On Forging the School-Running Characteristic of the University

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Supported by the Project of Key Research Base of Humanities and Social Sciences in Colleges and Universities of Jiangxi Province in 2017 “Transformation from ‘Teaching’ to ‘Learning’— Research on Teacher Education Reform under the New Paradigm of Undergraduate Education” (JD17075).

Abstract
The development process of a thing is a creative process. “The future does not exist in the present.” 1 Things are generated in the creative process. For Chinese Universities, it has been only ten years or so since the concept of school-running characteristic was put forward and gained attention. In order to forge school-running characteristic, we need constant review, summarize and research so as to push it forward.

Key words: School-running characteristic; Forging characteristic; The direction and aim; Effective strategy

1. FROM SUMMARIZING CHARACTERISTIC TO FORGING CHARACTERISTIC
Since the undergraduate teaching evaluation, University began to think highly of school-running characteristic. The undergraduate teaching assessment plan set up “characteristic projects”, and clearly defined that the conclusion of evaluation for excellent schools must show “distinctive characteristic”, a fine school must have its characteristic project. Thus, this promoted various schools to research and sum up their own school-running characteristics.

In the past decade, the university began to form characteristic consciousness, paid attention to summarize and promote their own school-running characteristics, which mainly dwells in three aspects: firstly, gradually incorporating school-running characteristic into its development strategy, when making the school development strategic plan, universities took the forming school-running characteristics as an important content. For example, Nanjing University puts forward, “set up school with characteristic, foster strengths and circumvent weaknesses, highlight the brand and status of Nanjing University with distinctive characteristic.” According to the guiding ideology of running school of appropriate scale and connotation development, Nanjing University chooses the creation of the world’s high level university as a breakthrough, takes discipline construction as the core, practically walks the roads of characteristic development. In the process of creating the world famous universities, puts forward “raise the level, produce fine quality and forge characteristic” development strategy. Secondly, school consciously reveals their own characteristics in the actual work. For example, in the recruitment of students, universities propagate and introduce school-running characteristics, such as the school-enterprise cooperation mode of running characteristics, “thick foundation, broad caliber” educational mode characteristics, etc; to attract
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the attention of the employing units, increase the rate of employment; In the conversing of research results into the market, using the advantages of their resources, universities focuses on the promotion of characteristic scientific research and project, strengthen the cooperation with enterprises, and at the same time, strengthen the marketing planning to improve the conversion rate of scientific research into market, etc. Thirdly, some of the schools regard this as an opportunity, summarize and begin to create their own school characteristics, and effectively promote the development of the school.

It must be fully affirmed that undergraduate teaching assessment of China’s universities is a positive stimulus for forging school-running characteristics, and especially for forming the characteristic consciousness. But, we must soberly realize that this top-down, excessively utilitarianistic “movement” of promoting school-running characteristics, would also bring all sorts of malpractices and errors, mainly in these aspects:

1.2 Generalization of School-Running Characteristics

The school-running characteristic has specific connotation, but lack of in-depth study and understanding in the process of summing up characteristic, thus causing the generalization of school-running characteristics, mainly manifested in:

Take school-running achievements as school-running characteristic. For example, a university summarized its own school-running characteristics as “adhering to the people-centered concept, the university has undertook a number of system innovation in teaching management, teacher team construction and talent cultivation, and has inspired teachers and students to take initiative in education and teaching reform, although the scale of enrolment keep on growing in successive years, teaching quality is guaranteed, preliminary realized the win-win quality.” This, however, is the school-running achievements not the school-running characteristic.

Take school orientation as school-running characteristic. For instance, school-running characteristic needs to conform to school orientation, but school orientation is not equal to school-running characteristic, for example, some schools will have their own school-running characteristic summarized as “accurate orientation, training pragmatic professionals needed in local economic construction”; “cultivating practical talents serving in XX industry”, “based on what, serve what, serve the local economy”. These are all school orientation, rather than the school-running characteristic.

Take school common characters as school-running characteristic. The realization of school-running characteristic can’t be separated from the common characters of higher education; it cannot run against the common laws of higher education, but the common characters are not characteristic. Taking common characters as characteristic is also a more serious problem. For example, the running characteristic of a university is summarized as “to establish the comprehensive ‘ educational ’ ideal, take effective measures, strive to improve the comprehensive quality of students.” This is something that every school should strive to do, rather than the characteristic of running a school.

