



OPENING THE DEBATE

A Case Against the Policy Mandating Vertically-Aligned Degrees in Philippine Graduate Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into a policy that mandates vertically-aligned degrees. For context, many universities have adopted and are increasingly considering adopting this rule, which surprisingly has not faced much public criticism. This paper argues against the policy of mandating vertically-aligned degrees because it is, in the term of Frankfurt, bullshit and lacks merit due to administrators' misconceptions about vertical alignment. It asserts that the policy mandating vertically-aligned degrees restricts academic freedom and presents students with a false dilemma, limiting opportunities for generalism and multipotentiality. Upon examination, the policy leads to the dehumanization and alienation of students, reshaping universities into undemocratic, tyrannical entities while stifling creativity and cross-disciplinary collaboration. This paper advocates for a more adaptable and inclusive graduate education framework. It underscores the necessity of prioritizing students' individual needs and aspirations, urging for an environment where students have the agency to mold their educational journey. This paper strongly urges a shift away from inflexible educational mandates and highlights the significance of fostering an environment that champions autonomy, welcomes diverse academic pursuits, and enables the full exploration of students' potential. Finally, it seeks to cultivate an educational landscape that fosters innovation and societal progress while honoring individual autonomy and development.

KEYWORDS

educational policy, generalism, graduate education, Philippine higher education, vertical alignment

Received 12 June 2023

Accepted 22 November 2023

Published online 27 December 2023

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The Story

In place of an epigraph, an AI-generated image with prompt: In a small café, two graduate students, a woman and a man, engage in conversation. The woman sits in tears, visibly distressed by her inability to make choices regarding her education (Figure 1).

Figure 1

AI-Generated Image



Note. Source: Microsoft. (2023). *Bing Image Creator* [Image creation model]. <https://www.bing.com/images/create/>

After five long years, Riena and I were able to finally meet. We were blockmates in college. We completed the same bachelor's degree, with English as our major. At a small café, we talked about life and shared some stories. "It was not my choice to study MA Linguistics at Philippine Unity University (a pseudonym; herewith referred to as PUU)," she admitted. "It was the administrators who chose that program for me."

I was shocked by this revelation. "But I thought you were excited to be studying at such a respected university," I said. Riena sighed heavily. "I was actually set on studying MA Special Education," she explained. "I'm really interested in understanding and helping neurodiverse children, and I thought that degree would be the perfect fit for me."

"But then when I attempted to enroll in that program, the registrar said that it's not possible because it was not vertically-aligned with my bachelor's degree," she

continued, while I was sipping my iced coffee. “The registrar told me that, according to the university’s rules, students are required to study a program that is in alignment with their bachelor’s degree.” This must be highly rigid and pedantic. “So, if someone has a degree in math, for example, they are expected to pursue a Master’s and Doctorate degree in math too.” A deep sigh evidently had escaped her.

As I listened to her story, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “They do that to their students? That’s so unfair!” I exclaimed, feeling a sense of frustration and sadness for my friend. Riena replied with reddish eyes, as if she was going to release a river of tears, but she held back and explained, “I know. I was greatly disappointed when I was told that I couldn’t study what I was fervent about. But, of course, I didn’t want my passing score on the entrance exam to go to waste and hence I reluctantly agreed to study MA Linguistics, instead.”

I pondered about this policy—it was doing more harm than good. Because yes, Riena wasn’t the only student affected by this policy, but many others too, at present and in the future. Hence, I said to myself that I must undertake a move. And the first thing I undertook was to research the issue further to see if I could find any way to bring attention to it. When I contacted my other colleagues who studied and had been studying there, I discovered that this policy was indeed being implemented there with full conviction.

No doubt that something must be done. I must bring attention to the detrimental effects of this policy, I decided to speak out against it—through writing a paper. This is a dissent. In writing this paper, I am aware that my views are contrary to those held by the majority of teachers and administrators who support vertically-aligned degrees as a requirement for education. Lastly, my goal is to share my opinion on how mandating vertically-aligned degrees can harm the university, its students, and society at large, with the hope that this enlightens policy-makers.

Administrators Spewing Bullshit

While Riena finished talking about her predicament, I uttered, “That’s total *bullshit!*” That may be a profane word, but I used it as how Frankfurt utilizes it in his book *On Bullshit*. There, he explains *bullshit* as a persuasive speech that does not care about being truthful (Frankfurt, 2005). These administrators, I contend, do not know what they are talking about. They have not tried to study if the policy they are implementing is educationally sound. Or perhaps they just do not want to bother about it anymore because they already hold institutional power and whatever they say, students will believe and comply.

