

FROM THE PRESIDENT

# ACTION ON THE PERIMETER

## CRAIG SWENSON ARGOSY UNIVERSITY



**C**RAIG SWENSON was once told by a colleague that it's difficult to bring about substantive change within an entrenched system. If you want to be a force for change, go to the edges. Be willing to suffer the slings and arrows. You'll be able to help the system from there.

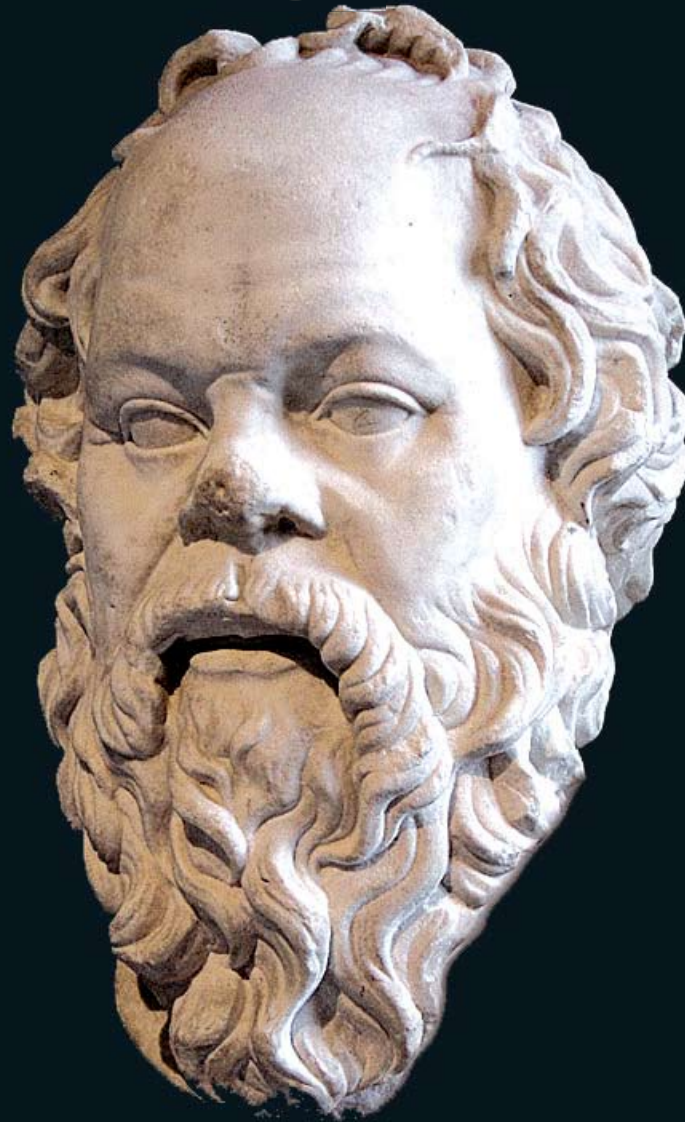
Swenson has been to the edge three times now. "I like to do it a little bit differently," he says.

He didn't start out as an educator. Initially, he was a marketing executive for a regional bank, who started teaching as an adjunct at local colleges, then at the local campus of University of Phoenix. "I absolutely loved teaching—especially adults—and discovered it's something I'm good at. So I did my work-a-day job to put food on the table; but what really excited me was the classroom."

Apparently they too thought he was pretty good. He became provost and senior vice president for academic affairs for the U of Phoenix system. Laura Noone, a former Phoenix president, recalls early evidence of Swenson's innovation: "The university went to electronic textbooks, but Craig wanted to do more than electrify the paper pages. He wanted a more robust learning experience overall and introduced new techniques

BY TOM ROBINSON

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Clinical Psychology student Michael Oganovich and Swenson

and simulations into the classroom.”

He also developed a four-question self-examination to determine if the university was meeting its obligation to its students.

1. Do they know what they should know?
2. Can they do what they are supposed to do?
3. Do they have the values appropriate for their profession?
4. Are they achieving their life goals?
5. Added later ... How do we know?

