

# Reflections on University and Urban Public University

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses the model of the “Western university” from the viewpoint of a non-Western person. The concept of an “Urban Public University” is then discussed and analyzed in terms of its role and relevance in today’s context. The paper further argues that while universities are non-static, and while their changes and adaptations to new conditions are essential, there are specific roles that universities as an institution should continue to uphold.*

## Introduction

Bill Plater has been a colleague and a friend from another country, a different space, with at least an ocean between us. Although we have not seen one another often and we come from different academic disciplines and cultures, a strong connection and bond exists between us. This bond stands rooted in an ongoing interest in shaping the university as an enduring, pro-active and relevant institution to serve society. I distinctly remember how, during our first meeting, we talked about our shared commitment and passion for developing and enhancing universities. At opposite ends of the earth, we were both exploring how to make centers of higher learning more relevant and useful to society.

At the time, I was struck by the many similarities between IUPUI and my own campus, the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA). I was thrilled with IUPUI’s effort to define itself as an urban university and to boldly address real-life issues confronting both the city and the state. I was especially impressed by IUPUI’s attempt to de-classify itself as just another conventional university. Needless to say, that meeting and subsequent ones stimulated many of my own thoughts and helped to shape the approaches I took toward my work and responsibility. Within the above context, addressing the theme of this volume, which is to critically examine the urban public university and its role and function in a globalized environment, seems a natural evolution of my conversations over the past years with Bill Plater.

## The Public University

The evolution of the university in the Western context can be traced to the Age of Enlightenment and even before. These characteristics include the following: a free and open ambience for learning and intellectual discourse, a place where learned scholars can congregate to exchange ideas among themselves as well as to teach and mentor their students, a place that cherishes knowledge and the creation of knowledge with no

repression or censorship, and a place where learning without prejudice can flourish. With these characteristics in mind, meritocracy, honesty, open-mindedness and the pursuit of truth should reign supreme in our public universities.

This strong Western tradition of organized learning, structured into credit hours and classroom-based instruction, differs somewhat from the less-structured tutor-pupil, monk-novice, or master-pupil learning system that characterizes many traditional Eastern higher learning situations. In the American tradition, both public and private universities advocate for principles of fairness, justice, honesty, integrity and the public good. In other words, Western universities are responsible for instilling and socializing principles and values that are the cornerstones of a good and just society. To my understanding, public universities in particular are expected to uphold the public trust that is accorded them by the taxpayers and citizens of the state. Hence, a public university is accountable to a broad range of citizens who make up its complex and diverse constituencies.

In the above context, public universities need to be more responsive to the needs and wants of its multiple “publics,” including the political actors and “powers that be.” Because of this complex interplay between the public university and its multiple constituencies, the requirements of a “public trust” which includes fairness, meritocracy, integrity and social responsiveness are critical to the good image and protection of the university as an institution in itself.

## **The Urban Public University**

A germane discussion of this subject would ask if the urban public university is indeed a special category of institution of higher learning at all. If so, what is it? How is it different from conventional universities? When this term was first introduced to me by Bill Plater, I was initially uncertain and skeptical that it merited a separate category of classification. Upon closer examination, further conversations, and some thought, I have become convinced of the justifications for using this term, for the following reasons:

- 1) The traditional organization of Western universities centers on a physical compound which demarcates the university from its external environment. This physical distinctiveness may include a landmark of the institution, such as a clock tower, a special building, fences, guard houses at the entry points, and so on. All told, the university has been traditionally separated from the world ‘outside.’ Its domain is purposely marked and demarcated. This separation is both symbolic and physically real.
- 2) Universities have their rules and regulations, standards of behaviors and codes of conduct stipulated by and adhered to only by their own communities. Symbolically, these codes are manifested in countless ways. Organizations such as student government, faculty senate, academic senate, and even the campus police, seem to symbolize the university’s stature as a separate entity that is independent, autonomous, self-governing and self-contained.

