EDITORIAL

50th Anniversary of the Universidad Nacional del Sur

“not another university, but a new one”

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Why a new university and not another one? I believe that in the 50th anniversary of the Universidad Nacional del Sur, this idea must be revisited.

This idea was born more than 80 years ago, when Bahía Blanca was experiencing a feverish foundational period (its second foundation). In the beginning of the 20th century, through its port and railroad tracks, rivers of wealth converged in Bahía Blanca, producing the spectacular transformation and growth of the city, as logical as was the richness in natural resources of the surrounding region.

The development of a strong migratory current gave Bahía Blanca an important cultural impetus in a broad array of arts, professions, and trades. Numerous public and private buildings still reveal the artistic and professional excellence that the artisans, builders, and professionals of the time exhibited. The Teatro Municipal (Municipal Theater), founded in 1913 embodies the cultural landscape of the time. Local magazines and newspapers also abounded, and the city was home of great writers such as Roberto Payró and Eduardo Mallea. It is not surprising then, that many proposals were made to create a university in the region in the civilizing and cultural climate of the 1920’s.

But it was clear at the time that Argentina depended technologically and economically on other countries. It is for this reason that in the genesis of the sought after university there was a firm commitment to put knowledge to the service of regional development. To that purpose, its foundational profile is oriented towards commerce and economics, engineering, chemical technology, agricultural and extractive sciences with a strong component of humanities.

The new University must conquer the country’s capacity of technical decision-making. This is the idea proclaimed in the legislative projects of the 1920’s and 1930’s by the deputies Mario M. Guido and Samuel Allperin. The eagerness of the city to forge its own destiny is first crystallized by the effort of a group of distinguished citizens who created the Universidad del Sur. This initiative materialized eight years later with the approval of a legislative project proposed by Dr. Miguel Lopez Frances and endorsed by the National Government. As a result of this endorsement, the Instituto Tecnológico del Sur was formally established.

To this generation of founders of a technical University, among whom I remember professors Berge Vila and Pedro Gonzales Prieto, Dr. Mario Fachinetti Luiggi, the engineers Walter Daub and José María Arango, we should add the strategic vision of thinkers such as Martínez Estrada and, in particular, by its first president Professor Vicente Fatone. The combination of these two lines of thought
established the foundations of a new university, new even today and still unique in Argentina and Latin America.

A university organized by departments, without barriers among archaic Faculties. A university where everyone plays an important role: students, professors, and the community. A university that is a communion of ideas, a university without cloisters, a university where students and professors of different disciplines learn together, a university that does research and commits itself to social and economic development.

The inaugural speech of its first president, the Argentinean philosopher Vicente Fatone, illustrates the essence of the concept of a university to the service of national development with the clear and humanistic vision of a university as a community of ideas without interdisciplinary barriers.

**Inaugural Speech by the First President of the Universidad Nacional del Sur,**

April 10th 1956

“We propose to provide the University with a modern structure. We have abandoned the ancient conception of Faculties, isolated from each other, merely juxtaposed without unity or cohesion.”

“Universities of classic structure are divided in Faculties with their students, as well as their professors, separated by fields of study. This is the source of all professional malformations, and the cause of so many misunderstandings. With the system we have implemented, the students that major in a particular field share many classrooms with students pursuing other degrees, and they learn there to coexist with the culture and professors inherent of other careers. By learning under the same roof, they also learn to coexist in harmony. This is also a contribution of the University to the strengthening of democracy.”

“We intend to eliminate from the academic jargon the word “cloister”, and all its connotations. That mere word, of such tenacious survival, fosters a negative attitude of enclosure, and isolation. We even fancy, now, to impose expressions such as “student cloister” and “alumni cloister”, that, together with the “professor cloister” would constitute three great isolations that coincide only in their resistance to allow the sense of community that, by definition, the University entails.”

“The University is not a cloister and much less a series of cloisters, but an effort in communication among people, and of communication with the social environment it must serve.”

“This University has been created so that the entire south of Argentina, and not only a group of students, can receive the benefits of culture and nurture its riches via the application of technical innovation. We all have been working hard in order to create a University that can best serve the needs of the many neglected regions of our Patagonia. The Universidad del Sur does not want to be a cloister or necessarily be located in Bahía Blanca, as it could just as well have been established anywhere else in the country.”

“We aspire to have a university that does not limit itself to reiterate the teachings already registered in textbooks. It is imperative that our professors and students engage in research. The academic year we propose consists of two 4-month periods and it was designed to facilitate the research endeavors of the University. Those professors only required to teach intensively during four months, will be available to take field trips with their students whenever the nature of the discipline requires. Thus, the University will only have in Bahia Blanca its administrative branch. Its teaching and research functions will operate wherever the needs and opportunities of the Argentinean south are present.”

“The University will not only be in the classrooms; it will be everywhere. This will be another way to shatter the notion of a cloistered University. The institutes already created and those to be built will organically face and tackle all the problems of the South. A first Institute of Edaphology and Hydrology will undertake the study of soil and water problems with rational criteria...”
“Another aspect of the mission that the University seeks to achieve is that of establishing a direct rapport with those people in the south that aspire to perfect their culture and work silently and ignored in order to spread their faith in the values of the spirit. We are aware that there are, in the plains and in the valleys, those who throughout the years and without any other help than that of their heroic vocation, have been working diligently for the seemingly sterile reason of elevating their spirits and the spirits of a handful of girls and boys that the Republic has entrusted them. With these individuals, the University must establish, through its Department of Cultural Extension, the necessary relationship to prevent their enthusiasm and dedication from being threatened by despair. The visit of a University professor to a lost school in a ravine can be culturally more efficient than the conferences in big cities that need of fleeting exciting moments to remedy their tedium. Those men will be able to communicate to the University the results of their observations, and why not, their knowledge so that those of us who live in the big cities, and think of ourselves the most cultured part of the country, may suddenly discover that human dignity – and all the culture that secures that dignity – can be better achieved, in the monastic loneliness of a small school than in the crowded isolation of the cities.”

“Here in Bahía Blanca the University welcomes young people from all over the South. We have placed upon ourselves the duty to form them spiritually and capacitate them professionally. To that effect, it is not enough for us to offer them a desk, a blackboard, some books, a few test tubes, and machines. We must create a decorous environment for them to carry out one of the most difficult spiritual arts: that of spending time in leisure and idleness. It is in idle moments when spiritual formation runs its highest risks, and undergoes its wildest adventures. Every college student encounters those pauses in which she must recover herself and decide, among aspirations and projects, nostalgia, and remorse, the fate of her soul. In order to prevent them from feeling confined in a multitude of people we must make students feel as people among people, and for this to happen it is essential that the place where they eat and dream have the same decorum as our civic homes. That is the very function of the student dormitories that accommodate the young people who come to Bahía Blanca.”

“It is also necessary to say the following words that have been substantiated throughout the centuries: “only truth shall keep thou saved”. And this is, to our academic life, a problem as important as those we encounter in our labs and research institutes. Technical progress and riches are not ends per se. The recent history of our world has shown us that the highest technical progress is perfectly compatible with the worst moral abjection. What matters is the consolidation of human dignity, and that dignity calls for us to consider these humble problems: the University cannot elude them, for it creates them when formulating its intention to become a University for the entire south of Argentina.”