

**Perspectives:****An Interview with Doug Lynch, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania****How Corporations and Higher Education Can Work Together for the Greater Good*****A creative approach to building a better corporate leader***

Business schools are increasingly coming under attack for the quality of MBAs they churn out. Senior executives complain that these individuals lack an appropriate level of experience with practical application of the skills they have been taught. Corporations can't seem to get it right either, with training that often lacks significant focus on critical thinking and general skills. With ethical scandals running rampant and corporate giants crumbling left and right, it's clear that educating business leaders is quite a challenge.

Doug Lynch is Vice Dean at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. He has dedicated most of his career to helping higher education and the business community find common ground for the greater good of society. At New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies, where he served as assistant dean for corporate learning, new business development, and international initiatives, Lynch founded and led an effort to build corporate-higher education partnerships working with companies including American Express, MCI WorldCom, and Jet Blue.

*Focus* recently sat down with Lynch to discuss his perspective on how companies and universities can find creative ways to work together to build stronger organizations.

**Are the popular criticisms of leadership training and education valid?**

If you look at the students you'll see they are trying to achieve a balance on their own. The National Center for Education Statistics says the average person engaged in college now is non-traditional in at least one of their categories. That means the average student is probably working and may be going to school part time. On their own, students want both: real-world experience and formal education.

In the business community, there's wide acceptance of this notion of a "knowledge economy," so corporations believe that investing in people is a sound strategy, but there needs to be a pay-off. They are not just investing in people for the good of the individuals, but so that the bottom line will improve.

So you have the individual who wants to build skills and be able to hang a certificate on the wall; you have the company that wants to ensure everything is being covered and improve the bottom line; and then you have a college or university that wants to give students skills and knowledge to be a successful bachelor of arts, or MBA—whatever the credential is. If you coordinate this properly everyone can benefit.

**What would that look like?**

What I am advocating is true work-based learning. You have higher education teaching people and corporations teaching people, and a lot of what they are teaching is the same. Why don't we talk to each other and coordinate some of this? Universities already have all these "sunk" costs: they have technology, classrooms, and faculty. If we can create partnerships that leverage what is going on in the work place and bring it back into the university, we can create programs and credentials instead of individual interventions.

I think teaching hospitals are an intriguing model. They offer a great combination of academic and experiential learning. A hospital is not unlike a company. It charges customers (patients) for its services (treatment). Senior people are the faculty. They are training residents. Residents are training interns. Interns have med students on their rotations who are in training. The whole thing is a giant teaching world, where the teaching isn't divorced from the practice. It's all holistic and woven-in. Wouldn't it be great if we could create that for the MBAs, where it's all tied together?

If the end game is the same—society wants productive citizens, universities want successful alumni, corporations want productive employees, and the individual students want to be decent human beings and make enough money to improve their lives—all those values are aligned.

**Isn't "work-based learning" the same as corporate mentoring programs?**

What's usually missing in those models is curriculum. I have seen some cohort-based models where one person shadows another and watches and learns solely through experience. I don't think that's enough. There has to be some curriculum underlying the experience to move someone far enough along the learning curve so that – going back to the hospital model – the first time you pick up a scalpel, there is an attending physician there and you both know why you are picking up the scalpel and what you are going to do with it next. If hospitals used the mentoring approach found in many corporations, most of the patients would die. Translate that to the business world and you are losing customers.

The ideal situation is a marriage of curriculum-based and experiential learning. And I think that happens when corporations and higher education create productive partnerships.

**Can you give us an example?**

When I was at NYU, I set up something called Corporate Learning Services to try and bring together corporations and universities that wanted to serve them with work-based learning. American Express came to us and essentially said, "We need to develop training in direct marketing. We've sent some of our people to your masters program and we think it's OK, but we have some issues: First, we need it for our all people in Europe and it's a bit of an expense to fly them all to NY, and the laws and regulatory environment are different there anyway so the curriculum wouldn't work; Second, we are the largest direct marketing company in the world

and we think we know something about marketing too, and we have a corporate culture—the American Express way of doing things—that we'd like to preserve.”

They wanted us to take our generic curriculum and build on it to create a customized program just for them. They also wanted to leverage our existing technology to deliver the learning online without the added expense of building or buying their own online learning system (we were already offering online education).

We thought this was a great idea and a real win for both partners. We could infuse our generic curriculum with real-world content and we already had the faculty and the technology in place to deliver exactly what they wanted. American Express could get the training they wanted and needed at a much lower cost than if they did it themselves. So from there it was just a matter of getting faculty to co-construct the program with the experts at American Express.

### **And how did that go?**

I'd say that both sides really enjoyed it, although they went in kicking and screaming. An important thing to keep in mind is that 50% of all faculty members in higher education are adjuncts—they all come from industry. There are more similarities than differences despite perceptions to the contrary. The ultimate objective is to make the world a better place so I would argue 'and' and 'both.' Coordinating and leveraging resources is the best strategy. A university can be part of the solution. Is it the end-all, be-all? No. Does it help? Yes.