Take characters and features as characteristic. Feature refers to the inspiration, fresh ideas, assumption; it is the germ state of characteristic. Character is the transitional stage from feature to characteristic, a highlighting “point”, and a relatively independent one point with dominant trait.
We can’t take character or feature as characteristic. For example, the school-running characteristic of a university is summarized as “create a new campus, give each professor a studio, two associate professors a studio .......” which cannot be called the school-running characteristic.

The generalization of School-running characteristics misguides people to mistakenly believe that “the forging the school-running characteristic is not difficult, but very simple”, thus affecting the forging of the school-running characteristic.

1.3 Focusing on “The Superior”, Ignoring “The Public”
The summary of the school-running characteristic is done in a top-down impetus manner, its purpose is to strive for” excellence” in the undergraduate teaching evaluation, and this strong inclination for utilitarianism, thus, leads the school to focus on the“ superior”, and the summing up of the school-running characteristic mainly depends on whether it will be recognized by the Ministry of education, or whether it will satisfy the superior departments, and overlooks the social identification and teachers’ and students’ recognition, thus, leads people into an misunderstanding of the forming school-running characteristic means mainly to be responsible for the superior.

The aim of forging the school-running characteristic is to better perform its own university functions. The function of the university is teaching, scientific research and social service, and the core is the cultivation of talents. Forming the school-running characteristic aims to improve the quality of talent cultivation, to better meet the needs of society and the students’ development; to produce high quality achievements in scientific research; to better serve the society. Therefore, we should fully understand the needs of the community and the desire of the students’ development in the process of forging school-running characteristic; we should switch from the superior to the public.

Summing up the school-running characteristic, inquiring into the development of the school history and culture is just a beginning. We should not only fully attach importance to the good trend that people begin to pay attention to the school-running characteristic, but also see various misunderstandings, carefully study the school-running characteristic and forge the running characteristic energetically. Institutional researchers have to make their own contribution for this, provide theoretical support, measure reasoning and evaluation implementation for the forging of school-running characteristic.

2. ESTABLISHING THE DIRECTION AND AIM OF FORGING THE SCHOOL-RUNNING CHARACTERISTIC
The school-running characteristic of a university formed a lasting and stable development style and society-recognized, unique, and excellent traits in the development process. About the connotation of school-running characteristic, the author has discussed in 2005, the sixth period of higher education research “On the School-running Characteristics of the Undergraduate Teaching Assessment”. The school-running characteristic is unique, of high quality, stable, developing and orientating. Therefore, the forging of the school-running characteristic, initially, requires us to research, create and establish the direction and aim. In the process of establishing direction and aim of forging the school-running characteristic, we should hold the following respects.

2.1 With “Category Characteristic” as the Prerequisite
Characteristic refers to a significant difference of one thing from others in style, form, which is determined by specific concrete environmental factors where the thing arises and develops. Things have different sizes and stratifications, the environment they depend on is different in thousands of ways, and therefore, the characteristic is also stratified. University has remarkable distinction from corporate, government, military and other institutions; it has its own characteristics, so running a university should follow the general law of the development of university. University also has all kinds of categories, for instance, according to division of discipline and profession, there are comprehensive university, polytechnic university, agriculture university, normal university, university of finance and economics, art college, etc; according to stratification, we have research university, teaching research university, teaching service-oriented university and teaching university, etc; and according to management authority, there are national university and regional university, etc. Every kind of university is different from other kind with its own characteristics, the author will call this difference “category characteristic”, “category characteristic” refers to the same kind of the university, that share common persistent development way and unique school-running traits, because of its similar school-running nature.

Take regional university as an example, the author thinks the regional university should take “constructing a teaching service-oriented university as “category characteristics.” Locating in a certain region, regional university suffers a regional comprehensive influence. Students come from the region, will graduates back to it, school funds come from the region; scientific research projects arise in the region; social service faces the region. Therefore, regional university first should be teaching service-oriented university. Undergraduate teaching is given priority to in teaching service-oriented university, graduate student education develop moderately; the aim of teaching and scientific research is to serve for the region, and cultivates applied talents to meet the regional needs;
holding kinds of service activities for the purpose to meet the needs of the region, forming regional full-service system.\(^3\)

According to the requirements of building a service-oriented university, JiShou university in Hunan basing on three irreplaceable concepts "providing talent support for local economic and social development", "providing scientific and technical support for regional resource development", "providing advanced thought and culture for the regional social development", explores “University + Company + Government + Farmer mode, combines the aim of “enhancing university level” with the mission of “enriching people”, thus, forms its own school-running characteristics; Inner Mongolia Agricultural University forms the characteristics of school-running with “highlighting the grassland and animal husbandry as the key”; Yulin college in Shaanxi forges the school-running characteristics according to the features of Yulin area, and basing on the energy, chemical industry, transforms its subject structure; Caili college in Guizhou, according to the characteristic of ethnic region, forming their own school characteristics in the” protection of inheriting and carrying forward the original ecological folk culture"; etc. all the above mentioned promoted the development of the school effectively.

