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Oral History Interview with Low Aik Meng: Conceptualising SMU

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualizing SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Low Aik Meng

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 8th February 2011

Location: Singapore Management University, Li Ka Shing Library Recording Studio

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Patricia Meyer: Today's interview is with Low Aik Meng, the founding and current Dean of Students at Singapore Management University. I'm Pat Meyer. We are meeting in SMU's Recording Studio at the Li Ka Shing Library on Tuesday, 8th February 2011. As you've been part of SMU since the beginning, we would like to talk about your recollections and your perspective on the formation and early days of SMU and your contributions and experiences as the first Dean of Students.

Patricia Meyer: How did you come to join the working committee for this new university in early 1998?

Low Aik Meng: Professor Tan Teck Meng was a member of the steering committee and chairman of its working committee. He requested us to join him in the committee. We were both excited and concerned. Firstly, the deadline was very tight, about two years to set up the university. Secondly, the new university was to be converted from the Singapore Institute of Management into the proposed university. Then there was the question of location as well as the budget. As it was to be established as a private university, the basis under which the Government was to fund the university was uncertain. However, we said yes, as the proposed university was to replace the existing business schools in NUS and NTU. Further, with Tan Teck Meng playing a key role in planning the new start-up, we were confident that it would be successful. He had after all transformed the NTU School of Accountancy to become a full-fledged business school. We decided to resign to show our faith in the start-up, and to show that it was not going to be a half-hearted effort. As it was a Government decision to create the new university, there was no objection from NTU.

Patricia Meyer: In those very early days, where did you first work?

Low Aik Meng: The planning team was still employed at NUS and NTU until 1998. Therefore, we met in the evenings and on weekends to do our planning at each others' homes before we resigned. From 1st March 1998, after Teck Meng, Chin Tiong [Tan Chin Tiong] and I had resigned our respective positions at NUS and NTU; we operated at the ground floor of Wah Chang House in Upper Bukit Timah road, the office premises of Mr Ho Kwon Ping who was the chairman of the steering committee. The members of the working committee, 12 of us, comprised, Teck Meng [Tan Teck Meng], Chin Tiong [Tan Chin Tiong], Kwong Sin [Leong Kwong Sin], Yang Hoong [Pang Yang Hoong], Kee Yang [Low Kee Yang], Thian Ser [Toh Thian Ser], Soo Chiat [Hwang Soo Chiat], Michael Gan, Kai Chong [Tsui Kai Chong], Teng Aun [Khoo Teng Aun], Wee Liang [Tan Wee Liang] and me.

Patricia Meyer: What were your areas of responsibility on the working committee?

Low Aik: The group of 12 operated as a team, but each had specific functions ranging from

Meng: strategic issues such as the vision and mission of the proposed university, core values, curriculum, teaching pedagogy, marketing and recruitment of the first cohort, finance, human resource, faculty recruitment, space planning, IT, legal matters such as the Constitution of the Students Association. I had oversight of the curriculum, as I had earlier whilst in NTU been responsible for the design of the Nanyang MBA curriculum when it was launched in 1991. However, all decisions were based on consensus after much debate and deliberation. All of us felt privileged and honoured but it was a huge load on our shoulders. We knew that the future of the proposed university as well as its eventual image and success depended on the rigour of our planning.

Patricia Meyer: How did you and the team go about developing the curriculum for the new university?

Low Aik Meng: As the Government had earlier decided on collaboration with the Wharton School it was natural to use it as a starting block for the design of the SMU curriculum. However, we made various changes and additions to make the SMU curriculum more unique. For instance, we decided to implement a compulsory internship component to ensure that its students graduate with some work experience. It will make them more employable. Further, employers also get to know the quality of our students. Another compulsory requirement was community service. We wanted to inculcate in students the spirit of giving back to society and to nurture students with a heart. Another addition was a course module named Business Study Mission which we had implemented successfully in the Nanyang MBA program. We saw the importance of developing in students a global mindset. Study trips overseas, visiting companies, interacting with top management - all these would provide our students with a better understanding of operating in different cultures, as well as economic, political and legal systems. The BSM has now become a very popular feature of the SMU undergraduate curricula.

To differentiate the SMU program with other local universities, we decided on a broad-based curriculum spanning 36 subjects compared to their 24, and interactive seminar-style pedagogy with small classes. We saw these additions as important to grooming graduates who are confident, dynamic, able to think out of the box, and with good communication and presentation skills. However, it would require us to extend the program to four years compared to three years in the local universities. We perceived, however, that these improvements would add value and provide our students with a more rigorous education, and enable them to thrive in an increasingly dynamic and global environment. The fact that the employment rate for our graduates each year is closed to 100%, demonstrates that employers have found them appealing.

