

Understanding and Reflection on the Construction of “Featured” Private Colleges and Universities --- Taking Anhui Sanlian University as an Example

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Abstract: Developing in a featured way is the only way for private undergraduate universities, and it is the keynote for the sustainable development of private higher education in China. Private universities should deepen the reform of talent cultivating mode, improve the scientific governance structure and operation mechanism, and fully understand the significance of sticking to the featured development in running high level private colleges and universities.

1. Introduction

The history of the construction of private colleges and universities in China is only more than ten years. In the process of construction, there are various and successful mature practices or effective explorations. However, as a special group of higher education, private colleges and universities, due to their particularity, need to further clarify some problems in the process of promoting their features, and it is necessary to do in-depth research and discussion.

2. The Basic Connotation of "Features"

The so-called “feature” is the style and form of a thing that is significantly different from other things. It is determined by the specific environmental factors on which the thing comes into being and develops. It is unique to the thing to which it belongs. Briefly, it is the unique nature and style of a thing.

It can be seen that "uniqueness" and "styles" are the basic elements of “features”, and "forms" is the key element or its basic expression of "features".

To construct a featured private university is to insist on a certain educational guideline. The features, which are of stability, expansibility, uniqueness and high quality, formed in the process of running a private university are the lifeblood and advantages of existence and development, and the significant symbol of school-running level and education quality.

Therefore, only by sticking to the featured or distinctive development, can the private universities establish their due status, so as to make a difference and overcome the tendency of homogenization.

Personnel training, scientific research, social services and cultural inheritance and innovation are the basic functions of a university, which is clear that talent cultivation is on the top among the four. In accordance with its history, regional advantages and resources, a private university has to leave its footprint on the featured and sustainable development way in school-running orientation, talent cultivation and discipline construction, adheres to connotative development and maintains its exuberant vitality. Only in this way, can the private universities better adapt itself to local and regional economic and social development needs, meet the diversified demands of the people to accept higher education, earnestly fulfill its social responsibilities. In other words, to adapt to the needs of regional economic and social development, to meet the diverse needs of the people, and to fulfill social responsibility is an important criterion to test whether a private university is a featured one or not.

3. The Urgency to Construct a Featured University

3.1 The Situation Faced by Private Higher Education

After more than 20 years since the establishment of private universities in the late 1990s, the development and coordination of private universities has been continuously enhanced, the structure has been constantly optimized, and the level has been significantly improved. But at the same time, their deep contradictions have become prominent, and the survival pressure has increased.

It can be said that 2008 is both the origin and the inflection point. In 2008, there were 640 private colleges and universities in China, which increased to 698 by the end of 2011, up by 9%. In 2008, there were 4.01 million students, and by the end of 2015, there were 5.8715 million students. By the end of 2011, there were 23.09 million students, an increase of 2.8 million, of whom 1.04 million were from private colleges and universities. Private colleges and universities accounted for 58 of the 146 newly approved colleges and universities. In 2008, the average number of students was 8,663, and by the end of 2011, it had reached 9,446, among which the average number of students in private colleges and universities was 6,263 in 2008 and 7,440 in 2011. In 2008, the number of college entrance examination candidates exceeded 10 million, and in 2012, it dropped to 9 million. In 2008, there were 610,000 candidates for college entrance examination in Anhui Province. However, in 2017, the number dropped to 499,000, showing a decreasing trend year by year.

People of insight predict that the development opportunity period of private colleges and universities is about 10 years. Generally speaking, opportunities outweigh challenges. However, differentiation and reorganization are inevitable, and a minority of private colleges and universities will encounter serious difficulties. And this is no alarmism.

It can be seen that, from the needs of the existence and development of private universities, and from the realistic requirements of constructing high-level private higher education, the featured development should not only be the strategy of establishing schools, but also the strategy of enhancing schools.

3.2 The Inevitable Choice of Future Development

From the perspective of policy trend, the construction of "feature" is not only urgent, but extremely urgent.

Firstly, *to Encourage and to Guide*. In the report of the 17th National Congress of the C.P.C., the keynote to initiate private education is "to encourage and to normalize", and "to encourage and to guide" of the 18th National Congress of the C.P.C. Although there is only one word's difference, people with insight admit that in the future, the state's support for private education will certainly be greater than the limitations. In addition, the Ministry of Education has set up a special fund for private education. It is believed that with the gradual establishment of government support mechanism, the national public finance function will further increase the support for private education. The basic orientation of supporting development is to support the featured development, high-quality development and normalized development.

