

THE CONUNDRUM OF PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

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The State, before all else, is charged with providing citizens with an 'integrated system of education'. This is not unique to the Philippines. As a research fellow at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Louvain) in the mid-1990s, I discovered that even as a Catholic university, it was subsidized by the State. Its standards are notoriously tough and only the very fit, intellectually, will survive Louvain. But my friend, Prof. Jan Van der Veken, quipped: "Whenever we let a student go because he does not measure up to the university's standards, we cut into our own flesh" -- each student let go meant a subtraction from State subsidy. In a visit to Germany, I was told that it was much the same thing there: there were no private higher education institutions, because there was a loathing for the elitism that came with privately held higher education institutions.

That cannot be the case in the Philippines for a very obvious reason -- the State does not have the wherewithal to provide higher education to all of its citizens. One merely has to look at the figures: the number of private higher education institutions as against the number of state universities and colleges. In part, this is doubtlessly due to the misplaced priorities of government. When you pay lip service to the constitutional demand that budgetary priority be given to education and spend millions instead on schemes of dubious usefulness (if not legality!) such as outright and unconcealed dole-outs, then what you have are coffers with very little to spare for higher education. Not too long ago, lawmakers decided to slash the budget of higher education and, with almost hilarious uncton, some argued -- while putting on the airs of sageliness -- that choosing between basic and higher education, prudence dictated that they send the funds in the direction of elementary and secondary education. In the first place, the dilemma is spurious. It is a dilemma of Congress' own making. In the second place, if you do not fund higher education, where do you get the teachers and the administrators of basic education? But how often is it in this country that suffers a serious deficit of intelligence in its government that pseudo-dilemmas become highly contentious issues?



It is enrollment time and the contest rears its ugly head again: While private higher education institutions endeavor to survive and to flourish, state universities and colleges, in many places, in a very real sense offer serious competition. And when you have a state institution demanding only a fragment of what private colleges and universities charge, is there any doubt about the outcome of this lopsided competition? Those who teach in state institutions are paid from public funds. Whether one has a class of seventy students (not unheard of, in fact, rather common!) or a specialized class of only four students, one's pay is in no way imperilled. Funds have been allocated under the General Appropriations Act. Private higher education institutions do not have such a security, whose administrators are constantly on edge at enrollment time as they keep a close watch on the figures of entering students,



as well as on those who ask for their records, obviously for the purpose of moving elsewhere. I should know. I have been a school administrator in the private sector as well as in a state university.

CHED is not oblivious to the problem, and it has attempted to address it in many different ways, the latest, being its highly controversial memorandum order No. 46, against which I have written -- joining my dissenting voice to that of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines that sees it as a serious infringement of academic freedom. CHED has constantly sought ways of reining in state universities and colleges -- SUCs -- but really, whatever its powers may be, these have their own charters and it is fundamental in law that generalia a specialibus non derogant -- the general never derogates from the particular. The law that vests CHED with powers over higher education institutions is general law; charters of SUCs are special laws and must prevail over CHED's general law. And the legislators who sponsor the creation of SUCs will not easily yield their vision of higher education through state institutions to CHED's own. But we cannot leave private educational institutions to perish and to fold up. There is no way state institutions can fill the void that the demise of private universities and colleges would create! That private HEIs have the edge of quality is a cliché -- a non-solution, because many parents who enroll their children hardly ask about quality. Second, in many instances the difference between private institutions and state schools as test results show is negligible!

With sufficient resolve, Congress and CHED together can take some measures. SUCs, for one, should 'socialize' enrollment in the sense that students whose parents can well afford the costs of private higher education should not be admitted to SUCs so that there will be room for capable students from low-income families. The policy of open enrollment currently in place in many state universities and colleges should be revisited and eventually abandoned. For one thing, it is very costly to the state. When a student enrolls in a degree-program that at first sounds like something exciting that however makes demands on him that he can ill muster, and he later drops -- as many are wont to do in SUCs -- that is certainly government money wasted! Instead of legislating comprehensive universities into existence, Congress would do better by creating specialized institutions in precisely those disciplines that are not adequately serviced by private higher education institutions. I am against confining SUCs to agriculture and fisheries -- vital though these programs may be to food production and economic stability. But dealing with the present conundrum of private higher education requires confining the expenditure of state funds and resources precisely to those disciplines and courses that private institutions do not make available -- and these may involve highly specialized fields of study demanding capitalization well beyond the means of private universities and colleges. Hardly any private higher education institution in the provinces will offer physics, mathematics and chemistry as courses (not only as major fields, or areas of concentration), because there will be few enrollees! This is exactly what SUCs can and should offer, because an SUC can afford a course with classes consisting of perhaps not more than ten students who nevertheless are highly motivated and intellectually alert.

If it cannot accommodate all who seek higher education into its college and university system, then the State must, in the very least, create the environment that allows private higher education institutions -- that discharge the function it should otherwise be burdened with -- not only to survive but also to flourish!