- 3) The self-regulated and self-contained nature of universities can be seen through the university's jealously-guarded choices of disciplines to be taught, curricula to be designed, and the criteria and standards used to choose faculty members and students. Rewards and punishments meted out to staff and students are generally internal matters for each university, not to be publicly scrutinized, questioned or criticized. Interference with the university's functioning may constitute infringements on academic freedom. (While true academic freedom needs to be zealously protected and promoted, until recently far less discourse and agreement could be found on how universities need to be accountable for their actions or responsible to society.)
- 4) The rhythms of campus life, while melodic in both traditional and urban campuses, require distinctive types of orchestration and often involve different sets of instruments to serve the needs of students. In the new urban context, universities can no longer cling to traditional organizational structures. Some urban public universities today may not have a physically demarcated campus with self-contained facilities. Their buildings may be scattered about in a sprawling manner. Hence, physically it may not be a distinct and separate entity. In the urban public university, campus life may not reflect a residential type of ambience and experience. Unlike many conventional universities set in a pristine environment, the urban public university may not even have its own grounds, but only some buildings. The twenty-four hour student life of the "traditional" university represents an impossible lifestyle for urban public university students, because they come from diverse backgrounds, with a host of work and domestic responsibilities. The students of an urban public university are frequently older, already working, and less privileged socio-economically.

Urban public universities witness the pressing socio-cultural and economic challenges that its students and neighboring environments confront on a day to day basis. The challenges for urban public universities are potentially double or triple those of traditional universities. Urban public universities do not generally enjoy physical expansiveness or nature's wonder and pleasantness, they may even exist in the midst of a concrete and asphalt jungle, sometimes in deteriorating and even "dangerous" areas of the city with high crime rates. Urban public universities need to confront these naked realities, adapt to them, and emerge strong and successful, but perhaps in a somewhat different context from conventional universities. For example, urban public universities need not and should not follow the stringent rules and norms of measuring academic success by traditional university ranking systems. If not liberated from the evaluating indicators that are appropriate and relevant to conventional, residential universities, urban public universities will continue to stagger behind and habitually feel inferior to conventional universities. The struggles and achievements of urban public universities need to be classified into different categories where other indices should be used to evaluate the performance and promises of their faculty and students.

For instance, recognition and awards need to be given to inspirational faculty members, particularly to especially attentive teachers who help disadvantaged students

rise to their full potential. Such faculty members may not publish profusely in national journals but their contributions to society are no less than their counterparts at privileged institutions.

Likewise, students at urban public universities should be evaluated by non-traditional measures, possibly in terms of their endurance and the ability to overcome all or many of the odds against them. Longitudinal measures may also be necessary as students' life experiences and career performance may be crucial over time.

Perhaps more credit and emphasis can be given to applied research than to basic research in urban public universities because solution alternatives are much needed and appreciated in the urban environment. All told, different sets of criteria may be in order for different types of universities. When lumped together and forced to evolve on a unilinear path, institutions of higher learning are in danger of losing their contextual relevance and function.

Urban public universities may have to continually prioritize and re-prioritize their duties and responsibilities because their contexts also change and evolve. At the very least, they need to focus on conducting research with practical applications intended to solve certain urgent problems in the city. Not only should urban public universities re-prioritize their research agendas, but also they should rethink the designing of courses and curricula. Can urban public universities help to alleviate the ills and problems of the city that result from inequality, poverty, ignorance and the lessening of social services essential to the urban poor? Proactive responsiveness to the urban environment will undoubtedly steer urban public universities away from the conduct, priorities and agendas of traditional universities. Urban public universities need to determine their own distinctiveness and priorities.

## **Comparing Urban Public Universities in the United States with those in Thailand**

Thai universities currently look to institutions of higher learning in the West as role models or at least for inspiration. However, Thai universities are relatively young compared to most in the Western context. Indeed, the oldest Thai institution of higher learning is less than a century old. Universities were built initially in the capital city of Bangkok. As special centers of learning for a limited number of people in society, universities were close to the seat of power and authority. Students were groomed to serve, maintain, and become part of the power structure. More recent expansion of public universities to provincial centers introduced the Western model of conventional, inclusive, residential campuses. Private universities came into existence less than thirty years ago. Hence, public universities in Thailand, especially the older, urban and more established schools, have an edge over other forms and types of universities. Because competition to enter public universities is very intense, increasingly youngsters from better off and more privileged families are more successful, leaving young people who have not won places in the elite public universities to seek out spaces at the non-

exclusive, open public universities or at younger, private universities. Recently, many former teacher training and vocational colleges have been upgraded to universities. The better and more prestigious universities remain urban and public and they are expected to, and will continue to, foster the ideals and image of a conventional university in the Western sense.

