Plan for the Asian Center

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The Search Committee, ladies and gentlemen:

My role, I think, if given the chance to serve as Asian Center dean, is to be an agent of continuity and change, that is, face the challenge of defining what needs to endure and what needs to vary over time. What makes the Asian Center unique in the UP community is that it is the only unit with a regional or Asian focus, and thus its foundations—the standards, program development, supporting policies, guidelines, and procedures—must be consistent with this regional specialization. All system design, implementation, support, and maintenance must be based on this underpinning in order to have any hope of institutional continuity, regardless of any adverse circumstances or events.

At the same time, recognizing that change is inevitable, we need to be energized in restructuring some of the practices and procedures within the Center. Running an academic institution is more multifaceted, competition is fiercer, students, faculty and administrative staff alike have greater expectations, and resources are, sadly, often in short supply. Leadership surely won’t get any easier. There are larger risks associated with actions across a wider front. Conceivably, the Asian Center will always be a work-in-progress, as it confronts change, but it is, happily, anchored on a medium term strategic plan that forms the organisation’s vision, culture and values as well as performance targets, as already laid out by Dean Carol Sobritchea. Obviously, there is an increasing opportunity also to replace the risk of disappointments with a desire to apply new approaches.

The key, or the primary task, is basically to both stay the course and introduce layers of improvements.
Let us focus first on the Asian Center tasks centered around this complex, the GT-Toyota Cultural Center.

On research, the most important action required is to lay the organizational groundwork for RISA, assuming its approval by the Board of Regents comes early enough. We already have a research and publications blueprint, approved by the AC faculty. With the earnings from this building and the auditorium providing seed money, we expect to deliver more publishable research undertakings (we have already started giving research grants to faculty) that are in keeping with regional and Philippine themes, seen with an Asian lens. God willing, we should see the first batch of non-faculty fellows by next year, to assist us in making RISA eventually financially independent and a viable think tank. We will try to tap many of our outstanding alumni as well.

With some physical alterations here and there, we also expect the Museum to become a truly Asian gallery of important artifacts and other objects of scientific, artistic, cultural, or historical importance for both academic and public viewing. It will host Asian exhibits and invite collections from other countries for short-term presentation. Although primarily concerned with providing a space to show works of visual art, it will host other artistic activities, such as performance art, mini-music concerts, or poetry readings. The open space within the complex is part of the museum, and will be landscaped accordingly. Our treasured collections of artifacts and other art works and documents should stay temporarily with other University units capable of preserving them, while we grapple on how best to rework matters in the Museum spaces we have. Let us hope too that Romulo Hall survives the structural tests, so that it will rejoin our complex and offer us more flexibility in designing our research and museum environment.

Our Library is facing physical constraints. It is not meant to host a heavy acquisition of books. The answer lies in new technologies. With so many stimulating innovations such as e-book readers, open source, and cloud computing, we can invest more in technologies that should protect quite a bit of library space. The relationship between library and users in any case is changing. Our library won't probably cave in that readily
to digitization, but its shape will likely change over time. Fewer students go to the library in search of materials for their term papers or theses. More depend on googling the internet; it is easy to acquire e-books, or e-journals, whose costs have considerably gone down. You can get classics from amazon.com for free, paying only for downloading costs; you can get most of Rizal’s works completely for free from the Guthenberg website. Extra space means we can make the library serve as a center dedicated to learning as much as to literature. Our librarians can resort to social media to receive feedback about what type of new programming the students and faculty want most (e.g., authors' lectures, book launchings, Skype discussions), and about what e-books should make their way in student Kindles or Ipads or tablets. For a start, we can make our relatively brand new computers in the library part of a friendly “cyber cafe” or lounging area where patrons go to view digital collections. Perhaps in the future, the library will be loaning, not books, but e-readers with capacities to store thousands of books. Certainly this is not feasible yet for tomorrow, but we can break ground to make these happen.

We need more events in our auditorium, theatrical or otherwise, that are more in keeping with the academic character of the Asian Center. Luckily, apart from the quite a few stagings that we have hosted, we have a big regular customer on Sundays that help us earn our keep, but too much dependence on a particular organization is not a good thing, as a sudden withdrawal will take the wind out of our sails. A sustainability plan for the auditorium is in order.

