

## **The Virtue of Priority Seats**

It is a common sight on Taipei's MRT or buses that the priority seats are always left vacant even when the trains or buses are crowded with people. I am probably one of the few who would choose to sit on the priority seats at these moments. When I sit down, I am fully aware that later I'll yield the seat to the needed and I am just staying here for a little while. However, it seems that the priority seat has become the "sacred seat" because when I sit on it, everyone would give me the look as if I have done something terribly wrong.

Priority seats bear the sign: "Please yield your seat to the elderly, pregnant or children." However, the creation of priority seats is also designed on the basis of visual judgements. If one is handicapped visibly and explicitly, without all four limbs as Ototake Hirotada (乙武洋匡) is, one can certainly sit on the priority seat like an honored guest, and other passengers would complete this ritual by showering that person with their full sympathy. However, visibility has its limitations: we are not able to see invisible or implicit traits under the clothes. Women in early pregnancy or youngsters after knee surgery, or other individuals with physical problems that are not visible will still receive condemning looks if they sit on the priority seats. Worse, their "offensive behavior" may even be filmed on video and displayed on Youtube to shame them.

Priority seats came into being in the affluent Scandinavian countries with the idea of making the world more accessible for the weak who will be able to see the world by using public transportation. But as the practice is introduced into Taiwan, we learned the surface arrangements without understanding the meanings underneath—to care for others in need whether the need is visible or not—then the seats became just a formality. People no longer feel the need to yield their seats; they now have an excuse not to because there are already priority seats set aside for such purposes. A thing of the heart is now the space of the law, and moral sentiments are gone. When people condemn those who seem to have taken the priority seats without good reason, they have forgotten that if necessary, they themselves can just as easily yield their seat to those who need it.

Yielding seats to others who need it more is an admirable moral conduct, but now the policy of priority seats has eroded people's sense of empathy and respect. I think my sitting on the priority seat is an opportunity for people to think about bringing back the good virtue of yielding their seats to those who are in need. Maybe I will show up on youtube videos one day, but I stand a chance to explain the real goodness behind the act.

## **University? Not a Big Deal!**

Just as electricity generates power, so does education strengthen a nation. It is widely believed that education will help promote the developing countries to the rank of the advanced countries. Establishing more universities is further believed to be a seemingly effective measure to enhance the quality of education, hence paving the way to national success. However, does such education reform really improve higher education? Let's take a glimpse at Taiwan's example.

Believing that providing more universities would also provide more opportunities for young people to receive higher education, Taiwan's Ministry of Education started the project of greatly broadening the scope of higher education in 1994. Beside building more new universities, it also encouraged existing vocational schools or specialized training colleges to upgrade to universities. According to statistics, there were 21 universities in 1994, but the total number has now skyrocketed to around 150. As for the enrollment rate, less than 50% of all high school graduates could get into college then, and now it is well over 90%. Having undergone this tremendous reform, Taiwan's education was anticipated to make lots of progress that would benefit the country.

Unfortunately, while increasing the total number of universities ensures the popularization of knowledge, it also profoundly degrades the quality of higher education. To start with, establishing more universities allows the relatively underprivileged students to be admitted by the universities. But as they were less well-prepared for higher learning, they would likely encounter difficulties absorbing sophisticated knowledge. Then their difficulties often induce professors to adjust the course content to meet minimal requirement. In other words, the course content would be diluted, lightened, and hence less challenging. This certainly results in a downgrading of higher education.

If university education suffers, so does vocational education. Rapid transition from vocational schools to universities severely disturbed the provision of education that is aimed at vocational training. As classes turned from the practical to the theoretical and academic, precious knowledges accumulated from on-hand work are slighted. Likewise, a sentiment develops that looks down upon labor and their experiences, making graduates hardly prepared for the challenges on the work floor. In recent years, there has been an acute shortage of mechanician, and the quality of mechanics has fallen too, both of which will undermine the development of industries and further jeopardize Taiwan's competitiveness.

No doubt, education is the foundation of a country's development, and higher education is the crucial element in fostering brilliant intellectuals. Yet from Taiwan's example, it can be seen that building more universities has led to a regression in students' quality of education as well as the termination of vocational training which is greatly needed by our country. Our education policy really needs a comprehensive reexamination.

## What to Wear?

When I was in high school, we were not allowed to wear our sports shorts (學校制服的運動短褲) outside school. We must be fully clothed in our formal uniform, with trousers or skirts at the bottom and shirts on top, whenever we entered or left the school during daytime, or else we would be stopped by the military instructor and chastised. It was a policy that never made sense to us because we always wore shorts in the summer and it was really inconvenient for us to change our outfit day in and day out.

We protested against this unreasonable policy several times, but the principal rejected our request every time with an unreasonable response, “Students should wear uniforms that are formal enough to represent the school. Wearing shorts outside the school will only leave bad impressions on others.” We were confused, because the shorts were also a part of the school’s uniform, how were we able to represent our school when the school itself didn’t even recognize and respect its own uniform? I think the main reason was that people usually categorize students who wear formal uniforms as “good students”, but that doesn’t mean wearing shorts is going to stop us from behaving nicely outside the school and making the school proud.

It was also argued by our headmaster that the top schools in Taipei didn’t allow students to wear shorts outside the school, so we should follow their example. But isn’t it more important for us to learn from their attitude of studying instead of what kind of uniform they wear? If the school wanted us to improve on our grades so that we could be one of the best schools, they should have focused on establishing rules that could actually help us enhance our academic performance rather than forbidding the wearing of sports shorts.

To avoid being stopped by the military instructor, we used to wait until he left the school gate, then we would sneak out wearing our shorts. Sometimes the girls would even wear shorts under our uniform skirts and take the skirts off as soon as they leave campus. Such violations took place daily and are unlikely to stop. Not only did the students’ behavior prove how meaningless this policy is, but the policy itself was encouraging students to go against it. I sincerely hope that the headmaster and the teachers would put themselves in our shoes and consider things from our perspective. After all, sports shorts actually help us feel more energetic and active—and aren’t those qualities valuable for our education?

