

Efficient, Effective, and Ethical Practice in Lifelong Learning

Thomas N. Guinsburg, *The University of Western Ontario*

Paper presented at the Fall Retreat, Ontario Council for University Lifelong Learning, October 19, 1995.

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to assess the interaction of—and tensions between—efficiency, effectiveness, and ethics in goal-setting for university continuing education programs. Its thesis is that efficiency, that is, a cost accountant's measure of productivity, is of limited utility unless we articulate thoughtfully and appropriately what we are trying to be efficient at. The goal of effectiveness, which measures the relationship between program results and program objectives, helps us to be wary of those "efficiencies" that subvert essential program objectives. Finally, effectiveness cannot be separated from an ethical view of lifelong learning: beneficial to society, collaborative rather than competitive, and keeping faith with our highest professional values and institutional standards. Only a *raison d'être* grounded in ethically based effectiveness can ensure the sort of future we want for university programs of lifelong learning.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article tente d'évaluer l'interaction de l'efficacité, de l'efficacités et l'éthique, ainsi que les tensions qui existent entre elles, dans la détermination des objectifs pour les programmes universitaires d'éducation permanente. La thèse défendue ici est que l'efficacités, c'est à dire la mesure de la productivité selon la comptabilité des coûts et prix de revient, est d'une utilité limitée à moins que l'on exprime clairement et pertinemment ce en quoi on essaie d'être efficace. Le but de l'efficacités, qui mesure les rapports entre les résultats du programme et les objectifs fixés, nous aide à nous méfier de ces « efficacités » qui détournent les objectifs essentiels des programmes. Finalement, on ne peut séparer l'efficacités de l'éthique de l'éducation permanente: elle bénéficie à la société, elle est faite dans un esprit de collaboration plutôt que de compétition, et elle tient ses promesses envers nos valeurs professionnelles et nos normes institutionnelles les plus élevées. Seule l'efficacités reposant sur l'éthique peut assurer la sorte d'avenir que nous voulons pour les programmes universitaires d'éducation permanente.

The task that has been assigned to me is a daunting one: to assess the place of the “three E’s”—efficiency, effectiveness, and ethics—in the provision of lifelong learning at universities. My diffidence at tackling this immense topic is compounded by the fact that I am no longer “in the trenches” with you, grappling with the dilemmas on a day-to-day basis. It is perhaps easier for me to remain idealistic than if I were still holding down managerial responsibilities. Yet I hope my perspectives on this topic, if no longer fully representing an “insider’s” knowledge, are at least a reasonable catalyst for reflection and discussion.

The terms efficiency, effectiveness, and ethics are themselves elusive, so let me put forth some working, though not authoritative, definitions. Efficiency will be taken to denote competency in performance, excellence in operational skills. Effectiveness, as I will use it, denotes achieving a purpose in the best fashion. Ethics pertains to principles of morality, of right or appropriate conduct in pursuit of goals. (I was assigned these three E’s, but was tempted to include a fourth—equity; indeed, I’ll talk about equity as a subcomponent of effectiveness and ethics.)

Efficiency most often is a term used to measure productivity. As a criterion of success, efficiency assures that, in the economist’s terms, we get maximum outputs for our inputs. It of course works relatively simply in relation to widgets, less easily in relation to education. Though even the crassest of university administrators in the executive suites hesitate to plunge the entire institution headlong into an industrial productivity mentality, one need look no further than the tendency at most of our institutions toward enlarged class size, increased teaching loads, and reduced writing requirements to recognize the illusory notion that we can employ fewer and fewer resources to turn out the same number of graduates. Sure we *can*. What *kinds* of graduates will emerge from this “more efficient” form of education is, of course, quite another question.

Efficiency is hardly a notion providers of university continuing education can scoff at. Given our cost-recovery mandates in nondegree programming and capacity for large revenue generation in part-time studies programs, we have long been held accountable for higher levels of performance than most of our colleagues across the institution. The people in this room need few if any lessons in how to do more with less. But however important efficiency may seem to our university overseers, I think we would agree that alone it is a sterile, incomplete, and perhaps even self-defeating concept. Its shortcomings become self-evident when we pose the simple question, “Efficient at what?”.

