



## A Message to the USC Community

These past weeks have shown us many good reasons to be proud to be Carolinians.

Our hearts truly warm as we hear of the community extension service (CES) activities, for Devotio is precisely the desired response to the needs of those who suffer as well as solidarity with those who help them. At the same time, though, we worry whether Carolinians are taking the necessary precautions not to get infected themselves, which is why USC always requires MOAs with our partners in order to ensure the standard safeguards. We empathize with the Carolinians when overworked, or when they find themselves in difficult situations, or feel frustrated at the pace of government assistance. We applaud that students are beginning to appreciate that their first laboratory is the world and the school lab only their second. That experiential Scientia is priceless. In fact, if they engage not for academic credits but do so spontaneously and generously, they are manifesting acquired Virtus, because they are the altruists who decided to move out of their natural egocentrism, victimism and inconveniences to focus on others in greater need of compassion and solidarity. Yes, it is such students and faculty that we consider the Carolinian Advantage. Such are the liminal outlines of what Education with a Mission is about.

These past weeks, too, the University made important decisions on the matter of continuous learning, albeit mostly remote and asynchronous. Decisions were also made on assessments, making expanded learning opportunities (ELO) a matter of academic policy and not only a guiding educational philosophy. To put these decisions in context, let me cite first the realities of Philippine Education. Our country ranks among the lowest in education quality in ASEAN and, by inference, in much of the world. We already have almost insuperable lags; we do not need to add more hurdles to the existing ones. Policy papers clearly indicate that college education in particular will be increasingly meritocratic (calling it elitist is stereotyping) in the sense that only those who deserve to be in college should be admitted there, and this refers to foundational literacies, intellectual progress, academic stamina, and so on. In Ivy league schools, there is an unwritten motto: No excuses for academic shortfalls. In Korea and Japan schools, students go to both school and tutoring just to pass college entrance exams. Why did we flunk PISA? Because our 15-year old examinees were “digitally challenged.”

A side effect of the pandemic is the acceleration of growth of online education. Thus, for USC, the appropriate response is to carefully document the gaps and seek viable solutions instead of shelving it completely. How is it that so many are able to engage actively through social media, but not through online education? And how are we to cope with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Artificial Intelligence, 3D printing, and so on unless DICT addresses these issues? Education should be resumed as soon as feasible; stakeholders can continue the discussion on online education in search of creative solutions like blended learning. This is the time to think outside the box and not be trapped in conventional reactions.

USC is not alone in being skeptical about the value of mass promotion. And it hopes that the motto NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND is properly understood, because the original purpose of universal education at Basic Education level was for every child to get adequate training with what he is endowed, and not to pass simply on the basis of pity (luoy or awa). In fact, the misuse of the phrase (as pasa-luoy or pasang-awa) has resulted in students not being able to read or even construct a decent English sentence at SHS! Grade-wise they were not left behind. However, learning-wise they had already been severely compromised, and all the expense and effort of those promising years have been completely wasted. Mass promotion in college would be to promote and deepen this anomalous practice. We have graduates who cannot even write a creditable application letter, and industry has long complained about job applicants not having basic skills. Faculty are already having major difficulties with multi-level cohorts from K12, and they are justifiably worried that the situation will worsen with mass promotion. Brighter students aspiring for Latin honors silently resent this unfairness to their hard work. Once out of the school, would you eventually trust your own life, health, integrity, safety, finances, business, legal papers, buildings, etc. to professionals whose TORs are dotted with passing or barely passing marks? Those Ps (letter grades) may provide relief temporarily, but will permanently raise questions and diffidence about the graduates' actual competence. In the name of academic integrity, USC simply wants its grades to be as credible as they are earned. Seasoned teachers at basic education will tell you that sometimes a failing mark is the teacher's act of mercy – from a long-term perspective of the prospects of the student.

In making our policy decisions in this time of unprecedented crisis, we are guided by the core values of the University. After all, St. Charles Borromeo himself was known not only for social compassion (or Devotio) but more so for academic integrity (Virtus) because he reformed both schools and seminaries from their decadence.

I close with the reminder of the sequence of the Paschal Mystery that must be lived in its integrity and entirety. On the cross on Good Friday, Jesus could only take on faith that his suffering was tolerated by his Father for a purpose, one which was fully revealed only on Easter Sunday. For us who already know how the story ended, we can only hope in our present suffering that there will be an Easter event, if we do not give up on ourselves, on others, and on God. Then can we truly begin to be Witness to the Word.

With the same greetings to his disciples, then: "Peace be with you."

For the Cabinet,

(Sgd.) Fr. Dionisio M. Miranda, SVD  
University President

April 25, 2020