### **A new transportation system**

A city may adopt a novel method of transportation to improve its image, yet it could also cause a variety of problems if the plan fails to connect with the reality. Take Taichung for instance, Taichung City Government aims to build an efficient public transportation so as to lighten the traffic pressure at the center of the city. The City Government chose BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) rather than MRT (mass rapid transit) or LRT (Light Rail Transit) for its lower cost, shorter construction period, and no need to set up specialized rails. However, its achievement is far from the expectation of the city, and people's complaint is accumulating day after day.

Generally speaking, a true BRT could be (A) a type of Right-of-Way (Segregated Right-of-Way) where the bus route would be completely segregated from other traffic systems, much like the Taiwan High Speed Rail, Taipei MRT, and Xiamen BRT, or (B) another type of Right-of-Way (Reserved Right-of-Way) with priority signs so that the system would be isolated from ground traffic partially and allows the bus to pass through first, much like the Light Rail Transit and Bus-only lane in Taipei. All in all, bus-only lanes and specialized designs would ensure that mixed causes of delay are avoided. Yet, Taichung's BRT is not really an integral BRT system because it doesn't have priority signs. When the BRT needs to wait for traffic light, its speed is slowed down. And as lanes are limited, buses often compete for lanes with other vehicles and traffic jams may result instead.

In addition to the imperfect design at the execution level, the main factor that led to the failure of Taichung's BRT is that it did not try to work itself into the bus system that has become quite convenient for residents. Thanks to the BRT, up to fifteen routes have been affected seriously--regular buses are forced to change their travel routes, bus numbers, and the bus shifts are cut down dramatically. There is no denying that people feel puzzled and annoyed by the irregular alteration of bus shifts and routes, and the website connection launched by the City Government lacks detailed information about the complete arrangement of the BRT. Taking the wrong bus and ending up in a different part of the city became a common scene. In addition, coastal line residents suffer most greatly as lots of nonstop buses are replaced by the short distance shuttle buses that cater to inner city travelers.

Since the BRT is a new transportation system in Taiwan, it's no doubt that there are still plenty of difficulties to be overcome. But instead of trying to learn from cities that have had great success running the BRT, such as Nagoya in Japan, the newly elected mayor of Taichung declared that he would abolish the BRT as a gesture to show his political resolve. Clearly, that would be a great loss of the huge sum that has already been spent. In my opinion, the BRT is still the best solution to the traffic problem in Taichung at the present, and the government should try to figure out how to save this system rather than just throwing it away.

### **When my roommates are my classmates**

Last year, when I just moved into the dormitory, I realized that all of my roommates are also English majors like me. At first, I felt extremely excited as I was looking forward to having friends to hang around with all day, just like I used to do in senior high school. I could take classes and have lunch with them, and after school we could have dinner and study together. How wonderful it would be!

When I shared this “good news” with my senior high school classmates, I discovered that not all of the universities assign dormitory rooms this way. One college does it by putting together students from the same hometown but not the same departments. Another college gives their freshman class an interest inventory test in order to gather those who have similar interests. Because of the test, one of my senior high school classmates started her music lessons again on the first day she moved into the dormitory. She has been interested in playing the cello and her roommates are also all good at music. How easily would she find partners! After hearing her lucky story, I become somewhat jealous. I began to have doubts about the way NCU distributed dormitory rooms.

I discussed the issue with my parents and their roommate issue also came up. My parents said their roommates were from different departments and they lived together for four years and still kept in touch after graduation. When they had difficulties on career planning, they would help each other. And because their school was in Taipei, through these roommates from other departments, they often interacted with students in other fields from other schools. During those four years, they made a lot of friends from different universities. In contrast, NCU is isolated on a little hill, and it's quite difficult to build relations with students of other colleges. In that case, we really should consider different ways of assigning dorm rooms so that we can at least increase and broaden interaction among students from different fields within our own campus. Students can still bond with students in their same department through taking similar classes or joining in their own department's after-school activities. If NCU could change its policy, perhaps it may bring more benefits for students.

As newcomers to the university, the freshman class usually needs to find a sense of belonging and lots of company. NCU seems to understand this need and uses this way of dorm room assignment to help us settle in. But when it comes to learning and making more friends, it might be better to try other different ways where we could be exposed to the most variety and diversity.

## **I still want to wear my uniform**

I browse through FaceBook every day, and recently I noticed a revolution was spreading in my old high school. Our junior sisters are fighting our school on the issue of school uniforms. They hope the school can change its rules on requiring students to wear white shoes, and as full sets of uniforms are now mandatory on campus at all times, the students hope they can wear sportswear whenever they want. While it is quite commendable that students these days can stand up and fight for their rights, every time I read about this fight, I feel quite disappointed.

In my opinion, I think uniforms carry two meanings. One is a sign of our identity, and the other is a show of collectivity. Human beings are social animals, and it is human nature to look for one or more groups to identify with. Finding a sign is just the beginning of this recognition process. The most classic signs include religion, the country, or some special totem. For students, maybe we can say the “uniform” is an important sign of identification. After all, we have worked so hard to get into our dream school, and now we are in, our uniform is a badge of pride, creating an identity for the school and is an important part of being a student in that school.

Collectively, when we wear our school uniform, it is almost identical to "the image of the school's first face." The uniforms can express the school's spirit, especially when a whole lot of students show up wearing the same uniform. Also, if I wear the First Girls High School uniform, a feeling will emerge inside me that I need to work hard so as to live up to the pride of my uniform. And I think the school uniform can also improve learning by reducing distraction, sharpening our focus on schoolwork and making the classroom a more serious environment, allowing students to perform better.

When I see my junior sisters fighting to get rid of the uniform, I feel sad that they do not understand the meaning and importance of a school uniform. If time could be turned back, I would still be willing to wear my uniform.

## **The Campus' Communication Report System**

An increasing number of rules have been drawn up with the intent to achieve order on campus, and the communication report system is probably the most notorious one. Legislated in 1996, based on the idea of creating a safer and friendlier campus, the communication report system allows information on certain events, from individual deviances such as smoking to larger events such as bullying, to be delivered to a higher level of supervision within hours. However, does this system indeed provide a better environment for education? I think it is time for us to step back and examine its results.

