

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Redirecting Higher Education to Meet the Needs of a Developing Society: The Liberal Arts and the Social Sciences

Felixberto Sta. Maria

Philippine Studies vol. 24, no. 2 (1976) 210–219

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Notes and Comments

Redirecting Higher Education to Meet the Needs of a Developing Society: The Liberal Arts and the Social Sciences

FELIXBERTO C. STA. MARIA

Observers of higher education in the Philippines are liable to be confronted with the following phenomena:

1. In proportion to its population, the Philippines has the second highest collegiate enrolment in the world, next only to the United States. It would appear, therefore, that the Filipinos are one of the best educated people in the world.
2. In the Philippines, 92% of the enrolment in higher education is in private schools. In the school year 1972-1973, the total annual support on all levels by the private sector in terms of operating costs was P267,190,000, representing an investment of over two billion pesos.
3. The Philippines has an oversupply of medical doctors and nurses, who leave the country in great numbers; until recently, Filipino doctors accounted for the second largest batch of foreign medical professionals in the United States. While many countries, including the industrialized nations of the West, import professionals, the Philippines exports them.

The statements, which are based on the latest available statistics, describe a situation unique in Asia and possibly anywhere. Seen against the realities of a developing society, the observations are not flattering to the Philippines. The fact is, we probably have too many students in our colleges and universities. Some of these students would be better off working with their hands in shipyards, in the factories, and on the land. Others should be pursuing tech-

nological and vocational programs instead of crowding already glutted liberal arts and social science courses.

The Philippines in effect faces a dilemma common among developing countries. An educated citizenry is a requisite for economic and social development, since an ignorant populace cannot advance a society; on the other hand, when a disproportionately large segment of that populace acquires a university education, subordinating the need for skilled and technical labor, economic development suffers. In other words, the absence of a close articulation between educational and economic development works against the interests of a developing society.

This was the conclusion made in the late 60's by Robert W. Smail, who supplemented an earlier work by F. Harbison and C. Myers. Whereas the Philippines had 16% of its youth between the ages of 20 and 24 enrolled in collegiate courses, the advanced countries had only 11% of theirs similarly enrolled. In terms of economic development, however, the Philippines ranked *among the lowest in the world*. Smail concluded that the Philippines "is producing more highly educated manpower than its economy can presently afford and absorb."

To compare therefore the size of the collegiate enrolment of the Philippines to that of the United States, while apparently complimentary to the former, is clearly unjustified. In the early 1970's when the comparison was made, the per capita gross national product (GNP) of the Philippines was about US\$150; that of the United States was close to \$5,000. A large collegiate population may be an asset to a highly developed and industrialized country but could be a liability to a country still struggling to break away from a colonial and agricultural type of economy.

On the second observation, the concentration of university enrolment in private schools could be viewed as an abandonment by the government of its legitimate role. The failure of the latter to provide education beyond the secondary level to hundreds of thousands of aspiring young men and women may be explained by the limited resources available. But obviously the problem is not simply one of a lack of funds. There is also a lack of adequate supervision by the government. It is a well known fact that many of the country's 695 private universities and colleges operate on minimal standards. A few are thinly disguised diploma mills. In fact, until recent years, higher education in the Philippines has

been a lucrative field of investment for some families and private corporations — a condition which the combination of inflation, recession, and tighter government control during the past three or four years partially corrected. In any case, with all its faults, private education seems to be doing a service which the government has failed to render, by either neglect or default. And the domination of higher education by the private sector will remain for as long as the government fails to assert its leadership.

As for the Philippines' reputation as one of the biggest suppliers of doctors and nurses to the industrialized countries of the West, the implications are disturbing. Available data show that the Philippines does not have enough physicians or nurses to take care of its own sick. In the rural areas many people die without ever seeing a doctor or a nurse. Yet, our doctors, nurses, engineers, and scientists continue to fly to foreign shores, depleting heavily our human resources. Government efforts to bring them back have been only minimally successful. Thus, the United States and other recipient countries find the Philippines a cheap source of professional skill and talent.

The question is: How do we redirect higher education, particularly in the fields of liberal arts and social science, to serve the needs of a developing society?