Secondly, *Classified Management*. *The Outline of the National Medium- and Long-term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* issued in 2010 is the first medium- and long-term plan for education reform and development in China in the 21st century. It will certainly be the basis of future policy, and it is imperative. To strengthen the connotation construction of private colleges and universities, let some private colleges and universities develop first, make them bigger, stronger, better and more special, and run a number of high-level private colleges and universities well will become the keynote of the development of private education in China.

Thirdly, *Greater Autonomy*. To further expand the autonomy of private colleges and universities is not only related to the overall situation, but also the general trend. It is of great significance that the Ministry of Education has delegated the power of examination and approval of major setting to private colleges and universities. In terms of independent recruitment of higher vocational and technical colleges, Anhui Province has expanded its proportion year by year. It can be imagined that it is entirely possible for private universities to delegate the decision-making power of recruitment of

students in the future. In the face of this trend, how to grasp it and whether to grasp it are problems that cannot be avoided. Without forethought, one must have sorrow at hand.

Fourthly, *Features and Quality*. The core of social identity of private colleges and universities lies in their features and quality. Whether private colleges and universities can be respected and recognized by the society depends on whether they have their own characteristics and distinctive features. It can be said that having features is the foundation stone for private higher education to establish a good social image, and the core competitiveness of private colleges and universities is the running features. In a certain period, compared with quality, features should be given priority. Features are more attractive to the society than quality, and more recognized and welcomed by the society.

Fifthly, *Social Responsibility*. Only by insisting on public welfare, running school in accordance with the law, in good faith and the correctness of the direction can private colleges and universities win the trust of the people, the society and the government, thus gaining the social recognition and government support. This is the political guarantee for the development of private colleges and universities. Facts have proved that only by standing at the forefront of economic and social development, changes in educational needs, and technological innovation in education can private colleges and universities shoulder our social responsibilities. Only by fulfilling social responsibilities can private colleges and universities broaden a broader space for the development of private education and maintain the development vitality.

In a word, the reform and development of private colleges and universities is very arduous, and there is still a long way to go. Therefore, we must increase our sense of urgency and responsibility, step up reforms, and accelerate development.

4. Reflections on the Construction of Featured Private Universities

4.1 Continuously Deepening the Reform of Talent Cultivation Model

First and foremost, changing the idea of running a school and enhancing the consciousness of reform and development.

The advanced and unique concept of running a school rules the development direction of the university. It is the soul of university and the core and premise of shaping the characteristics of running a school. Try to think seriously about why and how to run a school, what kind of person to be cultivated and how to train them as well as other issues. With the intertwined of current social and educational issues, if the ideological concepts of education are not greatly changed, then there is no way to achieve better and faster development. Therefore, it is necessary to consciously liberate from the untimely traditional mode and inertia thinking, liberate from the frame of "211" and "985" and the development model of the old public universities as well as to promote the profound transformation in ideological concepts, development ideas and institutional mechanisms. Do not copy the public mode but take the road of characteristic development that is in line with its own school orientation. We should continuously deepen the reform of the law of education, the law of teaching and the law of the growth of talents and insist on carrying out through the reform so that the system design, organizational facilities and effect evaluation of the reform can be conform to the characteristics of education and the law of talent development. By emancipating and unifying the mind and establishing the quality-based value concept, we can better adapt to the needs of talent cultivation. In this way, we can lead the direction of development of the characteristics of private undergraduate colleges. We should profoundly realize that we must constantly emancipate our minds, advance with the times and identify the characteristic construction points; we must constantly carry on reform and innovation because there is no way out without them. In fact, we will be eliminated if there is no innovation.

Secondly, private colleges and universities should change the way to achieve connotative development. For its social status and social credibility have been lower and its social recognition improved slowly since the birth of private colleges and universities. Private colleges and universities

must face reality. It is necessary to shift from paying attention to the number of students to the quality of teaching; from focusing on the scale of development to the connotation construction; from extensive management to scientific and standardized management. Thereby it can gradually forming a virtuous circle and embarking on a development path with strong competitiveness, excellent quality and distinctive characteristics. At present, private undergraduate colleges and universities should seize the opportunity of undergraduate teaching level assessment and professional evaluation by unifying concepts, highlighting key points, closing gaps, focusing on coordinated development and concentrating on building distinctive features. It must change from focus on scale and extension in the past to quality and connotation. Only by this way, can we lay a solid foundation for better and faster development in the future.

