

members covered up to two years of employment. Many stories have been circulated about professors whose contracts were not renewed due to their political orientations. The new University Law has introduced the tenure system as a measure to protect faculty jobs. However, the details of the implementation and regulation of tenure have not yet been specified.

#### *Financial Autonomy of Public Colleges*

Under the new law, the Ministry of Education announced that financial autonomy would accompany academic freedom. The ministry introduced a policy to make public colleges responsible for 20 percent of their annual operating revenues. This policy was a great surprise to college administrators, few of whom have any experience in fund-raising. The variety of fund-raising approaches adopted so far include raising money through alumni associations, convincing faculty members and college administrators to donate part of their salaries to their colleges, and offering extension courses to generate extra tuition revenue. It seems likely that with the pressures of financial autonomy, Taiwanese higher education institutions will become more market oriented than ever before.

## The Collapse of the Venezuelan University as an Instrument for Economic and Social Development

### **Orlando Alborno**

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What roles does the university fill as an instrument for economic and social development? Perhaps the answers are rather simple: to produce human resources, to create and disseminate knowledge, to be a critical force in the political arena, and to be the institutional leader in the intellectual environment. Within the country, the university should stimulate the realm of ideas that define the cohesion of Venezuelan society. Outside the country, the university should serve to link Venezuela to the global academic community. As such, the university should be both a national institution and a full member of the international world of scholarship.

If this is the case, the university in Venezuela is no longer able to fulfill its proper roles. The Venezuelan university has stopped being an instrument for development and is, perhaps, rapidly becoming a parochial educational

institution devoted only to training people in the different professions, unable to fulfill the other above-mentioned roles.

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In this South American country, the university has been an observer of economic and social changes, but has never actually led the way for development. During the severe economic and social crisis that began in 1989, the university began its decline. Just this past January, Venezuela reversed the policies of nationalization of both the oil and iron industries, sectors that produce almost all foreign income, which had been declared the national property of Venezuelans under the popular banner of *nacionalización* in 1975 under the first administration of Carlos Andrés Pérez. Today, Pérez is under house arrest, after being thrown out of office in 1993, and foreign companies are back in Venezuela, signing contracts with the government under “the doctrine of fifty-fifty”—according to which oil companies will keep half of their earnings with the country receiving the other half. This doctrine was developed during the mid-1940s under the leadership of Rómulo Betancourt. From a political point of view, no one is protesting internationalization, the same way that no one protested nationalization. But what is pathetic is the lack of any involvement by the university. The only university to play any role has been the Universidad Central de Venezuela, the largest university in the country, which accounts for almost 50 percent of all scientific research done in the country. Some years ago, this university would have been able to lead a national protest on such a significant matter. However, in 1996, the Universidad could do nothing more than publish a full-page newspaper ad, stating its arguments against internationalization, listing a telephone number (that nobody answered) to gather support.

Each of the almost 150 institutions of higher learning in Venezuela lives in isolation, simply taking care of the daily routine of classes, and in many cases doing nothing more than that. While some 30 of these institutions are universities, with the exception of 3 or 4 they are not engaged in any scientific research, nor are they addressing current events, or making any effort to go beyond what in Spanish is referred to as *la línea de la menor resistencia* (the path of least resistance). Private institutions are doing well

as teaching institutions. In fact, some are doing extremely well from the point of view of profits; it is said of some that it is much easier to get a degree than to park a car. Those private universities that cater to members of the elite are careful to remain noncontroversial; some of them are noticeable for their low profile, serving primarily as bridges to local industry. They are excellent in as much as there is full employment for their graduates and they are recognized as an important step in a successful life.

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The academic map of Venezuelan higher education is rather complex, since some public universities are spread out throughout the country, each one of them a kind of multiversity. In the private sector, there is no political activity of any kind, except in the conventional manner. In the public universities, however, there is constant political infighting and struggle, largely because senior academic leaders are elected and the electoral process has become highly politicized. A sort of academic *nomenklatura* has emerged, and some people enter academic life just to become political leaders in their institutions, using political connections the same way local politicians do.

As for academic responsibilities, those who fulfill the role of “the scholar” do so out of their own personal interest—because institutional obligations are rather light. Faculty members are expected only to teach, not to do research, and they do not have to publish or be a member of the international academic community. It could be said that in Venezuela the saying “publish or perish” is taken to mean that it is irrelevant whether you publish or perish—nobody cares either way. Some steps have been taken to improve this situation, but you can actually enter and leave a university in Venezuela as a member of the faculty without ever being able or obliged to publish even the most modest academic contribution. Ethics in academic life are almost nonexistent, and indeed in some universities people would be quite surprised if told that such a thing as an obligation to respect the value of ideas existed, either at the institutional or personal level.

Libraries are suffering from financial setbacks. In addition, the national currency has been sharply devalued:

before the monetary crisis began in 1980 the exchange rate was 4.3 bolivares to one American dollar, whereas the exchange rate is now close to 400 bolivares per dollar. This devaluation has made it almost impossible to purchase books or travel abroad, two of the main prerequisites to being a member of the international academic community. In relation to the American dollar, academia has gone back some 20 years in its purchasing power. Salaries are still good by local standards, but they are considerably lower when compared with salaries abroad. This has already started an academic “brain drain,” as some faculty members are leaving the country, leaving academia entirely; others take their faculty responsibilities very lightly, finding other jobs in the labor market even as they keep their academic positions at the university in what is called *dedicacion exclusiva* (full-time). With lifelong employment in the university and without a heavy academic workload, members of the faculty can navigate this nonacademic world, retain the title of professor, and look forward to retirement, with full salary, after some 25 years at the university.

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Perhaps, now that Venezuela has been officially recognized as a poor country, international assistance will help these universities develop a strong academic ethos. Otherwise, they will continue their decline; the only sign of life will be the political struggle for power at the public universities.

#### **Conference Announcement**

The fifth international symposium of the International Network on the Role of Universities in Developing Areas will be held at the University of Northern British Columbia in July 1997. If you would like to be placed on the mailing list to receive detailed information concerning the international symposium please write to Geoffrey R. Weller, International Studies Program, University of Northern British Columbia, 333 University Way, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada, V2N 4Z9. Fax (604) 960-5544