

THE VIEW FROM THE MOUNTAINS: A GLOBAL APPROACH TO ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION*

Abstract

Against the changes presently occurring in higher education which are taking the university from an elitist, isolated institution to an institution providing mass education.

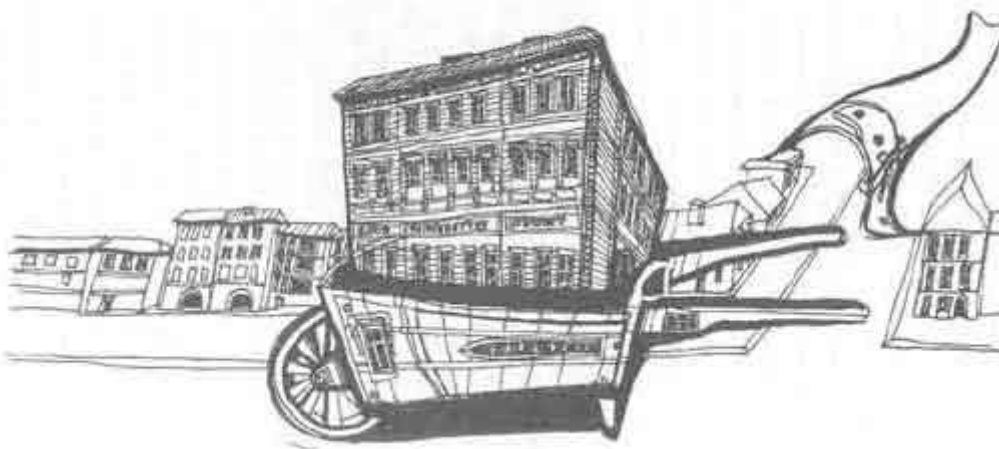
The author presents the most important features of Wyższa Szkoła Biznesu -National-Louis University, an institution of higher education he founded, that distinguish it in the Polish education market. The characteristic features of the School are its nationwide orientation and achievements of its students and alumni.

The article also presents the School's influence on the regional development of Nowy Sącz, emphasizing the fact that the school employs over 200 people and provides additional income for several hundred families. A substantial increase in the number of Nowy Sącz residents holding a university diploma, and a gradual creation of a local innovation center on the basis of the School, are of fundamental importance to the town's development.

1. FROM THE UNIVERSITY AS REMOTE ISLAND TO THE UNIVERSITY AS GLOBALLY CONNECTED ENTERPRISE

The 21st century will be a century of change in the academic world. Ever-quickenning changes in wider society, the continuing spread of higher education, and transformations brought about by globalization may result in the disappearance of not only numerous corporations - giants of the 20th century - but also of numerous universities. These universities, for centuries unique symbols of excellence, progress and knowledge, have been at the same time symbolic of an unchanging constancy. Now, however, they are forced to recognize the signs of the coming times and prepare themselves for new challenges. The coming turbulent times will see only the most adaptable and reactive educational institutions surviving and thriving.

Figure 1



* / Illustrated by Andrzej Szarek, Ph.D

For centuries, European universities were virtually isolated organizations, ivory towers accessible only to an elite (the most talented, most persistent, best prepared and usually also the wealthiest), that stored available knowledge, created new disciplines of science, and often protected and hid it from the wider population. So, higher education was accessible only to a very small percentage of the population even into the 20th century, and using ‘exalted’ knowledge for mundane, utilitarian purposes (for instance, to create new products, or using applied science) was considered inferior by scholars. Indeed, the university professor was a true master who often educated only one disciple, who then became his successor during his lifetime. Even today, it is not hard to detect the contempt demonstrated by the most respectable Polish universities towards research into new technological solutions as well as their annoyance at the influx of young people who want to study. Admitting only one candidate out of fifteen to departments where the total number of students in each year is twenty to thirty still gives many a reason to boast.

Nowadays, in developed countries approximately 50 % of young people from each age-group decide to study, and education has become one of the biggest ‘industries’.