Let us move on to other important aspects of Asian Center academic life.

It seems timely to discuss curricular change. At the tri-college level, we have generated consensus among the three units involved (CSSP, CAL and AC) to pursue a Philippine Studies conference that will take place early next year. Using an Experts Roundtable as an initial touchstone, we expect new ideas to be generated throughout the year on how to redefine Philippine studies along social, cultural and political lines that will eventually lead to a new PhD Philippine Studies curriculum, which has not been touched in the last
20 or so years. At the masteral level, although no major upheavals are being contemplated, minor but significant changes in language requirements, and in the core courses, will be instituted, to make the MA programs in both Asian and Philippine studies more relevant to the times. We will try to incorporate more choices of courses from other units in our development studies specialization, to make it a more professional curriculum.

Our own academic policies, which have piled up sporadically over the years need codification. We need a more coherent faculty and student manual. We need to manage our graduate courses more systematically, so that graduate students can have a deeper selection to choose from. For a start, we need to survey what our students really demand, so that we will not offer subjects that are just cancelled later for lack of enrollees. We need consistency in our standards on comprehensive and qualifying examinations, so that our graduates succeed truly as interdisciplinary experts. We need to bolster the authority of the Tri-College, at the very least, to pass judgment on its own graduates. Right now, our PhD candidates have to go through a gauntlet of faculty councils in CAL, CSSP and the Asian Center to be declared graduates. We want to see a Tri-College with its own set of rules, its own journal, and its own scholarship and fellowship resources.

We have an aging fleet of faculty that will need prompt replacements. Dean Carol has initiated a forceful recruitment initiative, but takers are far and few between. We will attempt to employ more aggressive search approaches for new faculty, especially in the key areas of Northeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Philippine Studies (foreign policy, sociocultural studies, development studies).

For our in-house faculty, the life of the mind is crucially important. Hopefully we can regularize the brown bag seminars and other workshops that have occasionally been held in our premises.
We will broaden our student constituency. We need to reach out to those doing foreign service, in order to develop area specialists that would populate diplomacy, business and civil society. We need new students among government people engaged in development, as well. For the Asian Center to start going global, we will try to attract more Asian and international students.

Our commitment to caring for each and every student should show through our academic, assistance and activity programs, but most importantly through our approach to student welfare. We will enhance student welfare through wide-ranging information and advice on funding issues, as well as issues on safety and security. International student support will consist of specialist support, immigration advice, and welcome activities. We will coordinate closely with our graduate student organization, the AC Balangay.

Networking is a crucial gap in the life of the Asian Center. Attempts at affiliating with foreign institutions are being made, such as a journal partnership with Kyoto University. Yet the Asian Center is not a member of any regional academic association, nor has it sustained any partnerships with major Asian Studies institutions, such as the IIAS. We will try to link up with at least one major network, within the year.

We will deepen the teamwork that has developed among faculty members and between faculty and graduate students, realizing that success comes not from what we personally accomplish, but what we achieve through others.

For the administrative staff as well, teamwork would be important. We have a talent-filled staff who need to be motivated to handle systems and procedures and office routines that improve efficiency and reduce transaction costs. Accordingly, we need to look deeply at the methodology of conducting day-to-day business, of instituting best practices that will help minimize any errors resulting from routines and old habits.
We have to do the right things to prepare the future leaders of the Asian Center. As the senior members sail into the sunset, new leaders must be trained like clockwork in the art of management and policy implementation, ready to bring the Asian Center into new heights.

Finally, will one year of serving as dean make a difference? It is easy for me to say that I will bank on my 7-year experience as President of the Development Academy of the Philippines. Yet my best argument is Dean Carol herself and the teamwork she has helped make possible. Within a year she has turned around the Asian Center after several years of lackluster performance. The Center has changed dramatically in certain ways while remaining surprisingly stable in others. In a year’s time, we have more publishable research activities, and the money to do them, a more coordinated offering of courses in both Asian Studies and Philippine Studies, a steady stream of new students. She has broken ground in curriculum changes, esp. in the PhD program. If selected as the new Dean, my task is to build on this momentum.

Maraming salamat po.