

Reactions to Learning About Lucy

DAVID P. FORSYTHE
University of Nebraska in Lincoln

John King Gamble tells us in entertaining fashion about widespread faculty doubts concerning certain changes found in American higher education – at least in large public universities. His complaints about (a) market principles applied to education, (b) the emphasis on political correctness, (c) the focus on student evaluations and student satisfaction, and (d) the mushrooming of administrative personnel who neither teach nor do research were all found in my university when I served as Department Chair. They are probably found in every American university that is similar to Penn State and Nebraska.

The crux of his argument, as I understand it, is that universities are different from corporations in the private sector and cannot be managed like them. Universities produce knowledge, which cannot be delivered (and counted) like pepperoni pizzas. The Thrift-Mart approach to producing happy customers, he says, is inappropriate to universities. He is, I think, both right and wrong.

I am, after all, really a faculty member, who had the misfortune to serve for almost five years in an administrative capacity, a woeful experience never to be repeated by any reasonably sane individual. As a former Department Chair, at least I have some experience dealing with complaining faculty, which seems to be their normal state of mind. But being a faculty member at heart myself, my critique naturally straddles the fence and fails to take a decisive position.

Corporate Management and Universities

As for the management of universities, I suspect the rubicon has been crossed: we academics will increasingly be held to some real standards of efficiency and productivity. The core issue, it seems to me, is when this central principle of corporate management is being pushed too far. Because American public universities exist in a

capitalistic culture, and because the days of ample public funding of higher education are over, there is no alternative to an increased emphasis on efficiency and rational use of scarce resources. There is no sound reason why both Penn State and Nebraska should both try to have an outstanding school of agriculture, or for that matter a Department of Geography. While universities may want to maintain a common core of studies, especially in the liberal arts, the heart of analytical thinking, areas of excellence should vary.

So there should indeed be reallocations, and tough decisions about which become signature programs, and which are downgraded or even dropped. Some faculty, quite a few actually, will not be happy about this. But the alternative – universities with broad programs of mediocrity – are worse. The Platte river is a mile wide and an inch deep (also too thick to drink but to thin to plow), but there is no reason for the University of Nebraska or any other university to adopt the “Platte approach” to producing and disseminating knowledge. Princeton University decided long ago not to have a law school. It is not a lesser institution for the decision. The University of Nebraska has decided not to have a school of veterinary medicine, but rather to send interested students to certain other institutions such as Kansas University. Being a political scientist I do not know for sure, but I suspect cows and horses are roughly the same in both states.

The process of reallocation matters, and there are better and worse ways of going about making the tough decisions. At Nebraska one year we were told to do reallocations in the light of several dozen variables, some of which were clearly contradictory. Even our experts in public administration and budgeting could not make heads or tails of the process. We were encouraged to teach as many students as possible, but were also encouraged to offer honors sections and Saturday classes that have limited enrollments. Then there are “strategic vision statements” which last about as long as it takes some State Senator to generate pressure in a different direction.

But I think, with personal regret, the days are long gone at American public universities when a talented group of faculty are left alone to “do their thing” whatever that may be. Rather, we will see the educational equivalent of “industrial policies” in which state legislatures and university personnel (including, hopefully some faculty, but not necessarily the faculty Senate, which is normally not

made up of the best and the brightest), designate certain emphases in university programming.

Corporate principles of management can be pushed too far. “Outcomes assessment” is mostly a joke at Nebraska. Take outcomes assessment of undergraduate education. We exert vast amounts of energy producing useless pieces of paper, which are then dutifully circulated through the layers of bureaucracy, so that we can convince some outside accrediting agency that faculty do indeed teach, and that students do indeed learn something. The accrediting agency has not the slightest notion of what comprises excellence in teaching or learning, and is therefore unable to evaluate the reams of paper we produce. But the game goes on, and only repeated references to it in the Dilbert cartoon strip are likely to put a stop to the madness. The powers that be are unwilling to stand up to the outside agency, and the agency is unwilling to admit it cannot evaluate the process it has foisted upon us.

So the faculty, who are already subjected to an annual performance review, a promotion and tenure review, and a post-tenure review, all of which include attention to teaching performance, are diverted from teaching and research to engage in a meaningless exercise. Committees already exist to evaluate and reward outstanding teaching, research, and service. And faculty already give grades to students based on an evaluation of what they have learned as demonstrated on tests and papers.