Yes, this trend is occurring in universities! This unquestioning acceptance has become standard in our country’s culture, especially within its universities, due to the Philippines being categorized as having a high-power distance culture. This means that inequality is viewed as the foundation of societal order (Hofstede et al., 2010). Consequently, individuals in lower positions (students) consistently defer to those in higher positions (administrators) and tend to accept this as the natural order of things (Sweetman, 2012), regardless of whether the rule is fair or disempowering.

Such a cultural dynamic fosters the notion that administrators should not and cannot be challenged. When they go unquestioned and receive no feedback, they wield unchecked power, which can lead to objectification, abuses, and corruption (Giray, 2021; Gruenfeld, 2020).

This is a pathetic sight of universities where students have become *sheeple*. They just follow what administrators say. I thought universities are heaven for critical thinking, reflection, and sound judgment, but this current situation says the opposite. This is ironic because they have become indifferent toward truth—the truth of academic freedom, the real meaning of vertical alignment, and that they are giving students a false dilemma. Those administrators should be the first ones to be concerned about truth values in the educational setting. Alas, they have become, as what Frankfurt (2005) calls them, *enemies of truth*. Now, I will detail why mandating students to take vertically-aligned degrees is bullshit (Table 1).

Table 1

Summary of Issues on Administrators Spewing Bullshit

Issue	Explanation
Destroying academic freedom	Mandating vertically-aligned degrees restricts students' academic freedom, curtailing their degree choices based solely on institutional regulations. This imposition limits exploration of diverse academic paths, undermining personal and intellectual growth
Wrong understanding of vertical alignment	Administrators' misconception of vertical alignment overlooks its purpose in curriculum planning. This narrow interpretation neglects the flexibility crucial for individualized learning paths, hindering academic and personal growth
False dilemma	Administrators limit students' choices by presenting a binary ultimatum. Failing to recognize alternative paths impedes autonomy and discourages intellectual exploration, disregarding diverse student aspirations and potentials

A. Destroying Academic Freedom

First, obliging students to earn vertically aligned degrees is against academic freedom. But do these administrators even know what it is? Do they know how this mandate clashes with academic freedom? Answering these questions can lead them to simple, definition-based, factual truths in the realm of education. It is ironic that they do not know this. How is it possible that they are in those positions? I bet they do not delve deeper about it because they are busy enjoying their lucrative salary and the air-conditioned rooms. But, let me help them. A quick-second search on Britannica can reveal that academic freedom entails the freedom of educators and learners to instruct, learn, and explore knowledge and research without unjust or limiting intervention from laws, institutional rules, or public influence (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

To reiterate, given the principle of academic freedom, which is instituted in all universities (at least in the Philippine setting), students should be free to pursue their academic degrees (MA, PhD)—whatever specialization they find fitting or interesting

to their endeavors—without constraint from any university regulation. Of course, satisfying the minimum requirements, like grades, is a prerequisite. But the name of the degree should not be a determining factor, most especially if the entrant is capable. As I see, PUU contradicts itself. Its administrators say that they value academic freedom; however, this policy of forcing students to take vertically-aligned degrees is a violation of academic freedom.

B. Wrong Understanding of Vertical Alignment

This is all mixed up! Those administrators have it wrong about vertical alignment. They think it is just about students sticking to one field from undergrad to PhD. Nope, that is not it! Let me explain. Vertical alignment, as Case & Zucker (2005) say, is about setting up a clear, sensible way of teaching subject-based content as students move from one level or course to the next. It is all about organizing what gets taught at different education stages. The aim? To make sure the lessons fit well together and nothing gets repeated (Hurst, 2015). And hey, it is not the students' job to handle this.

How do we make vertical alignment work? Definitely not by making students take specific degrees in a row. It is more about lecturers coordinating, updating what they teach and how they test, understanding what students need, and regularly checking if their subjects match their goals. Lapiz (2015) also mentions how programs are organized across different levels based on specialization, showing that vertical alignment is about creating a smooth academic setup, not enforcing what administrators want students to do.

Although I perused PUU's files and memoranda on their official website, to my knowledge, I did not find any written document that explicitly states a policy concretizing that students should take vertically-aligned degrees. Therefore, I assume that this is just a verbal and informal policy, which is spread in the frontline. These administrators have been saying and doing this over and over until it has become an ingrained policy.

They will tell the applicant, "Sorry, but you are unable to get this degree as it is not vertically aligned." Since applicants take these words as gospel, they would not dare to challenge them and would assume that the whole thing is for their own good. They would then just keep their mouths shut and switch the degree they really wanted. For the courageous ones, they would back down. However, considering this is a public university where tuition is affordable, many would hesitate to change institutions. They would just compromise, sacrificing their educational autonomy.