To start, let us take a critical look at the needs of that society. Priorities can be gleaned from statistics which, collectively, depict a discouraging situation. First, according to the 26 February 1976 issue of the *University of the Philippines Newsletter* (published weekly by the Office of the U.P. President), 2.5% of the people own more than 60% of the wealth; the remaining 97.5% of the population divide among themselves the balance of 40%. Second, in the Metropolitan Manila area, according to Dr. Mahar Mangahas in a paper entitled "Poverty, Income Inequality, and Equity" (quoted in the same publication), the percentage of families with income less than sufficient to afford minimum food prescribed by the Food and Nutrition Research Center increased from 17% in 1965 to 25% in 1971. In the rural areas the percentage went up from 29% to 48% in the same period. Third, the "income inequality index" of the Philippines, again according to the same source, is among the top 20% of the world. In simplified terms, this means that differences in income among the population are so great that the country ranks among the worst examples of inequity

in the world. Fourth, because of inflation, the real wages of skilled and unskilled workers are lower today than in 1950, even though since then real per capita GNP has about doubled. Fifth, close to 17,000,000 out of 41,000,000 Filipinos, according to Ma. Elena Lopez in a study entitled "Adapting to Poverty: Life in a Manila Neighborhood," survive on diets below minimum requirements. Affirming this finding are statistics published by *Time* last year showing that the nutrition level of the Philippines, with a per capital daily consumption of about 1,900 calories, is among the lowest in Asia and in fact the whole world. Finally, a research conducted in the Greater Manila in 1975, confirmed by a nationwide survey, showed that only 23% of Filipino children have normal weights; the rest are suffering from various degrees of malnutrition.

The picture emerging from this mass of statistics is undoubtedly dark, perhaps even slightly overdrawn. Most countries of the Third World would have comparable problems. To the government's credit, significant strides have been made in the Philippines in recent times to attack the problems of poverty and inequity. Land reform, which has been vigorously pursued since the advent of Martial Law, is correcting a centuries-old agrarian problem. Accelerated industrialization and massive infrastructure projects have a decisive, if delayed, effect. The general improvement of business conditions, even in the face of a severe world recession, will reduce widespread unemployment.

In education, the decision to screen prospective university students through the National College Entrance Examination has a salutary effect on the quality of college education. Government interest in accreditation, now being pursued seriously with the help of the Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE), will inevitably improve the standards of higher education.

Against this heartening background, however, there is evidence that much greater effort is necessary to redirect the forces of higher education to boost the government reform program. According to the *Bureau of Private Schools' Statistical Bulletin of 1971-72*, published by the Department of Education and Culture, the trend toward the emphasis on non-technological, non-science courses continued at least up to 1972. In the five-year period of 1967 to 1972 total collegiate enrolment increased by 14%, whereas liberal arts enrolment increased by 32%. The increase for commerce and

business administration, on the other hand, was 76%. The statistics are clear in this regard: more and more students were flocking to liberal arts and business administration courses, regardless of the country's developmental needs. What is probably more alarming is that in terms of the number of graduates, there was an actual *increase* of 38% for liberal arts within the same five-year period, whereas agriculture registered a *decrease* of 39%, and food, nutrition, and dietetics showed a decline of 13%.

By the school year 1971-72, according to the same source, non-technology students outnumbered technology students in the proportion of four to one - or a total of 473,881 students enrolled in non-technological courses, versus a combined enrolment of 120,403 students in technological courses. The statistics further show that in the same year 15,037 were enrolled in law and foreign service against only 4,059 in agriculture and 4,981 in food, nutrition and dietetics; furthermore, 122,378 were enrolled in the liberal arts against only 70,444 in engineering and technology.

On the assumption that a developing country requires a type of education oriented to science and technology, the trend in collegiate enrolment in the Philippines in recent years has been counter-productive. Redirecting the forces of higher education in this sense would simply mean reducing enrolments in the liberal arts, social sciences and similar non-technological areas in favor of technology and the sciences. This is not saying that a good liberal arts background is unnecessary for engineers, doctors, and scientists. The issue is one of priorities. Given the limited resources available in a developing society, the question is whether it is beneficial for that society to have more humanists and artists, for instance, than to have skilled workers, technicians, and scientists who can develop the country's economic resources.

The picture is not, however, totally dismal. On the sub-collegiate level, there has been a significant increase in vocational enrolment: from 82,000 in 1967, the figure grew to 112,000 in 1972, the graduates in the latter year actually numbering 56,683. Along this line, the government in the past three years has been engaged in manpower development that attempts to harness school dropouts.

It is undisputably clear that the immediate task of higher education, given the problems confronting the country today, is to help uplift the masses from poverty. There are obviously no panaceas, no magic formulas for instant success. There is only need for hard

work, a recognition of the country's priorities, and concerted effort from all relevant sectors of society.

