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Douglas E. Lynch *

Michael Barger †

*University of Pennsylvania, dougl@gse.upenn.edu

†JetBlue Airways,

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NYU and JetBlue: Partnerships that Work

Doug Lynch

University of Pennsylvania

Michael Barger

JetBlue Airways

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INTRODUCTION

In a knowledge economy, every organization must place a priority on developing talent: finding and keeping the right employees and helping them succeed in life and work is the fulcrum strategy for productivity at all levels. Implementing that strategy is an almost overwhelming proposition that requires enormous resources, particularly in a highly competitive environment. Higher education and employers can benefit from working with each other to maximize human capital, but it is a collaboration that requires flexibility and goodwill on everyone's part. This article, while introducing some of the literature on partnerships between higher education and corporations, also provides some anecdotal tips on how to proceed; more than anything else, it is a testimonial based on the partnership between New York University (NYU) and JetBlue as to what can be, as opposed to what is.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "PARTNER"?

Partnerships between higher education and the corporate sector are not new. Ten years ago, the American Council on Education suggested that the global market had already

encouraged alliances between business and higher education (American Council on Education, 1997). Historically, most corporate-university partnering has involved research. One need only consider the number of patents shared between universities and corporations to recognize the rich history of cooperation between universities and business. Similarly, the idea of corporations turning to higher education for help solving some of their learning challenges has provided some interesting history and often mixed reviews. James K. Broomall has noted that in general, educational partnerships between corporations and colleges tend to be linear and episodic rather than comprehensive and continuous (The College Board, 1996). The former characterization does not apply to the collaborative experience between NYU and JetBlue, where the focus was more on the “partner” than the “partnership.”

Looking back at our experience, we are drawn to the term “partner” because it is both a noun and a verb— it is what we are and what we do. Drawing a definition from the world of biology, we view a partner as “a symbiotically associated organism” (Lynch and Gonzales-Walker, 2006). This definition captures the organic nature of the metaphor and the symbiotic character of the relationship: two entities rely on each other to prosper and fulfill their missions. In practical terms, this means that as partners we shared a vision, possessed aligned values, were committed to developing and implementing the relationship, and were willing to share the risks associated with the relationship.

IS PARTNERING COMPELLING TO COMPANIES?

It is a cliché to say that we function in a knowledge economy; in similar fashion, we have come to accept that the skill sets and educational demands for the workforce change rapidly, meaning that what people need to know and must be able to do have also changed (e.g., Sheckley, et al., 1993; Tobin, 1998). Employers expect today’s workforce to be able to identify and organize resources, acquire and interpret information, and work with others (Evers, et al., 1998). Additional needed skills suggested by other researchers include effective communication, critical thinking and analytical skills, as well as ethical awareness (Lynton & Elman, 1987; Mezirow, 1997). In a nutshell, employees’ ability to learn has emerged as a strategic advantage for companies (Thompson, 1995).

It is not just the nature of skills that has changed. Gardner (1996) suggests that the workplace is now focused on teams rather than individuals. This restructuring of the patterns of work lends itself to a learning paradigm. Indeed, the trend seems to be both to hire more educated workers and to offer more education (both formal and informal) at all levels to employees. The result is that the training department is now key to an organization's success (Meister, 1998). The idea of the "corporate university," going in and out of fashion since General Electric created the first in 1955 (Meister, 1998), demonstrates that companies recognize the strategic nature of learning.

In our knowledge-based economy, organizational training now focuses on competencies closely aligned with higher education competencies (Evers, et al., 1998). The irony is that even as this alignment is occurring, the academic literature suggests that part of the reason for the emergence of corporate universities is the inability of higher education to meet corporate needs (e.g., Forrester, Payne, & Ward, 1995; Knechtel & Leithwood, 1995; Rowley, et al., 1998)

The existence of corporate universities should be viewed as higher education's failing; however, if higher education can be responsive to a company's needs, there is nothing that will prevent it from using the most efficient means to maximize the development of talent. Indeed, because demonstrating value matters to companies, and given the alignment of their needs with the core competency of most institutions of higher education, it can be compelling to companies to partner with higher education. There are practical benefits as well, such as applying for workforce dollars or grants.