Thirdly, innovative talent training mode and realize the characteristic development. Private undergraduate colleges and universities must always adhere to the central position of talent cultivation. It's of great importance to cultivating applied talents. We insist on facing the market and society and be oriented by employment to train practical talent with relative professional knowledge. We will objectively analyze and scientifically demonstrate the existing characteristics and advantages, identify and strengthen existing features. We should vigorously promote educational reform, change teaching methods, run specialties with advantages, develop special courses, deepen curriculum reform, adjust and optimize curriculum systems, establish and improve quality control systems, implement teaching quality improvement systems and compress extension development space and form featured professional group. We encourage diversity, we encourage more explore and practice, we encourage all forms of innovation and willing to see a hundred flowers blossom together. We need to constantly adjust our way of thinking, optimize disciplines, professions, levels, and categories, focus on cultivating new characteristics to achieve unrestricted training. We respect students' choices and fully mobilize students' enthusiasm and initiative, encourage them to learn creatively and pay more attention to students' ability development. Each student is trained to become a high-quality talent with strong beliefs and outstanding skills, which truly makes them capable and competent to succeed in employment and live a life of dignity.

4.2 Grasping Comparative Advantages, Developing Features Unswervingly

Private colleges and universities are kinds of regional and local colleges and universities that serve the local economic construction as its basic orientation. Therefore, scientific positioning is a prerequisite.

First, we must enhance our service awareness for local economic and social development. We must strengthen our own "locality" and base ourselves on the localities, face the localities and serve the localities. It is necessary to take the initiative to aim at the strategic positioning of local economic and social development and layout of industrial. So we should always adhere to the idea of serving the local economy and society. We should accelerate the adjustment of professional construction according to meet social demands as well as take the market demand as the "wind vane" to help us creatively set up professional courses and optimize the curriculum system to achieve professional and industrial docking. Further more, to avoid the homogenization tendency of disciplines and majors, we can implement an open-ended school type and adhere to the development of dislocation. The facts show that only by highlighting the "locality" and organically combining them can we combine well, and we must have broad prospects and space for sustainable development which acquire ever-lasting resources and vitality.

The second is to actively cater to the needs of industrial development. We need to constantly emancipate the mind, seize opportunities, broaden ideas, be pragmatic and seek features in innovation. We must take the proactive step to strengthen the close ties with the resident enterprises through the road of combining school and enterprise or combining production, education and scientific research so that enterprises can fully participate in the whole process of professional setting, curriculum provision, team building of teachers and teaching methods. Whether it is "course embedded" or "order-based" training, whether it is "work-study combination" or "enterprise-led" approach, the most important thing is that we must continuously strengthen the practice links and

strive to create opportunities to cultivate talents and make them more close to the needs of enterprise development and to be closer to the actual development of the industry as well as the needs of students' own development.

The third is to continuously improve the ability to serve local economic and social development. We must make great efforts to understand the real needs of the knowledge and ability of applied talents in economic and social development and industrial layout. Continuously promote various effective forms such as cooperative education, cooperative training and cooperative employment. We must insist on an open mind in setting professions according to the demands of the society and designing courses and teaching methods adapt to the needs of the industry development. We need to focus on cultivating talents for employment and entrepreneurship, such as improving the conformity of talent training quality with talent training objectives and improving the fit of talent training objectives with the needs of economic and social. From this point of view, what we should do is to actively strengthen cooperation with the government, industry and enterprises thereby open up a new model of cooperation with school, local and enterprise.

The preliminary practice of characteristic development. Anhui Sanlian College was approved by the Ministry of Education in 1997. It is the first private college in Anhui Province and the first batch of private colleges in China. It was upgraded to an undergraduate university in 2008. In recent years, Anhui Sanlian University has not blindly pursued a large number of disciplines and majors but under the principles of supporting excellence, supporting individual and supporting needs. However, it focus on supporting disciplines that can reflect the school's orientation and school-running characteristics. Relying on "National Vehicle Driving Safety Engineering Research Center" and "National Support Project", Anhui Sanlian University try to form a professional discipline group of accident prevention and control based on human-oriented subject and to radiate and drive the construction of the disciplines of the whole university. In 2009, the Anhui provincial department of education approved the construction of the "Innovative Experimental Zone for Applied and Compound Traffic Safety Talents Training Models" at the school of traffic engineering of Anhui Sanlian University. In 2014, it established the "Collaborative Innovation Center for Traffic Safety Application Technology" and it was approved as the unit of the ministry of education action plan in 2016. In 2018, on the basis of "based on the original", the key disciplines were built. In this case, Anhui Sanlian University and Shandong Jiaotong University promoted the joint training of postgraduates. In January 2019, the traffic information and safety laboratory was approved as a provincial key laboratory. At the same time, in response to social needs and giving full play to its comparative advantages, Anhui Sanlian universities adhered to the path of combining production, study and scientific research and formulated relevant policies. They carried out relevant theoretical research and practical exploration and established a long-term mechanism for cooperation between industry, universities and research institutes. Relying on the advantages of Anhui Sanlian Group, the school has carried out in-depth cooperation with affiliated enterprises of Anhui Sanlian Group and achieved coordinated development. They are trying to explore a new path of school-enterprise collaborative innovation and cooperation in educating people as well as building a school-running model of "integration of production, study and scientific research" in talent cultivation, teaching resource expansion, double-certificated teachers construction, scientific research, innovation platform construction and disciplines and professional clusters construction. At present, the autarkic university-industry that of the close-knit and mutual-feeding within Anhui sanlian group has been initially formed. At the same time, it has rooted in regional resources and has formed a multi-style and synergistic university-industry with other enterprises. In 2018, it was awarded the "China Industry-University-Research Cooperation Promotion Award" by CIUR.