In the liberal arts colleges, reform can begin by the shortening of curricula. The four-year bachelor degree curriculum that requires 125 to 150 units is impractical and wasteful. In the last two decades collegiate courses have been lengthened, no doubt in response to expanding human knowledge and the consequent trend toward specialization. But the lengthening is also due to two other factors: (1) an attempt to compensate for the deterioration of primary and secondary education by adding more units to the college curriculum; and (2) a largely subconscious urge to delay the graduation of young people on account of the poor prospects of employment after college.

Critics of higher education in this country lament the widespread tendency to give remedial work on the university level. Because of the poor pre-collegiate preparation of students, it has often become necessary to extend special help to entering freshmen, particularly in the areas of English and mathematics. In the 60's the University of the Philippines, despite rigid admission standards, had to institute massive remedial programs in English and composition in recognition of the poor language preparation of the entering freshmen. In many other universities the experience was the same. The point then arises as to whether the university should spend a significant part of its resources in remedial work at the expense of genuine college education. Most educators feel that the solution is at the pre-collegiate level. Teaching in the elementary and secondary schools should be strengthened; lengthening the university curriculum is not the answer.

The shortening of collegiate curricula can be immediately accomplished by restoring to four years most of the courses which have been expanded to five years. The move is not only practical in financial terms but is also pedagogically sound. In many cases the increase of basic professional subjects account for the added units. Such subjects can be revised and recombined, and some eliminated. Likewise, the "excess fat" in existing four-year courses — both from the preparatory liberal arts level and the professional area — should be trimmed. Fierce academic rivalries in a typical university setting often foredoom any attempt to reduce unit requirements and make it difficult for reform of this nature to succeed. But it is not impossible to achieve. With determined

effort, a number of courses now prescribed can be gotten rid of without ill effects on the curriculum. If one considers the added cost of an extra semester or two to poor students and their parents, he would agree that change in the system is long overdue.

In this sense, the Department of Education and Culture Circular No. 7, S. 1975, proposing minimum curricular requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (AB) and Bachelor of Science (BS) totalling 124 units, exclusive of physical education and R.O.T.C., is a welcome move. Now undergoing revision, the curriculum will hopefully hold down the number of units to not more than 130. The church-sponsored schools should not find it difficult within this framework to accommodate theology and other basic courses.

Directly related to the compulsive urge to lengthen curricula has been the proliferation of courses. An end should be put to the fragmentation of human knowledge arising from over-specialization. The fields of humanities and social sciences have not been spared this malady. In the true humanistic sense, a way must be found by the modern university to unify the concept of man. Probably there is already a counter-trend – an attempt to return to the fundamentals. In Stanford University a few years ago, a distinguished professor, critical of the way history had been chopped up and taught as small courses, put together a new history course integrating the fragmented parts and using the old unified approach. The course became popular, because effective. Students rediscovered the virtue of Renaissance discipline.

Such curricular reform can be extended to all areas, whether preparatory or professional. Why should a school offer four or five kinds of chemistry courses, for example, when one or two will do? For that matter, what is the justification for offering numerous research methods courses when one general research method course in the social sciences and another one for the physical and natural sciences will suffice? Although no perfect consensus is possible, it appears that a good two-year basic general education program of about 60 units is adequate for all. Basically such a curriculum should strive to teach the students *how to think*, and it should *develop in them a continuing appetite for knowledge*. It would include a few well-taught courses in language and literature, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, economics, sociology and history. The professional courses, not exceeding another two years,

should be put on top of such a curriculum, and reinforced with required apprenticeships in the field.

Shortening the college course would also give the added benefit of helping solve a festering problem in Philippine education: the chronic lack of textbooks. The shortage of reading materials on all levels of college work — or the high cost if available — has always posed a problem which inflation has seriously aggravated. An arbitrary reduction of the length of the undergraduate curriculum will cut the cost of college education significantly.

As a general policy students should be discouraged from taking up Bachelor of Arts (AB) and Bachelor of Science (BS) as terminal courses. The reason for this is that most liberal arts graduates without specialized training find it difficult to land a job. Perhaps only certain types of students, who are equipped with the necessary intelligence and aptitude, should be allowed to pursue an AB or BS degree; others should be restricted, unless the AB or BS is a required preparatory course for a higher degree. Furthermore, stricter government control should be instituted in the operation of the colleges and universities which offer courses in such overcrowded professions as education, commerce and business administration, law, and foreign service. Schools which cannot pass accreditation after a reasonable period by an independent, private accrediting agency should be phased out by the government.

