

A University for the Filipino People

What does it mean to be a public university in a democratic society? It is to be beholden at once to two masters: one, to the nation whom the university was created to serve, and at the same time, to the universal guild of learned peers without whose imprimatur a university is unworthy. Those two masters rarely talk, and when they do, they speak past the other in alien tongues.

Democracies are indubitably good for universities, which thrive on the soil of freedom, but they also tend to judge universities by the wrong standards. Democracies apply the test of popularity, and ignore the scholar's mission to seek new, if irreverent, truths. We tend to see the university merely as a source of diplomas that open the door to well-paying jobs. We delight in newspaper listings of those who excel in licensing examinations. We revel in the vibrant energies of the theater and the concert hall, and the wild cheering at the athletic fields. That is fine, because that is all part of the human side of learning.

But internationally, what elevates a school into a university is the research and publication by its faculty – the quiet toil in laboratories, in fieldwork, in historical archives. It is in the obscure and esoteric world of research – published in refereed journals – that UP has shown its inner strength, especially in the basic sciences, and for which the nation time and again has turned to UP in past crises. A volcano erupts once every two hundred years, but it takes the academics to have the patience to study them in between. And when finally a Mount Pinatubo erupts, a busy nation stops to learn the meaning of the word “lahar.”

Democracies pervert universities not because democracies are populist. What's so wrong in being reminded that it's Juan de la Cruz who's footing the bill? Rather democracies subvert the public academy by forcing the scholar to fixate on the here and now, just in order to score “pogi points” with the elites that sway public opinion outside academia.

A century ago, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. already deplored “that most hateful of American words and ideals, ‘smartness’ as against dignity of moral feeling and profundity of knowledge. [Nowadays] the man for the times is no longer the thinker and the scholar, but the smart man, unencumbered with other artillery than the latest edition of the Digest and the latest revision of the Statutes.”

The true threat to the public university is not the populist, who merely tells us which side our bread is buttered, but the dilettante and the charlatan, the “smart man” whose ersatz learning is just enough to dazzle the lay public but who knows not how, cares not, dares not, to change the world.

A revitalized U.P. will must enhance its commitment to research and scholarship in the natural and social sciences and the humanities, while rediscovering its old strengths in teaching and in applied and transformative work.