

TRANSFORMING U.P. INTO A GREAT UNIVERSITY: A CHALLENGE TO U.P. ALUMNI IN AMERICA¹

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Good morning, everybody, and thank you, Dr. Lindy Aquino, for that generous introduction. I also want to recognize my wife Gem for, without her love and support, I would not be where I am today.

When President Romy Aquino invited me to be your keynote speaker this morning, I hesitated because I felt a little bit like the ninth husband of the late Elizabeth Taylor. I knew what was expected of me, but I was not sure whether I could still make it interesting. Well, I am delighted to have this opportunity to deliver my one-hour-long speech to a captive audience. Kidding aside, if you give me your time and attention, I promise to deliver the shorter, 30-minute version of my speech.

Last year, I became the 13th president of Woodbury University, which is the second oldest educational institution in Southern California. Woodbury is a specialty university, which offers professional degree programs in architecture; business; and the media, culture, and design disciplines that serve the entertainment and fashion industries. I am honored to be the second of only three Filipino-American university presidents, among the twenty-some Asian-American university presidents in the United States. Two of us are proud U.P. alumni—my good friend President Gabriel Esteban of Seton Hall University and myself. I have known President Esteban since 2005 and our ascension to the presidency is testimony to the value of two “kababayans” and fellow UP alumni working together and mentoring each other.

Nearly all of us here share at least one thing in common. We all graduated from the best university in the Philippines. We have been told countless times that we are the cream of the crop, the crème de la crème, or the people’s scholars. Like you, I am an expatriate, a self-exile in this country that I have called home for 33 years now. Like all U.P. alumni, we share a moral and ethical obligation to give back to the people who invested in our education.

Today, at the request of our president, I would like to speak about three things: what U.P. means to me; how U.P. can be transformed into a great, world-class university; and what the U.P. alumni in America might do to help transform U.P. into a great university.

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What U.P. Means to Me

Let me start by sharing with you what U.P. has meant to me. Although I have spent the majority of my life outside the Philippines, I owe much of my intellectual formation to U.P. Diliman. It is here where I went to high school at the old campus in Katipunan Road; where I was more than an innocent bystander to the Diliman Commune, the First Quarter Storm, and student activism in the 1970s; where professors at the College of Engineering developed my competence in systematic analysis and quality assurance; and where my Beta Epsilon brothers taught me the true meaning of the words “brotherhood,” “camaraderie,” and “fraternity.”

At the College of Engineering, if Professor Fortunato “Boy” de la Peña did not give me a passing grade in IE 35 Statistical Quality Control, I probably would not have gone into the field of total quality management. I enrolled in the Master of Urban and Regional Planning program at the then Institute of Environmental Planning. Prior to that, I applied for admission to U.P.’s MBA program, but I got quickly turned down. For one thing, I did not have enough work experience. Then secondly, my 2.44 college GPA would have put me in a high-risk category of applicants. But this rejection was providential for two reasons. First, I fell in love with the MURP program, vividly recalling that my MURP professors (notably the late Dr. Benjamin Cariño) nurtured my passion for designing complex social systems. Systematic analysis and systems thinking really define my work today and, casting modesty aside, have kept my work distinctive among my peers. The second reason why the U.P. MBA director’s decision was a blessing in disguise is that, without it, I would not have gone to Pennsylvania to pursue my post-graduate studies in business administration. In quite an ironic twist, I personally thanked that MBA director when I returned to U.P. eleven years later as a visiting professor in the MBA program.

As an “iskolar ng bayan,” I have returned to the Philippines intermittently since 1988 and every year since 1995 to give back. My initial give-back was at the U.P. College of Business Administration in 1988, 1990, and 1994 where I designed and taught MBA electives in my academic discipline—strategic planning—and a doctoral seminar in management control systems. Since 1995, my annual give-back was in helping the Philippine Government—specifically the Development Academy of the Philippines, the Department of Trade and Industry, and the National Competitiveness Council—develop and implement the Philippine Quality Award, the country’s highest award for quality and business excellence. The PQA is the Philippine version of the U.S. Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the presidential award for which I have been privileged to serve as an examiner since 1997.