One of the most serious problems with the communication report system is that it often ends up discriminating against those students who already suffer from prejudices. In fact, certain students could easily become victims under the system. I happened to know a so-called “problem student” who dyed his hair blue, with tattoos covering both his calves, and became the eyesore of the drillmasters. Every deviant behavior the boy has done, as small as being late for school or as big as smoking during class time, would lead to the same result — being filed as a case, and the school would quickly organize a team to conduct investigations and to come up with resolutions to deal with him. I was pretty surprised that his late arrival would bring on such mobilization while other students got no more than a demerit mark for the same travesty. It is quite sad that all those efforts that the instructors have done had never worked as expected: the boy became so pissed that he even skipped class to hang out with a bunch of gangsters. From my point of view, spending time with the gangsters is a way for the student to free himself from all the condemnations and especially discriminations from the teachers, and it also proved that the communication report system does more harm than good.

Besides all the censures that the reported student has to face, another deficiency is that it is the teacher who would end up bearing the brunt most of the time. “To report or not” is always the dilemma in a teacher’s mind when becoming aware of an occurrence on campus. In addition to the unclear demarcation between events of varied gravity, a teacher who fails to make the timely report stands to face a fine of NT\$30,000 for the charge of negligence. Once a teacher decides to report a case, he no longer has the right to intervene in the solution process; instead, professed experts will step in and undertake the task. In the end, the teacher who has full knowledge of the student involved and the nature of the incident is kept out of the whole matter while exterior experts settle everything. The processes deprive teachers of the ability to manage their own classes and students in the local context. However it may turn out at the end, the teacher will always be there to see the students and the class to the end, while the experts are long gone.

In my opinion, the communication report system functions no more than a lucky charm that provides a sense of security for those who are in power. The intention of creating a friendly environment is well-worthy, but it should be more flexible and lenient so as to allow the matters to be taken care of locally. As it functions now, the system may bring more adverse effect and foster a hostile atmosphere on campus instead.

## **What is a Good Teacher?**

From time to time in class, I would hear some professors complain about the pressure and trouble brought on by the faculty appraisal system that has been implemented on campus since 2006 with the aim of supervising the teaching staff and guaranteeing students a high quality of education. Why do some professors disapprove of this policy while the intention seems so good and practical? Well, actually, the appraisal not only creates busy work for professors but also results in great unfairness in the evaluation process.

To meet the demands of the appraisal, professors have to take care of not only their own academic performance but also their participation in school affairs and supervision of student learning. As taking part in school affairs is considered important for the appraisal, in order not to fail it, professors might have to attend many conferences, manage laboratories, lead students to competitions, etc. In addition, counseling students is also necessary for a professor to do well on the appraisal. This way, professors become busier when there are more to do besides teaching and doing research, and their relationship with students might be tensed since, instead of willingly devoting themselves, professors are actually forced to help with students or school affairs by the policy.

Then there is the question of fairness. The higher authorities always need some kind of quantified evidence to evaluate a professor's performance. But, how can we quantify one's efforts as a way to judge him or her? How can we measure the effort that a teacher puts into preparing a course? Furthermore, many students mark the course evaluation sheets according to how easy it is to get a good grade in a professor's course. In that sense, how can course evaluations serve to prove a professor's quality of teaching? If these quantified results are merely problematic reflections of a teacher and his work, we really should not use the appraisal system to encourage our teachers to devote themselves to accumulating points and scores rather than concentrating on quality teaching.

The appraisal system had been put into place to eliminate inadequate teachers and improve learning conditions for students. Looking at the realities of the evaluation process, I cannot help but wonder whether this appraisal is rewarding good teachers and fulfilling its intentions or not. Many problems have already become obvious with the design of the appraisal. University authorities should think about making some adjustments before the original good intention backfires.



## Who's the Problem?

Everyone on this crowded, hot, and silent bus swayed as the traffic lights changed color and people waited anxiously to reach their destinations. Sitting in front of me was a mother and her son, with a heavy backpack and two bags of books. The mother was saying to her son: "How can you go to the cram school for three whole years but still got these awful grades on math? Do you think that you can enter a good university and find a good job with this grade?" Her words showed concern and love; however, the son just stared at the rain outside the window without saying a word.

What the mother said was sensible and undeniable, but it also exposed a huge problem in our society — grades have become the sole criterion to define a young man's value and future. If we didn't get high scores on exams, we will have difficulty getting into a "good school and good department" and find a "good job" after we graduate from college. Therefore, getting high grades has become a must in our life, and all kinds of pressure fall upon students. Many blame it on the officials in education. However, I think things are much more complicated.

Under the education system of Taiwan, all of us have to pass the entrance examination or some additional exam system in order to enter an ideal school. For many years, this system which chooses grades as the key criterion has been criticized by people; thus, other evidences of outstanding performance are allowed so as to lower the importance of grades. However, regardless of the reform of education methods, grades remain the only bridge between us and our glorious future and, as long as "grades" are implicated, it seems that all new reformed education models will be corrupted sooner or later.

Take the popular "Flipped Education" for example. Even though the courses have become more interesting and helpful for learning, students still tend to complain that they don't want to waste time on discussing; they demand that the teacher give them a thorough review before exams. To ensure good teaching assessment and performance, teachers even compromise to move back to the traditional teaching way and make the "Flipped Education" exist in name only. In a similar way, the "Multiple Entrance Program," which is designed to make education resources more accessible for children who have other unique talents, now has become a reason for parents to force children to go to cram schools, learn many different talents, and get good grades so they can thus get into a good college. Even in classes for "the gifted," parents believe good grades equal being gifted and distort the true meaning of exceptional learning and development. Finally, while the "Liberal Arts Education" and the professional knowledge learning in college aim to cultivate students' active learning and creative thinking, most people just put emphasis on whether that department is useful for finding jobs or not.

As I have tried to make clear, the problems we face in education are not the fault of the officials in education only, but more importantly the fault of the wrong ideas and social values that most people hold concerning schools and learning. Perhaps, we should all deeply ponder the meaning of learning rather than blindly study for the sole purpose of the pursuit of excellence and grades. If we don't get rid of this results-oriented and grade-first mentality, even the best education policies would be distorted.