4.3 Deepening the Reform of the Management System and Improving the Governance Structure and Operational Mechanism

First, the regulations govern the school. China's current private colleges and universities implement the principal responsibility system under the leadership of the board of directors. The prevailed internal corporate governance model is the most significant difference between private

colleges and public universities. Because private colleges and universities enjoy full autonomy that seems easier to lose the constraints of laws and regulations. Therefore, family, paternalistic, and business management models must be abandoned. Only by perfecting the corporate governance structure and establishing a modern university system through governing the school with a charter can achieve the goal of sustainable development. It is necessary to further improve the leadership system, optimize the organizational structure, establish a working system with clear powers and responsibilities between the chairman and the principal and start an operational mechanism for cooperation and constraints to ensure scientific, democratic and efficient decision-making. We will guarantee democratic management by establishing and improving scientific management and democratic supervision system such as the board of supervisors, faculty representatives, trade unions, etc., meanwhile, to improve the relationship and coordination mechanism between decision-making bodies, administrative agencies and teaching institutions.

Second, to improve the operational mechanism. The power operation mechanism, the teaching operation mechanism and the scientific research operation mechanism are the most basic internal operation mechanisms of private universities. Generally speaking, we must focus on reform and innovation. First, it is of great significance to establish and improve the operating mechanism of the board of directors to effectively protect the legitimate rights and interests of students and teachers. The second is to establish and improve a high-level teaching operation mechanism so that the talent cultivation, teaching management, quality assurance and the construction of the teaching staff structure, especially the part-time (part-time refers to those from production or management positions) become more reasonable and scientific. The third is to establish a sound scientific research and operation mechanism. The operation of this mechanism can make the scientific research team, scientific research management and scientific research guarantee truly implemented. What's more, it can also promote high-quality teaching through high-level scientific research which remains one of the weak links in private universities. We must use the innovation of institutional mechanisms as a guarantee to stimulate vitality as well as to create local advantages through the innovation of institutional mechanisms since there is no characteristics without advantages. At the same time, the school management should arise the service awareness, identify functional positioning, innovate management systems, change work style and improve work efficiency so as to forming their own characteristics in management and service. Through the establishment and operation of these mechanisms, private colleges and universities can be guaranteed to become a vitality and healthy organization with scientific structure, efficient operation and democratic supervision.

Thirdly, the practice of management system reform. Anhui Sanlian University always adheres to the scientific concept of higher education development. In 2007, it innovatively proposed the idea of flat management reform and piloted the two departments of foreign language studies and business administration together with launched relevant theoretical research. In 2009, the university transformed 10 departments into 10 second-level schools then fully implemented flat management in the next year. We have adopted two levels of management that is to decentralize human resource, financial and material management authority and moved down the management to second-level schools. This initiative opened the management innovation of private colleges and universities by fully mobilized the enthusiasm of the secondary colleges and greatly stimulated the initiative and innovation of the them. The institutional innovation with the flat management as the core adapts to the objective situation of the popularization, internationalization and marketization of higher education. It has stepped out of a road of innovation for private universities to enhance their core competitiveness and broke the school-running model under the planned economic system. Under such a background, the school adheres to the quality centered concept of running a school and draws on the management approach of entrepreneur by introduces the ISO9001 quality assurance system. Each year, the third party evaluates the management of the school and puts forward suggestions for improvement. On this basis, in order to achieve sustainable development of the school, we will further strengthens the connotation construction to builds core competitiveness by stimulating the endogenous dynamic of its own reform and development.