The research seems to support the premise that there are opportunities when values are aligned. Meister (2001) reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that of the 100 most successful corporate universities, 60 percent outsource course design to higher education. The literature is full of examples of partnerships that created mutually beneficial education programs (Eurich, 1985; Hines & Moorthy, 1995; Jarvis, 2001; Morici, 1990; Tobin, 1998). When partnering works, corporations gain educated workers and higher education fulfills its mission and maintains academic integrity (Kells, 1989; Meister, 1998; Morici, 1990; Rowley, et al., 1998).

WHY SHOULD COLLEGES PARTNER?

More than ever, universities are under fire about both their costs and their “products.” Concurrently, sources of funding such as private endowments and state appropriations are drying up. About the only thing that is increasing is the amount of student loans, which are the fastest growing component of financial aid (The College Board, 2005). This means there are fewer dollars overall and that students, who have to pay an ever-increasing share of the cost, are faced with the prospect of considerable debt. Consequently, colleges that want to compete for students without overburdening them with debt must think of new ways to generate income to cover the increasing gaps.

The irony is that the demographics give us a simple solution—the workplace is where the students are to be found, according to NCES, and it is also where the money is: in the United States, corporate learning expenditures dwarf tuition revenue in higher education. If a university is amenable to partnering with the private sector, not only are there students and dollars, but one could also argue that it is an extension, if not a vital part of their mission, particularly to those who care about adult and continuing education.

When thinking about training partnerships, the common assumption is that the university can supply the content. However, if one adopts a symbiotic model, universities can be much more than sources of content; conversely, astute university partners realize that knowledge is neither resident in nor created by them. Indeed, one would expect a large manufacturer of widgets to know a lot more about widget manufacturing than the average faculty member.

We also know from AAUP that some 50 percent of all faculty are adjuncts, and one could reasonably infer that many of them hold “day jobs” within the very organizations with which their university employer wishes to partner. The point is that knowledge is just as likely to reside inside an organization as within the university’s walls, and that the roles are increasingly blurred. Universities can be a valuable and cost-effective partner in helping meet a company’s learning needs, and the array of services they can provide is much broader than most people imagine. Included in the range of goods, services, and benefits for both sides are:

- Content (either custom or off-the-shelf): While traditional universities are regarded as suppliers of courses, corporate universities can often

offer more up-to-date or relevant courses in certain areas, especially IT.

- Consulting: From e-learning to evaluation to teacher training, there are a host of technical assistance services that either side might have to offer the other.
- Infrastructure: One entity may have training or classroom facilities that can be adapted for use by the other.
- Culture/values: Exposure to the urgency of decisionmaking or the need for a longer-term focus can be of value to both sides.

CASE STUDY: JET BLUE AIRWAYS AND NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

JetBlue Airways was founded in early 2000 with the philosophy of bringing “humanity back to air travel.” The airline was created as a low-cost alternative to the historically high-priced offerings in the northeastern United States. Even more intriguing than its intent to provide superior value to its customers was its commitment to hiring the best people and providing them the best possible education. This vision would ultimately lead to a productive collaboration between traditional and corporate education.

JetBlue’s workforce of approximately 6,000 is growing by nine hires a day. The diversity of the workforce is increasing as well. The fast-proliferating array of newcomers must be imbued with the corporate culture that has made JetBlue one of America’s most distinctive and successful airlines. The company wants to realize the full potential of its employees—from executives who are West Point graduates with master’s degrees to baggage handlers whose families are recent arrivals in the United States—as well as initiate and train new hires. JetBlue’s pride in its product, commitment to innovation, personal development, and unexcelled service to every customer have to be instilled in all employees at all levels.

Very early in the life of the airline, JetBlue recognized the strategic value of learning: the talent and values of its employees gave it a competitive edge. JetBlue University (JBU) was founded to produce and deliver exceptional learning experiences for its growing population of new Crewmembers (the JetBlue term for employees). The

centralization of resources—a common objective of many corporate universities—allowed JBU to establish a community of educational practice that represented the culture envisioned for the entire company by its founders. In recruiting faculty, instructors were drawn from the ranks of the front lines at JetBlue rather than from the world of corporate or traditional education. This gave faculty instant credibility—“been there, done that”—but at the same time, the reality was that great doers did not necessarily make great educators. Thus, it was imperative to find a partner who could deliver or create a program to turn exceptional operators into exceptional teachers.