The only rationale I can think of for our outcomes assessment exercises is to keep the legislature from doing something even sillier, in order to “ascertain” that faculty do indeed teach and students do indeed learn. Some management steps in the name of efficiency and productivity we could do without.

Political Correctness

Professor Gamble decries the emphasis on political correctness, especially attention to diversity, as something separate from, and presumably distinct from, the production and dissemination of knowledge. He has a point, though other things being equal, the student who is exposed to diverse points of view regarding “truth” as best we can determine it, including diversity based on gender and race and ethnicity, is probably a better educated student.

I have heard of disturbing stories, however, at other universities. It is said that in one Department, the male candidate for a faculty opening made the best presentation and had the best resume, but the job offer went to a female. It is said that in another Department, while the job opening was advertised as truly open, the Department only looked at candidates who were African-American. Professor Gamble is rightly concerned about such things.

I do wonder how much Penn State and Nebraska budget each year for financial settlements with persons in legally protected categories who are not productive and efficient, and who therefore do not get the evaluation or advancement they want, and who then sue. Given the costs of litigation and the effects of bad publicity stemming from false or distorted allegations, it is little wonder that universities frequently choose to settle along with obtaining a gag order. It has become almost *de rigueur* for persons in protected categories to sue when they do not like something that happens at their university. The laws are written to facilitate such suits.

There are ideological support groups on almost every campus to support protected persons in these suits. These networks are filled with people more interested in solidarity and proving "victimization" than they are in a careful examination of the facts in a dispute. A new type of McCarthyism exists in which public crusades are undertaken, using news leaks and press interviews, in an effort to destroy reputations and careers including those of entire academic units. And there are always lawyers ready to jump on this bandwagon rather than to give honest advice that the complainant really has insufficient grounds to pursue a reasonable claim. There is not even a remote chance of making money by being honest and reasonable.

The emphasis on political correctness does indeed have some down sides, and the actions of the states of Texas and California in reducing the effects of affirmative action programs merit careful review. On the other hand, a recent study shows that when universities bend the admission rules to accommodate more entry for African-Americans, the long range result is positive. Many of these legally protected persons, while making lower grades along the way, graduate and then move on to successful and profitable careers that close the Black-White gap in American society. The balance between costs and benefits of political correctness, especially via an emphasis on diversity, is not easy to determine.

Students as Consumers

Professor Gamble is certainly not happy about what he regards as pandering to students and their evaluations of faculty. He thinks too much emphasis is placed on universities being "friendly, comfortable, caring, sensitive places." He didn't say so, but he might have compared prevailing attitudes along these lines at his institution and mine to the traditional ethic at law schools: students are expected to come to class prepared, they are called on by name, and they are in general given a tough time in order to sharpen their minds and make them into analytical attorneys.

If I followed the traditional law school ethic in my undergraduate and graduate classes, I would certainly be given worse student evaluations and therefore worse salary raises (not that salary raises at Nebraska, which for me are minuscule as a percentage of my salary, serve as a prime motivator). I therefore cannot be too tough with students, for they will feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. They will regard me as unfair and too demanding. They will not sign up for my other classes, and I will feel disappointed that I do not have better rapport with students. Therefore, perhaps for the best, I try to find more positive ways to motivate my students, perhaps by giving them an easy first assignment to bolster their success (and interest) in the course. Still, one has to be very careful not to hurt their feelings unduly so in this day and age.

My Department has examined many times the student evaluation form that is mandatory for every teacher in every course every term. In a democratic society is it right to have such an exercise? We have considered repeatedly the wording and the questions on the form, which questions to use as an index supposedly measuring performance, and whether there are other forms or instruments we could use in addition to student opinion, so as to have a better view of teaching. We keep coming back to an emphasis on student evaluations, for lack of better alternatives, although in annual merit reviews and tenure decisions we look at other information such as the instructor's teaching philosophy and nature of course syllabi.

Universities do compete for students, increasingly so, and I see nothing wrong with universities trying to present themselves not only as a bastion of knowledge but also as a caring, sensitive, and friendly place for students. Improved student advising, social networks of support, and informal discussion groups are all steps in the right

direction. I see nothing wrong with university life being fun as well as enlightening, and most of us remember our undergraduate years with far more fondness than the drudge of graduate school. The University of Chicago seems to be so tough on its undergraduates that its enrollment is beginning to suffer.