Patricia Meyer: Can you tell us some more about how you went about creating the student experience or the culture of SMU?

Low Aik Meng: The 12 members in the planning team together had a few hundred years of academic experience behind us and we knew what we wished to see in our graduates. We saw the need to instil certain core values in our graduates which would make them distinctive and

give them an identity. We deliberated long and hard on the values the various stakeholders deemed as important and eventually came up with the CIRCLE values of Commitment, Integrity, Responsibility, Collegiality, Leadership, and Excellence. We felt that these were the attributes that would give our SMU graduates the 'soul'.

In the classroom, courses were introduced to instil some of these attributes such as leadership and teambuilding, ethics and social responsibility. These were supplemented with other initiatives and programs beyond the classroom such as empowering students to take on leadership roles in organizing university events, requiring all freshmen to attend a three day camp to inculcate the core SMU CIRCLE values, inviting students to give back to the university by serving as peer helpers, SMU ambassadors, etcetera and also encouraging students to spearhead overseas community service projects to help needy communities. We saw the importance of a holistic education in developing the quintessential SMU graduate, one who had undergone rigorous academic training, possessed a value system and a sense of social responsibility. The student body in collaboration with staff and faculty eventually composed the SMU pledge reflecting the SMU CIRCLE values.

Patricia Meyer: Can you share some memories that you may have from the first freshmen team building camp?

Low Aik Meng: Whilst camps in NUS and NTU were planned by students, with fun as the primary objective, the planning team decided that SMU's freshmen leadership and teambuilding camp should also have a learning objective in addition to fun. As there were no senior students, staff & faculty volunteered to be instructors and were trained by an expert on team-building techniques. They served as group leaders leading the freshmen in various team-building activities. The activities were designed to get students working in teams, interacting and strategising on the best approach to completing a task, and having fun at the same time. Each activity was intended to impart one or more of the CIRCLE Values. For example, there was the trust fall activity involving a person falling backwards from table height into the arms and hands of a group. This demonstrates the importance of commitment, responsibility & excellence without which it could be disastrous. Each activity was followed by a debriefing to discuss the lessons learnt. The first camp took place at the site of the current Copthorne Orchid Hotel at Bukit Timah. After 2005, with the increase in student intake, the camps were moved to the Outward Bound School. Currently, senior students take on the role of group leaders leading the freshmen. They are trained by managers in the Office of Student Life. The safety aspect is handled by the Outward Bound School.

Patricia Meyer: Can you tell us what the first days of classes were like?

Low Aik Meng: There was a lot of excitement in the air, the first day in the life of a new university. The students had earlier attended the freshmen team-building camp and knew each other well. Hence, there was a carnival atmosphere with faculty and students interacting with each other. I remembered Mahesh who eventually became the first president of the Students

Association 'monkeying' around dressed in robes and trying to amuse his new-found friends. The first teachers were the senior faculty who came from NUS and NTU, together with new staff such as Saw Cheng Lim and Lim Pey Woan. I sensed that the students didn't have much difficulties adjusting to the teaching style. They had applied to SMU because they preferred studying in small classes, the seminar-style, interactive teaching approach as well as the class participation, presentations and project work.

Patricia Meyer: How would you characterize the pioneer class?

Low Aik Meng: The pioneer class may be described as entrepreneurial, loving challenges and willing to think out of the box. Immediately they started forming clubs to enhance the level of student life. These students set the tone for future student leaders, which is why student life in SMU today is very vibrant. Many of the clubs such as Eurythmics and Guitarrissimo continued to flourish today, setting high standards for themselves and even organizing public concerts each year. Having taught at other local universities, I would describe campus life there as impersonal, with little interaction between faculty, staff and students. In SMU, at the outset, we decided that we would encourage a 'family' concept with fewer barriers between faculty and students. Our small classes and interactive teaching pedagogy also enabled faculty to know students better. Students were not afraid to approach faculty to discuss issues. It was not unusual for faculty to participate in activities of students. Many of the faculty, for instance, joined the pioneer students on a 3-day cruise at the end of their first year.

Patricia Meyer: Can you tell us about some of the early experiences with student-led activities and student leadership?

