantly pushed beyond what we once saw as its limits. Our job as academics, in short, is to hark to the future; our job is also to help create it.

Recent studies of tertiary education show that the future of societies, local, national and global, will rest increasingly on higher learning. In its report in 2000 on developing countries, the Task Force on Higher Education and Society proclaimed: "Higher education is no longer a luxury: it is essential to national social and economic development."<sup>1</sup> Yet developments in recent decades have tended to undermine this assertion. My purpose in this lecture is to discuss trends and global projections about the future of higher education and the impact

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<sup>1</sup> Task Force on Higher Education and Society, *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* (Washington: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2000), p. 14.

on or implications for UP. I will cite data on the United States and England on purpose, to draw out what, on the surface, are implausible comparisons.

What are present global conditions like? Three trends ended the last century and inaugurated the 21<sup>st</sup>: the massification of higher education, with more students entering college than ever before (the National University of Mexico and the University of Buenos Aires each have an enrollment of more than 200,000 students!<sup>2</sup>); the differentiation of universities into basically teaching institutions, polytechnic colleges, junior colleges, and high-end research universities; and the exponential growth of knowledge at an ever-quickenning pace.<sup>3</sup>

In 2004, worldwide, there were 132 million students in higher education compared to 68 million in 1991. About a quarter came from the East Asia and Pacific region, which experienced the largest growth in absolute number (by 25 million from 1991 to 2004), and another quarter from the U.S. and Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> In Southeast Asia, as Figure 1 illustrates, the Philippines until the 1990s had the highest gross enrollment ratio at the tertiary level<sup>5</sup> in the region, second only to Singapore since then. We have long had the largest number of college students, overtaken by Indonesia only more than a decade ago, as Figure 2 shows. But the largest expansion in college enrollment has taken place in Thailand and Indonesia, from nearly 131,000 Thai students in 1975 to 1.2 million in 1995, and close to 280,000 Indonesian students in 1975 to 2.3 million twenty years later.

To cope with the demand for tertiary enrollment, many countries in the world responded horizontally, by creating more universities or taking in greater

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<sup>2</sup> Task Force, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-34.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Global Education Digest 2006: Comparing Education Statistics Across the World* (Montreal, 2006), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Percent of population in the five-year age group following the official age secondary school is completed.

numbers, and vertically, by putting up institutions that cater to diverse capacities (community college, technical institute, comprehensive university, distance education, research university). In developing countries, however, higher education institutions are less diversified than in high-income countries. In our case, junior and community colleges do not exist perhaps because of the overwhelming cultural value we assign to a four-year college diploma, even if it comes from an institution hardly more advanced than a high school.

### **The challenge of marginalization**

On the other hand, and this is the paradox of our century, higher education faces the grave challenge of marginalization at a time when knowledge so rigorously demands it. The university budget is typically the most visible articulation of marginalization efforts for several reasons. The global fight against poverty gives primordial significance to basic education; higher learning must take a back seat while functional literacy is raised. In the developing world, fundamental needs of health care, education and social security battle it out in the tragedy of the commons. And in countries like ours that are ruled by governments with self-serving priorities and without a vision of the future except for Fantasy Island (think Enchanted Kingdom), even the beleaguered budget for education becomes an arena of corruption, patronage and mediocrity (think textbook scam).

However, even in the developed world, or what used to be so, university budgets have remained at insufficient levels. Prof. Alison Richard, vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, laments that British universities are “hopelessly underfunded.”<sup>6</sup> All over the U.S., even prior to the implosion of Wall Street, public universities voiced a similar complaint.

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<sup>6</sup> Jessica Shepherd, “Cambridge Mission ‘Not Social Mobility’”, *The Guardian*, 10 September 2008.