The role of the university has changed and will continue to change following the expansion of higher education and transformations in the global economy. It has become a unique enterprise processing knowledge and providing this knowledge to students and, at the same time, teaching them the skills to use this knowledge and utilize it for practical purposes. An individual relationship between the master-professor and the student-disciple who studies extensively to gain deep insight into a narrow subject area is becoming a thing of the past (apart from a few exceptions of the most expensive universities). What matters now is time and effectiveness - both from the university’s and the student’s point of view. It is clear that a completely different system is needed, one which targets the mass education of students – and not necessarily or only the exceptionally talented, but also the average ones.

The information revolution, happening in front of our very eyes and the limits of which we cannot even begin to fathom, constitutes an additional agent of change. Suddenly, right in front of our eyes, thanks to the Internet, all contemporary knowledge has become accessible to millions all over the world, not only to elect few. In my opinion, the Internet and the development of information technologies spread democracy much more effectively than any political solutions of the European civilization we are so proud of. At the beginning of the third millennium, all knowledge is global, and it is especially accessible to the younger generation, which has no inhibitions concerning computer use.

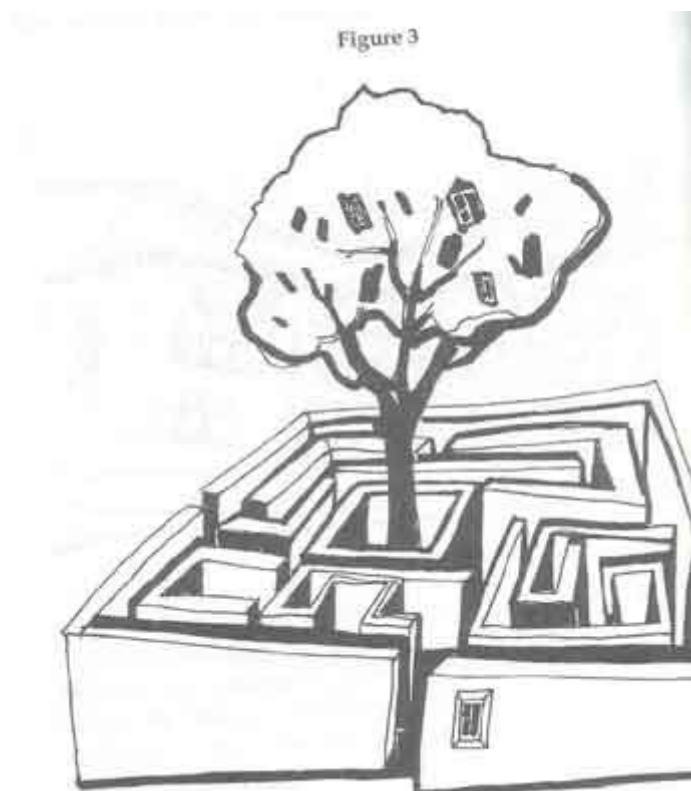
Figure 2



The new winners of this period of transition will be those academic institutions that learn the fastest how to transform the available knowledge into the individual intellectual capital of their alumni. The successful university’s alumni will be able to process and utilize their knowledge and skills, to

demonstrate their dynamism and entrepreneurship, and to continue to develop their knowledge and skills throughout their professional lives. In short, the defining feature of the best universities will be the professional success of their alumni – and not only science graduates, but also those graduating from Arts departments. Talented professionals, who are adaptable, innovative and capable of lifelong learning will be of the highest possible value sought after by the economy and jobs market of the future.

It has become evident in recent years that human resources (in particular, intellectual capital) constitutes the most fundamental asset that makes a country, a multinational corporation, or a small company competitive on the global market. It is these resources, not money or raw materials, which have a decisive role in achieving success on the market today and even more so in the future. This intellectual capital has yet another advantage over other resources: namely, it can be easily renewed and may become self-propagating provided that people using this capital are taught to actively process and constantly update their knowledge. This is not the knowledge hidden inside the dusty pages of unused books, but knowledge that is easily and quickly accessible thanks to new information technologies and supported by a person's proper preparation for its active use. This kind of knowledge has become a determinant of the 21st century.



