



**UNITED BOARD FOR CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ASIA
MEETING OF UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS
NOVEMBER 10, 2009**



United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia
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Summary of Discussion

Many colleges and universities within the United Board network see tangible value in maintaining their Christian identity and in concentrating their efforts on delivering high quality undergraduate education and experience, despite such challenges as competition with public institutions, limited funding, changing demographics and globalization. Twelve university leaders devoted a full day in Hong Kong to sharing ideas on how to proactively respond to challenges and capitalize on emerging opportunities. The meeting was convened by President of the United Board, Patricia Stranahan, to consult United Board partner institutions about the current environment in tertiary education and to seek feedback on the organization's own plans for the future.

Participants took note of the trend toward universal higher education in Asia, as government officials and educators seek to prepare students for twenty-first century careers. Yet this worthy goal raises a host of new questions for university leaders. As more people earn a college degree, how can policy makers and educators ensure that graduates' capabilities and skills are linked to the needs of the marketplace? Is a university's primary goal to create new knowledge or to prepare the next generation for productive careers? How can these institutions best determine their fields of specialization and enhance their competitive advantages?

The answers to those questions, as well as others raised over the course of the day, are to a great extent determined within the context of an individual institution, country or region. In different contexts, people may live their Christian values in different ways. But participants agreed that Christian education is defined as education of the whole person. Their institutions strive to strengthen Christian values through both academic and non-academic means.

The participating college and university presidents, representing ten countries and regions, spoke from their own experience, yet found fertile ground for informational exchanges with their peers on topics such as achieving and maintaining quality education, expanding resources and creating successful networks. A common trait was a proactive attitude toward meeting the challenges that confront them and persistence in seeking new opportunities that will strengthen higher education.

Meeting Challenges, Capitalizing on Opportunities

As the presidents of these institutions discussed ways to best prepare their students for a globalized world, their comments were framed by the goals of instilling a Christian ethos and making education a holistic experience. Participants recognized the inherent challenges associated with maintaining a private, Christian institution of higher education. Many of the participants were from countries in which Christians were a minority;¹ most competed with public institutions for faculty and students.² Yet their commitment to Christian values in academics and in campus life was evident. In fact, this commitment was often viewed as an asset that institutions can use in appealing to potential students: Christian colleges and universities strive to offer both quality of life and quality in academics. They take a holistic approach to education, which encompasses the development of purpose and values as well as the pursuit of knowledge and skills. They tend to concentrate on undergraduate students, who may feel lost in the larger population of a public university.

Private institutions operate without many of the advantages of their public counterparts, often making their quest for quality education an uphill struggle. With government subsidies, public universities are able to attract students with significantly lower tuition. They enjoy more resources and greater recognition. They often can pay faculty higher salaries. This means that private colleges and universities need to clearly articulate – to both current and potential students, faculty members and supporters – the value they can offer.

As long as an institution keeps its primary focus on undergraduate education, participants felt it is possible to maintain Christian character in education and devote significant time and resources to student development. Once an institution sets its ambitions on becoming a research institution, then standards necessarily change and it becomes more difficult to maintain a Christian ethos in a strict sense. The challenge is not insurmountable, participants said, but it requires difficult decisions about how to allocate limited resources.

Faculty Development

The college and university presidents agreed that having a highly skilled and motivated faculty is an indispensable component of quality education. This is particularly true in their institutions, which emphasize high quality, undergraduate teaching. All faced hurdles in recruiting, developing and retaining faculty, who often can find more lucrative opportunities in public universities, in business or with international organizations.

Some participants find the best solution is to recruit faculty from among their own alumni. These individuals, already familiar with the institution and its mission, will likely have a higher level of commitment than other recruits. But there also is recognition that it takes time to develop these young faculty members and requires resources to ensure that they will stay on. Other participants, concerned that recruiting too heavily from alumni will create an insular institution, looked to a broader catchment for recruiting faculty. If faculty salaries are

¹ The exceptions are East Timor and the Philippines, which are predominantly Catholic. Mainland China is a separate case, as there are restrictions on establishing religious-affiliated institutions.

² Chung Chi College is part of Chinese University of Hong Kong, a public institution.

competitive with those of public universities, faculty can be attracted. The problem for Christian colleges and universities is that many faculty are non-Christians. Administrators need to determine the best ratio of Christian/non-Christian faculty, in order to maintain dual goals of quality education and Christian values.