One effect of marginalization is the tendency toward market-driven education, or what some call the corporatization of the academe. Public universities struggle to survive amid reduced budgets, growing competition among tertiary institutions, faculty piracy prompted by indecent salaries, and reputations that increasingly rest upon global rankings of universities. The current drive for the internationalization of universities, which the survey of *The Times Higher Education Supplement* lays heavy emphasis on, is partly an attempt to pirate the best talents in the world, both faculty and students. Countries like the UK, where tuition at top universities has remained low compared to Harvard and other American universities in their league, are under tremendous pressure to raise fees. Vice-Chancellor Richard of Cambridge complains: "There is a prevailing view in the UK that students, all students, are a source of income, not an investment in the future."<sup>7</sup> Across the Atlantic, scholarships based on need are being replaced by merit-based awards as American universities attempt to raise their ranking by taking in better qualified students, who usually do not come from lower income, black or Latino families.<sup>8</sup>

### **The issue of access**

Access to higher education, then, has become a major global concern and not just in obvious cases such as ours and other developing countries. Although tertiary enrollment in England rose in 2000 compared to 1994, for example, the Higher Education Funding Council pointed out that the proportion of poorer students "hardly changed at all."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, college-age students in England's wealthiest neighborhoods have a better than 50% chance of entering university, compared to 10% for students residing in the poorest areas. In the U.S. the trend favors white American students, 30 percent of whom obtained bachelor's

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<sup>7</sup> Shepherd.

<sup>8</sup> Robert M. Diamond, "Why Colleges Are So Hard to Change," *Inside Higher Ed*, 8 September 2006, <http://insidehighered.com/views/2006/09/08/diamond>.

<sup>9</sup> "Student Access Inequality Exposed," *BBC News*, 19 January 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk\\_news/education/4185697.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/education/4185697.stm).

degrees in 2006, compared to only 15 percent of African American students and 10 percent of Hispanic students.<sup>10</sup>

While entrenched divisions between rich and poor in the West might offer solace to those who have long been familiar with inequity, the issue of access in the 'developed' world is approached quite differently from ours in the less developed countries. In the United States, for instance, the issue of access arises from the shift in a manufacturing-driven industrial economy to a Third Wave service economy propelled by information and technological innovation.<sup>11</sup> About 54% of new job openings in America in the decade 2004-2014 are expected to be filled by workers with some postsecondary education,<sup>12</sup> unlike the old economy, which did not require college-level knowledge and skills. Today, in anticipation of greater changes to come, a call to develop a 'college-going culture' has been made.

Ironically in the Philippines, such a culture has not been foreign to us. Even a secretary here is required to possess a college degree, unlike in England, for example, where 'O' level credentials are sufficient. Yet, the fastest growing domestic job openings here do not demand higher-order competencies; only the ability to speak English with an alien twang. The fact is that in the developing world outside the West, the concern with access emanates from the stark condition of poverty and its twin, social inequity. Our Commission on Higher Education frames its vision and thrust toward poverty reduction but unfortunately, makes no projection about the local job sector in its *Medium-Term Plan for Higher Education, 2005-2010* and says little else beyond a bland statement about the need to advance knowledge "for the improvement of academic instruction,

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<sup>10</sup> Edward M. Kennedy, "What Spellings Got Right and Wrong," *Inside Higher Ed*, 3 October 2006, <http://insidehighered.com/views/2006/10/03/kennedy>.

<sup>11</sup> Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, Education and Competitiveness: A Resource and Policy Guide," (Tucson, 2008), p. 2, [www.21stcenturyskills.org](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org).

<sup>12</sup> D. E. Hecker, "Occupational Employment Projections to 2014," *Monthly Labor Review* (November 2005): 80, cited in Pathways to College Network, "The Facts: Postsecondary Access and Success," Boston: The Education Resources Institute, Inc., 2007, [www.pathways@teri.org](http://www.pathways@teri.org).

productivity enhancement and job creation, and in addressing the key issues confronting the Philippine society.”<sup>13</sup>

Marginalization also finds articulation in the quality of learning. Listen to this: “73% of all colleges still find it necessary to offer remedial classes for entering students.”<sup>14</sup> Sounds like universities in a third world country, right? Wrong! The description speaks of the U.S.A. The OECD (Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation) found that 15-year-old American students placed 35<sup>th</sup> in mathematics and 36<sup>th</sup> in science among 57 countries that took part in the 2006 Programme for Student Assessment. Moreover, even the highest-achievers among American students performed below their international peers.<sup>15</sup> There is, too, concern in the United States that it will soon pale in the shadow of Asian universities, particularly Chinese, in the field of science and technology. For instance, The Task Force on the Future of American Innovation singles out as a contrast to the U.S., China’s recent declaration that it would transform 100 of its universities into the world’s best research institutions, a matter of Chinese national priority. China expects to do this by tapping Chinese specialists trained abroad and Chinese-American experts.<sup>16</sup> I have little doubt China will command its resources and meet this objective.