Transformations we are witnessing force us to review the fundamental mission of the university/ institution of higher education. In the past three centuries, the core of the university were masters - professors engaging in studying science, on whom the prestige and the position of the university depended and whose achievements were the main product of the university. The process of educating students accompanied research, and the most important task was to select the most talented students who would stay at the university after graduation and join its research team.

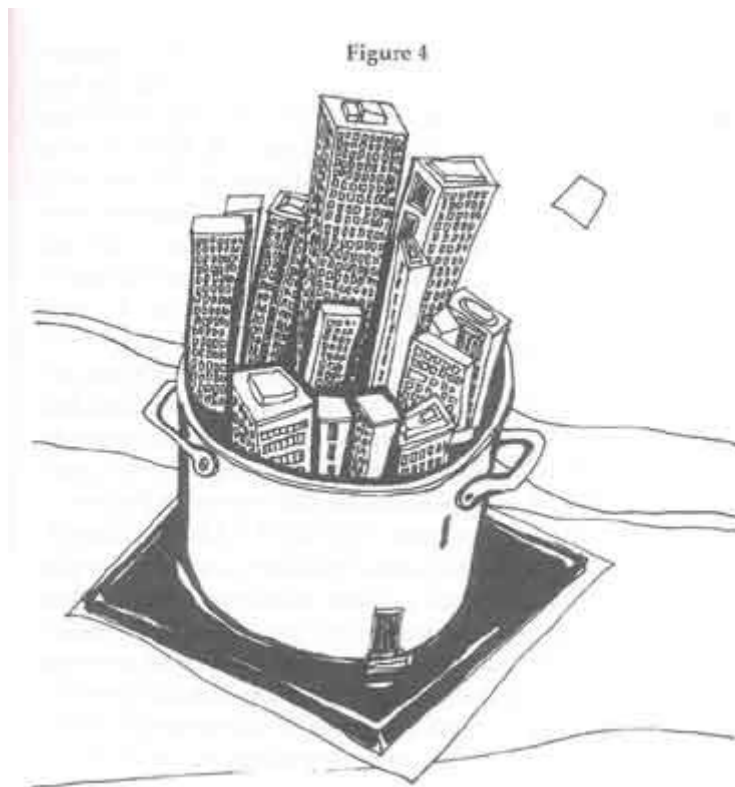
I am deeply convinced that the coming times will necessitate a clear change of mission, and the main product of the university's activity will be alumnus capable of facing the challenges of the future. This means that the university will have to follow the needs of its students and quickly react to changes occurring externally, not only in its closest environment. Research in fields recognized as relevant to the

new economy will be carried out mostly by the research teams of huge multinational corporations or by multi-person teams selected especially to deal with one particular research issue, which will be working outside university rather than at the university. Silicon Valley provides us with the most convincing example. Corporate universities and universities established on the 'for profit' basis, whose only aim is professional education, provide an additional impulse that accelerates the transformation process in the academic world. Managing knowledge available at the university becomes a key to success in the changing education market.

There exists one more essential agent of change which, in my opinion, is often overlooked by organizers and reformers of education systems, namely a change in the relationship between the lecturer and the student. For quite a long time this relationship was rather one-way (except for genius students): the master (professor, lecturer, instructor) presented knowledge--taught. Now, often there is more interaction, co-operation: the student, by posing questions and problems, forces the lecturer to process knowledge and present new solutions. This is most apparent in disciplines that develop the fastest e.g., in computer science where the process of change is so rapid that more and more often the skills of the student match those of the teacher and the younger mind absorbs, and processes new solutions faster. The future university will have to achieve apparently mutually unattainable results: on the one hand, it will have to provide effective mass education, on the other, through an active partnership between the lecturer and the individual student, to ensure synergy of intellectual capital of both subjects of this partnership.