Political actors and Thai governments in general, however, appear to be more interested in utilizing universities as a training ground to meet economic and market needs for an expanding and hopefully competitive economy. Practical concerns of how many engineers, doctors and accountants will fulfill the human resource pool seem primary to policymakers' ways of thinking. In contrast, criteria traditionally valued in higher education such as excellence in scholarship and the expansion of intellectual resources often are demoted to secondary interests.

Indeed, Thai universities of different types and tiers today are under great pressure to generate resources for survival, to achieve excellence according to international standards, as they are expected to copy the American "publish or perish" model of expectations for faculty. The above expectations are unrealistically framed given the limitations that Thai universities face. For one, younger institutions, if not given ample resources, cannot build a strong and capable faculty. To drive faculty members to do research without adequate training, funding or understanding of the research enterprise will only pollute society with research products that are substandard and not relevant, useful or applicable to contemporary needs.

Thai public universities also suffer from a general lack of intellectual ambience and atmosphere for strong scholarly inquiry. To make ends meet and especially to live well, many Thai faculty members have to juggle many tasks, some of which are economically driven and which distract faculty from intellectual pursuits. Since Thai public university faculty members are still a part of the large government bureaucracy, many have been called upon or even imposed on to serve multiple roles. Truth be told, Thai university instructors, especially the "successful" and "well-known" ones, have evolved into "jacks of all trades," exhibiting great versatility and agility as they strive to serve society in different ways.

Given the differences, especially the relative ages of universities in the U.S. and Thailand, the concept of the urban public university, while relevant and useful as a distinct category in the US context, is not as relevant in Thailand, save in one area: the multiple requirements imposed on their faculty members to transcend the somewhat narrow confines of academic duties and responsibility in order to become actively engaged in social issues and to seek solutions to problems. At the very least, they are frequently called upon to consult and to give opinions on the pressing issues of the day. As already mentioned, Thai universities have tried to emulate the conventional, traditional, US universities. Thai universities in general must come to grips with their mandates and missions, their roles and functions in serving Thai society. For example, a heated and ongoing debate concerns extension programs to provinces outside Bangkok. Should these programs be conducted? Can quality be assured? Why should

faculty members over-extend themselves? Will the overall quality of faculty performance be lower because of such extension programs?

This debate in Thailand was premised on an incorrect assumption that all extension programs are similar. Since universities are diverse, even more diverse are the different degree programs offered through the extension services by different schools in different universities. It is therefore fallacious to frame the debate on the assumption that all extension programs belong to a monolithic system. Some programs are well structured and organized. Others are less well- prepared, while some need to be phased out. Given the fact that Thailand is Bangkok-centric, other provinces are in need of good and strong MA programs for their older working people. The current system of bringing educational opportunities to cities outside of Bangkok is indeed a laudable effort. Even if the conditions are not ideal, it is still better to have access to these educational opportunities outside of Bangkok than not to have them at all. In significant ways, Thai universities have tried to adapt to internal and external pressures through diversifying programs and reaching out to new target groups and new “customers.” Such exchanges and debates echo somewhat the debates over the role of the urban public university in the United States. Special and different circumstances require special and different approaches to organization and management of learning and instruction. Perhaps we are overly constrained by a unilinear approach toward higher education and blinded to the limitless possibilities of making education relevant to a pluralistic society.

## **American Public Universities in Domestic and International Engagements**

American Urban Public Universities (UPUs)—as a hybrid system—face multiple challenges that require serious commitment and a strong will to confront them. Firstly, similar requirements and standards of academic achievement and performance are expected from UPUs as they are from non-urban public universities. Peer review, peer monitoring, and evaluation are also the same for UPUs. Secondly, despite these same academic expectations, resources may be more limited and less easy to come by for UPUs than for regular public universities and especially for wealthy private universities. Thirdly, UPUs need to nurture and motivate students with social disadvantages and handicaps. Fourthly, retaining a top-grade faculty may be somewhat difficult in view of competition from traditional universities in physically lovely and comfortable surroundings with significantly more resources and well-prepared students from privileged backgrounds. Fifthly, UPUs need to be “hands on” and relevant to the problems that surround them.