Transforming U.P. into a Great, World-Class University

Let me now turn to my second subject—transforming U.P. into a great, world-class university. Every country in the world seems to want a world-class university as if it cannot do without one. Having a world-class university within a country has become like the old American Express advertisement: “Don’t leave home without it.” The problem is that no one knows exactly what a world-class university is. The most elite universities in

the world are located in a small number of countries; in fact, last year, the *US News & World Report* listed among the top ten only four outside the United States, namely, Oxford, University College London, Cambridge, and Imperial College London, all in the United Kingdom. Western universities dominate the ranking of the top 400 universities around the world, and the highest-ranked university outside of the United States and Western Europe is #23 The University of Hong Kong. In this same ranking, only one Philippine university made it. It is, of course, U.P., which placed #348, nine places below George Washington University, 16 places below U.P.'s ranking the year before, and #67 in Asia.

Defining “world-class university” has been the subject of much intellectual discourse and, if any institution would like to achieve world-class status, the famous phrase “I know it when I see it” does not provide sufficient guidance. Incidentally, it was the late Justice Potter Stewart who coined that phrase in 1964 when the U.S. Supreme Court was attempting to define pornography.

Perhaps the most authoritative work on creating world-class universities is the one that Dr. Jamil Salmi of the World Bank published in 2009.³ According to Dr. Salmi, a world-class university has three distinguishing outcomes: first, highly sought graduates; second, leading-edge research; and third, dynamic knowledge and technology transfer. Dr. Salmi attributed these outcomes to three complementary sets of factors at play in these universities. The first factor is a high concentration of talent, consisting of faculty, students, researchers, and internationalization. The second factor requires favorable governance features that encourage leadership, strategic vision, innovation, and flexibility and that enable institutions to make decisions and manage resources without being encumbered by bureaucracy. The third factor consists of abundant resources to offer a rich learning environment and to conduct advanced research, with these resources coming from the public budget, endowment earnings, tuition fees, and research grants. Of these three factors, I believe that, compared to Asia's leading universities, U.P. might be competitive in the first two, namely, a high concentration of talent and favorable governance.

Transforming U.P. into a world-class university will be quite a challenge. In the Philippines, having more than one world-class university is possibly beyond the ability of the nation's resources to support. In addition to the U.P. System, the Philippine Commission of Higher Education supervises 102 state colleges and universities in the Philippines. In the Cordilleras alone, there are five state colleges and universities (such as Benguet State University) in addition to U.P. Baguio. Are they all needed? When I visited U.P. Diliman and met with President Alfredo Pascual last June, I remarked that the Philippine state colleges and universities have become like California's community colleges; much as every California state legislator wants a community college in his

³Jamil Salmi, *The Challenge of Establishing World-Class Universities* (Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2009). Available at URL: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200-1099079877269/547664-1099079956815/547670-1237305262556/WCU.pdf>

district, every provincial governor in the Philippines seems to want a state university in her province.

If the Philippine government will take on the challenge of creating world-class universities as the West defines this concept, there is really only one available option. That is to merge several existing state universities into the U.P. System and transform U.P. into a new state university system that would achieve the type of synergies corresponding to a great, world-class university.

Perhaps, U.P. should be chasing an ideal other than world-class status. The concept of a world-class university reflects the norms and values of the world's dominant research universities, which are found principally in the United States and Western Europe. The American system of higher education has thrived because its diversity reflects the diversity and pluralism of American culture and society. Much of the criteria in these world university rankings are input-based not outcomes-based, and are associated with only one type of academic institution—the research, doctorate-granting university. When American universities participate in the meandering procession to follow M.I.T., Harvard, and Yale, they miss out on leveraging the diversity of academic ideals, providing increased access to higher education, and pursuing opportunities to make college education affordable. If U.P. pursues the path of overemphasizing the achievement of world-class status as measured by world university rankings, it will certainly divert energy and resources from its core mission of producing graduates with highly valued degrees, equipping them with the knowledge and character to lead and to serve.

