FORUM

The Australopithecus Afarensis (Lucy) of Higher Education

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I have been a college professor for a quarter of a century. I know some will interpret these thoughts as just another example of a faculty member exercising her or his God-given, constitutionally-guaranteed right to complain about how universities operate. I can only urge the reader to ponder, seriously ponder, how well the shoe described here fits.

What follows is a detective story. I have discovered the *Australopithecus afarensis* (Lucy) of higher education, the bridge species between the old and new milieux of higher education. In the 1970s, when I began teaching, major changes were underway in higher education. For years, I appreciated neither the significance nor the pervasiveness of these changes. I should have seen – and objected to – them earlier, but I was young, naive, and believed most change was *ipso facto* good. The problems now are so widespread, often accepted so uncritically, that many of my colleagues do not even see them as problems usually believing this is the way things must be. While most readers are unaware of higher education's Lucy, all of us see the consequences including:

- uncritical acceptance of the premise that colleges and universities are identical to all other institutions and must be subjected to same rules and demands;
- mindless political correctness where faculty may pay more attention to the distribution of "he's" and "she's" in their lectures than to imparting knowledge;

- the notion that we can measure the quality of instruction precisely by distributing a questionnaire to students and carefully tabulating average scores on items like "instructor's interest in teaching the course" and "overall evaluation of instructor;"
- the explosive growth of personnel in higher education who have nothing whatever to do with teaching or research, the bedrock roles of higher education;
- lastly, a fundamental shift in the values on which leaders in higher education focus. The root value is knowledge. Universities and colleges exist because societies understand it is important to create, explain, understand, modify, criticize, and transfer knowledge. But this knowledge realm in which we operate is contentious, untidy, and takes enormous effort. It requires dedicated, smart, adequately compensated faculty who are relatively unencumbered in their pursuit of knowledge. Higher education has pushed these core values aside, so much so that today we worship other values such as satisfaction, sensitivity, diversity, and relevance.

Philosophers at least since Plato have warned people and institutions to stick to those tasks for which they are best suited. For higher education, that task is the pursuit, understanding, and transference of knowledge through teaching and research. This does not mean that sensitivity, diversity, and satisfaction are unimportant values. It does mean that our contribution to those other values must come mainly from what we are best equipped to do: pursuing and transferring knowledge. Instead we see an attempt at bureaucratic short-circuiting where we try to serve the values of sensitivity and diversity without doing so in the only way universities can possibly succeed, through the laborious, expensive route of knowledge.

Examine the public statements of the presidents of most colleges and universities. Compare the number of references to "diversity," "sensitivity," and "satisfaction" with the number to the bedrock values. Since diversity is most in vogue in 1999, it is the easiest to examine. The absence of almost any discussion of the downside of diversity is astounding. The pursuit of almost all values requires trade-offs. While their consequences may be overwhelmingly positive, intellectual honesty requires that tradeoffs be scrutinized. Try to find a president of a college or university who has said, "diversity is very good, but it will cost money that is hard to find these days." Even

harder, try to find a provost who will say, diversity is good for our college, but it must compete with other goals that might be even better. Hardest of all, try to find a dean who has said "diversity is fine and should be pursued, but there may be situations where it conflicts with other values and we need to discuss which value is more important." None of these examples says that diversity is undesirable, just that it must be examined with the same rigor and precision we demand in other areas.

I know everyone is waiting for me to get to Lucy. I have proof there was a chance mutation in higher education where a bridge species came into existence that eventually was to become the "mother" of all institutions of higher education today. Of course, in this instance, we have an example of institutional evolution, not biological evolution, so it happened much faster, in this case only two decades.

I stumbled upon this higher education Lucy quite by accident. I was traveling through Centreville, Iowa at the time of graduation for Spring semester. I am always interested in how other institutions handle the events with which I am so familiar at Penn State, so I paid close attention to the local newspaper which devoted about half its print inches to the event. It was the 100th commencement of Central Iowa State University (CISU). One of most notable events in the ceremony was the conferring of an honorary degree on one Dr. Mortimer Mc.C. Bekkerman, a hometown boy who definitely had made good. The biography of Dr. Bekkerman in the *Centreville Bugle* was impressive. After graduating from Centreville High School, Bekkerman went to a fine undergraduate college and then earned the Ph.D. degree from a noted Ivy League school (located in a city named for a prestigious English University). Bekkerman had begun his career at CISU in 1963 as an Assistant Professor of Education. According to the biography, he published prolifically, taught superbly, and, by 1970, was a tenured Professor of Education Administration and dean of CISU's College of Education. He went on to become vice-president for academic affairs at a major university, then chancellor of a state system of higher education and, in career-crowning fashion, served three years in Washington, DC as assistant secretary for post-secondary education.