Now what about us? We all agree that our education pipeline is poorly constructed to begin with, and being at the other end of the pipeline, there is little we can do to clean out the rot or remove the rust or deepen the pipeline. But even in UP, higher education has become increasingly remedial not just at the level of incoming freshmen, who experienced the XDS program in the late ‘70s

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<sup>13</sup> Commission on Higher Education, *Medium-Term Development Plan, 2005-2010: Responding to the Challenges of a Dynamic Environment* (Pasig City: Office of Policy, Planning, Research and Information, 2007), p. xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy.

<sup>15</sup> Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> The Task Force on the Future of American Innovation, “Measuring the Moment: Innovation, National Security, and Economic Competitiveness,” November 2006, p. 26, [www.futureofinnovation.org](http://www.futureofinnovation.org). See also: “U.S. Slips in Attracting the World’s Best Students,” *The New York Times*, 21 December 2004; “China Luring Scholars to Make Universities Great,” *The New York Times*, 28 October 2005.

and early '80s, and summer bridge programs in the '90s, but also juniors and seniors who do not possess or are not adequately being prepared for 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies. Yet, they enter the world with our diploma.

Each year I worry that we will graduate students with a bachelor's degree who do not know how to write, or do not understand what they read in a critical way (or perhaps read very little), or are unable to analyze what they learn before recycling it in an essay exam or a term paper. The inabilities of incoming students we can blame on basic education—the clog in the pipeline—but the responsibility for the failed abilities of upper undergraduate students rests at least partly on our shoulders.

### **Dealing with corrective needs**

My sense is that we are not prepared to deal with the corrective needs that plague higher education. First, our attitude is that we are here to advance knowledge, not to cure it. When students enter UP, we assume they possess the prerequisites and if they do not, that is their problem, not ours. Second, if we were to spend our energy and resources on remedial education, less would be left for *real* education, which is our primary, many would argue, sole, task. Third, by doing remedial courses we diminish our standards and thereby shortchange our students.

All these are valid arguments. But what is not acceptable is when we ourselves lower standards to ensure that our courses will always have students or because teaching is too painstaking and eats up far too much of our time. For instance, a number of colleagues have suggested to me that the reason for the surprisingly large number of honor graduates is that our GE program has become effortless. With 45 units easily in the bag, our students can still attain honors even if they perform less ably in their major courses. I do not know if this is true but if it is, the fault is ours and ours alone. Have some of us succumbed to the

market orientation that in order to attract students and sustain departmental access to, say, equipment funds, our GE courses must be easy to pass? Are the learning materials we have developed, including those that apply educational technologies, too simple, too remedial that we end up sacrificing substance for form? Do the GE readings challenge our students? And do the exams we subject GE students to actually test their ability to think critically, to be creative, to write coherently, to argue on the basis of sound judgment, and so on? The strength of the GE program is its ability to challenge, and this is, or ought to be, the very source of its attractiveness.

Whenever I cringe at my students' essays, whether written in Filipino or English, they tell me that one reason they did not learn to write in UP is that when their papers or exams are returned, all they see is a number. No indication whatsoever is written about what the number actually means, about which part of the essay is poorly argued or badly written and why. So they repeat the same mistakes—because they passed those courses anyway—until they get to me. I tell them that at the senior level it is a little too late for me to undo what they have internalized, even as I apply the weapon of fear followed by horrifying grief upon reading their first draft.

