

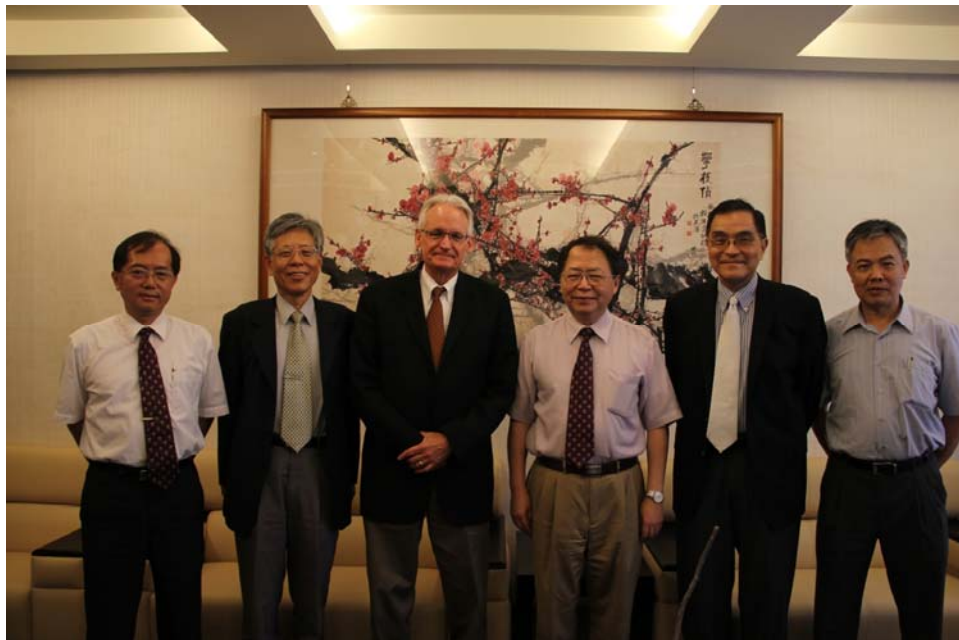
# **Need Based Financial Support and Lack of a Formula:**

## **Fundamentals of Crafting a World Class Student-Body for Stanford University**

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On the last day of May of 2012, National Tsing Hua University had a rather unusual visitor. He was Stanford University's Dean of Undergraduate Admission and Financial Aid, Mr. Richard H. Shaw.

The first thing Dean Shaw made it very clear from the start was that his trip not "*not to recruit students*" but to share lessons learned about how Stanford University recruits undergraduate students. "*As Taiwan's higher education is by far one of the best in the world, I am interested to learn how universities here recruit undergraduates and through which we could find areas to work on win-win scenarios,*" according to Dean Shaw.

The host of this short, cordial but stimulating meeting was Academician Lih J. Chen, President of NTHU. Also attending the meeting were Professor S. W. Chen, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Professor Hwai-Pwu Chou of the Institute of Nuclear Engineering and Science, Professor Rong-Shun Chen of the Department of Power Mechanical Engineering and myself.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, irrespective of how much a university, private or public, deemed itself as "research" in characters, educating undergraduates is always one of the, if not the most, important parts of its mission.

Furthermore, each university should and must have unique characters. For example, the fact that California Institute of Technology and Stanford University are both world renowned private research universities, their respective missions, and I am sure is reflected in the philosophies of undergraduate education are necessarily and understandably different. As a result, I am sure what Caltech's Dean of

Admission is looking for in a potential student can be differentiated from Dean Shaw of Stanford.

A research university has three important recruiting efforts.

**Recruiting faculty:** The aim here is clear. The target must be or have with a deep passion for teaching and the potential of having truly outstanding broad research ability and outlook. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is more and more discussion that recruiting must be “color-blind,” “nationality-blind” and “religious-blind.”

**Recruiting graduate students:** The aim here is simple. The target must be outstanding or the potential to be outstanding in research. Once the faculty of a particular department is or becomes well renowned, attracting the best graduate students by the department is or should be a relatively straightforward process.