## **“Voluntary” Service**

The 12-year compulsory education law was brought into force in 2014, aiming at reducing students' academic stress so as to help them develop their diverse interests. One of the major changes is that students can now apply for admission to any school without taking any entrance examination. However, screening processes have emerged, during which the grades, physical fitness, service experiences, and other performance records of the applicants are evaluated. And out of these required credentials, the necessity of service experiences has unwittingly backfired.

Voluntary services are supposed to proceed from a person's free will, filled with love, passion, and happiness. To offer services without asking for any returns is considered a commendable virtue, which can benefit our society immensely. Thus, it is understandable that this act of selflessness would be included in the screening list: students who have conducted such services at their young age tend to have the kind of personality desired by higher learning. Unfortunately, when acts of kindness and selflessness become profitable, their original meaning also changes. Neither do students learn from their services, nor does the society benefit from such half-hearted services.

For students, it's hard for them to transform their negative attitudes toward services into positive ones. The longer they serve, the more they complain. Thus, these voluntary services all turn out to be a waste of time. Moreover, it's difficult to quantify the value and feedback of service. It's quite unfair for the hardworking to gain the same points as the lazy ones. In terms of the society as a whole, this utilitarian attitude leads to inefficiency and perfunctoriness. For example, some students serving at the information desk in hospitals don't even prepare for the patients' potential requirements. All they do is wear the bright yellow sleeveless jackets that announce their role and stand like decorative vases. They not only confuse the patients but also deteriorate the images of the service units, causing more inconvenience.

If students' voluntary services aren't based on such goals or grades, they may actually gain a lot when they apply themselves to the services. I have attended a winter camp held in a remote elementary school once. Before the activity, I prepared for everything needed, contemplated on the most trivial but vital details, and practiced repeatedly to ensure thoroughness. Since then, I've learnt to be more thoughtful before carrying out anything. As I served, I effectively coaxed some mischievous or stubborn kids into behaving. It has also helped me develop a sense of patience. After the meaningful activity, I established a close relationship with some kids and their feedback cards always brought tears to my eyes. I created not only an unforgettable memory, but also strong positive power in my heart.

To sum up, voluntary service should be regarded as a wonderful and significant event. Putting it onto the screening list may do more harm than good for some students since the lack of free will and the base of profits undermine the real meaning of service.

## **Does National Health Insurance Provide High Quality of Care?**

In 1995, the government introduced a whole new welfare policy to integrate various chaotic kinds of insurance originally designed for specific citizens such as labors, farmers, etc. The main purpose of “national health insurance” is to provide everyone with good medical service and enhance their health at a very low cost. However, many reports have recently pointed to the decline of quality in medical services. How did this well-meaning policy turn into such a nightmare?

It goes without saying that hospitals are profit institutions. As every hospital can only share fixed proportions of the profit in the national health insurance plan, hospitals began to seek innovative methods to increase their profit. One is the decrease of salary for doctors, which results in a shortage of doctors, especially surgeons because surgeons not only work day and night but also take high risks in medical responsibility. As salary decreases, people are more reluctant to take surgeon as a good occupation choice. Another problem is the quality of medical treatment. Hospitals tend to replace high quality imported medicine with cheap domestic products. For example, in orthopedic treatment, because the medical steel provided by the health insurance plan is low quality, most doctors would suggest their patients to pay for quality medical steel with their own money. And if the patients cannot afford it, they can only settle with low quality treatment, which lowers the quality of medical services. Also, as hospitals become cost-conscious, many research projects have been cut. But, experiments are actually important for the improvement in medical technology. Cuts in researching funding will naturally hurt the quality of medical services.

The original aim for the national health insurance plan was to raise the quality of medical services while lowering the cost. Yet nowadays as hospitals strive to make more profit, they are in fact lowering the quality of medical services. As we face a possible bankruptcy of the health insurance plan in the near future, our government really needs to take some quick actions to save it and make it work again.

### **Priority seats in context**

Priority seats were created for people who are senior citizens, pregnant women, and passengers who are disabled or with child. We regard those people as in need of being seated first. Yet this social consideration takes place in quite specific social contexts.

When I was little, few people would take public transportation in Taichung. However, as the population grew, more bus routes are planned by the government to encourage people to take the bus in order to ease the problem of busy traffic and serious air pollution. As more and more people take the bus, the buses became more and more crowded and the issue of priority seats came into being. In other words, priority seats are created in Taichung because the problem of overcrowding on the buses has made it necessary. It also means the weak and elderly are finding it very difficult to get seats, that's why the city had to make a policy to reserve some seats for them. But then, the priority seats became so exclusive that only those who are visibly in need of seating can sit down. A lot of times, people would not even approach the priority seats when there is obviously no one sitting there.

Strangely, there are others who would not sit even when there are empty non-priority seats. Normally, when there is an empty seat, people would go for it and sit down as soon as they get on the bus. However, if the seat is next to someone who is already seated, people would hesitate or even ignore the vacant seat; they would rather just stand on the side. I have observed that this phenomenon is most obvious among teenagers, especially girls. One reason could be that they find it uncomfortable sitting side by side with strangers. Another reason is that, as they often travel with friends on the bus, sitting down alone while your friends remain standing is considered inconsiderate. So, all of them choose to stand together and continue their conversation while the seat remains unoccupied. In the end, adults tend to take up all the seats.

Decisions about seating on public transportation could be quite complicated, depending on the person making those decisions and the culture that shapes them.

### **Fair Affirmative Action for Aborigines?**

It was not until my friend, Min, was admitted to a top university that I learned about the affirmative action policy of entrance examination for indigenous students. I have known Min for a long time, yet I never found out his secret identity. Instead of the dark skin and chiseled features typical of indigenous people, he has pale skin and a snub nose. While aborigines tend to be more athletic, he is bad at playing any kind of sport, even tripping himself three times in a basketball game. Also, he shows no sign of coming from a disadvantaged background since he wears famous brands every day. From what I know, he is no different from all my other classmates and he does not need any affirmative action to boost his grades.

