



New Requirements and Challenges for Chinese University Presidents in the Construction of an Innovative Country

Yake Cao

College of Industry and Commerce, Tianjin Polytechnic University

Tianjin 300384, China

E-mail: caoyake@yahoo.com.cn

This research was financed by "The Eleventh Five-Year Plan" Educational Science Project of China Higher Education Society (Grant No. 06AIG0030004)

Abstract

University presidents have become a special group worth studying. With the implementation of college education reform, some topics are discussed extensively such as the ideals, values, missions and obligations of the university. As a result, the special group closely related to the university's fate, university presidents, deserves a profound exploration. In this article, the germ of some ideas about their missions and obligations will be put forward.

Keywords: Innovative country, University president, Target orientation, Innovation ideas, Public images, Cultural atmosphere

It has been revealed in the history and the reality of the university that a university has to rely on its president's administrative ability to exist and develop as well as its teachers' creativity. Therefore, the issue of university presidents can not be neglected in any nation who puts much importance on the strategy of developing itself through that of universities. According to the experience of those world-class universities, an excellent president comes first on the list of important factors for the construction of a first-class university. With the establishment of the goal to construct an innovative country as well as the implementation of the strategy of building up the nation with independent innovations in China, how should we do to maximize the value of our university presidents.

1. Confirming the Target Orientation of University Development

When orienting the targets of university development, a variety of factors should be taken into consideration. Summed up, they may include educational regulations and policies issued by the government, public expectations on universities, educational resources which can be employed by universities and the competition situation of universities and so on. Target orientation just refers to an overall reflection and design based on the combination of all these factors. As for its specific content, a target system of a university can be established including targets in its function, academic development as well as its overall development level.

As far as the current situation is concerned, a large number of Chinese universities don't establish their missions and targets starting from their obligations for our society, the actual demands of the economic and social development of their regions, the development rule of the university as well as their own experience and conditions. For example, some universities establish improper targets of constructing well-known, first-class or distinguished universities; some only keep their eyes on research-oriented targets, comprehensive-university targets and doctorate education; some exert every effort to expand their universities as well as to build some luxurious buildings at the cost of a large sum of debt in spite of their inferior staff in quality as well as quantity, poor educational conditions and a severe shortage of funds. These excessive investments may become heavy burdens and sunk costs for universities in the future. All these above phenomena, along with high-level adulation, blind upward comparison, a shortage of individual characteristics and great casualty when dealing with people or things, are caused by the shortage of a right idea of target orientation. Therefore, a university president is expected to spend a large amount of time and energy in studying and confirming the missions and targets of his university first of all. In spite of their differences, world-class universities have it in common that they put great importance on individuality and specialty to find out their relative advantages, confirm their directions to break through then and finally achieve their overall development with their achieved breakthroughs.

2. Having Special Innovation Ideas

Choosing a university president actually means choosing his educational ideas. As the representative and main administrator of a university, a president is absolutely the core of the whole educational system of his university.

A quotation from the former president of Qinghua University, Yiqi Mei, is widely used, "Great masters, instead of splendid buildings, are important for universities." (Liu, Huang, 1994, p10) In my opinion, "great masters" here don't only refer to those academic masters, but the administrators themselves. To be more specific, school administrators are expected to establish innovation-oriented educational ideas, only with which are we able to create an academic environment for the coexistence of different schools of study, to truly realize academic freedom as well as theoretical innovations. It is also said by Vice President of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology that only with a well-known president will a university be able to attract well-known professors and then good students (Kong, 2004, P15). This claim gets support from some examples, such as Yuanpei Cai in Beijing University and Boling Zhang in Nankai University, who are well-known for their educational ideas.

University presidents represent their universities' spirits. Some legendary presidents throughout the history of higher education all over the world have challenged the outdated educational ideas and thinking stereotypes with their distinguished ideas, amazing vitality in reform as well as moral impel forces and have created a brand new educational environment, hence having an impact on the whole nation's ideological rituals and value orientation. Seen from the conversion of the role of a university president, the history of higher education development can be called that of university presidents' educational ideas. A qualified university president should have the following qualities: first, they should have strategic insights as educators to be aware of social demands, to understand the directions for academic development and to cultivate talents to the largest degree; second, they should have politicians' tact and means to put their ideas into practice. As is well known, modern universities are complex organisms, therefore, your idea is far not enough to coordinate conflicting opinions and interests in them or to seek for support from government or the society out of it. Determination, enthusiasm and political tact are indispensable to achieve something instead of only purchasing skin-deep harmony. Otherwise, no environment for university development can be created.