**Recruiting undergraduate students:** Undergraduate students are the “grass roots” components of a university. Their characteristics directly manifest a university’s characteristics. Crafting the “right” undergraduate body is a complex and multi-dimensional effort. In the United States universities, such as Stanford, declaration of a “major” by an entering undergraduate is more for administrative purposes than a declaration of intellectual selection by a young man/woman. The mission of an undergraduate education at Stanford, for example, is to ensure the transformation of a student into a “complete” individual ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All this makes recruiting such students a complex human engineering process.

To this end, “being academically outstanding in high school is only necessary but hardly sufficient.” To enter Stanford, selecting students, according to Dean Shaw, becomes a highly professional, intellectually demanding and labor intensive effort throughout the year. For this reason, at Stanford University, Dean Shaw’s office maintains a large (if memory did not fail me, I think it is around 70!) professional permanent and temporary staff, since they have to carefully evaluate some 30,000 highly qualified applications!

Here are two fundamental recruiting philosophies of Stanford as mentioned by Dean Shaw.

**First**, according to Dean Shaw, no qualified students are turned away from Stanford University because of financial reason(s). This is the monumental principle of the University. One of the reasons why Stanford University could do this is because it is armed with an endowment of nearly \$12 (U.S.) billion. Hence, financial support of entering students is strictly “need based” and not “merit based.” This means that a student is rejected only because he/she does not reach the extremely high threshold of admittance and not because he/she cannot afford to come. **Stanford University casts their recruiting net for all students from every corner of United States (and to a lesser extent to the world) and select students from all levels of economic backgrounds.** It should be underscored that only a few universities in the United States could truly afford this practice. This includes Harvard University with \$25 billion endowment, Yale University with \$17 billion and Princeton University with \$11 billion.

Another reason is that all these universities maintain a relatively small undergraduate body: Stanford 7000, Harvard 7000 and Yale 5000.

Hence, for Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania, which have undergraduate populations and endowments 14,000 and \$5 billion and 10,000 and \$6 billion, respectively, it would be very surprising that they could practice the philosophy to the same extent as Stanford University.

As far as I could surmise, there is no possibility that private universities in Taiwan could practice this philosophy. For example, many of our private universities (*with tuition and student population numbers tightly controlled by the Ministry of Education, so in some sense it is a misnomer that they are private*) have enormous student populations and most have very high percentage of undergraduates. For example, in Tunghai University, it has 17,000, Tamkang University, 23,000, Fu Jen University, 23,000 and Chinese Culture University, 30,000. Furthermore, while I do not have the data, I suspect that the endowments of these universities, if they existed at all, are minuscule!

**Second**, according to Dean Shaw, one of the comments he made which drove Taiwan universities admission officers “nuts” is that there is **no formula** in accepting students. Whenever a parent mentioned how strong his or her child is, such as how high is the student’s SAT score, Dean Shaw’s standard reply would be “that means your child is eligible for competing for a position at Stanford.” As far as Stanford University is concerned, no single number of any sort can reflect enough the total package of a student. To understand the total package, it necessarily makes admission practice of Stanford University very labor intensive.

Of course, as Dean Shaw said, the outcome of the work of the admission office also has rather severe accountability. That in fact comes from Stanford University’s world class faculty members. He as Dean of

Admission certainly will hear from his “boss” the Provost of the university when Faculty either complains or compliments about the quality of students.

Ultimately, in selecting students, according to Dean Shaw, the Admission Officers who will make the final decision will have to have enormous inherent self confidence and the realization that as much detail as they intend to pay to for every single applicant, they will at times make mistakes. The key is that when that happens, they must evaluate as to what went wrong and to ensure that the same situation would not repeat itself in the future.

One final important point which Dean Shaw makes, and that is being a private university with absolute autonomy, there is NO political influence what-so-ever in their selection process.

## **Epilogue**

After listening to Dean Shaw, I find it hard to see how public universities could follow the same path. What is disconcerting is how significant a gap our private universities practice admission, and thus crafting their undergraduate portfolio from Stanford University.