### **Working backwards**

What strategy could possibly address this problem? First, I propose we take a look at our methods courses and work backward in terms of the knowledge and competencies we expect our majors to acquire along the way. We can do this in clusters of disciplines although, given the transdisciplinary nature of knowledge, discussions across fields would be instructive. Second, let us review the GE program along the lines I noted above. Third, I strongly urge the administration to bring UP into the network of universities that do CPR, Calibrated Peer Review, an online self-learning tool developed by UCLA that began in chemistry because American educators were alarmed that science

majors did not know how to write. CPR exposes the student to excellent reading material, teaches the student how to read the article, and finally, how to tell whether an essay is well or badly written. Hence the term ‘calibrated peer review.’ As its website explains, CPR “enables frequent writing assignments even in large classes with limited instructional resources” and actually “can reduce the time an instructor now spends reading and assessing student writing.”<sup>17</sup>

What we should work on is our own web-based tool for writing in Filipino. Alternatively, although this could be costlier, there is the model of the University of Cape Town in South Africa, which has a writing center (called Center for Higher Education Development) where students are sent and then, in groups, are guided to rewrite their essays. The center also deals with remedial problems in numeracy. Faculty at the center work full-time and, like any other faculty, are expected to research on problems in their field in addition to mentoring students.

Finally, and this is where we as an institution have been remiss, we need to make public our expectations of basic education. I do not suggest this as a guide to passing the UPCAT but as a response to the changing demands on pre-collegiate education arising from the pace of knowledge creation, with which we are most familiar. If we inform the Department of Education and schools about rising expectations, the more committed ones will hopefully strive to meet them.

### **The Oxford Question**

It is difficult to speak about remedial education apart from the question of access since there is a positive correlation between income and UPCAT score. The higher the applicant’s declared annual income category, the higher the subtest scores except in test items in Filipino. Tempting as it is to shy away from the question, access goes straight to the heart of our purpose as a public university, a purpose that is being debated elsewhere in the world. Posed by a

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<sup>17</sup> Calibrated Peer Review, <http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu/>.

professor who teaches at both Oxford and Stanford: “The fundamental question—call it the Oxford Question—underlying all the others is this: can we, in Europe, have social justice in higher education and world-class research universities? Or must we choose?”<sup>18</sup> Cambridge Prof. Richard argues that it is wrong for government to look upon universities as “engines for promoting social justice.”<sup>19</sup>

We try to reach out to the best students, whatever their background. One outcome of that is that we can help to promote social mobility. But promoting social mobility is not our core mission. Our core mission is to provide an outstanding education within a research setting.<sup>20</sup>

And yet this year Cambridge announced that the proportion of students it admitted from state schools rose to 59%, the highest since 1981. (State schools educate 93% of all English students.)<sup>21</sup> Oxford, for its part, applied a new procedure this year that takes into account the applicant’s neighborhood (poor, middle-income, wealthy). Mike Nicholson, the university’s director of undergraduate admissions, explains why: “We want to make sure that we are not missing pupils because we are using A’s at GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] on their own without more information about the context within which they were gaining those grades.”<sup>22</sup> Achieving top grades under difficult conditions, Nicholson maintains, suggests high potential. “Using grades alone,” he says, “is too crude. I want to make sure that, if students are applying from places that have very few people progressing into higher education, we recognise that they are breaking the mould.”<sup>23</sup>

I find it paradoxical that as elite universities in the UK are changing admissions policy to take in poorer students, we in UP have taken the opposite

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, “Can We Have World-class Universities as well as Social Justice in Education?” *The Guardian*, 29 May 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Shepherd.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Shepherd.

<sup>22</sup> Anushka Asthana, “Oxford Targets the Poorest Postcodes,” *The Observer*, 17 August 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

route. Dissatisfied with the affirmative action component of the previous admission scheme because, among others, it did not discriminate among high school grades, Diliman opted to correct high school grade inflation by pegging school marks to the UPCAT score. The high school grade, which is supposed to indicate student diligence in learning over a stretch of time, has thus been merged with the UPCAT, a one-time measure. Two students with identical high school grade averages—previously a one-to-one correspondence—can now be assigned entirely different marks, depending on the UPCAT performance of the school's graduates. This adjustment index, which can be equal to, greater or less than one, is, according to proponents, a truer, more accurate indicator of student merit.

However, as Prof. Claude Steele, Psychology Department Chair at Stanford University, points out, scores on standardized admission tests are also inflated by such advantages as private school training, admission test review classes, access to books and computers at home, and so on<sup>24</sup>—advantages, in short, enjoyed by children in better-off families. It is thus no surprise that 93 of the 100 high schools with the highest UP adjustment factor in 2008 are private, while 70 of the bottom 100 schools are public (general).<sup>25</sup> The adjustment index, then, is also an indicator of affluence or lack of affluence. By correcting one sort of inequity, have we not created or aggravated another?

