

USP professors call for changes. Read the whole manifesto, below.

August 3rd, 2009

USP needs to change

The University of Sao Paulo needs to change. USP needs to modernize without losing its long tradition of quality. USP needs to take on the responsibilities it owes to the society that maintains it. The moment of choosing a new Rector is the right moment to raise new ideas – to think big. The candidate each of us will choose is not the point: whoever is elected must guarantee the quality of our institution in a new world order and a new era of knowledge, combining USP's tradition of excellence with the necessary agility demanded by our modern world.

Global changes, accentuated by the recent crisis, have created new axes of political and economic power in the world and have revealed new priorities, generating opportunities for Brazil. If our University is among those with the highest international visibility, the decisive fact is that it figures among the top five universities in the countries that today, more than ever, are truly emerging. In this context, the role of USP may be critical in helping our country grow and take on the place we all strive for. If this future vision is to become a reality, USP must change. The changes involve strengthening the criteria that demand quality in all management actions and mechanisms, starting with the choice of the Rector, with academic criteria outweighing lesser interests. This requires subordinating bureaucratic and administrative procedures to the end-goals, stripping them of their ritualistic red-tape.

The way of choosing USP's Rector needs to change during the first year of the next administration. A broader and more representative participation across the university needs to be ensured in the final decision, always aiming for higher quality in the university's activities. New ways of choosing the Rector should be discussed with the academic community. Whether by reinforcing or by broadening the current electoral college in its first round, we agree that change is urgently needed, that any reform must build on and increase USP's excellence, and that the current second-round electoral college should be eliminated.

However, the changes in power structures are only one aspect of the alterations that will guarantee an improvement in the quality of our institution. We have strong and highly competitive groups, as well as newly formed groups and others that need to grow or be honed. The existence of groups or courses of lesser academic importance, be they in teaching or research, is certainly the responsibility of the

Rector's Office and the Directors, and demands creative intervention on the part of academic authorities, so as to make sure that some maintain or increase their leadership and others move on to the level of USP's mission. The institution has to work as a group, synergetically and complementarily, avoiding the internal competition that threatens to dismantle the common ethos of the university.

The leadership qualities and intellectual competence of many USP Professors have built the traditional excellence of this university. Successful groups and scientists have also made significant contributions to the university, in terms of equipment, laboratories, reagents, instruments and scholarships. But the difficulties created in infra-structure and administration, often accompanied by departmental resistance to these scientists, have driven them away from the life of the university: they have sought isolation and independence, turning to the more flexible management mechanisms of extra-university resources. These groups have to be actively reincorporated into the institution; their leaders need to receive incumbencies that are compatible with their scientific production; administrative and resource-management bottlenecks must be resolved and simplified, so that the university itself can take responsibility for all or most of the actions carried out in hundreds of entities that attach themselves to it without due control. These would be important measures to contain the centrifugal forces that are fragmenting USP.

USP has the largest group of researchers and specialists among Brazilian universities. It cannot become isolated: without entering party politics it must dialogue with governments and the society that keeps it going. As well as having an educational mission, USP has the duty to create knowledge, contribute to solutions, provide advice to resolve stalemates and help promote Brazil's development.

The challenges that Brazil faces are of two types: deficits and opportunities. There is a long list of topics in which USP may intervene effectively, and representative of our social deficits we might mention violence, with its many roots; inequality in all its dimensions; increasing pollution; the unnecessary antagonism between development and biodiversity/cultural diversity (for example, the extinction of indigenous languages, the study of cultures such as Korean and Bolivian, two peoples who are becoming part of our daily life); the risk of São Paulo's capital city becoming completely paralyzed by traffic, stifling its economic, social and cultural vigor; the extraordinary change in the demographic profile, in which the ever-increasing number of elderly people is joined by a dramatic fall in the birth-rate, a phenomenon that already affects all activities, from health care to urban planning, by way of labor relations and social security. But the greatest contribution that USP

needs to and can make to the country and to the State of São Paulo, to a much greater extent than it already does, is in its relationship with education at all levels.

