Howard Hunter has idealistic notions about money, career and life. Kelly Tan chats with the American academic on how he plans to steer Singapore’s first autonomous university to greater heights.

**INDEPENDENT THOUGHT**

Howard Hunter, President of Singapore Management University (SMU), grew up on the coast of Georgia watching his father pull off dramatic returns from the shrimp-boat business. Years later, he was generating high returns of his own from a successful career as a litigation lawyer. But it’s never about money, muses the mild-mannered man about his move to academics. “The pay-cut wasn’t drastic. Academics have always been comfortable,” Hunter shares.

When he started teaching, he says he was assigned ‘boring’ subjects such as contract law, insurance and procedure. What he wanted was to go into ‘freedom of speech in the press’ because of a previous foray representing a television station, something he enjoyed tremendously. But he continued with the job and grew to love the classroom. He relished the challenge of having students learning to love their studies rather than just cramming for good grades. And this philosophy became SMU’s recruitment policy. Applicants must not only be smart, they should possess curiosity, edginess and hunger for knowledge.

“We’ve turned down straight As before. Some students are excellent receivers of information and have good ability to regurgitate it; but if they lack curiosity, they are not suitable for SMU,” explains Hunter. “Personality and participation in extra-curricular activities also count.” This far-sightedness works towards grooming the leaders and change agents for the next generation.

**NIMBLE DANCE**

Singapore’s third university is autonomous and small, just the way Hunter likes it. “We are more flexible and quick on our feet. Size creates inertia.” He is quick to point out of course that there is much to learn from behemoths National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University, and the benefits are mutual. “Competition is always a good thing. Monopolies rarely work well in any situation,” he adds.

Big lectures, which bore students, are not the norm in this university. Classes of 30 to 40 students are conducted in a highly interactive way with regular student presentations. While this is a hit among students, Hunter’s challenge is to train teachers to embrace this style. The low teacher-student ratio also leads to high costs, but Hunter is adamant about quality.

Coming into this job, Hunter inherited most of the major decisions — the most talked about being the city location. Not that he’s complaining when he gets a fantastic view of the city’s skyline from his office. “It’s like a return to the roots. This location used to be an education hub where St Joseph’s Institution and the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus were. Now, we are in the midst of museums, a library and art schools,” he highlights. And the icing on the cake: business offices within walking distance for students doing projects. “Proximity breeds interaction.”

It’s hard to imagine that anything can faze the reserved man, but he gripes about cyclist-unfriendly Singapore where buses and cars don’t give way. He doesn’t care much for local coffee or hierarchy, and he misses the space back home where he used to keep horses. “I have a little garden here where a green snake resides, a koi pond, a cat from across the street and lots of geckos,” he jokes. But these are little things that do not distract him from what he came to do for the next five years at least. That is to run a university that the region can look up to.