The objective was clearly defined: in order to produce the best workforce, the educational process needed to present a collection of knowledge and skills in a way that inculcated each new Crewmember into the unique culture of JetBlue. The premise was that by instructing prospective trainers—master teachers—who would be responsible for transmitting skills, attitudes toward work and customers, and a shared sense of corporate purpose, JetBlue would strengthen its competitiveness, maximize productivity, and elevate morale. Given the incredibly competitive nature of the airline industry, it was critical to get it right.

JBU faculty were going to have to know more than how to create a PowerPoint presentation or deliver “edutainment” to the masses. Interestingly, these were the two primary areas of focus for the vast majority of train-the-trainer programs commercially available at the time, and it became clear that none were likely to provide the desired depth of content.

Turning to higher education, visits to traditional universities across the Northeast resulted in numerous rejections and a general lack of interest in the potential project. Responses such as “Do you know who we are?” or “You don’t understand how it works here” or “We can’t do that kind of thing” were common until New York University entered the picture. As with so many ultimately successful expressions of creativity and vision, the JBU/NYU partnership began informally over a cup of coffee with free-flowing brainstorming recorded on the back of a napkin. The specific needs of JBU were presented in great detail and compared against current offerings at NYU. It was clear that NYU had both the capability and capacity to create a program to meet JBU’s needs, but vital to the success of this relationship was the willingness of both parties to disregard

convention and approach the problem without pretension. Both partners cared about the other's success and empathized with the other's challenges.

Ultimately, the goal of the partnership was the creation and delivery of a program to accomplish the following as extracted from the actual syllabus:

The goal of this course is to help faculty learn to design, deliver, and evaluate world-class corporate education that meets JetBlue's exceptional standards. Specifically, the program gives each participant an opportunity to learn the skills and knowledge that will enable JetBlue U faculty to create effective learning experiences, establish motivating learning environments, and help students transfer subject matter expertise to fellow Crewmembers.

The program would be created, administered, and managed by NYU after close collaboration with the leadership of JBU to create the curriculum, select the faculty, establish performance standards, define the evaluation plan, determine the schedule, and set expectations for the communication strategy. In its final form, the program consisted of ten classroom sessions of five hours each covering a variety of topics from the fundamentals of adult learning theory to physiology of the brain to needs assessments and evaluations. Cohorts consisting of 20 JBU faculty were assembled with a particular emphasis on diversification (i.e., each cohort contained faculty members from each of the major operational disciplines at JetBlue). Once a cohort was created, JBU leadership would lead the communication effort and formally hand off the participants to the program faculty at NYU.

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY (PROBLEMS)

While the program succeeded on a number of levels, there were a few areas for improvement. For NYU, program development and administration were challenging because faculty were chosen from different colleges within the university. As one might expect, this created some questions about the distribution of program costs and revenues. This meshing of faculty also tended to confuse the issue of program ownership—a factor that occasionally led to less than ideal communication and general course administration.

Finally, even though NYU faculty committed to learning as much as possible about their new customer, it was clear throughout the program that gaps in their experience and knowledge of JetBlue's core business tended to diminish the effectiveness of the implementation.

For its part, JBU encountered a few problems as well. The first was a lack of time for the requirements of such a rigorous program. How were the JBU faculty going to find the time to attend 50 hours of training over 90 days? Secondly, JBU faculty were often somewhat discontent with discussions that focused more on the philosophical constructs of adult education than the practicalities of their day-to-day realities in the classroom. This is not surprising and is quite typical of adult learners; they tend to want real-time applicability rather than theories. Finally, the faculty of JetBlue U consisted of Crewmembers with a very broad range of educational backgrounds. This often made it difficult for NYU faculty to come to grips with the appropriate levels of effort and performance to expect from the participants.

All of these challenges were managed effectively and did not significantly affect the outcome of the program. They do, however, illustrate some typical problems associated with bringing together higher and corporate education.