The earliest affirmative action on the entrance examination for indigenous students in Taiwan was implemented in the 1960s. Its primary aim was to protect the rights of the underprivileged minority so that aboriginal and non-aboriginal students could reach a substantive equality of educational opportunity. The action was also a kind of compensation to the aboriginals for being deprived of their land and culture, which had created their unequal status in the first place. After the policy was carried out, it seemed to prove quite effective as the enrollment rate of indigenous students improved significantly. However, new problems also have gradually emerged, indicating that the policy might not work so well for today's context.

First, the affirmative act unwittingly stigmatized aboriginal students. Social atmosphere in Taiwan nowadays places a high value not only on equality but also on hard work and competitiveness. For those indigenous students who attain great academic performance, no matter how hard they study, their efforts are often ignored by other people because of the affirmative action. It leads to a common misunderstanding that indigenous students do not perform well and they only get ahead because of the advantage they received through this policy, which reinforces the traditional stereotype that indigenous students are really not that competitive. In the meantime, even though the policy does not affect the enrollment quota of non-aboriginal students since aboriginal students are relegated to additional quota, non-aborigine students still feel themselves deprived. For example, when we learned about Min's ethnic identity and his success in getting into the top university, we could not help but feel somewhat shortchanged because everyone had studied equally hard yet no one could be as lucky as Min.

Second, urban aboriginal students enjoy a better chance than rural aboriginal students under the same policy. In the past decades, many aboriginal families have left their home in the mountains and acclimated to the urban lifestyle, while their children

were brought up in the city. Min, for instance, is a typical case and his appearance, academic performance and lifestyle are no different from non-aborigines'. As mentioned previously, the quota for aboriginal students is additional, which implies that aboriginal students are thrown into the arena to compete with one another. However, because educational resources in urban and rural areas are distributed quite unequally, aboriginal students who live in urban areas definitely enjoy a certain advantage over those living in rural areas. Furthermore, the policy decrees that aboriginal students who can pass their native language proficiency test could get extra points. The incentive spurred those who can afford language lessons to go to cram schools and study up on their native language, while those who are without resources will have to rely on themselves. In that sense, the affirmation action further widens social inequality.

I have asked Min whether he considered the affirmative action for aboriginal students a way to break the boundary between aboriginal people and non-aboriginal people. He said that there was no boundary at all, and that there were only people who knew how to make use of the law and those who have no recourse. It does not matter if there are disadvantaged people who really need help as long as we only see our own benefits. The affirmative action today has been misused by people with bad intentions and the consequences have stigmatized the whole aboriginal group. It's high time for the policy and its impact to be reexamined.

## **Abuse of the Insanity Defense**

A cruel murder that happened recently sent shockwaves through our society. The killer used a knife to hack away at a little girl's neck which led to her instant death. According to the eerie words of the killer and some strange notes found in his house, the police thought that he may have suffered from severe psychosis, yet plenty of psychiatrists questioned the idea and worried that the killer and his lawyer would take advantage of the insanity defense to reduce prison sentence or even get an acquittal.

The insanity defense argues that the defendant is not responsible for his actions due to a psychiatric illness. The original intention was to protect those who could not tell the difference between right and wrong. However, in Taiwan, many lawyers have used it as defense to prove the severity of the defendant's illness in order to get an acquittal or a commutation of sentence, especially in those obviously guilty cases. In that sense, the insanity defense has become a convenient means to help the defendants evade due punishment. This abuse of the insanity defense has led to a discrimination against psychotic patients. For when some lawyers habitually find excuse for their defendants' brutal behavior in the insanity defense, people may come to believe that those violent criminals commit crimes on account of their psychosis. Thus they may become afraid of psychotic patients and their alleged but latent violence. Out of such fear, ordinary people may decide to take action and bully or humiliate psychotic patients. The latter's resentment then grows and accumulates without a vent, and eventually become security risks for the whole society. In other words, some psychotic patients now commit crimes because of social malice and oppression, not for their own psychosis. Nevertheless, most people continue to unconsciously incite them without ever understanding that actually those patients are suffering from mental illness. It then becomes a vicious circle, and no one is aware that we are in the production line of potential criminals.

Paradoxically, the intention of the insanity defense is good, but it is excessively used by people with ulterior motives. The abuse of the insanity defense then leads to social panic and discrimination, which is part of the reason why those who have mental diseases have no choice but to rebel against the unkind society. In my opinion, to avoid more side effects, the government needs to come up with some strategies or modify the policy to solve the problem, and the public should learn to discern between fact and prejudice as well as being concerned about the mentally ill.

## **A Well-rounded Education**

Numerous students lined the entrance of the lecture hall, waiting to have their student identification card stamped. One student let out a long sigh and declared that after this lecture he would have accumulated enough hours to meet the graduation standard. Inside the lecture hall, students filled all the seats and even the stairways, yet nobody was listening to the lecture as students were either swiping their cell phones or taking naps. This ridiculous scene is not a special case in universities nowadays. As universities require students to accumulate a certain number of hours of attending special lectures or activities to achieve a well-rounded education, students are taking part in all kinds of activities but without much concentration.

This policy has been designed by education experts back in 2001, and is a program that authenticates the educational and socializing training of a student on campus beyond academic performance. Such training activities could include open lectures, musical events, volunteering services, and various training camps. Students are required to attend at least 30 hours of lecture, 20 hours of art-related events, and 50 hours of volunteer service. If you did not meet this requirement, a straight A record in the academic field will not be enough for graduation. As it is considered an unwelcomed extra requirement, students tend to immerse themselves in anything other than the lecture itself. This is not only a disrespect for the speaker but also a great loss of possible knowledge and learning.

Volunteer services met with the same fate too. There was a ridiculous beach cleaning campaign organized by my high school. It was a blazing sunny day and volunteers were assigned to pick up bottles on the beach for recycling. I was one of the volunteers, and I muttered throughout the entire day, cursing the rule that made this act necessary. As I looked around, I saw other girls taking selfies of themselves in their "volunteer" vest and checking their photos on facebook. They were doing nothing but fooling around, regardless of the reason of being at the beach. Since we were all forced to be there, the volunteer services did nothing but create a sense of alienation toward the thing we are supposed to do. This attitude will be that last thing that a well-rounded education aims to achieve.