C. False Dilemma

Imposition of degrees that administrators believe are appropriate does not give students a real choice, but rather creates a false dilemma. Administrators say, "Take this specific degree or leave the university," simplifying the options to just two when students actually have many choices. A dilemma means every possible action leads to bad results (Thompson, n.d.). Here, if students take the degree, they might feel unfulfilled, or if they leave, they lose the chance to study affordably. Both options end up unsatisfactory for students personally. This way of presenting choices wrongly limits and disempowers them because it ignores their values, wishes, and goals.

These administrators implement such policy as they believe it to be the right way to do things. In academia, having degrees that match is considered a key factor in demonstrating expertise and credibility. At the same time, not every student pursues an academic career. Some opt for other career paths or plan to change fields after earning a degree. While I recognize the benefits of vertically-aligned degrees, I strongly believe that administrators should not limit students' choices by imposing degrees they find appropriate. Nor should they make it a requirement. They can advise or encourage students, but whether or not to pursue an aligned degree should be entirely at the discretion of the students involved.

Transgression to Autonomy, Generalism, and Multipotentiality

Imposing vertically-aligned degrees to students is a blatant transgression to their autonomy, generalism, and multipotentiality (Table 2). First, it constrains personal and student autonomy; it specifically limits their agency as a person who has the capacity to control their life and impedes their independence of being in-charge in terms of their own learning. Second, this policy implies that specialists are superior compared to generalists, when, in fact, both types are equally valuable in work and in societies. Third, it disregards that some people have multipotentiality, the capacity of a person to excel in multiple fields.

Table 2

Summary of Issues Discussed on Transgression to Autonomy, Generalism, and Multipotentiality

Issue	Explanation
Assaulting autonomy	The policy restricts students' autonomy, dictating a predetermined path and impeding their freedom to pursue personal interests, hindering their full potential. Administrators imposing vertically-aligned degrees act as academic coercers, disregarding students' ability for independent decision-making
Discounting generalism	The policy dismisses the value of generalism, emphasizing specialization and undermining students' exploration across diverse disciplines. Mandating vertically-aligned degrees confines students to a singular track, stifling curiosity and limiting interdisciplinary search crucial for innovation and societal advancement
Ignoring multipotentiality	The policy overlooks multipotentiality, disregarding individuals' diverse talents and interests across multiple fields. Imposing rigid program adherence stifles the growth of multipotential individuals, hindering their adaptability and exploration across disciplines.

A. Assaulting Autonomy

In a situation of compulsory vertically oriented degrees, students are deprived of autonomy and are prevented from following their personal and educational interests. I see that they are essentially slaves to the system, forced to conform to a particular set of expectations rather than being able to make their own choices and pursue their own

goals. Despite the belief of some school administrators at PUU that a set of vertically aligned degrees is desirable and advantageous for graduate students, I disagree. I believe that this system actually has the opposite effect and deprives students of the ability to make their own choices and follow their own paths. It stifles creativity and prevents students from fully realizing their potential.

When administrators do not consider what students want and their decisions for themselves, and when the administrators take away students' control over their own learning, this becomes *academic coercion*. They are forcing the students to get a specific vertically-aligned degree. These administrators think they know the best for students and hence act on the latter's behalf. Understanding that these graduate students are already adults, this policy neglects the capacity of them to decide for themselves and for their own personal and academic pursuits.

These students are not children anymore—they are, in fact, old and mature enough to decide wisely for their decisions in studies and life. They are responsible for the consequences of the action that they are going to take, whether it is taking an academic degree which may not vertically-aligned. Besides, the graduate students know what they should do with their education. They do not need another party to do the picking on their behalf. So, I see that insisting such is rule is unethical and insensitive.

Autonomy, alongside with competence and relatedness, is a psychological need which individuals must have for them to flourish in school and in life (Ryan & Deci, 2012). Again, this is a need. It's not optional. If this is stripped from them, their humanity will also be stripped—converting them to automatons. I fear that PUU is doing it without awareness. And I hope they won't close their sight on this terrible situation. This is very unbecoming of a university which is supposed to be a refuge to make individuals freer because of education. In the same vein, this is related to the bigger concept of agency, which refers to the “the ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 134). Because yes, all of us, students not being exempted, need autonomy in life! This is a way for us to refine our sense of identity and gain confidence in our being.

B. Discounting Generalism

As the policy of vertically-aligned degrees is put into practice, students are required to traverse the path of specialism. Specialism pertains to concentration to a certain narrow field of study. This is in contrast with generalism, which is about the practice of studying various disciplines. Although I do not have any problem if a student desires to pursue a track to being a specialist, I insist that it is wrong if it is forced onto them. By telling—no, requiring—students to take vertically-aligned degrees only is an obvious transgression to their individual autonomy. We do not want them to think that they are hopeless victims of educational empires for not letting them become who they are because the programs they want are forbidden.