I am not easily impressed by government positions or by academic administrative achievements. But several other claims made about Dr.

Bekkerman's career seemed like serious stuff. He was credited with "transforming higher education" through the introduction of fundamentally new concepts such as "total quality improvement," "needs and outputs assessment," and "performance-based budgeting models." I also noted that CISU Press had just published Bekkerman's autobiography entitled *Higher Education in America: Let's Put Quality First.*

Three months later I saw Dr. Bekkerman on a late night interview show. He was glib and articulate. But I disagreed with almost everything he said. I wondered how he and I could have been participating in the same system of higher education. The next day I ordered the book on inter-library loan; it contained the major piece of the puzzle to discovering higher education's Lucy. On page 77, Dr. Bekkerman describes an event that transformed his life. It was late Fall in 1964 during his first year at CISU. Dr. Bekkerman was shopping at the just-opened Thrift-Mart store. It was Bekkerman's first time in the store, so he was very attentive to its features and innovations. Among other things, he noticed a greeter at the door who smiled and welcomed customers. There was a brief power outage, the cash registers went haywire and the already long lines went very slowly. This gave Dr. Bekkerman time to think.

Bekkerman recollected the Dean's Undergraduate Development (DUD) committee meeting he had attended that morning. The theme of the meeting had been how to encourage more students to apply to CISU. The student body had grown steadily with state appropriations doubling in six years. CISU was in fat city, but would it last? Older, more prestigious and more research-oriented universities in the state were beginning to get a larger percentage of the very brightest high school graduates leaving CISU with the SAT-challenged. How could CISU reverse this trend? The theme of the DUD meeting had been that CISU should adopt a multi-pronged approach. Bureaucrats talk about multi-pronged approaches when they see problems, but have no clue how to solve them. Try as he would, Bekkerman could remember only one prong – CISU should broaden its mission from teaching and place more emphasis on research and scholarship. This change of focus would appeal to faculty (there was a shortage at the time), to bright students, to sources for grant money, and to the state legislature.

Bekkerman saw a real opportunity to advance his administrative career if only he could find some new wrinkle besides adding a

research emphasis. Research might help a bit, but everyone knew this would never be CISU's forte. What else could CISU do, Bekkerman mused as the checkout line finally started to move.

The combination of boredom and various stimuli in the Thrift-Mart permitted Bekkerman's mind to move in new directions, to see patterns and interconnections invisible to most people. Then came Bekkerman's eureka: our students – current and potential – at CISU are just like customers at Thrift-Mart. We need to satisfy them and make them feel happy about their experiences with us. Of course, if we want to make students happy, we must tell them about us and our advantages. We cannot put a full color supplement in the Sunday *Bugle* like Thrift-Mart does, but there are dozens of ways to publicize what a nice, friendly, comfortable, caring, sensitive place CISU is. We can put ads in newspapers, but these must be dignified and not look like ads. We can print flashy brochures highlighting the advantages of CISU. We can hire an advertising agency to design a logo that quickly plants a positive image of CISU in the minds of everyone who sees it. We should have focus groups of potential students to see what color and design of logo is most welcoming. We need a much larger staff to lure students to CISU; that staff must be able to go on the road to get the message out and to sell – really sell – students on the place.

The time spent in the checkout line was to change his career and higher education. Bekkerman took some of these ideas back to the next DUD meeting where the reception was stunning. CISU became a national leader in marketing itself like a business. Bekkerman got the ball rolling, but others added new ideas. A major one came in 1970 when Bekkerman made a presentation to the President's Institutional Structure Committee (PISCom). Bekkerman was apprehensive about the meeting. He had changed CISU and had gone from Assistant Professor of Education to Professor of Education Administration and dean of the College of Education in six years. Some said he was coasting, incapable of producing new ideas like he had in the mid-1960s; most disturbing to him, many faculty thought Bekkerman's ideas were only gimmicks.