2. LOCAL INITIATIVES, NATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND AMERICAN FACILITATION

What differentiates the Nowy Sącz School from other traditional institutions of higher education is a clear student-centered approach. This approach is so distinctive that it is at times contested by new lecturers coming to teach at WSB-NLU who so far have operated only at traditional universities. A great problem of educational systems is caused by the fact that the image of alumni and their needs is created from the single perspective of those who teach, but not by the job market (by a businessman or a manager of an institution which hires a new employee). Therefore, it is no wonder that so many graduates complain about the unsuitability of curricula to their particular needs or even about teaching them redundant, useless knowledge.



In case of the Nowy Sącz school, its fundamental curricular issues came from recipients of future graduates, namely, business people. Parallel to organizing WSB-NLU, I created or was actively engaged in establishing organizations that associate business people and managers such as Business Centre Club, National Chamber of Commerce or a regional Nowy Sącz-Podhale Chamber of Commerce. It was my partners from business circles who influenced my views on the curriculum and sometimes they even initiated new programs (e.g., in financial management or computer science). At the beginning of the 1990s, the needs of newly-established or restructured firms were clear-cut: new ideas, openness to change, being active and entrepreneurial and, finally, fluency in one foreign language and high computer literacy. It did not seem much but, from the perspective of graduates of the majority of universities, it was too much. Our curriculum was strengthened by an extensive group of the so-called general studies, required by our American partners. The convergence of the two approaches--Polish organizers' leaning towards both the student and the expectations of the recipients of our work (i.e., business people), and managers with the American pragmatic approach and the comprehensive curriculum that offered broad but superficial knowledge--produced unexpected results. WSB-NLU alumni became immediately and positively accepted and recognized on the job market in Poland.

Since its beginnings, i.e. since 1992, WSB-NLU has been deeply immersed in American academic reality, which naturally gave this small local school a global character. Our partners from NLU brought to Nowy Sącz not only their business curriculum and active teaching methods, but also their excellent English language curriculum. They also set up a criterion of a good knowledge of English required for admission. In addition, during three years of study, our students received initially over 1,000 hours of language instruction. The effect was dramatic: in the mid 1990s, our graduates had a much better knowledge of English than their competitors. The Americans also brought to WSB-NLU their organizational culture - respect for students, obligatory evaluation of all professors and instructors by their students, and methods of internal communication. After a few years, my local co-workers started to feel like aliens in their own country, we were annoyed with tardiness, lack of immediate response to our letters, and with breaking promises (even spoken ones). During the first, most critical period i.e., in the academic year 1992/93, we were joined by three lecturers from NLU. It was thanks to their persistence

and accurate observance of principles set in writing (which was at that time perceived as too rigid by us) that the university became a smoothly running organization oriented to the satisfaction of the student - our client and partner.

In the years 1994-96, a group of professors from CSB-CSU, Fresno, joined NLU professors in Nowy Sącz. Thanks to the USIA grant, as many as 27 full courses were taught by experienced business professors of a renowned Californian university. They set up a high standard of lectures taught in an interactive way with strong emphasis on examples from real business practice. Alumni who studied at that time still remember the lectures of professor T. Wielicki, G. Bryan and Manab Thakur.

For us, the founders and organizers of the School, it was obvious from the very beginning that our success depended mainly on the success of our alumni. Therefore, we strove to inspire our students with openness to the world: we invited to the School politicians, diplomats, managers and entrepreneurs. We also created conditions that enabled the most active students to show their talents. Soon, the richness and variety of student life became a feature of the School. Now students act not only in the Students' Council, local AEISEC Chapter or in various student societies and clubs; they also organize large student conferences, lasting a few days and attended by several hundred people. They are so successful that students from other universities come to these conferences with the single purpose of checking what we do and learn from us. The strong curriculum and active students have brought recognition and success: our students' teams have won several times an international business competition via the internet called MarketPlace, and they have been three-time winners of a national business competition, 'Entrepreneurship', organized by the Entrepreneurial Education Foundation. Students' good morale, the positive attitude of the faculty and administration towards students, and the ease of finding attractive jobs at prestigious companies quickly resulted in high admissions to the School.