**From Phoenix to WGU briefly**

Swenson later joined a very-untraditional

online Western Governors University as provost and vice president of academic affairs. He explains that WGU was created by 19 western state governors who were critical of colleges and universities that were turning out people with degrees, of whom employers said, “They don’t know what their schools are saying they know.”

That disconnect led WGU to develop an acid test by which to judge a graduate’s real preparedness: competency.

WGU’s ‘competency-based model’ grew from an assumption that adult students with good mentoring could organize online learning, use resources and gain competence equivalent to what you get in a classroom. Swenson, who was fascinated by the novel approach, notes, “It is more of an Oxbridge model of the tutorial than an American model of the classroom semester.” Swenson was lured away just a year later by an opportunity to lead yet another unconventional enterprise, Argosy University.

In the mid-1970s, Michael Markowitz founded the American School of Professional

Psychology to fill a void for psychologists who wanted to be practicing clinicians rather than researchers. He achieved accreditation from the American Psychological Association, and later acquired the University of Sarasota and the Medical Institute of Minnesota, and named the amalgamation Argosy University in 2001. It was acquired later by Education Management Corporation, a smart and successful education enterprise ‘gone private.’

Argosy now has 19 U.S. campuses and a recent online program. It serves 16,000 students, most of whom are seeking graduate degrees in psychology, education, business and health sciences. A new undergraduate program in psychology has been started. Like Phoenix and WGU, Argosy’s success measurement is student competency.

**An edgier view of teaching and learning**

Swenson earned a bachelor’s degree in Journalism/Mass Communication from the University of Utah in 1978, then a Master of Arts degree in Organizational Communication from Brigham Young University in 1982, and his Ph.D. in Education/Adult and Organizational Learning from Walden University in 1995.

He considers himself to be a student of teaching and learning as well as a practitioner. He is keen on infusing his passion for effective teaching and learning

**IS A FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTION ALL ABOUT THE MONEY?**

At Argosy, tuition ranges from an associate degree at \$455 per credit hour through a doctoral degree at \$780 per credit hour.

Swenson says, “Successful businesses are places where you find passion for the mission, not a passion for the stock price. We offer a unique educational product, so why go anywhere else? Profit will follow as an outgrowth of the passion.”

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into Argosy's ethos. "Teaching and learning are not synonymous," he states rather bluntly. He believes much of higher education operates under "a false understanding of how human learning transpires."

He is rather philosophical about philosophers. Take Socrates for example. "This brilliant man didn't stand up and lecture. He asked questions. He teased knowledge from people or forced them to think in a new way. He excited them about learning."

Fast forward to Aristotle, the lecturer. "He had it wrong when he said communication is when someone says something to someone else," says Swenson. "That's not communication. We understand communication needs a feedback loop. People learn by taking in information and bouncing it off their experience and other people. It's a social activity."

Nonetheless, the lecture is very much with us. Swenson bemoans that the lecture is also an economic construct often used to balance the books . . . one person speaking in front of a large number of students to lower the unit cost of instruction.

Swenson advocates a lecture of twenty minutes maximum to provide the vocabulary upon which to have a discussion. He wants to provide a more exciting and interactive curriculum that challenges students to learn in the way they learn as professionals. He wants to use digital materials that enhance the quality of the learning experience. He wants to blend simulation and gaming with a "page-turner kind of course."

He observes, "In higher ed we focused on the cognitive or pedagogical side—content and coverage of material. Whether students actually got it was another thing. I find it strange a professor can brag how difficult he is and how many students failed his final exam. What does that say about his teaching? You should be inspiring people. Your job is to make them thirsty."

He believes there is no adult learning style, *per se*. But adults do bring life and work experience into the classroom. Further, they tend to be intimidated by the environment and require more structure.