When a university establishes the direction and aim of forging school-running characteristic, the first thing is to have its own clearly defined position in the university system, taking “category characteristic” as the prerequisite.

2.2 The School-Running Characteristic of the University Should Be Selected in the Competition

Why should university forge the school-running characteristic? One of reasons is: the University is facing fierce competition; it has to survive and develop in the competition. Especially newly-built regional university is also facing the crisis of survival. On January 19, 2012 national ministry of education issued the ministry of education about suggestion of higher school setting work during “The 12th 5-Year”, clearly stated: explore to establish higher school exit mechanism, if school conditions are not achieved and failing to correct overdue, or institutions of higher learning do not recruit students for many years, would be withdrawn by submitting to the examination and approval authorities in accordance with law. To win in the competition, when we develop common characters, at the same time, we must stress prominent characteristics, improve the level and quality of school-running, and form its own personality.

The school-running characteristic of the university should be selected in the competition, we must first understand the competitors, especially analyze the same category, level of University, make “same type” comparison to find their own development space. For example: located in Jiangsu, Xuzhou medical school with a relatively small scale, and no geographical advantages, are bold in blazing new trails. They walked along a previous not traversed road of characteristic development, and founded China’s first major anesthesiology, concentrated all forces for development in order to make into the forefront in the whole country. “Multi-level anesthesiology professional education research and practice with Chinese characteristics” won the first prize of the national teaching achievements. The development of the discipline of anesthesia drove the development of other disciplines and majors such as the medical imaging disciplines. Henan University of Science and Technology is located in Luoyang, according to the industrial structure of Luoyang, the school disciplines mainly in machinery. But the general development of mechanical discipline, in the short term, may not catch up with large powerful Tsinghua University, HUST, and xi an JiaoTong University, etc. They choose bearing as the main point and advantage, found bearing design and manufacturing professional, in this respect, it becomes the top in china, highly original and thus forming its characteristic, and it not only helps the development of mechanical discipline, but also contributes to the development of the other disciplines, consequently its graduates are very popular across the country. All above mentioned are successful examples of establishing direction and goal of forging the school-running characteristic through the same type comparison in competition, which is worth learning.

2.3 The School-Running Characteristic Should Be Developed in the History and Culture of the University

The school-running characteristic should be formed in the historical process of the university development, which is inseparable from its own history, culture, or it will become water without a source. In the process of the development of the university, teachers, students, staff and other personnel will be replaced constantly, all kinds of systems would also make a change, but only the school culture will survive. Review the school history, the key is to review the school culture.

Tsinghua University, in its process of forging the school-running characteristics makes systematic review, summary of one hundred years’ developing history and culture. We concluded that the initial development of Tsinghua University was saturated with the influence of western culture, but the school is rooted in the fertile soil of the national culture, and formed its own tradition and spirit. Four tutors Wang Guowe, Liang Qichao, Chen Yinque, Zhao Yuanren in ancient Chinese literature research Institute as the representative of the Tsinghua scholars advocates the compatibility of Chinese and western culture, permeation of science and liberal arts and transfixion of ancient and modern, which had far-reaching influence on the development of Tsinghua. The University’s motto of “Self-discipline and Social Commitment“ and “Actions are better than words “of
the school spirit become the pursuit of scholarship and behavior of teachers and students from the earlier stage of it, and for generations to transmit. From “the may fourth movement” patriotic movement, “the 129” anti-Japanese invaders war to anti-the civil war for democracy of “121” student movement, from Shi Huang, Wei JieSan to zhu ziqing and wen yiduo, vividly demonstrated the revolutionary spirit of Tsinghua teachers and students. After the liberation, the Tsinghua University adhered to the party’s education policy, adhered to the “both red and expert” direction, cultivated “preciseness, diligence, truth-seeking, innovation” school spirit, and explored a “patriotism, talent, dedication” and “work fifty years for the motherland healthily” development road, thus endowed the university with unique spiritual glamour. Tsinghua University on the basis of the development of its own school characteristics moves forward with confidence to the world first-class university.