In a way our problem with social inequity is like that of deteriorating basic education. We are at the receiving end of both and are powerless to change the reality that precedes entry into UP. One could argue that it is not the University's job to cure the ills of basic education or to reduce social inequity. Perhaps so, but neither is it ours to make policy or take action that keeps qualified entrants at a remedial level, or that reinforces inequity or punishes those with less.

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<sup>24</sup> Claude M. Steele, Expert report prepared for Gratz, et. al. v. Bollinger, et. al., No. 97-75321 (E.D. Mich.), "The Compelling Need for Diversity in Higher Education," January 1999, <http://www.vpcomm.umich.edu/admissions/research/expert/steele.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Vice-President for Academic Affairs A. Guevara, October 2007.

## The purpose of the university

In all the discussions we have had on admissions, there is one thing we entirely overlooked, and that is the relationship between merit-based admissions and the purpose of the university. William Bowen, president of Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and before that, president of Princeton University for 16 years, explains that

the starting premise [of admissions] is that a school has an obligation to make the best possible use of the limited number of places in each entering class so as to advance as effectively as possible the broad purposes the school seeks to serve. Within the very real limits imposed by the fallibility of any selection process of this kind, a school should try hard to be fair to every applicant; but the concept of fairness itself has to be understood within the context of the obligations of a university. Accordingly, in making these difficult choices among well-qualified candidates, considerations other than just test scores and grades come into play.<sup>26</sup>

These considerations, in turn, are premised upon not just the qualities of individual students but also, Bowen adds, the shared features of an entire group of students who, by their common characteristics, enrich the learning environment and bring into it the diversity that is an indispensable part of university life. As a Princeton graduate remarked, "People do not learn very much when they are surrounded only by the likes of themselves."<sup>27</sup>

And this is true. Before I entered UP I was exposed to only private school students, having studied in Catholic schools since kindergarten. My father, himself the product of private education, insisted we children study at UP precisely so that we would meet people from all walks of life. A few years ago De

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<sup>26</sup> William G. Bowen, Expert report prepared for Gratz, et. al. v. Bollinger, et. al., No. 97-75321 (E.D. Mich.), <http://www.vpcomm.umich.edu/admissions/research/expert/bowen.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *ibid*.

La Salle University tracked down its 'Star' scholars (the equivalent of our 'Oblation') who had declined admission. One reason they cited for choosing UP was our heterogeneous population in contrast to La Salle's elitist character.

### **Valuing diversity**

But I think the question before us is not that a diverse student population offers immense learning opportunities to everyone all around, but rather, whether UP values this diversity enough to count it among its purposes. If UP does, then merit in admissions would take on additional meaning beyond the rigid convention of high grades and test scores. If, on the other hand, this is not our purpose, then we can end all discussions on admissions here and now.

There are a couple of other implications of global trends that I wish to take up. The university will no doubt retain its role as arbiter of academic worth but with a difference, for in this century, goals and targets will no longer be fixed as before because of rapid advances across all disciplines. Just when we think we are nearing our mark, it moves farther away. Moving targets thus change the meaning of laggard: an intellectual laggard in this century is not the one left behind and not even the one who stays put, but the one who does not move swiftly enough with the advance of knowledge. It will no longer be sufficient, and neither should it be permissible, for departments, colleges, campuses to simply coast along in our second century. The rapid movement of knowledge also demands that we select our leaders at all levels with this in mind. Academic leaders who find comfort in the isolated quiet of their offices, or are buoyed by the absence of discussion or debate, or who mistake the stony silence of faculty indifference as implicit support, will never take us forward. UP's second century has no place for laidback leaders who move only when prodded or threatened.

To attract and encourage the best leaders, we also need to rethink our search process. The matrix of candidates' strengths and weaknesses, which is

usually the end product of the search process, actually ought to be just the starting point. In what context are candidates' attributes perceived as strengths and weaknesses, and relative to what goals, needs or direction? A perceived weakness could, in a different context or relative to a certain thrust, actually be a strength and vice-versa. There is, too, little value added by search committees that are not allowed to exercise any judgment beyond the enumeration of candidates' attributes.