I propose that U.P. focus on transforming itself from a “good” university to a “great” university. This reminds me of the 1913 quote from the late Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, which is enshrined in Malcolm Hall of the U.P. College of Law: “I say the business of a law school is not sufficiently described when you merely say that it is to teach law, or to make lawyers. It is to teach law in the grand manner, and to make great lawyers.”⁴ As the late Dr. Robert J. Kibbee, former Chancellor of the City University of New York, stated, “The quality of a university is measured more by the kind of student it turns out than by the kind it takes in.”⁵

Successful graduates are ambassadors for the university. They are innovative leaders who help people and communities flourish. They are known for being strong communicators, ethical thinkers and creative problem-solvers with a deep commitment to sustainability and social justice. They are knowledgeable in their disciplines and eager for collaboration and continuous learning. They integrate professional skills with global citizenship, entrepreneurial energy, and intellectual curiosity. They make a difference in the lives of others.

⁴Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Use of Law Schools,” *Speeches by Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1896), 30.

⁵Robert J. Kibbee, “Excerpts from Addresses,” *The New York Times*, 27 July 1971.

As U.P. embarks on this renewed pursuit of excellence, I am reminded of my younger days as a runner. Although my waistline now shows signs of prosperity (as the Chinese would say), in high school and college, I was a varsity runner on the track and cross-country teams. I remember my high school coach sharing the story of the Four-Minute Mile. For decades, man had tried to break the four-minute mile barrier. The medical authorities all said that it is impossible to run the mile in less than four minutes. Simply put, you will die. But one British medical student by the name of Roger Bannister did not believe the so-called experts. He trained and trained until one day in May 1954, Roger Bannister ran the mile for 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds. He achieved this record on a cinder track under very unfavorable weather conditions. What is even more interesting is that, during the first ten years after he became the world's first sub-four-minute miler, it was reported that 336 other runners beat that record. Many of the barriers that we face are artificial and, therefore, surmountable.

Continuing on with my story, only 46 days after Roger Bannister overcame the four-minute mile barrier, John Landy of Australia ran the mile 1.4 seconds faster. Then in the great tradition of the Battle of the Champions, in August 1954, Roger Bannister and John Landy were to run the so-called Mile of the Century at the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Vancouver. All through that race, John was way ahead of Roger. When he was close to the finish line, John wanted to gauge how far ahead of Roger he was. So he decided to look to his left side ... and, as he did, Roger Bannister burst past him on his right. And the rest is history.

The moral of the story: It is less distracting to chase a dream than to chase the competition. Besides, wouldn't you rather reach your dream than reach your competition?

Challenge to U.P. Alumni

Let me now address my third and final subject: How can we as U.P. alumni contribute to making our alma mater a great university?

Before sharing my thoughts further, let me first recognize that many of us here will celebrate the Sabbath tomorrow. In keeping with it, please allow me to briefly share with you one of my life's inspirations—the Parable of the Talents, which is recorded in Chapter 24 of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew. In this parable, the master gave each of his servants a specified number of talents. Although the word “talents” in the story refers literally to money, you can obviously extend the meaning to other areas. At the day of reckoning, the servants who invested those talents wisely were rewarded, while the one servant who hid his one talent was physically thrown out to where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The gifts and talents that we possess come from one—and only one—source. Therefore, there is no cause for us to brag about our individual talents because they did not come from us. Likewise, there is no cause to brag about charitable contributions that we make because they are simply the fruits of gifts with which we have been endowed and which we do not deserve. We are simply trustees of

everything that we own. Our talents are entrusted to us, like a master putting money into the care of his servants, and these gifts and talents come with the expectation that we would use them in the service of humanity. “And for whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:48).