The Nazi security chief Hermann Goering instructed his police, "Shoot first and inquire afterwards, and if you make mistakes, I will protect you." That was his formula for efficiency and, by his standards, it worked. But our standards of efficiency cannot be his. Turning to our own enterprise, suppose a continuing education division could make substantial profits from a course on "how to invade others' privacy" or "employment equity regulations and how to circumvent them" or "egoism as a success strategy," should it do so? Suppose to meet a budget cut, a part-time studies unit elected to eliminate its counselling services. In both instances, short-run, bottom-line considerations might be positive. We would have increased or maintained efficiency, in a strict sense, by augmenting or maintaining outputs with the same or reduced inputs. In these extreme examples, we can see how preposterous it would be to take pride in being efficient, whatever the budgetary ledger says. Yet, especially in difficult times, there are many less flagrant, but also questionable, decisions we feel impelled to make in the name of efficiency.

Many of these decisions will be both unavoidable and even beneficial in using resources and generating revenues to the fullest. It would be suicidal to ignore opportunities for cost savings and revenue opportunities so as to enhance efficiency. Yet that desideratum can only be satisfactory if the standards of what we are trying to be efficient at are thoughtfully and appropriately articulated. And here's where effectiveness comes in.

While efficiency relates inputs and outputs, effectiveness refers to the relationship between program results and program *objectives*. Any action in the name of efficiency that subverts the program's objectives needs to be recognized as a detriment to effectiveness. From time to time we may be forced into such actions, but we need to be steadfastly self-conscious about the impact on effectiveness.

Everything that we stand for requires that we resist a simplistic bean-counting approach to measuring effectiveness. If we "educate" more people, but with less quality and in subjects chosen merely on grounds of expediency, what have we achieved, how *effective* are we? And if we cannot justify our existence on criteria of effectiveness, will we be able to retain the stature we have been afforded, grudgingly and painfully, in the university academic community? Or, to look at it another way, if we survive at our institutions only by efficiencies that enhance our balance sheets but decimate our larger objectives, should we not describe our programs as institutional outreach or educational marketing but not kid ourselves that we are truly devoted to lifelong learning?

Believers in the university's essential role in lifelong learning, as I assume we all are, cannot define efficiency apart from effectiveness. Nor, I submit, can definitions of effectiveness be separated from an ethical view of lifelong learning. Some may regard such an ethical view as an albatross, impeding pragmatic or opportunistic decisions that will save the continuing education division's bacon by keeping it profitable. I've never regarded it as an albatross for two reasons. First, that ethical view is the reason why most of us chose to devote our careers to providing lifelong learning opportunities. Second, without a set of ethics infusing our vision of lifelong learning, I do not believe we can succeed in our mission and I doubt that the rest of the academic community will endorse our enterprise.

What do I consider an ethical view? Obviously, first of all, the simple aphorism of health practitioners, "do no harm." Our goal is to help society, and our programming should reflect that. As indicated earlier, there are potential programs that could be attractive economically but are ethically repugnant. None of us does these, and we need to ensure that economic pressures do not impel us to change our stance. But as well we need to be wary of decisions we may make that are likely to do harm to people who have put their faith in us—our learner clients and our colleagues. No one should be victimized by decisions made in the name of efficiency. Easier said than done, I know, but a necessary resolve.

A second facet of our ethic: our mission in lifelong learning needs to be based on collaboration rather than competitive individualism. When I first entered the ranks of continuing education, more than a decade and a half ago, there were distinct feelings of competition—concern about who was going to gain control of off-campus territories within reasonable distance of several institutions; rivalry between traditionally oriented part-time studies programs and distance education programs, each believing that its brand of education provided greatest service to the learners; fear that continuing education programs would be pirated by other institutions; a reluctance to share information that might diminish one's advantage. I confess to have flirted with that prevailing outlook in my early career. It was short-sighted.

What I quickly came to recognize is that while some competition is inevitable and maybe even healthy, generally it impedes putting the emphasis where it belongs—on how best to serve the *learners*, a goal so large that it is surely most reasonably served by cooperation and collaboration. Happily, during my years of service in continuing education and since then, the ethos has changed and we have moved locally and nationally to greater collaboration and sharing of expertise, to recognition

that we are stronger and more effective together than apart, and that unless we complement and help one another the formidable mission we are seeking to pursue will defy our efforts.

