

ON CREATING A GREAT UNIVERSITY

Stuart A. Umpleby

umpleby@gwu.edu

Suppose one wanted to create a great university. How would one do it? I chose this as a topic for some remarks that I made in May, 1995, to a group of about 80 young Russian professors who had just spent a year at universities in the U.S. They were the first group of participants in the Junior Faculty Development Program, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State under the Freedom Support Act. The purpose of the Program is to expose young Russian academics to university life in the U.S. — teaching methods, administration, and the literature in their fields. The purpose of the meeting in May was to give the visiting professors a chance to meet each other and to think about and share their experiences in the U.S. The Americans hoped that when the visiting professors returned to Russia they would revise their course materials and share them with colleagues on their campuses and colleagues at other Russian universities that they met through the JFDP program.

In my talk at this conference at the end of their year in the U.S., I was asked to address two topics — autonomy and democracy in higher education. The assumption was that people at universities in Russia had many more opportunities for creating autonomous, democratic universities in 1995 than in previous years. So, the question was, how can Russian professors take advantage of their new opportunities to improve their universities? Based on my experiences at U.S. universities, I made two suggestions which I thought would improve autonomy and two suggestions which I thought would improve democracy.

Autonomy

1. Know who your competitors are and learn from them. I studied engineering at the University of Illinois. As editor of the student engineering magazine for two years, I became quite familiar with the College of Engineering. The College wanted to be the best College of Engineering in the country. In this College it was very easy to initiate change. All one had to do was to say, “MIT has such a program,” or “Stanford already does this.” From then on the burden of proof lay with those who were opposed to the innovation rather than with those who were in favor.

This is the idea of “benchmarking,” which is well-known in quality improvement circles. If the people in an organization decide that they want to emulate or surpass another organization, much can be learned by studying what the other organization does. Of course, no two organizations are exactly alike. The local context must be considered.

2. Have a strategic plan. To do this, define your comparative advantage. The University of Illinois wanted to be an outstanding research university. The problem they faced was how to distinguish themselves from other large state universities, and, specifically, how to attract bright, young researchers. They thought their physical location was a handicap — corn fields for hundreds of miles in all directions — particularly when compared with California, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Florida. They decided that they would have the most advanced computers in the world. They reasoned that some of the most advanced research in many fields requires the most advanced computers. By being a leader in computer technology they had a chance to attract some of the leading researchers in many fields.

They also provided a very supportive administrative climate for doing research — minimum bureaucratic hassles. Professors were expected to write proposals and do research, not to learn in detail the procedures for how to pay people or buy equipment.

This strategy has worked very well for several decades. The Illiac I, II, III, and IV computers were state-of-the-art research computers. There were also more specialized computer-oriented laboratories on campus, for example, the Computer-based Education Research Laboratory and the Biological Computer Laboratory. Mosaic, the forerunner of Netscape, was invented by a graduate student at the University of Illinois.

Democracy

1. Manage intellectual competition creatively. Academics tend to be critical of one another. The task is to make this criticism constructive rather than destructive. In the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, this feat was accomplished as follows. The faculty in the Institute, led by then-director James W. Carey, claimed that there were basically three approaches to the study of communication: a) A behavioral approach — survey research, analysis of data, hypothesis testing, etc.; b) A cultural approach — the oral tradition vs. the written tradition, time-binding cultures vs. space-binding cultures, etc.; c) A cybernetic approach — formulate principles concerning communication, whether it occurs in machines, human beings, or social groups. By claiming there were three approaches, no one group ever had an “ideological” majority. (In terms of numbers, the behaviorists outnumbered the other two groups.)

Graduate students would associate themselves with one of the three approaches and would argue among themselves the pros and cons of the three approaches. In this way they learned the strengths and weaknesses of their position and of the other positions. Because all three positions were considered valuable, no one feared that he or she would be driven out of the department for unorthodox views. Indeed, the advocates of the minority positions were valued because they brought different perspectives to any issue.

2. Create a group that will introduce continuous quality improvement methods throughout the university. This is an idea which is now gaining ground in American educational institutions, following its success in corporations, government agencies, and health care institutions. Key ideas are to think in terms of processes rather than tasks, to define process improvement teams, and to empower the people on the teams to make improvements in the processes in which they work. Decisions are made not on the basis of internal politics, but rather by obtaining data from the “customers” of a process. “Data-driven decision-making” creates an environment in which people are confident that suggestions will receive a fair hearing based on their merits. Suggestions are considered by the team working in the process, and the person making the suggestion receives a reply, following careful consideration.

Conclusion

Finally, the way to create a great research university is to continually praise the leading researchers. At the University of Illinois every time an administrator made a speech, he or she would praise the University’s long record of research contributions—computers, radar, particle accelerators, earthquake-resistant buildings, semi-conductor lasers, etc. These speeches had several effects: They made the leading researchers feel important. They told young faculty members whom to emulate. They told students what faculty members to study with. They told alumni that their University was making important contributions to society. And they told politicians and the public that the quality of life is improved by supporting research. Hence, every speech by an administrator restated the vision and mission of the university and illustrated how it was being realized.