What I clamor is for them to have a choice to be a generalist! Not all want to be specialists. Not all are going to be successful on that pathway. I want that PUU allow the students to pick an academic degree even though it is not aligned to their

previous programs. There is nothing wrong from being generalists. This curiosity can lead them to cross-fertilizing ideas and disciplines. They might even help bring about an innovation, a new model, or even a new branch of knowledge! This is a better way to broaden the scholarly knowledge than just forcing them to stick to a confined, conventional track, which they may not even want in the first place. For yes, this set-up dampens students' spirit of curiosity, which is a crucial intellectual virtue to make science and societies flourish. Allowing them to pursue another discipline can make students blaze a trail!

Perhaps, deviating from vertically-aligned degrees can be stemmed from thinking that generalism is inferior. Many academics and administrators that I have talked to hastily generalized that it's not the sensible pathway because institutions put premium on specialism. However, in behavioral ecology, generalist species are better adapted to changing environments than specialist species. This is because generalists are able to survive on a wider range of resources and can adapt to a wider range of environmental conditions (Richmond et al., 2005). Applying this to the modern workplace, generalist individuals have the ability to learn new skills and adapt to changing environments. They may be more versatile and able to take on a wider range of responsibilities than specialists, who may have a deeper knowledge of a specific area but may be less able to adapt to new situations. See!

There have been many individuals who have achieved success and fame by taking a more generalist approach to their education and careers, combining knowledge and methods from different disciplines to bring about significant advances. Examples of successful generalists include Margaret Wheatley, a management consultant and author with a Master of Arts degree in Media Ecology and a doctorate from Harvard's program in Administration, Planning, and Social Policy; Dan Ariely, a professor and author with a Master's degree in cognitive psychology and a PhD in business administration; and Shaquille O'Neal, a former professional basketball player and businessman with a bachelor's degree in general studies, a Master's degree in business, and a Doctor of Education. These individuals have all achieved success despite pursuing programs that were not directly aligned with their previous degrees, showing that it is possible to blaze one's own trail and learn new things, regardless of previous academic backgrounds.

In this hypercomplex world, where singular disciplines often fall short in addressing multifaceted issues, generalists wielding diverse perspectives cannot be overlooked. Their expertise is increasingly invaluable in tackling challenges that transcend specialized domains. In fact, today's professional landscape necessitates the transfer of knowledge—the adeptness to apply insights across diverse contexts and domains (Epstein, 2021). Hence, it is indispensable to foster a mindset capable of navigating various disciplines. We face a lot of complex and cross-disciplinary problems and they demand a blend of skills and knowledge from multiple spheres, making a diverse educational background a valuable asset.

And if some people would maintain, "You are not going anywhere if you have degrees from different disciplines," it'd be better to whisper at their ear that it's

bullshit. Just like *shit*, it does not have any nutrition. They are just saying that to convince the other party that they are credible and all-knowing. If one is going to dissect that statement, they will see that it is ludicrously wrong. Having knowledge and skills in different disciplines can be a major advantage in today's world. With a diverse set of skills and knowledge, individuals are able to pursue careers in a variety of industries and may even be able to invent new fields by combining their expertise in unique ways. In this way, it can open up a wide range of possibilities for personal and professional growth.

Common sense seems to dictate, "PUU only wants them to become specialists so they end up being excellent knowledge workers." One might believe that it may be a good thing—but this kind of thinking is rigidly constricted. Its logic is merely about producing workers for industries and societies. Yes, we want to equip ourselves with knowledge and skills. Yes, we want to excel in the work we do. Yes, we want to help the society. But we also take graduate degrees for the advancement of ourselves, for the realization of our personal goals, and for the development of our identities.

Let me clarify this. I am not against specialization. I even recognize the value of specialism in life and in the workplace. However, not all want to become specialists. If one wants to specialize in a certain field, let them do it. But my point here is that requiring students to follow a specific, vertically-aligned degree program is not just. Not everyone wants to specialize in a particular field. And many people enjoy exploring other fields, connecting different ideas from different disciplines, and becoming generalists. Universities should recognize and respect this diversity of interests and allow students to pursue their own goals and interests, rather than mandating a particular path.

C. Ignoring Multipotentiality

Multipotentiality is the ability to have multiple potentials or talents. In the literature of giftedness, it is often used in the context of individuals who are not just skilled in one specific area, but who have a range of abilities and interests (Rysiew et al., 1999). These individuals may be referred to as *multipotentialites*, and they may have the ability to excel in a variety of different fields or disciplines (Wapnick, 2017). I see multipotentiality as a strength, as it can allow individuals to adapt to changing circumstances and pursue a wide range of interests. However, I contend that multipotential individuals cannot flourish in institutions, such as PUU, where deviating from previous program isn't allowed.