Once you find that you are forced to meet a standard, no matter what it is, even if it is the thing that you like the best, you will grow to hate it. It is no surprise that a voluntary action is turned into a reluctant one, just as the lecture which should be attended whole-heartedly turned out to be a heavy burden that students carried without passion. Obviously the certification hour plan is failing to achieve a well-rounded education.



## **Labor Dispatch**

In 2007, a Japanese drama, which features inspiring stories of a contract worker, became a big hit in Asia. It could be inferred that labor dispatch has now become a dominant model of work. Flexible working hours may sound like a free choice of life; however, in terms of contemporary dispatch phenomena, this kind of employment brings forth an enormous downside to labor.

The appearance of labor dispatch could be traced back to the increasing needs of temporary workers in enterprises. To keep the cost down, enterprises begin to downsize, letting go employees no longer considered necessary. But when the company needs the expertise and skills which they don't have within their payroll, they turn to hire the temps. Owing to the trend, dispatching companies have come into being. They sign contracts with workers and gain commission from the user enterprises, working as a broker between employers and employees to earn profits. Of course, where there is profit, there is usually exploitation and it is the worker that suffers.

Originally, the so-called dispatch agency aims at pulling workers and enterprises together. Nonetheless, the essence of dispatching is to meet the requirement of the hiring companies. Thus, labors' interests are often sacrificed in two major forms. First is the unreasonable breakdown of the earnings. Typical labor contracts only involve two parties, the employees and the employers. After the emergence of dispatching companies, the flow of money becomes indirect. Workers will merely get part of the pay as they give the rest to the dispatching units. Second, rights of labors are not safeguarded. Their salaries and benefits are far less than regular employees. On top of that, since the labor pattern is beyond the range of Labor Standards Law, it turns out that contract workers could be summoned and dismissed at will by enterprises. These dispatched workers actually become "disposable workers" with nowhere to turn to when the temporary work is completed.

Labor dispatch is becoming popular with companies that are happy with paying temp salary but not full salaries. As companies look to cut cost, it is possible more jobs will be filled with labor dispatch. To protect their interests, labors should unite first. People should continue to supervise enterprises, appeal to the public to focus on the issue, and put pressure on the government to legislate the related regulations.

### **Preferential treatment of aborigine students**

According to the Additional Articles of the Constitution of The Republic of China, "The State affirms cultural pluralism and shall actively preserve and foster the development of aboriginal languages and cultures." The government hopes to preserve the unique traditional aboriginal culture and aboriginal language with this policy. Furthermore, the Education Act for Indigenous Peoples also mentions that Indigenous education shall have as its aims safeguarding each indigenous people's dignity, ensuring the continued survival of each indigenous people, advancing each indigenous people's well-being, and promoting each indigenous people's sense of collective pride in their identity. Yet, since the policy was implemented, it has become increasingly controversial. Some people think it should be a plus for aboriginals, but others say that today's aboriginals and ordinary people are not that different, and no preferential treatment should be provided for them. My own experience is also unsettled on the issue.

My friend Patricia is an urban aborigine. Her father is a doctor and the family lives in the city's exclusive residential area. But her academic performance was not ideal even with extra lessons. Thus, with this policy and her mastery of her ethnic language, she was admitted to her first choice of high school and college. Many aboriginal students are like Patricia: they have lived in the city for many years, and their parents' education level is good enough, with a good income to nurture a child. Their life, education, access to resources are even better than ordinary people. But with the protection of the policy, their only competitors became the rural aborigines. Owing to the fact that they have more education resources than rural aborigines, the urban aborigines usually win the competition. The government became aware of this problem and made adjustments in 2006 by adding native language proficiency to preferential considerations, thinking that rural aborigines would have some advantage there. Unfortunately, obtaining language proficiency certification for those urban aborigines proved not to be a problem—it is but another exam and exams are what these urban students have been trained for. So the problem remains. Another friend Benjamin also took advantage of this policy to enter the department of law of National Taiwan University and later went to the States for a high-pay job. The original intention of the points system was to help continue aboriginal communities and maintain their cultural values, but the implementation of the system completely overlooks the ultimate goal and only gives the elites of indigenous communities an opportunity to pursue their individual dreams.

Despite the above two negative examples, more aborigines indeed have been admitted into universities. They can not only choose from more schools, but also return home to do service. My friend Julia, who now studies social work, told me that her goal is to be able to improve aboriginal children's education. It is these students who continue to need support from the not-so-perfect policy. There may still be problems of fairness and justice, but the preservation and promotion of aboriginal cultures are still worth the effort.

### **Forced Medical Treatment at a Panic Moment**

After the appalling murder of a four-year-old child when she was decapitated in a random attack in Taipei, Taipei City Government intends to relax the standards of the law concerning forced medical treatment because the murderer is purportedly a psychiatric patient. But before the suspect was definitely diagnosed with mental disease, public opinion has already begun to describe psychiatric patients as a high-risk group that could become criminal with the least provocation. In that sense, attributing the problem to psychiatric patients is not only an unfair treatment, but also a stigmatization. Many patients and people who have related medical history got the call of concern, and it makes them restless as they worry whether they will become the next to receive forced medical treatment and experience involuntary psychiatric care.

Contrary to popular opinion, people who suffer from mild mental diseases are not really offensive; they just live in their own spiritual world and may tend to talk to themselves. People who suffer from severe mental diseases, on the other hand, may become irritable and aggressive. However, if forced medical treatment is applied across the board and the standards of law remain vague, patients who are alleged to be harmful to the public could be taken to the hospital directly. The uncertain divide between people who need treatment and those who don't may leave the vulnerable groups facing worse situations. Furthermore, the treatment to be applied is also indeterminate. It usually takes a long period of time to determine whether psychiatric patients have severe mental problems. Under those circumstances, sending people to the hospital to receive forced medical treatment may be a rash decision.