#### A considered view of the clientele

He believes that future practitioners must

learn and master the tools of their trade. The world that professional students will work in is very different from just 12 years ago. For example, a clinical psychologist used to take a list of symptoms to the library and consult medical journals or the

infrastructure whose primary purpose is to serve that student."

Today's college population has differing ages, ethnicities, income and family education histories. "There are adult learners with a lot of plates spinning. It is a matter of pride to serve them all," Swenson says.

Are non-traditional institutions just right for a growing population of non-traditional students?

#### Managing a sprawling domain

Swenson oversees 19 campuses in eight states and visits each several times a year. He has six commencement addresses scheduled so far. "Graduation day is like Christmas to me!" he proclaims. In addition, he serves on the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, which is shoulder deep in accreditation issues. He is a member of the U.S. Army Education Advisory Committee and a consultant/evaluator for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and the U.S. Army Distance Education and Training Subcommittee for Accreditation. He has published frequently in the areas of higher education, organizational management, distance education and faculty development. Swenson also advises such organizations as American Express, American Association of Retired Persons and Genworth Life Insurance Company as a consultant.

#### How does he manage all that?

"He must not sleep," laughs Marcia Bankirer, president of Argosy's Denver Campus. Laura Noone also pokes fun at him for his assumption that everyone is as voracious a reader as he is. "Every Christmas gift is likely to be a gadget from Levenger."

Rather than strategic plans that sit on a shelf, they set five strategic priorities. "We break it down and give assignments to people who are accountable," Swenson explains. His top priority is hewing 19 separate universities into one cohesive unit.

Swenson credits a team of competent campus presidents. They have a weekly conference call. They meet monthly in person as a group. There's an annual system-wide webcast for all faculty and staff.

### FIVE DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1. You don't have to be a good researcher to be a good teacher.
2. Professors know a lot about their disciplines, but very little about teaching.
3. Professors know even less about learning than they do about teaching.
4. Part-time instructors are just as good as full-time faculty members.
5. Seat-time measures (Carnegie Units) don't measure seat time (and are anachronistic in today's electronic world).

*From a 2001 paper authored by Craig Swenson and Laura Noone.*

Physician's Desk Reference (PDR). Now he punches search terms into his PDA. "We are still teaching with 150-year-old technology—the textbook, which by the way was never meant to be read from beginning to end," Swenson offers.

"Close your eyes and envision a college student," he challenges. "Twenty years-old, living on campus, mom and dad paying the tuition, going to school full time, enjoying the social life and football games. That profile is now one in six. Yet we have a huge

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The respect is mutual. "He is an excellent teacher; it's a shame he can't spend more time in the classroom," says Dan Peterson of Argosy Dallas. His ability to motivate is apparent in his management style. "Craig totally creates a sense of calm initially. Calm, then excited. You'd jump off a cliff with him," Peterson adds.

Swenson says his job is no more complex than others. "Michael Crow has many more departments than I have campuses." It seems like a Lear jet would be in order, but Swenson flies commercial, and his land vehicle of choice is a Prius hybrid.

#### Man of La Mancha?

Swenson sees challenges everywhere and continues to take them all on.

**Capacity.** With the retirement of the Baby Boomers, the U.S. needs 20 million college-educated people over next 10-12 years. "The traditional system, funded as it is, is simply not capable of doing that."

**Cost-to-value.** "We must be cost efficient and pedagogically effective to be a going concern. On the other hand, if we under-spend on the academic side, we won't be able to produce quality graduates."

**Flexibility.** "How do you keep what's best about an institution—its soul—and yet be flexible enough to respond to change?"

**Innovation.** It's so very American to find innovative ways to do things. "Ironically, universities build innovation institutes and entrepreneur centers, and yet punish people who try to innovate within the ivy-covered walls."

**Survival.** Swenson believes that American higher education is losing its rank against other developed countries. "We have to be better. We in higher education need to ask ourselves 'what happens if we don't do this?'"

In the face of so many daunting challenges, what makes him think he can make difference?

"I am naïve enough to not realize that I am tilting at windmills," muses Swenson. ■

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