Low Aik Meng: The focus in the early years was to encourage students to participate more actively in student life. There was less emphasis on student life as an instrument for student development. OSL's [Office of Student Life] role was to assist students to set up clubs and advise them on systems and procedures. With a small student body, there was less pressure to compete with the other local universities in the area of sports and arts. University-wide events were then spearheaded primarily by OSL managers with the assistance of students. With the increase in the student population, the university began investing more heavily on co-curricular activities as an integral part of student education, and co-opting students to spearhead university wide events. The students rose to the occasion. Today, some major activities organised by students include the freshmen teambuilding camp for 1,700 freshmen each year. Each year some 100 students undergo months of training under OSL managers to become instructors and to lead groups of freshmen in teambuilding activities. Convocation and Patron's Day are other university events organised by students under the supervision of OSL managers.

Students also volunteered their time in service to the university. The peer helpers, for instance, are SMU's eyes and ears on the ground and provide basic counselling to students who are lonely or in distress. The Council of Student Conduct comprises

students who educate the student body on the SMU core values. A group of accounting students who called themselves the SMU Advisory and Assurance Team volunteered their time to audit the accounting records of the 130 student clubs. OSL also introduced an excellence program whereby clubs that are committed and excelled in their activities are provided funds to employ coaches and to stage annual public concerts and performances. Leadership programs are arranged for student leaders to ensure that they excel. To encourage clubs to aspire to higher standards, funds are provided for high performing clubs to participate and compete at international competitions and events.

Patricia Meyer:

Can you tell us how the idea for student ambassadors came about?

Low Aik Meng:

The SMU Ambassadorial Corps was set up in Aug 2003. We found that students were excellent and they are probably the best ambassadors in showing the SMU uniqueness. The ambassadors are trained and hone their skills as external relations representatives of the university. They engage external guests, parents, and prospective students, during their visits to SMU and at important school functions. Many distinguished visitors were very impressed with the calibre of our ambassadors and this contributes to a very positive image of SMU.

Besides hosting distinguished guests, the ambassadors also organise and manage projects that reach out to the university's external stakeholders, such as the annual Evening@SMU for parents the HPAIR conference in collaboration with Harvard students. The ambassadors have been involved in a project on environmental sustainability for the last 3 years. Seeing how de-forestation, poaching and bad urban planning have depleted the elephant population in Thailand from 100,000 in the 1900s to 4,600 today, The ambassadors have been visiting an elephant park in northern Thailand to teach the hill-tribe living near the park on re-forestation as a food source for the elephants, as well as building a well for the tribe, teaching them how to package products for sale, and producing a film documentary to promote public awareness in Singapore regarding the plight of the Asian elephant.

Patricia Meyer:

Can you tell us some more about how your office has gone about developing service projects and opportunities for the SMU students?

Low Aik Meng:

To groom responsible prospective global business leaders and entrepreneurs, SMU saw the need to introduce a compulsory community service component into its undergraduate program. We felt that this will shape their outlook on volunteerism and giving back to society when they finally graduate. Students have the choice of doing their service in Singapore or overseas. In total, on the 10th anniversary of SMU [Jan 2010], students have performed more than a million hours of community service. A substantial number have rendered service totaling hundreds of hours. Initially, some students showed reluctance but eventually most saw the value of community service in helping others and contributing to their own personal growth.

In Singapore, community service projects include visiting the elderly in old folks home or

those living alone in one-room HDB [Housing Development Board] flats, as well as helping the sick at hospitals and hospices. Overseas, the students have been involved in a variety of projects in needy communities. Project Argali in 2007 consisting of 14 SMU students who partnered a local NGO [Non Government Organization] in South Sikkim to improve the living standard and quality of life of its people. The project involves manufacturing chlorine-free paper from the Argali plant which grows profusely as a means of economic livelihood for the community without polluting the environment or cutting down trees. Our students assist with product development and the marketing plan for the paper products.

Another project was a Dare to Dream expeditions in 2007 – 12 SMU students partnered five hearing-impaired youths on a project in India. To better understand the silent world, our students learnt sign language to communicate with the youths. Through this, they learnt about the challenges faced by the hearing-impaired in their daily lives. The group collaborated with an organization in the village named Yuksam to promote eco-tourism as an alternative income source for the villagers. Our students assisted in developing merchandising ideas and marketing strategies for the products to woo eco-tourists to Yuksam. Then of course in the 2004 Asian tsunami, a group of students spent a few weeks in Khao Lak in Southern Thailand to assist in building a children's home for orphans who had lost their parents in the tsunami.