Combined with the emphasis on political correctness, the focus on student satisfaction sometimes goes too far. I once heard about the professor who faced a triple threat, an undergraduate was Native American, physically challenged, and female. She played all three roles for as much as she could get. The professor let her have extra time on the exams, extended her deadline for the research paper, and at her request gave her an incomplete in the course and plenty of time to complete the work. Only when she tried to get a passing grade without doing the work did he draw the line, and she still had a failing mark for that course. But up until that point, he gave her every benefit of the doubt. He bent over backwards to accommodate her concerns, and also was afraid of a law suit. But the fact was, while she wanted a passing grade, she did not want to do the work. Attention to student comfort has its limits.

Administrative Bloat

If public universities are to compete for students, which they increasingly have to do in order to pay the bills through tuition revenue, they need an advertising department by whatever name. They need expanded publications offices to turn out slick magazines and glossy brochures. They need more press officials to circulate the word. They need skilled personnel to deal with the high schools. And of course they need lobbyists to deal with the state legislature and federal government. The University of Nebraska is among the top lobbyists in this state in terms of money spent wooing State Senators in our Unicam (thank goodness we only have one legislative house to deal with; it's cheaper than bribing two). A winning football team will carry you only so far.

Given "market competition" among public universities for students, I really don't see any realistic alternative to this trend. You certainly don't want the (mostly complaining) faculty rank and file out there trying to recruit undergraduates. My Department, however, is sending faculty on the road to recruit graduate students at other regional colleges. I sometimes wonder if we should not emulate my

undergraduate social fraternity during pledge drive, when we – tongue in cheek – would offer “movie money” to certain frat brothers to be out of the fraternity house when the prospective pledges came by. Maybe we could offer a stipend to certain faculty NOT to volunteer for our Department road trips. In any event, I understand why there is at least some increase in administrative personnel. And they do allow faculty to concentrate on teaching and research.

Once again, the issue is balance. When a lobbyist, not to mention the volleyball coach, is paid twice as much as a full professor in the History Department who is good and has been at it for 30 years, the faculty is bound to be unhappy. When the Dean’s office expands tremendously at the same time that academic departments are being downsized, the faculty is bound to be unhappy. When administrators, not to mention coaches, get percentage raises larger than the faculty, the faculty are bound to be unhappy.

If public universities don’t successfully compete for students, and make them feel happy, the faculty aren’t going to have any students to teach. Then we will really hear some faculty complaints. But the administrative side has to be managed in a responsible way, and explained to a faculty that normally distrusts administration. When I became Chair, one of my colleagues told me point blank: “now you’re the enemy.” I spent most of my time working for them: finding them money, nominating them for awards, getting resources for our department. But I was the enemy.

And So?

Up to a point Professor Gamble is right when he says that universities are different from other organizations, especially in the private, for-profit sector. At the graduate level we take five faculty members and have them supervise one doctoral candidate. We teach small graduate seminars with a half-dozen or dozen students. At the undergraduate level we teach honors seminars of similar size. This is certainly not an efficient use of faculty resources as IBM would measure efficiency. But it is necessary to turn out Ph.D., Masters, and Honors graduates. It is probably not very efficient to have a full professor teach and advise students in an introductory course, but we do it, and presumably the students benefit.

So there are limits to the corporate management of university resources for the central purposes of higher education, the creation

and dissemination of knowledge. But within those limits, the 21st Century will definitely see more principles of corporate management applied to public universities, along with more attention to recruitment and retention of students. Hopefully we will see some decline in attention to political correctness. I mean by that that we should be able to control the down sides of political correctness while maintaining its positive aspects. As with most issues of higher education, the matter is one of balance and reasonable adjustment to a changing context, not to an ideologically pure "either-or." But whatever transpires, you can count on the faculty to complain.

David P. Forsythe is the Charles J. Mach Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. He has been in the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Political Science Department since 1973, where he served as department Chair from 1993-1998. He teaches international relations, and has authored or edited some 15 books and about 65 journal articles and book chapters. He has been a visiting professor in Denmark, Holland, and Switzerland. He currently directs the Human Rights Program at UNL and will teach for part of this year at the University of Geneva.