Bekkerman needed a masterstroke to give his career a lift and to move to a bigger pond than CISU. The title of his speech to PISCom was "CISU in the 1970s; Getting Our Message Across to the Mass Media and the General Public." Dr. Bekkerman's theme was that it is no longer enough to sell CISU to students, we need to analyze how the

media report our activities and how the public perceives us. The speech went very well until Dr. Kritikelmas, a professor of chemistry (there was still faculty representation on PISCom in 1970), chimed in "you're going to turn us into a XXX XXX public relations operation. We're a university, not a used car lot." President Shortsite, silent until then, jumped into the discussion saying he believed Bekkerman had put his finger on a major issue but that Kritikelmas had a point. A university must not be perceived as doing public relations. A long discussion followed. Despite Kritikelmas's strong objection, the discussion focused almost entirely on finding an acceptable name for this new effort, not on whether a university had any business doing it in the first place. A number of different suggestions were offered, but President Shortsite – evidently not an acronymsmith – seemed to like Development, Outreach, and Public Information (DOPI).

CISU immediately implemented the plan and conducted a national search for a new position, Vice President for Development, Outreach, and Public Information (VP-DOPI). The person hired as VP-DOPI, Timothy Rosievue, was the second highest paid person in the university trailing only President Shortsite (CISU never had become a football power). Bekkerman's star was rising rapidly. The next year, he became vice president for academic affairs at a major university and by 1980 headed one of the largest public university systems in the United States. To the extent possible, Bekkerman worked tirelessly to continue his crusade for this happy consumer model of higher education.

I suspected, but needed to prove, that Bekkerman was the Lucy of higher education. I asked my research assistant to spend the summer of 1998 carefully tracking Bekkerman's career, institutions for which he had worked, commissions and boards on which he served, his stint as a Fulbright United States-German International Education Administration Fellow in Berlin, and so on. She compiled a list of 100 individuals in higher education with whom Bekkerman had worked closely over the last two decades. Next I asked another research assistant to search presidential statements at United States colleges and universities made over the last 20 years using a coding form to look for the most egregious examples of mindless adherence to these derivative values to the exclusion of bedrock values. He compiled a list of the 100 worst offenders. I checked the work of both assistants carefully to be certain neither their bias nor mine had intervened.

Shortly thereafter, I met with the two research assistants. We compared the independently-developed lists of 100 people and found 74 people were on both lists! Bekkerman's influence was greater than even he or the *Centreville Bugle* could have imagined; his ideas had spread like a virus throughout higher education.

What does this mean for us, the higher education professorate? It means we have given away too much to the Bekkermans of higher education. It means we have been too tolerant of abject stupidity masquerading as sensitivity. It means we have been silent as public relations offices have grown larger than history departments, and geography departments have disappeared entirely. It means we have not objected strenuously enough when legislators and oversight bureaus have forced outcomes assessment on us as if we were shoe factories.

Most fundamentally, it means we have forgotten that higher education is profoundly different from other institutions. The power vested in faculty should create a working environment very different from other institutions. Colleges and universities cannot ignore the market entirely; but the uniqueness of educational institutions dictates that we be shielded from the vagaries of the market. If CISU pays its most senior professor of French US $68,000 per year and the market requires a salary of US $139,000 for a professor of widget CAD-CAM engineering technology, then maybe widget CAD-CAM engineering technology should not be offered at CISU. Our students are *not* just like customers at Thrift-Mart. It is blasphemous to call what we produce a "product." Those who utter slogans like "putting students first" usually have taught little and published even less. We must be judged and be willing to compete for resources. But that must occur within a context that understands that we are different; it is not easy to measure the quality of higher education especially when people like Bekkerman think "quality" is an adjective that means "good."

Professor Kritikelmas left CISU in 1974 for an Ivy League university where Broadway shows often begin and went on to win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry; she knows the meaning of quality. If Bekkerman had begun his mischief 25 years earlier, I wonder if Kritikelmas would have left higher education. One hundred years earlier and Dr. Einstein might have stayed in the Swiss Patent Office.

(Disclaimers: I am Professor of Political Science and International Law at Penn State. This piece is intended to make a point and represents only my views (sometimes not even them). Names of institutions and individuals are fictitious except for Penn State and me. I selected Iowa because of its central location and because its approach to higher education is enlightened enough that my motives are likely to be understood there.)

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