So, as “iskolars ng bayan,” how can we give our gifts and talents back to the Philippines when we live and work in America, a country which is not our homeland? The simplest way to do this is, of course, to make a financial contribution to our alma mater, and I do hope that each of you do your fair share of giving back. But what can we do beyond simply giving money? If you are an academic, you can return to U.P. for a semester or two either as a United Nations Volunteer or as a Fulbright Scholar or Specialist. But what if you do not have access to academic sabbatical leaves? Let me share with you an idea. But before I do so, let me share with you some statistics about Filipinos in America. I must warn you that the data do not paint a pretty picture, but please do not shoot the messenger.

The Filipinos have become a borderless, global community with about ten million belonging to the Filipino diaspora, which is about the population of Central Luzon. The second largest Asian-American group in the United States is the Filipino-American community, which is estimated at slightly over four million (including about one million TNTs). Statistically speaking, one out of four in this room is a TNT; if you’re one of those, please raise your hands. Back to my earlier point, in terms of educational attainment, however, studies have shown that Fil-Am public high school students have one of the highest dropout rates in the country. A study released by the National Federation of Filipino-American Associations in 2008 found that, in Los Angeles County, the dropout numbers for Fil-Am public high school students represented 56 percent of all dropouts in the county.⁶ Fil-Am public high school students in the city of San Francisco had the highest dropout rate among other Asians.

Other studies found that second-generation Fil-Am students have substantially lower college graduation rates compared to U.S.-born Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. Only 22 percent of second-generation Filipino-Americans complete a college degree, compared to 51 percent of Chinese Americans. At the University of California campuses in Berkeley and Los Angeles, Fil-Ams have the lowest college admission rate among all racial or ethnic groups, which is ironic because Filipinos comprise the largest Asian-American ethnic group in California. Other authors have cited that Filipino-Americans are often marginalized within the Asian American umbrella, are viewed by other Asians as being at the bottom of the Asian hierarchy, are the targets of ethnic jokes, are ignored for leadership positions, or have their ethnic-specific issues ignored by the larger Asian-American group.

⁶A. Barretto Ogilvie, “Filipino American K-12 Public School Students: A National Survey,” a national report from the National Federation of Filipino American Associations, Washington, D.C., January 2008. Available at <http://filameducation.com/wp-content/uploads/FilipinoK121.pdf>

Let me offer an explanation. The mother and the father in many Fil-Am households are employed, with some even holding down two jobs or needing to work overtime. This allows little time for parental supervision of the children's progress in school. Also, with a few notable exceptions, Filipino parents tend not to get involved in the public school system. The 2008 study also reported that Fil-Am public high school students focused their energies more on working so as to be able to buy expensive clothes and cars. They were much more into dancing and singing than studying and earning academic awards. Becoming less academically achieving and if this trend is not reversed, young Filipino-Americans will soon be caught in the insidious cycle of poverty, having become permanent members of the low-educated and low-skilled group vying for low-paying jobs.

The question is: How can we as U.P. alumni in the United States, as achievers in and of ourselves, become more inspiring to the future generation of Filipino-Americans? I would find it hard to believe that our diligence and dedication when we were students at UP are absent when it comes to the education of our children and our youth at large. I would find it harder to believe that we are hungrier or more passionate about achieving the American dream than our own children and our youth, who have never known deprivation of the scope and scale that we had when we were growing up.

It is not easy to be a young person in America these days. Fewer young people are growing up in homes with two parents. Nowadays, parents are working longer hours, and they have less time to spend with their children. Many of our youth do not have the advantage of living in those tightly-knit neighborhoods where many of us grew up, where people looked out for each other and for each other's children.

We have also seen a rise of a popular culture that does not exactly celebrate diligence and self-discipline, but instead, sends a message that you can be rich and famous without doing any work and simply by looking good, that your ticket to success is only through rapping or basketball or being a star on reality television. Many young people do not have anyone in their lives to counteract that message, to tell them that gratification that comes instantaneously usually disappears just as quickly and that real success in life comes from commitment, persistence, effort, and hard work.