2.4 Recognition From Both Teacher and Student
Establishment of the direction and objective of a school-running characteristic needs to invite both the teachers and students to discuss and form a consensus. And it is a long and hard process that demands wisdom, wisdom from all staff and students, and their active involvement is also vital to the fulfillment of this characteristic, otherwise, this would just become a piece of paperwork. The premise of their involvement is recognition, only if they recognize its value, will they actively involve themselves in it. Therefore, to have the teachers and students join the discussion of the school-running characteristic is a process of exploiting group wisdom, of uniting cohesion, and of forming consensus.

Since its establishment, Huazhong University of Science and Technology Wenhua College has set a “student-oriented and quality first” school objective. In order to improve its educational quality, university has to found its running characteristic, because characteristic and quality are fundamental requirements and general law of school-running. Universities need research and create their own ways to forge their running characteristics. After three years of research, with consideration of the times and environment, its nature, its structure of disciplines, and the characteristics of its students, etc. and after a series of communication, discussions and seminars, Wenhua College initially set “individuality education” as its school-running characteristic. A seminar with the attendance of all backbone teachers and middle-level and above cadres was held to discuss the proposal and finally formed a consensus that “individuality education” school-running characteristic is a profound perception of the true meaning of education, that it meets the needs of the popularization of higher education, and that it is advantageous to foster students’ creativity and to implement fair education. Some teachers believe, “Launching a individuality education is a choice made during the process of establishing its running characteristic in Wenhua College, this choice is an ideal, a pursuit, as well as a responsibility”. And because of the recognition from teachers, students, and cadres, individuality education smoothly becomes a reality.

3. EFFECTIVE ESTABLISHMENT OF SCHOOL-RUNNING CHARACTERISTIC
Once its direction and objectives are set, a University should put all its efforts to effectively push forward the establishment of its school-running Characteristic. The following three points are of vital importance.

3.1 Forge Core Educational Idea
According to their development orientation and core culture, and in order to fulfill their unique educational mission, Colleges and Universities set their core educational ideas which include their core value orientation and common wish of relevant beneficiaries, represent their highest objection and ideal pursuit drawn from school-running practice, and reflect the ultimate credendum that guide higher education into an enduring development. University is the product of cultural integration, and an idea without cultural base will never make into a core idea. Any idea and cultural creation needs to convey the university’s core idea, meanwhile, any core idea of a university should manifest its unique connotation and reflect its running characteristic. Different core ideas generate different culture forms, management principles and styles, outcomes, and thus forming different characteristics. A university can choose and adjust according to its own cultural gene a focus point, and gradually form a core educational idea that reflects cohesively its spirit, action, principle, and cultural environment.

A school motto is the standard of behavior and moral code that all teachers and students abide by, and it is also a reflection of the school’s core educational idea and carrier of school-running characteristic. Only if the running characteristic is combined into its motto, can it produce a wide and profound effect, sink into the minds of the teachers and students, and emerge into their actions.

School motto should be comparatively stable, and at the same time in developing. Developing schools with short history should form its motto through a general discussion according to the demands of its running characteristic. For example, the motto of Beijing Normal University has undergone a developing process. In 1915, President Chen Baqiuquan proposed “Honesty, Bravery, Industry, Affectionate” as the school motto. In 1925, President Fan Yuanlian dedicated “set oneself as example” to graduating students, and later it became the school motto. In 1997, Mr. Qigong wrote “Pursuing study, cultivating oneself, and Helping the whole world”, this became the new motto. In the new century, BNU gave this motto a new meaning, believing that it
contains mission of the age and social responsibility, reflects pursuit of high value and spirit of self-reliance, and stresses a unity of learning and acting, personal and social, ideal and practice. It not only is the modern interpretation of China’s excellent education and cultural traditions, but also a reflection of the contemporary teacher’s professional moral and the quality, as well as a centralized embodiment of the school-running soul, spirit, and characteristics of BNU. “Let Plato be your friend and Aristotle but more let your friend be truth” in Harvard, “the wind of freedom blows” in Stanford, “light and truth” in Yale, “in the nation’s service” in Princeton, “Self-Discipline and Social Commitment” in Tsinghua, “Gratitude and Responsibility” in Shanghai Jiao Tong University, “dedication to the public interests, acquisition of all-round capability and aspiration for daily progress” in Nankai University, and “Pursue Excellence, Strive for Perfection” in Xiamen University all reflect their own core educational idea and school-running characteristics, which are worth of learning.

Therefore, school motto should be unique, basing on its running characteristic, and it should grasp the pulse and spirit of the times, embody humanistic care and humanity spirit; and combine traditional culture to enrich its cultural color.