Bombarded by the sensational reports on this one terrible murder, psychiatric patients are now confronted with the anxiety of forced treatment. Even people who do not have mental illnesses may also be subjected to forced psychiatric treatment. For example, the itinerant, the homeless, and vagrants who usually live on the streets and are unable to work are easily regarded as threats. In fact, vagrants are often suspected to have mental illnesses since they seem abnormal. An easy equation is then created: vagrants=psychiatric patients=criminals. Such is an obvious case of prejudice.

The government may want to amend the laws for forced medical treatment in order to comfort the panicking public, but if it is done at the price of sacrificing the disadvantaged groups, and bringing about more discrimination and fear, then it better rethink the matter through before it makes a greater mistake.

### **Good intentions but Bad Results**

We often intend to help others but end up making a bigger mess, because having only good intentions is never enough; reckless actions may solve one problem but create another unexpected issue. Two examples will demonstrate my point here.

The first story took place at the Middle-East University of Vermont in the States. The university executive thought students should use environmental cups for drinking water instead of buying bottled water, as plastic bottles can not decompose easily and will be hazardous to our environment. In all good intentions, he ordered bottled water to be taken off the shelves of campus stores; only tetra pak sugared beverages are available for sale. However, this decision caused another big problem. As students do not want the trouble of bringing their own cups, they ended up drinking more sugared beverages and hence became fatter and with the risk of developing cardiovascular or coronary artery problems in the future. The university official could just as easily have achieved his purpose by establishing a bonus system whereby students who bring in their own environmental cups will get NT\$ 5 discount on every order. In that case, everyone could buy water at a lower price and protect our environment at the same time.

Good intentions and actions not well-thought through could lead to miserable results in the end. The institution of UBI (Universal Basic Income) had been designed so that the government can ensure that the citizens have a stable income to cover their daily necessities. The institution has some good benefits, but if it was not planned carefully it will also lead to bad result in the end. The first thing is the heavy fiscal burden. If people thought they did not have to do any work and could still enjoy a good life, then how is the fiscal burden to be handled? The second thing is that UBI will have to establish some kind of measure to keep the rich from taking advantage of this policy. After all, they already have enough money to enjoy a comfortable life; they should not take from the system that is supposed to help the poor. Last but not least, if anything goes wrong with this policy and it has to be terminated, interest groups and politicians would not want to cancel this policy because of concerns for their own political career. Then the nation will go bankrupt.

In tough times, we do need bold actions. But as my examples have shown, good intentions are not enough to justify bold actions. Every plan needs to be thought through carefully. It may be hard for us to anticipate all the outcomes, but we can make a detailed plan to fulfill our good intention.

## **Maladies of the Star Plan**

Recently, news about a student being matriculated by National Taiwan University through a score of 48 on the college entrance exam shocked the public. In terms of his exam score, this student cannot enter the most outstanding university in Taiwan. Then why did he get admitted? It was because he applied through The Star Plan channel. This event then triggered public arguments: some people thought he was unqualified, others emphasized that those who criticized the event didn't know the system of Star Plan well. So what is at issue here?

The Star Plan is a channel of admission through which exceptional students from lower-tier schools or from remote areas could still get the chance to enroll in outstanding universities. The government established this channel because it hopes to break the privilege of celebrity high schools and integrate high schools with local communities. Understandably, there has been very strong opposition against the Star Plan since its implementation. First, some people think the quality of the Star Plan students is not good enough and they will face difficulties and high pressure if they were given a place at the outstanding universities. Second, although some scholars indicate that the Star Plan can encourage marginal students to enter good schools in the big cities, the Plan also encouraged urban students to take the advantage of attending good schools in the countryside, which further deprived the disadvantaged students' right to good education. Thirdly, the people that Star Plan intends to help the most still can't take advantage of it to enroll in better universities. After all, education resources in rural areas cannot compare with those in urban areas. Disadvantaged students still have a hard time getting over the deficiency of education resources. Lastly, teachers have been known to tamper with their student's grades in order to put the latter into the Star Plan. Such cases of corruption will only create more problems for the Star Plan.

Judging from what we have seen, there are not many remedies that could be applied to save the Star Plan, which originally hopes every senior high school students can have an opportunity to go to excellent universities. At present, this policy has not really achieved the government's aim of fairness, that all people are equal at the starting point. Whether the Star Plan should continue or not is going to be a tough issue for the new Minister of Education who will come into office soon.

## **Controversies over the Jury Trial System**

Nowadays, lots of people in Taiwan are discussing an issue--if the jury trial system can be implemented in Taiwan. Generally, people consider it a characteristic of the common law system--since the jury trial was first put into effect in the United Kingdom in twelfth century. But Taiwan is governed by civil law, a legal system which originated from Continental Europe, and usually tends to use no jury to hear or decide cases in the court. However, for the past few years, many civil law countries, including South Korea and Japan, also started to implement some type of citizen participation in their criminal justice systems. Is Taiwan ready for the jury trial system?

Two aspects in the jury trial system attracted the most discussion. One is the "selection of the jurors," the other is "impartiality of the jurors." First, what will be the qualifications of a juror? Currently, most of the states in the United States formulate the age of eighteen as the minimum age to be a juror, as for Hong Kong, they take the age of twenty-one to be the minimum age. As for Taiwan, will the minimum age be eighteen, which is the minimum age to be charged for a criminal case, or will it be twenty, the minimum age to be charged for a civil case? So far there are still no final conclusions on what is the most appropriate age to be a juror.

Next, "the impartiality of the jurors." That is, how will the system prevent jurors from being bribed? One of the main reasons why people support the jury system is that many people believe that judges and the judicial system are corrupt. But if judges are already considered enjoying a high status in society with high salaries, then how can we ensure that ordinary jurors won't be corrupted by money? Besides, Taiwanese media are known to be frantic and totally out of control under certain circumstances, will the media try to manipulate the jurors' judgment through unfair reports or disclosures of the private lives of jurors? This is what the opponents of the jury trial system are concerned about.

Before implementing the jury trial system in Taiwan, there are still plenty of problems to be solved and considered. We may need to set or alter some rules. Only when the complementary measures are established can we implement the jury trial system in Taiwan. After all, we should remember that the jury trial system also have its own shortcomings, we should not rely on it entirely.