The case of teacher training, with its plunging enrolment in recent years (from 190,653 in 1967 to 84,391 in 1972, or a drop of 56%), is probably a good example of the operation of the law of supply and demand. By 1970 the Philippines was producing 24,000 more teachers annually than the school system could absorb. The drop in popularity was a reaction to the oversupply and consequent unemployment of thousands of teachers, some of whom had to accept menial employment as clerks and salesgirls.

While the so-called law of supply and demand provides a self-adjusting mechanism for the interaction of economic forces in a free enterprise society, it may not always work to a particular society's advantage. It may actually result, as in the case of the Philippines, in the overcrowding of certain professions where remuneration is attractive (such as, for example, business administration and nursing a few years ago), and in the scarcity of practitioners in other fields where the need is great but remuneration is relatively low (for example, teaching mathematics, physics, and

basic sciences). What is needed under the circumstances is an assertion by the State of a stronger role in the harnessing of economic and social forces for national development. And this includes the regulation of collegiate enrolment to favor the fields which directly contribute to development efforts.

In the case of the declining enrolment in teacher education, the excess student population appears to have been simply channelled to "soft" courses instead of to the "hard" technological courses, as proved by the undiminished total college enrolment and the swelling enrolment in liberal arts and commerce. The shift was, therefore, hardly any gain for the country.

Related to the problem of redirecting academic efforts in the liberal arts and social sciences, but in a sense transcending it, is the need for restructuring the academic calendar for greater efficiency. Under the semestral system the schools' plants and facilities are idle for almost one-third of the year, discounting summer classes. A more sensible utilization of such expensive investments should be explored. The trimestral system, which has been tried with success in a few places, appears to be a more practical way of arranging the school calendar. Under this scheme, the school year is divided into three equal parts, with short vacation periods in between, enabling serious students to finish a course in a shorter time and at less expense than under the traditional semestral system. Advocates of the trimestral plan claim it incorporates the advantages of the slow-moving semestral calendar and the somewhat hectic quarterly schedule. At the same time, it allows for the maximum utilization of the school plant and facilities. It would do well for the government to consider the possibility of instituting the trimestral plan, perhaps after a pilot study.

Finally, the liberal arts and the social sciences should be used to counteract a deplorable trend in the formation of mass values. What good is it, indeed, to spend millions or even billions in educating the citizenry if most of them end up poor and frustrated, hankering for the things they cannot afford?

Critics of the Filipino's education in the past half century blame our colonial history for the unfortunate situation. Under the American regime the country's economy was geared to producing raw materials for the mills and factories of the colonialist; the finished product in the form of consumer goods entered the country duty-free under a scheme of free trade. Thus, the Philip-

pires, failing to industrialize, became utterly dependent on the mother country. At the same time, the critics claim, the schools have propagated materialistic values among the youth as part of a grand design of imperialistic powers to keep the native populace under perennial bondage.

The accusation sounds a little too harsh but carries a disturbing ring of truth in it. Colonial history everywhere reveals the same familiar pattern. But if, indeed, the analysis is correct, it is education that can undo much of the damage by reshaping peoples' attitudes and values. The liberal arts and the social sciences are at the forefront of a possible campaign for reform.

Mass media, which is run by the products of our colleges and universities, commands one of the most potent forces in the context of contemporary culture. But it is also, in the mind of some observers, the biggest offender. Dr. Lourdes Sanvictores, economic planning commissioner of the Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines, told delegates of the Philippine Mental Health Association in a recent conference that luxurious living as portrayed in newspaper advertising and TV commercials contributes to the rising rate of mental illness. She said that unemployment, high prices, and low wages aggravate the situation, since the great disparity between the luxurious lifestyles portrayed by media on the one hand and the actual conditions of the people on the other produces much tension and frustration. Mass media, she suggested, should exalt virtues of discipline, hard work, patience, and perseverance rather than emphasize sex, conspicuous consumption, and luxurious living.

A solid liberal arts education anchored in the genuine cultural traditions of a people but attuned to the needs of the present is an asset. Shifting the emphasis from the liberal arts to science and technology does not mean disregarding the useful role that the former can assume in a growing society; those who are endowed by nature and circumstance with the ability to make use of the refinements of a liberal education should devote their time and their talent to the betterment of that society. In effect, what is called for is a reorientation of values, without which no amount of educational reform can make our school system truly responsive to the needs of a developing nation.