Patricia Meyer:

Can you tell us about SMU's first student hostel, when and why was it established?

Low Aik Meng:

SMU Residences at Prinsep was opened in 2007. It is within walking distance from campus. It consists of three blocks of four storey apartments in a tropical setting with landscaping and abundant foliage and can accommodate 260 students. Each apartment has a lounge and dining area, equipped with refrigerator and microwave oven. The hostel is primarily for first year international students as well as senior students who act as mentors. Before the hostel was opened, OSL used to source accommodation for international students in locations such as Chip Bee Gardens and in Farrer Road with hostel providers. SMU believes that hostel living is an essential part of university life for students. Living together on a daily basis ensures that both local and international students integrate, accept each other as people and forge closer relationships. In the context of Singapore, it supports the Government's national agenda of community engagement and foreign talent retention.

Living together enables students to learn about the importance of diversity, form friendships, and eventually entice foreign students to stay on in Singapore after graduation. Now for our first hostel, we decided that someone trained in counseling was important as many of the international students are young and needed a father figure. In fact, we had two who were about 16 to 18 years old. Timothy who is our first residential master or housemaster is assisted by a group of students called residential seniors who mentor the students in their apartments. We wanted the SMU hostel to be a home away from home. As such emphasis was placed on residential life, with regular activities organized to bring the hostel community together.

In fact, because the SMU hostel has been so successful, we are now requesting the Government to give us land to build hostels for both faculty and students. Currently, a proposed concept has been finalized and we hope that the MOE as well as URA will be convinced enough to give us the land in the near future.

Patricia Meyer: How has student financial assistance developed and changed over the years at SMU?

Low Aik Meng: SMU has a broad spectrum of financial assistance schemes for students. In particular, Singapore students who qualified for admission can be assured that they will not be denied an SMU education because of fees. The schemes comprise loans, grants, bursaries, awards, and scholarships. Students who prefer to earn to fund their studies can also take advantage of the Work Study Grant by working with SMU schools and offices. This grant has both a work and financial assistance element. Recently, an education loan was introduced to assist local and international students to cope with fee increases. To encourage more Singapore students to seek global exposure and to broaden their mindsets, the Government and SMU co-fund an Overseas Student Program Loan. Students can utilize the loan scheme for up to \$11,500 for overseas trips sanctioned by SMU such as exchange programs, BSM, internships, and community service. There is also a conference grant for students who wish to present papers at academic conferences. For students facing serious financial difficulties, there is a Student Life Financial Grant available for them. We also recently introduced an Overseas Entrepreneurship Attachment Grant which provides funds to enable students who wish to eventually start their own companies to intern with an overseas start-up venture. In line with SMU's emphasis on a holistic education, scholarships and awards are given to students based on a list of criteria. Besides GPA [Grade Point Average], these include active involvement in CCAs, contributions to the university, undertaking leadership roles in clubs or in organizing major university events, and contributing to the community at large.

Now our 2010 valedictorian is Russell Tan. He was selected because of his very active involvement in student life. He was the president of the SSU which is the SMU Sports Union. Tan Lay Khim was selected as salutatorian because she was very active, being one of the founders of the SMU's Advisory and Assurance Team which audits the student clubs for SMU. So, we use a holistic measure when we actually award winners.

Patricia Meyer: What advice do you have for future SMU students?

Low Aik Meng: My advice to future students is that they should take advantage of all the opportunities that SMU has to offer. Otherwise, they would have missed out on an important aspect of their education. Study is only one part of the SMU experience. Another important aspect is their personal development. Active involvement in CCAs, taking on leadership roles, contributing in service to SMU as well as the community at large builds character and contributes to personal growth. Over the years, I've witnessed how students who embraced a holistic education grew in stature and maturity. That I think is the SMU

difference!

Patricia
Meyer:

Thank you.

End of Interview

Acronyms List

	Acronym	Definition
1.	CCA	Co-Curricular Activity
2.	CV	Curriculum Vitae
3.	GPA	Grade Point Average
4.	JC	Junior College
5.	MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
6.	MOE	Ministry of Education
7.	NIE	National Institute of Education
8.	NTU	Nanyang Technological University
9.	NUS	National University of Singapore
10.	OSL	Office of Student Life
11.	SIM	Singapore Institute of Management
12.	SMU	Singapore Management University
13.	URA	Urban Redevelopment Authority
14.	YEP	Youth Expedition Project