OUTCOMES

To date, more than 150 JetBlue U faculty have participated in the program. Evaluations of the program clearly indicate participant satisfaction, even with the challenges previously identified. As evidenced by the dramatically improved educational vocabulary and vast improvements in the structure and content of program offerings at JBU, faculty members have displayed a much deeper understanding of adult learners and what it takes to create and deliver meaningful learning experiences for Crewmembers. This foundation, provided in sequence with an internally developed area-specific faculty development program, has created a world-class faculty to deliver the best possible education to Crewmembers across JetBlue. Equally important, the partnership continues to flourish even after one of the principals in the relationship—Doug Lynch—left NYU, and has become more comprehensive.

OBSTACLES

Only 5 percent of all outsourcing in corporate training involves partnering with higher education. The reason is cultural, and more perceived than real. Think of Shaw's famous line, "Those who can, do; those who can't teach." Companies perceive universities as ivory towers with no ties to the real world; universities assume that companies care only for the bottom line. However, since most college students work, they are some company's employee; and currently, since some 50 percent of faculty are adjuncts, most faculty are also some company's employee. The point is that the distinction—both among faculty and student—is (sorry) academic. While perhaps every reader can think of anecdotal evidence of failed partnerships, the research suggests that some companies—by certain rubrics the "best" companies—have found ways to have spectacularly successful partnerships with higher education. At least some scholars agree with our overarching premise and suggest that partnerships can benefit everyone (Bok, 2003; Jarvis, 2001; Meister, 2001; Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1998; Tobin, 1998).

That said, there are real challenges. Perhaps the biggest challenge found among unsuccessful partnerships was a failure to communicate. The research also suggests that a lack of flexibility on either or both sides is often a cause of failure; it may stem from the perceived differences but its manifestation is real. Higher education is ultimately a "retail" business model and often does not have the requisite systems to manage business-to-business relationships successfully.

We would argue that although there are certain fundamental philosophical differences about the purpose of learning between higher education and corporate universities, corporate universities are evolving from training to higher-order learning, and are embracing an academic model. Poledink (1997) speculates that new models for higher education and training will emerge in this new landscape. Perhaps these models will suit partnerships well. In higher education, much learning is professional in nature and many students are working adults. Shrinking resources both position and motivate colleges and corporations to engage in conversations. The values are aligned enough to warrant piloting partnerships.

SUCCESSFUL PARTNERING

Our experience suggests to us that the key to partnering involves will and goodwill. If both parties see the benefit of the relationship, they will survive the inevitable bumps given the divergent cultures. The trick is finding a suitable partner and recognizing that not only resources but also values need to be aligned for the partnership to succeed. The employee, the employer, and the university all benefit from a successful educational experience. Maximizing human capital allows both parties to fulfill their missions.

But finding the right partner is complicated. There are some 10,000 institutions of higher education in the United States; more than 6,000 are accredited, and almost 3,000 have regional accreditation. With whom does the company work? While every institution is different, we believe that the logical point person should be the director of executive education or continuing education. These people tend to be the entrepreneurs within higher education and will be more inclined to understand the benefits of partnering. Reaching out to an individual faculty member may be a risky proposition, particularly if there is a sense of urgency. Organizations like UCEA need to champion partnerships.

Finally, as having one's eyes open can only help with vision, here are some basic steps to consider when exploring a partnership:

- Acknowledge differences.
- Maintain strong lines of communication.
- Establish clear and concise goals.
- Stay flexible.
- Become a student of corporate learning.

The reasons for corporations to partner with higher education are compelling. For the company, collaborating provides access to resources—both financial and intellectual—that it otherwise would not have. Colleges know about learning, have expertise in a host of topics, and can access foundation and government funds allocated for training through grants and contracts. Partnering also creates an enticing carrot for the employee—the credential—that can serve as a retention tool.

For the college, companies are where to find the students, since the many college students are working adults. Corporations also invest in learning. The amount of money spent in corporate training dwarfs student expenditures in higher education, so for colleges, corporations are where to find the money. The right partnership provides the college with highly motivated and talented students without spending much needed money on recruiting. Perhaps more importantly, companies are where to find the intellectual challenges—the real-world learning opportunities. The right partnership is an efficient way of aligning resources among organizations with similar goals, but it may also raise the bar for both colleges and companies.

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