Retaining qualified teachers is the flip side to recruiting, and in this sense, private institutions often have fewer incentives to offer than public ones. For instance, participants indicated that their faculty carry full teaching loads, limiting the time available for research pursuits. Sabbaticals generally are not offered. Faculty may be torn in their priorities: they seek recognition within their academic field, which typically comes from research and publication, but must invest substantial time in teaching and student formation to support the goals of a quality undergraduate institution.

Christian Presence

Meeting participants agreed that they want to have excellent universities, but added the question “for whom?” Forming future leaders who can serve society’s needs and priorities may be more important than nurturing individual researchers with international reputations. The general consensus was that Christian colleges and universities must educate the whole student.

University leaders look for ways to align the interests of students and the needs and desires of faculty with Christian concerns. Courses in theology, peace studies or ethics, combined with service learning opportunities, can help students broaden their university experience, develop concern for the less fortunate and nurture values in their personal and professional lives. For faculty, universities can make grants to faculty to look at social change or concerns about poverty; they also can advocate for a research approach that first looks at actual examples within a country before applying a theoretical framework.

Even developing exchange programs with other organizations can reflect a Christian ethos. A university’s reputation may be enhanced by establishing exchanges with leading institutions in developed countries. But Christian colleges and universities should weigh the impact of building an international reputation against the obligation to help others, and also seek out exchanges that will help strengthen their lesser developed peers.

Globalization and Student Mobility

Globalization adds a new dimension to higher education in Asian countries. As they prepare students for twenty-first century careers, university leaders see an increasing need to internationalize their course offerings and their campus life. All participants agreed that language proficiency – specifically, in English – is the key element in internationalizing a campus. Having sufficient numbers of faculty and students proficient in English enables universities to increase the number of courses offered in English, recruit more international faculty and attract more students from abroad.

Globalization creates opportunities for Asia’s universities to respond to another factor: changing demographics. Birth rates are declining in many Asian countries, so within a generation there

may be surplus seats in their universities. This is already the case in Taiwan, which is recruiting more students from the mainland to its campuses. Developed countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, which also have surplus seats, are actively competing for Asian students to fill them. In the higher education sphere, as with other sectors, globalization promotes greater mobility across borders.

But this concern about loss of students also can be translated into opportunities, participants said. Universities can strive to have two-way exchanges, recruiting students from other countries or establishing joint degree programs with foreign universities. Private institutions may have advantages over public ones, as they often have more flexibility to devise creative exchange opportunities. Many universities in the United States encourage, or even require, their students to spend a semester or two abroad; these students may find short-term courses of study in Asia appealing. The key is to offer courses that will attract foreign students, such as Southeast or South Asian studies (taught in English).

University presidents also see advantages in sending their own students abroad. This exposure can help students develop the skills that give them the option to pursue their profession in other countries. For the universities themselves, these exchanges are to benchmark their students and programs, particularly against the standards of institutions in the developed world. Sending students abroad may represent a short-term loss in revenue, as students pay fees to another institution. But participants perceived this to be a worthwhile investment, as students and their parents will take international opportunities into account when deciding which college or university to attend.

Technology opens additional avenues for internationalizing programs. Digital tools make it relatively easy and affordable for Asian institutions to have lecturers from other countries speak to their classes. Some participants indicated their own on-line courses already include students based outside their national borders. These opportunities will only increase with the proliferation of digital technology.

Globalization also heightens the important role of a university's director of international programs. Working through his or her network of peers can be an effective means to raise the international profile of a university, earning greater recognition for its undergraduate programs.

Cultivating Sources of Support

A private college or university must persistently seek funds for its current programs and future plans. Yet the different environments in each of the countries made it abundantly clear that it is best to tailor fundraising efforts to national culture and the history of a particular university.

For example, soliciting alumni for contributions may achieve success in Taiwan or Korea, but it is not yet part of the culture in India, Indonesia, Thailand or other parts of Asia. Many participants said that when it comes to alumni, they are taking slow but steady steps to maintain regular contact and build relationships. (A commitment to keeping an alumni database current is required. Participants also noted the utility of Facebook and other social media in connecting with alumni.) They look for ways to bring alumni back to campus in order to reconnect them to

their university experience. They first want to build good will and perhaps seek small donations, before pursuing major gifts. Participants said that alumni want to know that their gifts serve a clear purpose, such as support for construction of a hospital or for scholarships.

Student fees constitute a major source of revenue for private colleges and universities. This is certainly the case for relatively new institutions, which do not yet have extensive alumni networks to draw upon. Participants explained that in some cases they designate a portion of student enrollment or graduation fees for construction of new facilities or for scholarships. In at least one case, students enrolled in programs (such as business or engineering) that are expected to lead to more lucrative careers may be charged a higher fee than those pursuing a degree in the social sciences. Yet even in these institutions, heavily reliant on student fees, there is a role for alumni to play. Alumni can be instrumental in spreading the word about a university, thereby attracting more applicants and raising the revenue generated by student fees.