### **“Equal” Access to Education Resources**

The policy “equal access to education resources” brought forth new administrative measures for Taiwan’s higher education system. With qualified certification, disadvantaged students that belong to national minority ethnic groups or have special accomplishments can enjoy the privilege of having a certain percentage of points added to their initial score in the high school and college entrance exam. This policy can be traced back to 1955, 1961, and 1987, when Indigenous Taiwanese students are protected like other disadvantaged with the original intention of putting social justice into effect. Operating more as substantive equality than formal equality, this practice is considered to be fundamentally fair; however, it also has encountered problems.

To begin with, some disadvantaged students that make use of the policy to attend a better school may not have the competence needed in order to benefit from the educational resources. This can result in an aggravation of their lack of confidence and sense of inferiority, since they may already be suffering from the self-abasement that came with the social prejudice toward their unchangeable birth background, and now, after studying with other more competitive schoolmates, they may feel even more miserable and passive in learning. For those other who are actually competitive enough to do without the added benefit in entrance exam score, they could still end up being labeled as “free riders”. Schoolmates may consider them really not up to the standard and look down upon them, and the lingering effects of inequality will continue to do great harm to the psychology of disadvantaged students.

Last but not least, owing to the controversial incident in which a whopping sum of 20 Indigenous Taiwanese students with added score were admitted to National Taiwan University School of Medicine in 2004, the government decided to revise the regulation and put a limit on admission quota for Indigenous Taiwanese students lest they should deprive the opportunities of regular students. However, the additional quota is for aborigines living in the plains as well as those still living in the mountain regions to compete for. Many aborigines living in the plains have already blended in with regular citizens and are in many ways no different from the general public except for their ethnic type, growing up with regular kids and receiving the same abundant educational resources as regular kids in the cities do. Yet aborigines living in the mountain regions have nothing else to claim except their ethnic identification, having been brought up in impoverished families, with little access to good education but having to face the fierce and relentless competition with other affluent aborigine students. In that sense, the policy is still quite unfair.

The original intention for setting up this special education policy is to make up for the congenital inequality suffered by disadvantaged students and to boost their ability in the competitive society. Nonetheless, in some cases, it still doesn’t work well. Real equality should be practiced in helping people who are really in urgent need.

### **A Virtue or a Malpractice?**

In Taipei, when people take the escalators in the MRT stations, they tend to stand on the right-hand side and let those who are in a hurry pass on the left. This was the result of a campaign that started in 1988 and has created a sense of orderliness that has become the proud mark of Taiwan.

Twenty years ago, when Taipei MRT station began to operate, Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation followed the example of the Tokyo Metro to call on Taipei residents to stand on a specific side when taking MRT escalators, hoping it would create a favorable metro culture. Surprisingly, while legislation forbidding right turns on red lights was not well received by people and violations are still quite frequent even today, people accepted the new metro culture soon and seldom disobeyed it. This kind of specific phenomena might be owed to the self-esteem of Taipei residents, who considered it as a virtue and thought only people who were rude and under-cultured would occupy the left-hand side of MRT escalators. Nowadays, most Taipei people are used to the practice and have spread it to escalators in other parts of the city of Taipei.

Lately, the media have been reporting on the potential dangers of the way people ride the MRT escalators. First, although people think that giving the left way to others who are in a hurry is a courtesy, in fact, pacing through the escalators quickly is dangerous, because if people trip on it, they will get hurt badly due to the hard and rough steps. Second, when crowds of people are getting on the escalators, the best way to disperse them is distributing people to both sides of the steps and moving all of them out as quickly as possible. Third, if people stand on both sides, the spaces between people can be larger, and this also makes passengers feel more at ease. Last but not least, when people concentrate on the right-hand side of the escalators all the time, the gravity of escalator will be in disequilibrium, and that would cause damages to the machinery and might create other dangers.

Speeding up the flow of passengers should be the primary concern of policy when thinking about escalator use, but the four reasons mentioned above also need our serious consideration. However, once a behavior becomes a habit, it is hard to change, not to mention that people regard such acts as “virtue”. Nobody wants to be the first one to correct the malpractice and end up “blocking” the way of a hurried person or getting into a meaningless fight. If we hope to change this practice, it may take quite some time.



## **The self-righteous citizen**

The young man was badly hurt in a car accident. His heart suffered damage and his lungs caved in. After heart bypass surgery, he was given a catastrophic illness card. Fortunately, his appearance remained no different from other young guys. Yet, in daily life, when he remains standing too long, his heartbeat would hasten and his blood pressure rises. That's why he always goes for the priority seat when he rides the MRT in Taipei. Unfortunately, "the self-righteous citizens" are also on hand to condemn him for occupying the seats reserved for the elderly and the weak.

Self-righteous citizens are those who seem righteous but actually are bigoted. They are most annoying not only because they pay lip service to civic values but also because they are meddlesome. Believing all people should live by strict rules of good and proper conduct, they monitor what other people are doing, judge the latter by the standard of civic values, and lecture them whenever they seem out of line. This is very annoying because the self-righteous citizens believe they are doing the right thing even when they violate the privacy of others. Worse, self-righteous citizens compel people to abide by the values they themselves believe in. And whosoever chooses not to go in the same direction will surely be chastised by such citizens.

A special breed of self-righteous citizens are active mostly on the internet. Known as "cyber mobs," they use their anonymity online to bully those they consider to be problematic. The most disgusting thing is that they even compete to see whose reproach is the most poignant and out of the ordinary. Yet, if they apply the same rules to themselves, they can hardly meet the basic standard. Self-righteous citizens do not realize that moral codes exist to regulate all people, not just other people. Thus, they constantly accuse others of straying from moral norms but never demand that they themselves meet the expectation.

Self-righteous citizens think they should defend the values they approve and those not in line with the moral code should be eliminated. In the case of the young man mentioned at the beginning of this article, self-righteous citizens care very little about real people with real difficulties; they only care about making everyone live up to the rigid rule of yielding their seats to the elderly. And they tend to have only one moral standard: theirs. The most appalling is that they would apply coercion to make others follow in their steps. Unfortunately, the number of this sort of people also seems to be increasing gradually.