Multipotentiality is a term used to describe individuals who have a range of skills and interests across multiple fields; this reminds me of the concept of a *Renaissance man*. A Renaissance man is a person who is highly educated and knowledgeable in a variety of subjects, including the arts, sciences, and humanities (Heller, 2015). Famous examples of Renaissance men Leonardo da Vinci (painter, scientist, philosopher, engineer, etc.) and Nicolaus Copernicus (astronomer, diplomat, physician, economist, etc.). They made significant contributions to various fields and had a major impact on the world. These historical figures are remembered for their ability to shift old paradigms and advance mankind through their diverse skills and knowledge.

I believe that multipotential individuals will not thrive if they are required to have narrowly focused degrees. It is essential for people to have the freedom to explore their interests and to have the option to study or work in multiple areas if they want to (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Some people may find that a multipotential approach suits them best, and it is important for them to have the ability to follow this path if they choose. It's important for individuals to be able to make their own choices about what is best for them and to have the support and resources to pursue their goals.

I am inclined to align with Felipe Fernández-Armesto (2015) on the fading presence of multipotentiality, suggesting that universities play a role in its decline. The growing emphasis on specialization and the push for students to pick a narrow field of study early on contributes to this decline. PUU lacks the flexibility or resources to aid students exploring multiple areas of study, hindering the growth of multipotential individuals. This absence of support might create hurdles for them to excel in such an environment.

Finally, this topic of multipotentiality reminds me of *Divergent*, a science fiction novel by Veronica Roth (2011). The story is set in a dystopian society where people are divided into factions based on their personalities and are trained in specific disciplines. The main character, Tris, is a divergent, meaning she does not fit into any one faction and has the potential to be skilled in multiple areas. Tris must hide her divergence and prove her worth, while also fighting against a corrupt government that seeks to eliminate all divergents.

The place depicted in novel is somehow similar with PUU's for the students do not have the freedom to choose their own path of study and are instead assigned to a specific faction (discipline). This means that divergents (multipotentialites) are not able to pursue their own interests or goals and are instead required to specialize in a particular discipline. While administrators may argue that this system is beneficial because it prepares students for the kind of specialized degrees that are desired by many institutions and organizations, I believe that it actually hinders students' ability to thrive. By not allowing students to explore their own interests and passions, they may not be able to find fulfillment or succeed in their chosen fields.

Negative Repercussions to Students, Universities, and Societies

The implementation of mandatory vertically-aligned degrees in Philippine higher education has raised concerns about the negative repercussions it could have on students, universities, and societies. This policy can result in the dehumanization and alienation of students, who may feel like they are being forced to conform to a certain standard without regard for their individual interests or talents. Second, universities could become anti-democratic, tyrannical, and oppressive if they prioritize a rigid system over the needs and aspirations of their students. Finally, this policy may stifle creativity and consilience, as students are restricted to a narrow field of study and discouraged from exploring other approaches. I will explore these negative repercussions in greater detail (Table 3).

Table 3

Summary of Issues on the Negative Repercussions to Students, Universities, and Societies

Issue	Explanation
Students are dehumanized and alienated	This policy reduces students to mere pawns in the education system, depriving them of informed choice and individuality. This oppressive approach silences students by pushing them down predetermined paths without exploring alternatives
Universities become anti-democratic, tyrannical, and oppressive	The policy excludes students from decision-making, suppressing critical thinking and resembling undemocratic governance. Imposed without student input, it stifles engagement and contradicts values of democracy and fair governance
Creativity and consilience are stifled	Mandating specific degrees limits students' exploration, hindering creativity and impeding the free flow of interdisciplinary ideas necessary for breakthroughs. Focusing solely on specialized degrees opposes multidisciplinary approaches, limiting learning and cultural evolution

A. Students are Dehumanized and Alienated

Allow me to become more dramatic as I discourse the terrible repercussions of this policy to students. As Nick Haslam (2006) so eloquently stated, dehumanization is the insidious process of viewing others as mere objects, no different than beasts or machines. Yet, at PUU, students are subjected to this cruel fate. They are stripped of their humanity and forced into degree programs against their will, nothing more than mere pawns in a larger game, mere objects to further the agenda administrators call *vertical alignment*, which is again another political ploy to subvert spirituality in the realm of education.

The tyranny of power rears its ugly head in the world of education, where administrators, blinded by their own authority, fail to recognize the devastating effects of their actions, of their ill-conceived policies. Lammers and Stapel (2011) have shown that with power comes the dehumanization of the powerless, as the mighty justify their mistreatment by reducing others to mere objects. The students, with their voices silenced, are at the mercy of these administrators, who hold the platform of education in their hands. And yet, power corrupts, allowing individuals, such as these administrators, to act in increasingly self-serving and irrational ways (Giray, 2021; Guinote et al., 2002). The future of our students hangs in the balance, threatened by the very people who are tasked with shaping it.