Here, of course, in addition to inter-institutional cooperation, organizations like OCULL and CAUCE have a critical role to play. Sometimes, faced with the enormous burdens that we all confront at our own institutions, we may be tempted to question the value of the commitments of time and even money that we make to these organizations. Often there seems no immediate pay-off. Yet those of you who have known me over the years know where I have stood on that issue. I continue to believe that, especially in difficult times, we need to learn and gain strength from one another, help one another, contribute to projects of mutual benefit, work for the commonweal. I know that many of the people in this room whose faces I recognize share that commitment; I hope those I don't know will be similarly engaged. This organization is important to us all, and its contribution to our success will depend on such engagement.

The collaborative ethos, as past association meetings devoted to "partnerships" have pointed out, is not confined to our working with one another. Since other meetings have focused specifically on partnerships with private- and public-sector groups, and since most of you have made remarkable progress on this front, I'll simply mention the goal here. Our roots in the community, the validation of our effectiveness by outside groups, are vital to our claim to importance and distinctiveness, and we've got to develop a powerful political identity based on these relationships.

We should not, however, believe that outside linkages are a substitute for intra-institutional collaboration. Without lapsing into the jargon of "intrapreneurship," let me simply say that anything a continuing education unit can do to attach itself to important objectives of the institution overall will be a great asset. My talented and resourceful former colleagues in Part-Time and Continuing Education at Western have done remarkably well at this with their recently developed and well publicized multi-media teaching project and a training program for international teaching assistants, both of which demonstrate that the expertise developed in continuing education can have large benefits for other critical institutional goals.

A third facet of an ethos for providing effective lifelong learning is summed up in the old-fashioned word "integrity." Albert Camus once said that "integrity has no need of rules." Maybe, but I think it is important at

least to talk briefly about the meaning of integrity in this context. In regard to lifelong learning, it means keeping faith with our constituency, not marketing and packaging lifelong learning in the fashion of hot dog vendors of the educational world screaming, “Hey, getcha *savoir faire* here, red hot!”

Many continuing education divisions once offered a number of the sorts of programs now so successfully marketed by outfits like Career Track. When these competitors emerged, we gnashed our teeth; they were stealing away our clients with slick, inferior programming. Yet I would say that competition from these hucksters ultimately did us a favour by protecting us against our baser instincts—which led us to go after quick and easy dollars with offerings that, even allowing for their smaller size and more “sincere” local instructors, were scarcely worthy of the name lifelong learning at university. We need to aim higher than that, at more than educational snake oil, and to know ourselves. And if integrity infuses our sense of effectiveness, we’ll do more creative things that not only make money but ensure our deserved place in the university community.

Keeping faith with our constituency—that will not always mesh easily with efficiency. A couple of decades ago the brilliant iconoclastic economist Arthur Okun entitled a book *Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff*. The dilemmas Okun emphasized for public policy-makers as a whole are more than a little familiar to continuing educators. We have made large and worthy commitments to notions of opportunity and equity—belief in providing the “second chance,” in aiding those facing sociological and geographical barriers—and we have done so in the knowledge that such commitments often run counter to the dictates of efficiency. A homely example: not cancelling an economically unviable class needed by one or two people who have struggled to the threshold of graduation. Everyday we make decisions where equity and humanity override formulae for short-term efficiency. That is part of our belief structure *vis-à-vis* lifelong learning.

To maintain integrity and to keep faith with our constituency—and ourselves—it probably helps to have a credo. We developed one in Part-Time and Continuing Education at Western a few years ago, and I think the project was useful. We believe, it says, with brief explanations of each item, in learning throughout a lifetime, in uncompromising quality, in the value of enquiry, in listening, in our instructors, in professionalism, in you. . . . Cynics might say that these are mere words. But it seemed to me a sort of covenant between the learning public and ourselves. Its inclusion in every

continuing education brochure makes all those concerned with the continuing education program at least conscious of some ethical underpinnings.

What will this get us, this emphasis on ethically based effectiveness rather than narrowly defined efficiency? Though someone once said that virtue is its own reward, I will not take recourse in that fatuous bromide. I genuinely believe that the path I've outlined is the path to success in programs for lifelong learning at universities.

First, it brings out the best in everybody working at the enterprise. To take an economist's term, there is "value added" by the commitment, resourcefulness, and creativity of a professional who senses that the essence of his or her activity is effectiveness, shaped by ethical practices, rather than efficiency, measured solely by the balance sheet. That value added ultimately, of course, affects the balance sheet, which is one reason why, in the long run, programs actuated by higher goals than taking in dollars can actually end up profitable as well.