In the final analysis, the kind of leaders we desire will depend on what we aspire for as an institution of higher learning and a community of scholars. For example, the presidents of the world's leading universities were studied in order to answer the question: Are the best universities led by top researchers? The universities were taken from the 2004 edition of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranking, whose criteria are presented on the screen. The study counted the number of each president's scholarly publication citations, rated the numbers against disciplinary citation norms, and then correlated the normalized figures with the ranking of the universities.

The pattern that emerged is as follows. The higher the global ranking of a university, the more likely that the citations of its president are also high. Heads of the top 50 universities, for instance, are two and a half times more highly cited than those at the bottom 50. A president of a top 20 university is cited nearly five times more than a leader in the bottom quintile. In short, the study found that although "a simple link between the position of a university and the research history of its leader does not explain causality .... [the] results do, however, suggest that being a good manager and leader is enhanced in a university context if a president is a successful researcher."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Amanda Goodall, "The Leaders of the World's Top 100 Universities," *International Higher Education* 42 (Winter 2006), [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/Number42/p3\\_Goodall.htm](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/Number42/p3_Goodall.htm).

I cite the study to stress that in light of the profound changes in knowledge and learning and at an unprecedented pace, the type of leaders we want at any and all levels, and the scale of scholarship we expect from them will, in the end, depend on what our collective and institutional ambitions are. So as with the question of access, we once again return to our purpose: what do we wish to become in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Thankfully it is not my task to answer all the questions I raise. Whatever we decide—and we must do so with deliberate thought and discussion—let us keep sight of our mission to advance and share knowledge in and beyond the classroom. The university, after all, is not a gated subdivision; it is and always will be engaged in the life of the community, the nation, and the world. We celebrate our successes at a time when nearly everywhere around us, at home and in the world, voices of optimism struggle to be heard amid the wail of human suffering or the deceptive silence of apathy or despair. The paradox of celebration amid tribulation is a stern reminder that we belong to a public community larger than our academic republic. More than a community that supports us and to which we are answerable, it is a community to which we are wedded, good times and bad.

### **The sense of belonging**

It concerns me that our students have become more self-absorbed and less caring about this broader community. In my GE class last semester, most of them said they are moved to act only when directly affected. Since they rarely read the papers or listen to the news, they cannot get affected by what they do not know (or do not bother to know). A combination of hard times, parental pressure, desire for security in the face of an uncertain future, and disenchantment with today's leaders have caused the young to look upon their degree as little more than a job ticket. As a result, grades have taken precedence over learning; their real world has shrunk to their family and friends, while the one world they can freely venture into is the chat room, Friendster and other social

networking sites, where they control the shift in boundaries of anonymity and familiarity and decide whom to let in and out.

There is, of course, no point developing a sense of humanity that connects one only to the tiny radius of relatives and friends or to the self-created virtual world. The sense of belonging to a collective larger than ourselves, our families, our immediate circle of friends and colleagues is fundamental to our humanity. As our history and that of humankind demonstrate, the most significant and uplifting human successes have been those born out of collective action. What would one's personal success mean amid a sea of people wallowing in subhuman conditions? Indeed, what kind of humanity is it that selects the individuals it can relate to and deliberately disregards the humanness of others? I hope this kind of inward pragmatism—heedless to the needs of others—is just a phase of youthfulness. My senior students assure me they think differently from the freshmen I cited.

Do not think for a moment that I blame the students entirely for thinking this way. Such heedlessness could well be a reaction to or a product of a deeper pathology that engulfs our society. It is not my purpose to break down this social pathology into its anatomical parts. But allow me to offer a different take on the matter. Foucault explains that every conceptual apparatus sets its own restrictions of what is and isn't possible, and within these limits, develops its own standard of normalcy.<sup>29</sup> During American rule, for example, the logic of imperialism deemed it rational to postpone political independence while we were perceived to be unready for it and in its stead, enjoy the benefits of progress American style. It was not rational and therefore not normal to insist, as the Katipunan and subsequent revolutionary societies did, that freedom is indivisible in all its forms and expressions. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Filipino society was classified into 'poor and ignorant' at one end, and 'rich and intelligent' at the

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1970).

other. Unthinkable it was to switch the colonial pairing around: ‘poor and intelligent’ or ‘rich and ignorant’ was simply not possible. And so each generation, each society declares its own meaning of normalcy according to its world of possibilities.