Meanwhile, I see a trend in universities where many young students pursue graduate degrees. These young graduate students find themselves amid their developmental years, where they are prone to accepting the authority of their teachers and administrators without question; hence, they'd just obey the latter. This can have damaging consequences if students are forced to undertake a graduate program that they have no interest in. This may lead to what, in psychology, calls *identity foreclosure*, which pertains to a premature commitment to an identity without questioning it (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Students would just accept the values, goals, and roles chosen for them by administrators without considering their own wants and desires, and the potential for other alternatives.

In taking a graduate degree, the students are faced with a decision that could shape the rest of their lives. However, if they are told that their path is predetermined by their previous academic degree and they must follow the conventional track of a vertically-aligned degree, they may feel helpless. But little do the administrators know, the decision to pursue a graduate degree is not so cut and dry.

For the students are conscious beings, with their own experiences, beliefs, and aspirations. They know that there are various reasons for furthering their education, reasons that couldn't be ignored or reduced to mere names or numbers on a piece of paper. And so, if one chooses to go against the norm, to deviate from the expected path, let them be. After all, students possess their own bodies, and with that, the right to make their own decisions.

And make no mistake, our education becomes part of us. It helps shape who we are and what we stand for. That is why it is crucial that we, as individuals, are given the power to choose our own educational path. Students must not allow themselves to be mere vessels for someone else's vision of success. Therefore, the students' consciousness must be the deciding factor, the driving force behind any choice, including the choosing of a degree program.

Besides, education is not just about obtaining degrees, but about personal growth, self-discovery, and the pursuit of one's passions. And universities should not constrain them. Universities should not be seen as shackles, but as launching pads, spaces where the students can unleash their full potential. For yes, students must reclaim their autonomy in learning, and administrators hold the key to unlocking this potential. Only by granting students their rightful power can they truly become lifelong learners and fulfilled individuals.

B. Universities Become Anti-Democratic, Tyrannical, and Oppressive

Universities should not only be viewed as centers of learning and research but also as essential institutions of democracy (Fallis, 2007). This is because education itself is a powerful force that democratizes individuals and prepares them to actively participate in democratic life, as Koliba (2000) suggests. The foundation of a democratic state lies in the democracy present in educational institutions (Davies, 2008). Further, Fallis (2007) posits that in a knowledge-based society, universities are critical for the complete realization of social, civil, and political citizenship.

However, what is democracy in educational institutions? It is not a mere term to be thrown around and ignored. In the words of Lynn Davies (2008), democracy in education demands a thorough understanding of rights and responsibilities, and an unwavering commitment to their implementation. As stated by John Stuart Mill (1998) and widely propagated by Amartya Sen (2017), democracy is all about *government by discussion*, a process that cannot be accomplished by simply making decisions behind closed doors. If we are to truly uphold democracy in universities, we must engage with the students and other stakeholders and give them a voice in the decision-making process. Only then can we hope to create a society that is truly democratic and just.

It appears that the administrators at PUU have taken it upon themselves to make important decisions without even bothering to ask the students for their input. I believe

this is an outright transgression of democracy! The mandate that students take only vertically-aligned degrees has been imposed on them without any consultation with the public or its stakeholders. Such actions are highly anti-democratic and go against the very essence of democratic values.

As John Dewey (1916) so eloquently put it, democracy is not merely a form of government, but rather, it is a way of living, a mode of associated living that is based on conjoint communication and shared experiences. It is a space where people can interact, consult one another, and reach consensus. If we do not uphold these principles, we risk losing the very foundation upon which our democratic society is built. It is our duty to ensure that all voices are heard and that decisions are made in a fair and democratic manner.

During a recent discussion with a colleague, I was disheartened to hear him say, “We cannot do anything about it. Those are the rules set by the administrators, and we just have to follow them.” What a pitiful and faint-hearted attitude! This person seems to have given up on challenging authority and has become complacent in a world where those in power cannot be questioned. What shall happen in this world where we just do always with what others tell us? But I refuse to accept this as the norm! Such an approach is akin to living under a dictatorship, and it goes against the very essence of democracy.

State universities, such as the one we are discussing, are owned and operated by the democratic Philippine state. As such, they should uphold the same democratic values as the state itself. There should be open discussions and consensus-building, with the voices of students valued and their human rights protected, including the right to autonomy in educational decisions. As stated in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “Everyone has the right to education” (United Nations, 1948). This right should include the freedom to choose one’s course of study, as education is not just about obtaining a degree but enriching one’s qualitative life. It is our responsibility to ensure that these fundamental rights are respected and upheld in all aspects of education.