3.2 Applying Serious Measures
As a creative event of overall importance to a university, the establishment of a school-running characteristic requires serious measures. And these measures demand courage, and a transcendental, skeptical, and critical mind, to transcend various bonds of traditional ideas, to challenge all kinds of historical theories and authorities, to make deep criticism and reflection, to inquire into the premise and to emphasize the creation and construction of the subject.

Push the forming of school-running characteristic with serious measures. Once “individuality education” was set, Huazhong University of Science and Technology Wenhua College creatively applied several important measures to explore students’ superior potential: setting up for the first time in China instructors to help students to develop their capabilities and superior potentials, and to guide them with their future plans; creatively applying tailor made training plans and personal schedule for students with learning difficulties; offering versatile and specialized education with unique disciplines; implementing targeted teaching to stimulate students’ interest and passion so as to enhance their learning effect. These measures were warmly welcomed by student, and tremendously optimized individuality education.

Establish a teaching staff that suits the school-running characteristic. The realization of school-running characteristic largely depends on the teachers. It requires their recognition, corresponding quality and capability, as well as activity. Wenhua College paid special attention to this: recruiting new teachers by examining their recognition to the value of individuality education; cultivating them with theories and practices of individuality education; evaluating them by the effects of their abilities to apply individuality education and their duties as potential mentors. Now, most teachers not only recognize individuality education, but also try to practice it in their teachings.

Cultivate school culture that embodies school-running characteristic. School culture and its running characteristic supplement and promote each other. During the process of forming the school-running characteristic, school spirit, style of study, and tradition gradually accumulate into a unique culture of its own; and this will in return promote the deepening of its characteristic. The cultivating of a school culture that embodies school-running characteristic is a long, hard, and complicated process that demands our hard work.

3.3 Developing Through Evaluation
Ultimately, school-running characteristic has to be evaluated by the market, and by society. Under a perfected market mechanism, the success of school-running characteristic and the quality of its student cultivation can be reflected through market and society. The employment rate of its graduates, their popularity in society, as well as their payments will all become important factors to measure whether a school runs successively and to decide its reputation.4

The establishment of school-running characteristic requires timely and regular self-evaluation and societal evaluation to find out its progress and problem and also its continuous developing direction. During evaluation, if the characteristic proves to be right, then it needs to be carried forward persistently, and keep an open mind to absorb all kinds of critiques and suggestions, and solve the problems with appropriate and new methods to ensure a healthy development.

After years of applying individuality education, Wenhua College organized a self and social evaluation. Firstly, a systematic paper review from all staff was carried out; secondly, an investigation on some of the graduated students was done to find out their evaluations on individuality education; and relevant experts were invited to collect their advices on individuality education. For over a year, prestigious scholars and leaders in educational circle like Gu Mingyuan, Pan Maoyuan, Zhou Yuanqing, Ye Lan, Wang Yingjie, Zhang Chuting, and Li Yanbao etc. have visited the College, and they all showed their approval and gave constructive advices to individuality education. Taken all these into consideration, individuality education should be improved from these two aspects: put more efforts on personality education, and create a widen space for students’ individual growth. Thus, Wenhua College proposes the following two methods.
Carry out “aspiration setting” education. Setting aspiration is the premise of forming a fine personality. Mr. Sun Yat-sen pointed out, “setting aspiration is the most vital thing of a scholar.” Sukhomlinski believes, “setting aspiration, selecting specialty, are the sources of happiness.” With great aspiration, comes the motivation and activity to study and explore one’s superior potential, and to perfect oneself so as to better serve the public. Through motivation, colleges and universities should, in all the educational parts and sections, help students plan their future, and guide them to learn from the successful experiences of excellent talents, to study and practice, to set up their own aspirations.

Provide a wide space for students’ development. Students’ individual growth depends on their own efforts, the main responsibility of a college or university it to provide them with a wide space to improve them. Mencius said, “the gentleman gives instruction to his pupils in five ways: the first way is to exert a transforming influence on them as a timely rain nourishes everything on earth; the second is to help to bring their moral character to perfection; the third is to have their talents developed; the fourth is to answer their questions; the fifth is to set an example for those who cannot receive instruction directly from him. These are the five ways in which a gentleman teaches.” Students differ from each other, and they carry different aspirations and dreams, colleges and universities should try to provide space for different students to grow. For example, students can set up their own specialty (mainly course system) according to their own interests and possible future careers; provide versatile courses that cultivate multiple abilities for students to choose; reform sections like examination, graduation design, and internship etc. colleges and universities should emancipate their minds, boldly create all kinds of space for students to grow.

The establishment of school-running characteristic is closely related to a school’s survival and development, to its status among higher education, and it is a long and hard process. In all, it is an arduous task with heavy responsibilities.

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