Some institutions indicated they have used special events, such as golf tournaments, marathons or auctions, to raise funds.

Private universities also should pursue competitive funding opportunities, both public and private. Some of the participants indicated they had had success in competing for research funds and for student scholarships. They are training their faculty to develop sound grant proposals. Business represents another source of potential funding, though applicants should recognize that the interests of business differ from those of philanthropy. Corporations will have the mindset of investors and will want to know what benefit they can expect to derive from a contribution to a college or university. This underscores a fundamental principle, applicable to all methods of fundraising: big goals require a clear vision.

The Role of the United Board

The United Board firmly believes that its best work is done in partnership with the best minds of its partner institutions. This gathering in Hong Kong exemplified the value of this approach. Earlier in 2009, in response to the global financial contraction, the United Board carefully assessed all of its programs. At the direction of its board of trustees, it adopted new, innovative practices to ensure that it can continue its mission of enhancing Christian presence in Asian institutions of higher education. This consultation was a valuable opportunity to seek further input from partners on this new phase for the United Board, as it builds on its signature programs and activities, introduces new initiatives on topics of concern and deepens its partnerships with Asian colleges and universities.

The current challenges and opportunities raised by the college and university presidents underscored the value of United Board programs and highlighted some additional ways to serve the common interests of Asia's institutions of higher education. Faculty development, for instance, has long been a hallmark of the United Board's programmatic work. Meeting participants were clear in stating that, in order to recruit, develop and retain faculty, they need to offer means to pursue advanced degrees or gain international exposure; programs such as the United Board Fellows or Regional Scholars directly respond to these needs.

Administered programs, such as the Asian University Leaders Program, now will be more directly focused on specific needs of the region. The 2010 program, for example, will address fundraising and the 2011 iteration will focus on student counseling.

The participating college and university leaders recognize the value of partnership with other institutions; the United Board's Asia-wide, collaborative network is a significant asset for them to share expertise and maximize resources. Most were familiar with the United Board's Coastal Resource Management Program, through which institutions in India, Indonesia and the Philippines shared expertise in marine pollution and ecosystems, marine mammals and mangroves. This collaborative template can readily be applied to other substantive issues, to the benefit of all participating universities.

Three new United Board initiatives – focusing on the environment, inter-religious understanding and local knowledge – now offer additional opportunities for partner institutions. The rationale for focusing on these initiatives is simple and straightforward. Environmental degradation is all too evident, and Asian experiments in non-exploitative, sustainable living need to be drawn further into educational practices. As people of all faiths make their home in Asia, respecting diverse beliefs and promoting dialogues that explore unifying elements is an integral part of our mission. Finally, in a rapidly globalizing world, preserving local knowledge takes on greater urgency. The increasing availability of digital tools will make it easier for Asian institutions to share this knowledge.

Participants also raised some additional suggestions for the United Board, including the following:

- Providing funding for faculty research and publication on topics related to service learning or values instillation, thereby merging the requirements of academic career advancement with social efforts;
- Considering the merits of a ranking system for Christian colleges and universities in Asia, which would raise the profile of this entire sector;
- Holding a conference on the idea of a Christian university, with papers prepared and presented by representatives of Asian Christian universities.

The ideas generated over the course of the daylong discussion vividly demonstrated the United Board's belief that the center of Asian Christian higher education is *in Asia*. This belief is also inherent in the United Board's own practice, as its programs are initiated and located in Asia and, from inception through execution, are driven by the needs and knowledge of the region.

The United Board stands for ideals fundamental to Christian teachings and traditions: unity, integrity, tolerance, harmony, reconciliation, and justice. It believes that by working together with its partners, it can reinforce these values in higher education throughout Asia.

About the United Board

The United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia works to support a Christian presence in academic communities in Asia.

Founded in 1922, the United Board is an historic Christian organization with a contemporary mission: we work with higher education institutions in Asia to develop leadership, collaboration and values such as justice, care for the environment, reconciliation and harmony among ethnic and religious communities, and civil society.

Further information on the United Board and its programs can be found at www.unitedboard.org.

United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia

Headquarters:

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1221
New York, NY 10115
United States
info@unitedboard.org

Hong Kong Office:

1/F, Chung Chi College Administration Building
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Shatin, Hong Kong