To overcome the difficulties faced by urban public universities, the first important step is to persuade and convince all concerned parties, including faculty and students, that there should be a paradigm shift away from viewing the university as a single system with only one set of standards, criteria and evaluation measures. Indeed, a strong case can be made for the differential role and function that the urban public university must

play. A much more flexible and needs-oriented approach toward education, with continuous adaptation and change, will be much more suitable for higher education on a global scale.

Excellence in academic achievement should necessarily broaden to include more criteria than the standard academic publication and basic research format. In fact, diversification of criteria for determining excellence and success will contribute to a more realistic and desirable concept of a pluralistic form of university for the twenty-first century.

Thus, unlike more traditional public and private universities, UPU's cannot claim the prerogative of non-involvement in social issues in the name of creating knowledge for knowledge's sake or in the disguise of academic neutrality. Identifying social problems and seeking solutions for them become unavoidable and inevitable for UPU's research priorities. Otherwise, they will be seen as irrelevant, unresponsive, and not responsible to their constituencies.

## **Measures Needed to Be Pro-active and Relevant**

The management of UPU's necessarily requires greater flexibility, adaptation, innovation and creativity to achieve their ultimate goals. For instance, admission of students cannot follow regular methods to the fullest. Students with promise but poor past records may have to be given some additional consideration. Standardized tests may not be the most reliable yardstick. Instructional methods, techniques and curricular design can and should deviate from conventional types. The strengths of urban students need to be understood and highlighted. Examples used in classrooms need to be relevant to the experiences of the students.

## **Why is it Important to be Connected or Linked to the World?**

Many Americans are so comfortable in the general prosperity of their country that they become inevitably isolated from the world. There is a considerable lack of curiosity or interest about other societies and cultures outside the United States. Some pockets of the American population neither know nor understand the world and its many cultures and societies; urban poor families have almost no opportunity and access to travel abroad or to be involved in learning about other cultures. American society becomes ethnically more diverse each day, and American cities have become more culturally diverse as manifested through the emergence and proliferation of ethnic restaurants, ethnic shops and the presence of many languages and ethnic groups. Nonetheless, this diversity does not penetrate into the mainstream or average American home or psyche. In this context, it is especially crucial for American UPU's to play a strong role in providing their students bridges to the global community.

As globalization progresses, more effort is needed to help our students understand the need to be a global citizen and to cooperate with others to foster a mutually beneficial global community. The reasons for international engagement by all are numerous. Because of the interrelatedness, interdependence and interconnectedness of the world today, many issues that humanity faces are no longer national issues. Prevention of and solutions to these problematic issues can no longer be carried out by a single state. Instead, multi-state parties need to cooperate. Global warming, deterioration and degradation of the natural environment, depletion of non-renewable energy sources, and a general decrease in biodiversity stand as examples of the problems that transcend national boundaries. Solutions to these problems require cooperation, collaboration and partnership from many countries and peoples.

Looking at the social dimension, we also find many problems and issues which need to be addressed and tackled by cooperation, partnership and collaboration from state parties and citizens across borders. Issues of human rights violations, gender inequality, and social injustice appear to have increased and worsened despite increased economic development. Trafficking in human beings, especially in women and children for sex and labor, is a case in point. Problems of transnational crimes as in drug trafficking, money laundering and terrorism also require a multi-partner effort. A single state is rendered ineffective, if not totally helpless, in dealing and coping with the problems mentioned.