There are, also, great opportunities for Brazil: we may be the first environmental power on the planet, we have specialists who are capable of taking the lead in the huge challenges that will dictate the growth rate of various countries, such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, sustainable energy generation, the use of water. Our cultural diversity may reveal sources of unsuspected wealth, which can be converted into innovative scientific, technological and social contributions.

USP has special responsibility for undergraduate and graduate education, especially with the excellence and the changes needed in a world where professions have become more varied, distance-learning more intense, and the continued education of students, professionals and teachers more common, leading to the creation, revision, fusion and extinction of courses. The university should increasingly play a role in proposing innovative models and initiatives, instead of repeating what other institutions do, but on a larger scale. It should renew university training, so that our students can deal with life through an interdisciplinary approach; it should understand that new professions have arisen and are not always anchored in a diploma.

For this, the academic and departmental structure has to be reformed, to free itself of the immobility and bureaucracy that puts rite before merit. University bureaucracy is not exclusively the product of an elite group of staff, but also of the conservatism of professors, especially those sitting in administrative positions or on the many committees across the university or its subdivisions. It is up to the Rector and vice-Rectors to break out of this stagnation that derives from the blind repetition of routine and unquestioning observance of rules that should be fleeting and transitory, rather than being transformed into immutable laws.

USP has more than double the number of graduate programs than the next university in the ranking. It covers almost all sectors of knowledge in its more than 200 programs, 90% of them including doctoral courses, characterized by their high quality and leadership capacity. Some years ago USP produced more than half the doctorates in Brazil, and today it is still responsible for nearly a quarter of the total: this very decrease is one of the proofs of its own success, since most of the new post-graduate programs nationwide are led by academics whose degree came from USP; they can now be found working in all Brazilian states and in almost all Brazilian universities. To a great extent, Brazil's Graduate System owes its shape and current success to USP. Our University, in turn, has a

great responsibility to renew its graduate programs. Without abandoning quantitative targets, it should focus on new challenges, such as making efforts to develop programs that go beyond the boundaries of classical disciplines, and that deal with the complexity of our world and of knowledge, in new ways of interlinking research groups and fields of thought. Graduate courses should have a major place in this new vision, mainly keeping in mind that the Professors and researchers of the whole graduate system in Brazil, across traditional and newly expanding universities, will need vital help in maintaining and consolidating their scientific activities. This may be the most important contribution that USP can make to the future of Brazilian university system.

Evaluation is a central management tool in any institution, be it public or private. It is also the key element in defining targets and being accountable to society. Evaluation of targets should be part of USP's daily life, at every level. It cannot be a on-off phenomenon, an amateur exercise, nor should it be the focus of pressure from different groups within the university itself, trying to control the outcomes. It should be a process whose end product, rather than just feeding news items, works for the Rector's Office, directors and the government so as to improve USP's performance.

To sum up, we need a dynamic university that does not abandon its roots but shows that it is open to those changes that can guarantee its excellence. Its Rector will need scientific authority, academic representivity and social commitment to strengthen positive potential, reuniting the institution and restoring its enthusiasm and vigor, qualities that should extend to all who take part in its management. We who strive for university quality are the ones who need to define what USP should be, and who need to find a Rector who is committed to the best ideas and real possibility of putting them into action. We urge our colleagues to bring their most precious ideas and most valuable ideals into the open, so that the next Rectorial election will go beyond just choosing a name, becoming instead the occasion of reaffirming the scientific daring and social responsibility of our university.

Adalberto Fazzio – Institute of Physics, USP

Glauco Arbix – Faculty of Philosophy, Letters and Human Sciences, USP

Hernán Chaimovich Guralnik – Institute of Chemistry, USP

Jorge Kalil Filho – Faculty of Medicine, USP

Marco Antonio Zago – Faculty of Medicine at Ribeirão Preto, USP

Renato Janine Ribeiro – Faculty of Philosophy, Letters and Human Sciences, USP

Vahan Agopyan – Polytechnic School, USP