4.4 Firmly Following the Featured Developing Way and Promoting the Construction of High-level Private Colleges and Universities

Firstly, the development of characteristics is the foundation. At present, the vast majority of private colleges and universities rely on the road of “taking students to raise schools”. Compared with public universities with long history and considerable strength, they are easily caught in the homogenization of running schools. Not only that, it is a dilemma between for-profit and non-profit for private colleges and universities. Besides, the brain drain and the instability of the teaching staff, cronyism, nepotism and seniority-based system have become the biggest shortcomings and bottlenecks that restricting the development of the characteristics of private undergraduate colleges. The existence of these problems cannot be neglected and must be directly addressed and effectively resolved. At present, the Chinese private undergraduate colleges and universities are experiencing an important strategic transition period from scale expansion to connotation development. How to jump out of homogenization competition with public universities directly and take the road of individualized development? “Characteristic development” is undoubtedly the only wise choice for the sound and fast sustainable development of undergraduate colleges and universities. It is not difficult to find out through the study of the top 20 private university systems in the United States that although there is no fixed model, one thing in common is that: they got distinctive features. Known as “tiny but mighty”, California Institute of Technology is the elite university model. The school was originally a medium-sized technical school. It was changed to a university in 1920. Since the Second World War, it has basically maintained the scale of six departments, with 900 undergraduates and 1,100 graduate students. The school has 27 professors or alumni who have won 28 Nobel Prizes. The rapid rise of Stanford University through cooperation with industry is another example of winning by speciality. The characteristics of the transformation of "academic-technical-productivity" have become world-famous. Comparing the development path of these two private universities, it's not difficult to figure that the characteristics which hardly replicated have great impact on the prospect of the school. It can be seen that the pursuit of characteristic has become a general consensus for the development of colleges and universities.

Second, high-level private undergraduate colleges must be distinctive. Since the 1990s, the State Council of China has vigorously promoted the construction of world-class universities and high-level universities through the national development of the "985 Project" and the "211 Project" from the strategic height of national development. In fact, it is the localization and innovation of modern university system in China. High-level universities is a comparative concept for it contrasts with the world-class universities and world-class disciplines. On account of this, the concept has a specific historical background. In 2012, the Ministry of Education officially proposed "accelerating the construction of a number of world-class universities and a number of high-level universities, building a number of world-class disciplines... strengthening the connotation construction of private colleges and universities, and running a number of high-level private colleges." Therefore, the “high level” corresponds to the world-class universities and world-class disciplines. In recent years they are referred as “double-class construction”. From the perspective of the construction of high-level universities around the world, private universities in some western countries are mostly synonymous with high-level universities. The top 20 universities in the United States are almost all private universities. In Asia, private universities in Japan and Korea enjoy high reputation worldwide. However, there are only three or four universities (all public universities) in China can rank the top 100 in the world. Throughout the modern and contemporary history of China, during the period of the Republic of China, a number of high-level private universities such as Yanjing University, Nankai University, Jinling University, and Soochow University have emerged. Private higher education in the People's Republic of China began to revive only in the late 1990s. To be precise, there is currently no high-level private college that can compete with public universities. Nowadays, building a high-level private undergraduate college is a wonderful dream. It has a bright future that requires unremitting struggles of generations. However, high-level private college building can not only bring "catfish effect” but also effectively promote the benign competition between private

colleges and public colleges in the long term. Thereby it can enriching the academic environment in China by diversifying higher education and satisfying the varies demands of people which of significant importance. Private undergraduate colleges should aim at "high level" by highlighting the pertinence in the professional setting, highlighting the innovation in the curriculum structure, highlighting the practicality in the teaching method and highlighting the application in talent training. Through continuous innovation in discipline construction, team building, scientific research, talent cultivation and management systems, we can promote the overall improvement of the running level of private undergraduate colleges and universities. In other words, having characteristics, innovation and competitiveness is the only way for the development of high-level private undergraduate colleges. Nowadays, the construction of excellent high-level private undergraduate colleges has become the main tone, which is exactly the main idea of this paper.

5. Conclusion

There is no end to the construction of a characteristic private undergraduate college but a long-term dynamic process. There are no shortcuts, we must fight for the day and night and continue to accumulate experience and practice in the process of running schools. As long as we seek survival with "characteristics", develop with "characteristics", persist in unremitting efforts and exert the advantages of latecomers, we believe that the development of private undergraduate colleges will have a long-lasting vitality.

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