Looking at globalization as an inevitable process that affects the entire world, albeit in varying degrees, one cannot help being concerned about the negative impact that globalization has on the poorer, weaker countries and peoples of the world. Granted, globalization does provide opportunities and access to upward social mobility for many around the globe, but generally the poor and the marginalized around the world bear the burden of injustices and disadvantages while the better-off move further up the social mobility scale. This phenomenon is well demonstrated by the increasing rate of social stratification in developing countries where their educated and urbane groups have been able to join the globalized professional classes but their rural, less educated fellow citizens have been left behind. Furthermore, as electronic media and technology shrink the world and bring everyone into contact with the powerful controllers of media programs, cultural transmission from the powerful to the weak is unprecedented. We witness today popular Western culture in all forms being transmitted to the whole world. Coke is the drink; Heineken is the beer; McDonald's and Starbucks are visible around the globe. Western music and lifestyles, or imitations of them, have become prevalent throughout the world. The process of cultural homogenization through globalized corporate media is indeed an issue to confront.

What I am bemoaning here is the rapid disappearance of cultural diversity, heritage and richness in the world. American UPUs can foster the understanding and the desire to mitigate the cultural homogenization which accompanies globalization. Urban public universities can help to instill the desire to revitalize cultural diversity and the need for people to appreciate the multifarious richness of humanity's experiences, especially within its own confines. Celebration of each urban area's cultural diversity

and tolerance for difference would lead to an appreciation of the richness that all cultures and ethnic groups have to offer one another.

## **Striving for a Shared Mission Among All Universities**

No matter what type of university, one common goal to be shared is to attain balance and to avoid imbalance. While higher education is expected to impart knowledge to its students and foster learning, intellectual skills, problem-solving skills and critical thinking, it must also foster a balanced approach toward all dimensions that students face in life and in work. In other words, students need to learn to balance local concerns with global concerns; to balance the achievement of individual goals with greater social goals for the common good. They need to balance intellectual attainment with a commitment to social action, and they need to learn and know how to be competitive without losing the balance of appreciating cooperation.

Universities must be especially dedicated to harmonizing academic learning with ethics, principles and values for the greater good of humanity. The global trend is for the glorification of individual achievements, especially through economic success, often at the expense of ethics, morality, justice, fairness and concern for the well-being of others. This dangerous trend needs to be stopped. Instead, the promotion of a balanced, ethical, and caring society should be a common goal. Higher education will have failed if it does not help to deter the ways and means to accumulate selfishness and greed which seem to be so evident in most societies today, both at the individual level and at the community level. On the other hand, higher education will have succeeded if it helps to foster a sense of sharing, caring and concerns for one's fellow human beings.

## **Envisioning University in the Future**

Universities in general are pressured in one way or another to be more dynamic and adaptive to rapid changes and the dynamic future. The revolutionary change in modern technology, has most certainly and drastically altered human existence and undertakings. A youngster with good computer literacy can access information and process it to create knowledge and understanding almost independently. Self-learning is easier and more readily available today than ever before. Exchange of intellectual discourse can be done through cyberspace. Virtual classrooms and virtual learning and even the virtual university are already a reality.

How should universities respond to the above situation? Will the role, mission and vision of university change necessarily or inevitably? What should the role of the urban university be in this context?

As technology influences people's lives and society as a whole, we see new patterns of behaviors where individuals can become isolated. One can work from home, shop from home, make contacts via the internet. The need to interact face-to-face is reduced. For some people, almost all of life's needs and sustenance can be obtained

via the internet. Despite these conveniences, there is a downside to this technological advancement.

If the intellectual quest shifts to non-personal, non-human interactions, it will be a great loss to humanity. In this context, the university in its various forms needs to reassert its role as a center for learning and research where a congregation of the learned and like-minded who share the same intellectual interests and passions can work cooperatively and collaboratively. There is virtue in learning together. There is also strength in numbers when resources can be shared and where mutual inspiration can lead to greater creativity and achievement.

In the new century, the university is both a symbol and a true representation of the vanguard for knowledge creation and for achieving excellence. Moreover, in the midst of rapid change, social values appear to be in flux. In this uncertain state, the university must champion ethical and moral principles in order to anchor society on the firm, solid ground of integrity; to remind society of its lofty and higher ideals; to exercise influence; and to set the stage for tolerance, acceptance and understanding of diversity, multiple interests and the needs of a globalized world. In other words, aside from its academic role, the university needs to be the conscience of society. It needs to rally members of its community and society at large to be mindful of the core values which engender human beings to strive for intellectual achievements and excellence while not neglecting or forgetting to celebrate human kindness, decency, compassion and tolerance.

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