

## **UP System as the Center of Excellence in Asia – Realistic Dream?**

**By Joe Garbanzos MPH/MBA**

University of the Philippines System President Alfredo Pascual was the guest of honor at the UP Alumni Association dinner in San Diego, Crown Plaza Hotel on July 20, 2014. The "Evening with UP President" was the culminating activity of the Executive Board meeting of UPAAA with the officers of the UPAA of San Diego. At dinner President Pascual outlined initiatives to reform the UP system. His over-all goal is ambitious - make the UP systems a center of academic excellence in Asia in 21st century.

### **Who is Alfredo Pascual?**

Alfredo Pascual is an interesting choice to be UP System President. He is the 20th president of the State University System and took office in 2011. A UP alum, used to be an adjunct faculty at the Arts and Sciences and Business Administration Colleges. He was a member of the Board of Regents and was also active in UP the Alumni Association. Unlike previous UP president, he did not serve in government nor, as far as we know, have been a confidant of influence and politicians. He is first to admit he does not consider himself an academic either. He comes from the corporate world - finance and banking. He comes across, as an idealist, a philosopher-manager. One gets the impression in his vision for the UP System.

### **UP losing its luster**

President Pascual recognized serious challenges facing the UP System today. In a world of constant innovation and technology change, the UP system has to compete. One may recall, UP used to be considered the premier university in the country and a center of excellence in the Asian region. Recent rankings of academic institutions in Asia, the University of the Philippines has lost ground to other institutions. Even within the country, private schools like Ateneo and De La Salle have gained ground in academic reputation. In Asia, schools in Singapore and other ASEAN countries have gained new-found stature in research and academic excellence. The University of the Philippines may have the legacy of a great educational institution but it has slowly degraded its luster. Even Pres. Pascual will reluctantly agree with this point.

## **Reforming the UP system**

The UP system consists of eight universities, seventeen campuses spread across the country with a student population of 57,000 students. President Pascual's vision is to make the system work as a unified, focused and competitive organization. He has chosen the theme of "One University; One UP" to capture the reformation effort.

He believes that reformation should start by enabling access to UP by a diverse and qualified talent of students. He admits that entrance to UP is competitive and may have a selection bias. Students from metropolitan areas, from the upper middle class families shown a high acceptance percentage vs. students from lower income families in the provinces. Pres. Pascual shared his plans to address this disparity.

To enable talented but disadvantaged students to apply and pass the UP entrance test, Pres. Pascual is introducing online UP College Admission Testing. He also putting in place a system of flexible tuition payment plan and liberal tuition discount to assist eligible students faced with financial burden and needing help. This may not solve the disparity over-night, he admits; but he feels that these are steps in the right direction.

## **Academic Excellence**

"Reformation of the UP System must address faculty development", said Pres. Pascual. He shared a number of initiatives to help faculty development and advance academic excellence. He is making more funds available to support faculty fellowship overseas and exchange programs. He is also increasing funding for research. On the question of funding, Pres. Pascual was successful in scaling-up the UP System budget. He got approval from Malacanang for a P5B annual budget in 2014, a significant increase from previous budgets.

Educational excellence will also come from streamlining programs and reordering of priorities, Pascual confided. This means aligning UP's priorities to emerging innovations and global trends. This can be demonstrated in opening UP to massive online course studies (MOCS) and aligning UP's academic calendar in-line with schools in the US and rest of the world. Another initiative he is introducing is benchmarking performance in research with world's best. "This is another way of raising

competitiveness and setting higher bar of academic excellence”, Pascual added.

### **New Campuses**

The scandalous Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) is not all bad, according to Pres. Pascual.

He acknowledged that PDAF monies were utilized to develop a new campus in Cebu. The improvements in the UP campus in Cebu will be the venue for Information Technology and Business.

There is also a new campus planned in the New City area, used to be Camp Bonifacio. This new campus in the heart of the new greater Metro-Manila area will specialize in Business, Law and Statistics. This will provide a campus venue for middle and senior managers, working for companies in Makati and neighboring areas, to pursue continuing education programs at UP closer to their workplace.

Campuses in other parts of the country will also be specializing in a narrower but relevant field of study. Campus in Mindanao will be the center for Agriculture, in addition to Los Banos. UP Visayas will continue to be the center for Aquatic Science. The Clark Campus in Pampanga will specialize in Sustainable Environment. The devastated campus in Leyte will be relocated to higher grounds.

### **UP Alumni Support**

President Pascual noted the important role of Alumni Association chapters all over the world. Each chapter is needed to help support and finance reformation of the UP System. The UP Alumni Association America is a good example. It’s been a consistent supporter of the UP System in many years. Individual alumni chapters are known to provide financial support to their chosen colleges. The Friends of UP Association, said to have \$1M in the bank, with distinguished alumni members like Loida Nicolas-Lewis has been a constant supporter all these years.

“The UP system needs all the support it can get to realize its goal as a center of educational excellence in Asia in the 21st century”, Pascual concluded. All UP alums share his dream and wish Pres. Pascual the best in this herculean effort. In reality, in addition to alumni support, he will need consistent support from many other stakeholders. This effort will need support from stakeholders within the UP system, its faculty, students, the government and business to achieve the dream. Is this dream realistic? If you were a gambling kind, do you want to bet on it?