3. Publicizing and Improving Their Universities' Public Images

In the modern society, with universities regarded as the carrier for the style of our times, presidents are the representatives of the style of their universities. In the face of the media, they are expected not only to deliver their own educational ideas but to shape and publicize their universities' public images as a representative of their spirits and styles. They should even display their universities' profound spirits in science exploration and rich culture accumulation because, in most cases, the public is not impressed by the academic achievements of a university due to its distance from them. Instead, they are often interested in whether a university has rich cultural images and appeals to students in addition to their rankings in academic achievements and whether they can offer favorable employment and so on. As a result, it is of great significance for a university to show their attractions at all aspects to the society, which will exert influences in all sides, such as donations from the society and students' choices.

Meanwhile, we should realize that the present universities are no longer the former tower of ivory. Everything about a university, ranging from its policies to what teachers and students say and do, is exposed to the media and the public every day. In addition, the rapid development of modern communication technology has helped to break through the space and time limits of information transmission and spread, hence making it possible to spread every event at every corner to the whole world with Internet. It is this reform in transmission means that has made public opinion opener, more interactive, more real-time and more sudden. Without proper measures to some unexpected events, some incidents may evolve into negative opinions and social effects. Therefore, a university president is expected to be adjusted to the new situation to strengthen his external propaganda sense, to establish his university's positive public images by getting in touch with the media actively, to overcome crises and negative news elaborately and to improve his ability in leading public opinions in a favorable direction. To be more specific, on one hand, more attention should be paid to exerting the media's role in reaching common ground, reassuring people, clarifying facts and emotional counseling and so on; on the other hand, they should be good at supporting themselves with facts, data and instances, as well as some new media, such as Internet. Especially in the case of sudden and hot-button incidents, they should have quick reaction and proper measures to strengthen first-time information distribution, to earn public trust with objective, justified and detailed reports and to avoid the spread of rumors with the initiative of information transmission at hand.

4. Creating a Cultural Atmosphere to Stimulate Curiosity

Innovation is one of the cores of university spirit, which is just what most Chinese universities lack. With much importance put on the inheritance and reproduction of culture and knowledge in Chinese traditional education (including higher education), children are confronted with examination-oriented education from the very beginning, hence having a larger knowledge store than western children at the same age. However, an important aspect--- the cultivation of children's individuality and creativity--- has been neglected. In recent years, it has been pointed out by

quite a few educators in China and abroad that the lack of world-shaking achievements and contenders for the Nobel Prize is largely attributed to such traditional educational ideas and practice. Now that we have realized our shortcomings, it is time for us to change it.

Actually, Chinese students shouldn't be blamed for an inborn lack of creativity. It has been proved by the achievements of some Chinese students abroad that they are able to become creative talents with a favorable academic atmosphere provided. According to a report on Internet, nearly 300 Chinese overseas students graduating from Australia National University in 2006 are said to be very good by its president. Although they are not as willing to question their teachers as Australian students in the first semester, they have done quite well once they have been absorbed in such an atmosphere (2006).

The atmosphere mentioned by UNU president is the very cultural atmosphere in which students' curiosity will be stimulated. Honorary President of University of Alberta holds the same opinion, who is specially fond of an old saying said to have come from China--I will forget what you have told me; I will memorize what you have shown to me, I will understand forever what you have made me do myself. The cultural atmosphere in Oxford University is said to be like this: professors gather their students to their houses every week, where they just puff smoke to these students, and students will become mature scholars after four-year experience of that (2006). Zhaozhong Ding, a well-known Chinese American Physicist, once said that curiosity is the original drive for scientific researches. In his opinion, curiosity comes first when achieving a goal. A simple point is embodied in it: one will do something diligently if they are really interested in it and will not be bored a little no matter how hard it is. There is no passion without curiosity, hence no devotion.

Therefore, university presidents should try to stimulate students' curiosity and cultivate their enthusiasm for scientific research and creativity by encouraging them to study classical works, adopting the discussion method, welcoming students to take part in teachers' scientific research items, organizing all kinds of science and technology competitions and setting prizes in them.

University presidents have become a special group worth studying. With the implementation of college education reform, some topics are discussed extensively such as the ideals, values, missions and obligations of the university. As a result, the special group closely related to the university's fate, university presidents, deserves a profound exploration. However, our existing researches on them seem inadequate in depth and theoretical system. We hold to the belief that China's higher education will achieve new glorious goals with in-depth researches on this issue.

References

- (2002). *Zhaozhong Ding's Speech at Shanghai Jiao Tong University*. Wen Hui Newspaper. September 22nd.
- (2006). *Shortcomings Revealed in President Forum: What are Universities lacking in?*. [Online] Available: http://www.edu.cn/gao_jiao_news_367/20060719/t20060719_188981.shtml. July 19th.
- Kong, Xianduo. (2004). *My Ten Years in Hong Kong University of Science and Technology*. Peking University Press. p15.
- Liu, Shuli & Huang, Yanfu. (1994). *Selected Works of Yiqi Mei on Education*. People's Education Press. P10.