Our young people today, let alone the Fil-Am youth, have a much smaller margin for error. If you did not finish college or if you only had a high school diploma a generation ago, you could still make a pretty decent living. That is no longer the case today. More than ever, success in life depends on success in school. And nowadays, a bachelor's degree is not even enough. And young people who start down the wrong path and do not have anybody to steer them straight are not just consigning themselves to a life of financial hardship; they are consigning all of us to an economy that will be less competitive and a nation that does not fulfill its promise. Equally importantly, our Fil-Am youth will be consigning all of us to a country that might brand Filipino-Americans as underachievers and, therefore, less worthy of empowerment in society.

Studies have shown that young people in mentoring relationships get better grades in school; they are less likely to drink and they are less likely to do drugs. If you ask any successful person how they got to where they are today, chances are they will tell you about a mentor they had somewhere along the way.

The great poet and author Maya Angelou did not discover poetry until her mentor took her to the tiny library at her school and challenged her to read every book in the room. The late Steven Jobs of Apple was an incorrigible troublemaker until his fourth-grade teacher took him under her wing and convinced him to focus on mathematics instead of mischief. Ray Charles first discovered his gift for music when, at the age of 3, his next-door neighbor taught him how to play the piano.

So I challenge each U.P. alumnus in this room to be a mentor to a young Filipino-American. You might have already provided adequate educational guidance to your own children, but I am certain that you can identify a nephew, a niece, or another young relative or friend who needs a mentor. We know the difference a responsible, caring adult can make in a young person's life: buck them up when they are discouraged; provide tough love when they veer off track; being that person in their lives who does not want to let them down and that they do not want to let down; and refusing to give up on them, even when they want to give up on themselves. UP's motto, "Honor and Excellence," is not only relevant to U.P. students and alumni. It is also an appropriate ideal to pursue for our Fil-Am youth.

Before I conclude, I want to share a story from social entrepreneur Bill Shore:⁷

There once was a traveler who journeyed all over the globe in search of wisdom and enlightenment. In the midst of one village, he came upon a great deal of noise, dust, and commotion. He came across three masons who were working at chipping chunks of granite from large blocks. The first seemed unhappy at his job, chipping away and frequently looking at his watch. When the man asked what it was that he was doing, the first mason responded, rather curtly, "I'm hammering this stupid rock, and I can't wait 'til 5 when I can go home."

A second mason, seemingly more interested in his work, was hammering diligently and when asked what it was that he was doing, answered, "Well, I'm molding this block of rock so that it can be used with others to construct a wall. It's not bad work, but I'll sure be glad when it's done."

A third mason was hammering at his block fervently, taking time to stand back and admire his work. He chipped off small pieces until he was satisfied that it was the best he could do. When he was questioned about his work he stopped, gazed skyward and, with a broad smile and a gleam

⁷William H. Shore, *The Cathedral Within: Transforming Your Life by Helping Others* (New York: Random House, 1999).

in his eye, proudly proclaimed, "Can't you see? I...am building a cathedral."

Such is the story of the building of the Duomo, Cathedral of Milan, which took more than 500 years to build. Imagine the depth of the vision that the builders must have had to create this magnificent structure, especially knowing that they would not live to see the finished cathedral themselves.

As we leave here today, let us remember what has drawn us together—a desire to make a difference in the lives of others and the world...one young person at a time...a desire to contribute to making U.P. a great university by not only doing well but also doing good. That is our cathedral.

There is no doubt about the tremendous need for mentors in this country, in our case starting with the youth of the Filipino-American community. What we need now is for committed adults to step forward and help us meet that need. Who would be in the best position to lead Filipino-Americans in this community effort other than the “iskolars ng bayan”—the U.P. alumni! Will you accept that challenge?

Thank you very much.