I hold that the task of the University is to depart from the realm of possibilities and the boundaries of normalcy it creates, and instead explore what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls ‘the unthinkable’, or “that which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternatives, that which perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased.”<sup>30</sup> To return to the ‘Oxford question’ as an example, the thinkable frame juxtaposes social justice against a world-class research university, presenting the two as the only options available in the matter of admissions. The unthinkable, on the other hand, would turn the question on its head and challenge its underbelly: why these two choices in the first place?

### **Thinking the unthinkable**

Thinking the unthinkable will be the University’s primary challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in every discipline and field of endeavor. This challenge will demand not just a shift in our mental inclinations but also new ‘instruments of thought’—concepts, methods, frameworks—that will enable this shift to happen.<sup>31</sup> Oftentimes we do not realize how normalcy—that is, keeping within established and comfortable limits of possibilities—has become the hidden curriculum because, as Foucault again points out, people’s thoughts are basically shaped by rules or assumptions they are not always aware of. In our case, bureaucratic thinking and a politicized approach to problems, goals and decisions block the academic’s pathway to the unthinkable.

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<sup>30</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, cited in *ibid.*

A bureaucratic mentality ties the power of policy to the authority that enforces it rather than to the substance and merit of the policy. Backed by the weight of office, the bureaucrat's appeal is legalistic, not intellectual. Rules are narrowly construed rather than understood in relation to issues that question, and quite possibly subvert, the very basis of the rules. The only possibility in the world of the bureaucrat, therefore, is compliance, and any attempt to question it is met with technicalities. The inability to explain the rationale of a policy, or the reference to its longstanding existence as an explanation, are typically bureaucratic responses, feeble but effective only because the mental device of the bureaucrat has become part of the academic's sense of normalcy.

I do not mean to belittle our rules but the University is not a bureaucracy; it is an academic community. In our next hundred years some of our policies and rules will have to change in reasoned anticipation of the demands of knowledge, new modalities of learning, evolving relationships within the institution, etc. We must prepare ourselves for this future by learning to think outside the box. To do so, we must avoid one other pitfall, the politicized approach.

Competition, vested interest, power—these are things that play upon human nature and human institutions, the university not excepted. The question is, how do we frame these within our domain of possibilities? In the arena of politics numbers count because they are the expression of popular will. In contrast, in the academe what counts are the discussion and debate, the reasoning, that precede the vote and give it value.

As a young instructor dismayed by the politics of elders in the department, I once sought the advice of the late law Prof. Haydee Yorac regarding a decision obtained by the majority's show of hands. Her response was unequivocal: a majority vote does not turn what is essentially wrong into something right, pointing to decisions of the Marcos-led *Batasang Pambansa* as an example. Politicians get away with the tyranny of numbers because the conceptual

apparatus of politics deems this not only possible but normal. If the same kind of thinking persists in the University, it is because we, too, have imbibed the politicians' sense of normalcy. Hence we agonize between the academic and the pragmatic or politically palatable, between merit and livelihood as the basis for promotion, between competence and closeness to officials as the pivotal point in making decisions.

In sum, the politicized and bureaucratic mental frames are averse to change, the former in defense of the status quo or of self- or group interest, and the latter, hampered by limp intellectual muscle. In this century we will need to break out of the 'conspiracy of the normal,'<sup>32</sup> wean ourselves away from our comfort zone, and develop a frame of mind that is open to vastly different possibilities, that eclipses old boundaries and invites novel ways of thinking, doing and learning. From the practice of our disciplines to our pedagogy, from how we relate to one another as colleagues to the structures that govern us, from channels to processes, the framework of the unthinkable will be a valuable guide with long-reaching effect. To think, speak and do the unthinkable, that is the challenge of our century.

Thank you.

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<sup>32</sup> A term coined by S. D. Brookfield, "Transformative Learning as Ideology Critique," cited in J. Mezirow (ed.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 138.

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