### **What would you say to critics of online learning?**

We have found that we have a higher retention and completion rate of online courses, with no discernable difference in output. Also, I would note that not all face-to-face learning is the same and really high-quality face-to-face learning is difficult to come by.

What you have to recognize is that technology is not content. Take the play, *Hamlet*, for example. There are a variety of ways you can experience *Hamlet*. You can see a performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company or the local high school. You can read the play or watch one of the film versions. The delivery is different but the content is the same.

**So why aren't more companies creating partnerships with higher education?**

People are just not thinking that way. But if you look at statistics, students *are* thinking that way. So “Jane,” who is a working mom at Wal-Mart, is getting training at Wal-Mart and at the same time is looking to grow and is taking a course at her community college.

**What does it take to get people to think this way?**

Will. A willingness on both sides to get them to agree that this makes sense. Also, I think being eclectic and ecumenical; bringing together seemingly disparate resources to solve problems. You need to care about solving the problem more than guarding your own individual turf. And I think most people really do care. The key is not putting blinders on and I think everyone has. All you have to do is bring everyone in the room and get them to realize that the mission and goals are the same.

It also requires attention to differences in vernacular. I've been working at Penn on a project focused on dyslexia. I met with a group of business people who talk about testing as part of the solution. In academia, “testing” is not highly valued, but “diagnostics” are and in reality both sides are talking about the same thing, but the language could create frustration and friction. At the end of the day, everyone wants to see kids do well. The values and the goals are the same, but how they talk about it is different.

Whenever I have spoken at conferences, initially the faculty says, “This is evil.” Corporations say, “This is terrible.” And then afterwards everyone says, “This is kind of cool.”

**So what you are saying is that to make these partnerships work we need to keep preconceived ideas in check.**

It just requires an open mind. I love the way kids think. I have a 2 year old that I like to use as an analogy. When he was learning how to walk, he fell probably 5,000 times. Each time, he just got up again. Your average adult would fall twice and give up. Another great example of creative thinking is Einstein—he was famous for wondering, what would it be like if you were riding on a ray of light and you turned on a light? That sort of really weird thinking, the way a kid thinks, is very healthy.

**That's fairly rare in the corporate world.**

Well, sure, because the stakes are so high. You're the CEO. You have 20,000 employees whose livelihoods depend on you. You have all the shareholders who are relying on you. You have all your customers. And if you make the wrong decision the implications are staggering. But the alternative is that you only make tactical decisions based on the margins. I suppose you have to choose your risks.

**Have you seen any corporate-higher education partnerships that were particularly creative?**

Jet Blue was fun. The person who runs their training program used to be an instructor at Top Gun. He cared deeply about his company, cared deeply about employees, cared deeply about his customers and knew learning was part of the

solution. He approached me wanting to build a council of Jedi. He was going to take his best pilots and have them teach other pilots; take his best flight attendants and have them teach other flight attendants. The idea was that the best people would be teachers.

In the airline industry, the argument is that you are flying the same planes over the same routes so the only way you are going to differentiate yourself is through price and customer service, and customer service is a learned function. We basically deconstructed a masters in education and put it on steroids and created a very cool and interesting program for them. We took everything we knew about teaching and said, "Here's how you become a master teacher."

Everyone was somewhat out of their element: we had instructors who were used to teaching teachers, now teaching pilots and baggage handlers; and the 'students' weren't hired to become teachers, so they were scratching their heads a bit wondering, 'what are we doing here.' We had them reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. But everyone went with it, and it worked. It was an excellent example of a successful union between expertise and education.

A good teacher has to be an expert. If you explain something to someone and the response is, "I'm sorry, but I don't understand," saying it louder doesn't help. You have to be able to go deeper, on the fly. That means you really have to know the idea inside and out and be able to explain it multiple ways to reach all the students. If it is done correctly, teaching becomes a driving force for expertise.

### **How would a CLO start – where could s/he look to begin such a partnership?**

The first step is knowing how to navigate your local university. There is an increasing trend among executive and continuing education programs to offer something like this. The truth is that higher education is not great at marketing – getting out there and getting students. Corporations can bring in ready-made classrooms full of students to take advantage of the resources the schools already have and want to use. So it's an absolute win for both partners. In larger cities there are a lot of choices and you are likely to find a partnership type program. If not, the best approach is to contact the dean of an executive or continuing education program. They'll get what you're talking about.

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More information about the book *Corporate-Higher Education Partnerships: Best Practices, Tools And Case Studies For Aligning Values* by Roxanne M Gonzales-Walker and Doug Lynch can be found on Amazon at:

[http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1579221254/qid=1123106923/sr=1-1/ref=sr\\_1\\_1/104-5496325-3827915?v=glance&s=books](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1579221254/qid=1123106923/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/104-5496325-3827915?v=glance&s=books).