I cannot in good conscience stay silent about the policy that has been imposed on the students, which I can only liken to tyranny. This policy robs them of their autonomy as individuals and strips away their freedom to pursue their own goals. It is a stark contradiction to the very idea of student-centeredness. We all yearn to explore and satisfy our curiosities, and to use our education to achieve our personal goals. Yet, under this policy, students are left feeling helpless, as if they are living in a state of tyranny where they lack sovereignty over their own bodies and minds (Mill, 1998).

The university’s restrictions deprive them of the opportunity to choose their own courses of study, a situation that is reminiscent of the enslavement of people throughout history. Such a lack of autonomy is never beneficial for those who are enslaved, and the consequences can be much more severe than just psychological harm, as Abed (2004) has noted. As Paulo Freire (2007) said, any act that prevents people from becoming more fully human is oppressive, and this policy is undoubtedly one such act.

Louis Althusser (2014) believed that institutions that shape people’s beliefs and values, such as universities, can be considered as *ideological state apparatus*, which refers to the role that these institutions play in reproducing and reinforcing dominant ideology, thereby maintaining the existing power structure. By mandating students to take vertically aligned degrees, universities become part of this apparatus through perpetuating a dangerous

ideology that education should only serve the purpose of preparing individuals for work. This narrow-minded perspective ideologically molds students to be uncritical laborers (Saltman, 2018), fostering conformity and stifling diversity and critical thinking. Therefore, this threatens the very essence of free and innovative thought.

Meanwhile, we can connect here the Marxist concept of false consciousness. *False consciousness* is a dangerous state of mind where individuals unconsciously adopt ideas that are not in their best interest, thus perpetuating the existing power structure and dominant ideology (Augoustinos, 1999; Eyerman, 1981). At PUU, this can be seen through the requirement for students to take vertically-aligned degrees with the purpose of solely preparing them for work. By accepting this narrow perspective, students unconsciously accept their role as uncritical laborers in society, thereby reinforcing their own oppression and maintaining the status quo.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, which pertains to the subtle and indirect ways in which dominant groups exert power and control over subordinate groups, can also be linked in this topic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; see Zizek, 2008). By mandating students to take vertically-aligned degrees, universities are perpetuating symbolic violence, making students unconsciously adopt limited perspectives on education and reinforcing the existing power structure.

Hence, I stand firmly against the restriction of student freedom in choosing their own degree programs. It sends shivers down my body to think about the implications of this move. Normalizing routine and conformity, it threatens to extinguish the sparks of individuality and creativity within our learners. As eminent public university, PUU's implementation of this policy has the potential to spread like wildfire to other institutions. If not met with critical mindset, it may give birth to a series of ill-conceived policies that will rob our learners of their autonomy and lead to a dystopian Philippine educational system, where education is no longer a beacon of hope and creativity. I cannot let that happen.

Looking toward the future, I am filled with a sense of dread. The suppression of student freedom to choose their own degree programs is already taking root and gaining credibility, and I fear that it will become an accepted norm like the air we breathe. This hegemonic thinking threatens to transform our universities into anti-democratic, tyrannical, and oppressive institutions that suppress critical thinking and strip learners of their autonomy. We must fight to ensure our universities are democratized. We cannot allow our voices to be silenced and our freedom to be restricted.

C. Creativity and Consilience are Stifled

According to St. Augustine (1909, pp. 5–22), no one performs well when acting against their own will, even when the action itself is good. This strongly suggests that an innate, unrestricted curiosity leads to more effective learning. Truly, the individuality and autonomy in learning cannot be neglected. This also applies to mandating graduate degrees. When students are forced to pursue a specific graduate degree, they may lack investment in the learning process and feel obliged to complete coursework without any genuine interest in the subject matter. This can hinder their ability to explore, make mistakes, experiment, and become creative, which are vital for a meaningful and engaging learning experience. By allowing students the freedom to choose graduate

degrees that align with their interests and passions, they are more likely to approach their studies with enthusiasm and a desire to learn, which can lead to creative breakthroughs.

“The University is above all governed by actions of discovery; and that such discovery and inventiveness—the adventure that is a University—is shaped by a demand for an ongoing openness to possibility. The word that we usually give to that openness to possibility, of course, is just freedom” (Docherty, 2011, p. 4). The adventure of a university is indeed shaped by an ongoing openness to possibility, which requires the freedom to discover and explore. Unfortunately, at PUU, students are mandated to pursue vertically aligned degrees, which limits their exposure to different fields and ideas. This can send the message that they should conform to a particular degree, field, and set of expectations, rather than explore their interests and passions.

I think that this lack of openness and freedom at PUU can hinder students’ ability to think creatively and innovatively. Mandating vertical aligned degrees may stifle their inventiveness, as we may feel pressured to fit in to a specific way of thinking and problem-solving. When we have the ability to explore various fields and ideas, we are more likely to make connections between different areas of study, leading to new insights and discoveries. Who knows, perhaps the person who deviated from the enforced vertically aligned degree could become the next trailblazer or even make groundbreaking discoveries?