Second, quality and creativity count in the world of lifelong learning. As the simple credential counts for much less than it once did, the quality and distinction of the learning experience takes on greater meaning. In a deregulated environment, I believe it is the high quality, creative programs that will succeed in attracting learners to pay the fees we are asking. I hope, moreover, that emphasis on quality will persuade past beneficiaries of our programs to be supportive of our ongoing efforts. In the difficult times ahead, we will need to call upon those with whom we have kept faith to keep faith with us by supporting us politically and materially. I am confident that those whose careers or lives have been enriched by an effective lifelong learning program will respond to our calls for help in preserving our effectiveness and balancing our budgets.

Finally, I believe that to preserve the kind of identity we want at our institutions will take effectiveness, not just efficiency. Everywhere we hear talk about how universities will need to give greatest support to academic areas of quality and distinction. I do not think this is idle talk. Either continuing education units will demonstrate outstanding effectiveness as an academic arm of the institution or, assuming they can at least turn a profit, they will be relegated to the role of a quasi-ancillary unit, whose assessment will be done by the bookkeepers and whose champion will be the Vice President-Administration rather than the Vice President-Academic.

The danger is, as we strive for a place of honour at the academic table, that we shall be measured by inappropriate standards of achievement. There is a recommendation in the draft of Western's new strategic plan to have the Vice President-Academic develop what are called "activity indicators" as a means of judging the relative quality of units. I suspect it is not a concept confined to Western. Many of us have urged that any centrally developed indicators used across the institution would almost surely be preferential to some units, invidious to others, including Part-Time and Continuing Education. So it is a great challenge that confronts us—to try to develop and gain acceptance for a reasonable and intellectually respectable set of criteria by which we are measured.

We could, to be sure, escape the challenge by going the ancillary unit route. But who with professional pride among us wants to go that route and how would it debase our role? In reply to the question of what he did during the Reign of Terror that accompanied the French Revolution, the Abbé Sièyes declared, "*j'ai vécu*" ("I survived"). Maybe in response to reigns of terror that we in continuing education will face as part of what is going on at our institutions, we'll take satisfaction in the simple notion of surviving. And surely a prime goal in difficult times has to be simply not perishing. But I suggest that if we truly believe in lifelong learning, (a) mere survival is not enough and (b) that the way to do more than survive is to pursue a positive ethic that will exalt what we stand for.

We need to pursue continuing education programs that are more than simply efficient in taking in more dollars than they cost. Efficiency may be necessary to survival, but alone it will not ensure survival, certainly not the kind of survival any of us really wants. Unless our *raison d'être* is grounded in ethically based effectiveness, we may well be facing a situation only slightly better than the prospect of nuclear holocaust, in which, it was often argued, the survivors would envy the dead. Let us continue to do all that we can to avoid that situation.

BIOGRAPHY

Thomas N. Guinsburg is Professor of History at The University of Western Ontario, where he recently returned to full-time academe after 17 years in senior administration, 14 of them as Dean of the Faculty of Part-Time and Continuing Education.

Among his many contributions to university continuing education were his service as president of the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education and the Ontario Council for University Lifelong Learning. Both associations made him an honorary lifetime member in 1993.

Author of two books and many articles in his academic discipline, Tom Guinsburg also wrote a number of papers on the university's role in lifelong learning, including the much discussed "From the Quagmire to the Promised Land: The Unfinished Agenda of University Continuing Education in Canada," which attempted to set benchmarks for the 1980s and beyond.

Thomas N. Guinsburg est professeur d'histoire à l'Université de Western Ontario. Il vient de revenir à l'enseignement à plein temps après avoir été administrateur pendant 17 ans, dont 14 ans comme doyen de la Faculté d'Éducation à temps partiel et permanente.

Parmi ses nombreuses contributions à l'éducation permanente universitaire, on peut noter qu'il a été président de l'Association pour l'éducation permanente dans les universités du Canada et du Ontario Council for University Lifelong Learning. En 1993, les deux associations l'ont nommé membre honoraire à vie.

Auteur de deux livres et de nombreux articles dans sa discipline universitaire, Tom Guinsburg a aussi rédigé un certain nombre de communications sur le rôle des universités dans l'éducation permanente. Celle qui a entraîné le plus de discussions, *From Quagmire to the Promised Land: The Unfinished Agenda of University Continuing Education in Canada*, essayait d'établir des points de références pour les années quatre-vingts et au delà.