Meanwhile, the Philippine Qualifications Framework (n.d.) outlines that Level VII (Post-Baccalaureate Program) graduate students are expected “demonstrate advanced knowledge and skills in a specialized or multi-disciplinary field of study for professional practice, self-directed research, and/or lifelong learning.” Mandating students to take vertically-aligned degrees is against the spirit of the PQF. This policy limits students’ choices and suggests that graduate studies are solely focused on specialization. This approach disregards the importance of a multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach to learning, which is critical for developing a well-rounded and versatile graduate student.

If mandating vertically-aligned degrees becomes a trend, I think it may potentially lead to a dystopic society. When students are forced to pursue a specific degree, they may feel obligated to comply with the requirements without genuine interest or passion. Consequently, the resulting work may lack authenticity and individual expression, leading to dehumanization and a lack of benefit to society. As John Stuart Mill (1998) aptly argued, the authentic pursuit and achievement of individual talents and passions contribute to the greater good of society. Making graduate students pursue degrees that align with their interests and resonate with their soul, I believe, ultimately benefits not only the students, but also the society as a whole.

Also, *consilience* is strangled if this policy is perpetuated. As Charles Murray (2003) states, the meaning of *consilience* is the linking together of principles from different disciplines, especially when forming a comprehensive theory. However, when students are mandated to pursue vertically aligned degrees, the potential for consilience is limited. The focus becomes too narrow, stifling creativity and innovation, and discouraging students from exploring interdisciplinary or unconventional approaches. This can lead to missed opportunities for creativity and limit the development of comprehensive theories that draw upon knowledge from multiple fields. Moreover, mandating such degrees can also increase pressure and competition within the education system, leading to a more stressful and competitive environment for students.

Consilience, as described by Edward Wilson (1999), involves the collaboration of various academic disciplines to explore a common topic of interest, with the hope of contributing to cultural evolution. However, mandating students to pursue vertically aligned degrees could potentially hinder this process. As Melvin Konner (2003) argues, the very survival of our species and planet requires wonder, which can be stifled by a narrow focus on a particular discipline. Such a mandate could lead to a bordering effect that limits cross-fertilization of ideas and stifles interdisciplinary exploration. It could also restrict students' ability to think critically and creatively, which is essential for contributing to scholarly advancements. As such, it is important to maintain academic freedom and encourage students to explore various fields and approaches to contribute to consilience and cultural evolution.

Concluding Thoughts

In place of an epigraph, an AI-generated image with prompt: A student imprisoned by bureaucratic processes, striving to break free and create their own educational path amidst institutional rigidity (Figure 2).

Figure 2
AI-Generated Image



Note. Source: Microsoft. (2023). Bing Image Creator [Image creation model]. <https://www.bing.com/images/create/>

The case against mandating vertically-aligned degrees in Philippine graduate education is a complex one with far-reaching implications for students, universities, and society as a whole. The administrators who advocate for this policy, though well-intentioned, are destroying academic freedom, a fundamental pillar of higher education. By forcing students to adhere to a narrow, rigid system, they are stifling innovation and creativity, and undermining the very purpose of education. Their understanding of vertical alignment is also flawed, as it ignores the fact that cross-disciplinary approaches and generalist skills are crucial for solving complex problems and advancing knowledge in the 21st century.

Indeed, the policy of mandating vertically-aligned degrees in Philippine graduate education violates students' autonomy, generalism, and multipotentiality. By disregarding autonomy, universities risk becoming oppressive institutions that prioritize conformity over critical thinking and individuality, potentially leading to an anti-democratic and tyrannical environment. Dismissing generalism ignores the importance of multi-disciplinary knowledge and skills that are crucial in adapting to evolving job markets and societal needs. Moreover, ignoring multipotentiality neglects the fact that a student may possess a number of diverse interests and talents that can be harnessed to create innovative solutions for complex problems.

For yes, we must challenge the false narrative that mandating vertically-aligned degrees among graduate students is the only path to development, credibility, and excellence. We must continue to hold administrators accountable and demand that they prioritize the needs and aspirations of their students above narrow and rigid systems. By working together and advocating for a more inclusive and flexible higher education system, we can create a brighter future for our students and our society.

Education, after all, comes from the Latin word *educare*, which means *to bring forth what is within*. Students should not be molded into a predetermined shape, but rather given the opportunity to shape themselves. As John Holt (1967) wisely noted, we must end the ugly and antihuman business of people-shaping and allow and help people to shape themselves.

Let us demand an education that values individual autonomy, creativity, and potential. Let us create an education that helps people shape themselves and brings forth their unique talents and passions. Only then can we truly unleash the full potential of individuals and create a better society for all.

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