Since 1997, WSB-NLU has become a countrywide school, taking into account students' permanent residence. As a rule, private colleges and schools draw their student body from their local area. WSB-NLU is the only Polish college that is an exception to this rule.¹ In the past three years, students coming from beyond Małopolska voivodship have constituted the majority of the WSB-NLU student body (70%) with only 12 - 20 % of local students.

We have put into use all the mechanisms that enhance students' individual activity and their engagement in studying and acquiring new skills. We send lists of our top graduates to 200 presidents of the biggest and most prestigious firms (the so-called 'Top 50 List'), the best students get scholarships abroad (e.g., to DePaul University in Chicago, thanks to grants from the Kościuszko Foundation), we also offer merit-related grants. We are not complacent about the results achieved, but constantly seek new forms of enhancing and bringing to light in young people qualities that are the most valuable: their creativity, courage in thinking and acting, and entrepreneurial spirit. We strive to add one more new dimension: namely, character-building.

¹/ See the results of a study carried out by Prof. J. Dietl and presented at the conference *'Experience of and perspectives for non-state universities - the quality of teaching.'* Conference proceedings, pp. 27-61 'Business studies at non-state universities from the perspective of empirical research.'

Figur 5



The Nowy Sącz School is an institution that can be considered an organization characterized by constant change. Change and progress have become a permanent feature of our operations. We started with elementary things such as providing a good, efficiently implemented curriculum, and we have created close relationships with business, which has facilitated job-seeking for our graduates. Now, we aim to strengthen the academic dimension of the School in order to develop the scholarly talents of students and faculty. Therefore, we have increased the number of programs offered at WSB-NLU to enable all talented and ambitious people (even those who do not dream of a career in business) to find their place at WSB-NLU.

The long-term success of the School depends on our continual efforts to build strong and lasting relationships between:

- our clients (the students)
- the founders and employees of the School (the faculty and its leaders) and
- the recipient of our efforts (the job market).

We need a new formula, one adjusted to both the challenges of the new global reality of constant change and to the need to educate individuals whose main resource will be their intellectual capital.

I am convinced that the main mechanism of this new formula should be the partnership occurring in the above student-school-recipient triangle and this partnership needs to be active, the one to which all parties contribute their best resources. Close relations with selected big companies, especially those of bi- or multi- lateral nature, constitute an element of this partnership. Our co-operation with Optimus S.A. sets an example here. On the one hand, WSB-NLU provides an exclusive MBA program for top managers of the firm, on the other, Optimus acts as the Programming Board for the new program in Computer Science and offers internship opportunities and, later, jobs for its graduates. We still need to implement an essential element of full partnership, namely, to provide consulting services to firms and conduct contractual research on demand, as well as employ practitioners: entrepreneurs and managers as professors. We have already taken initial steps: all our assistant lecturers hold internships at the best companies, which familiarizes them with operating in a business reality, and a substantial group of assistant lecturers have substantial experience of working for big companies.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF THE SCHOOL ON THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Until the beginnings of the 1990s, one of the tenets of the Polish education system was the belief that an institution of higher education could only function in a city, at best in a metropolis. And truly, the only universities highly respected by the public and considered the best were located in Warsaw, Cracow or Poznan, and universities operating in Rzeszów, Kielce or Zielona Góra were often referred to as 'provincial' with its negative connotations of inferiority. The Nowy Sącz School became an exception to this rule: it was the first university established in a small town of less than 100,000 inhabitants; moreover, the town is located on the peripheries of the country and far away from the metropolis. As an additional surprise to the public came the fact that the school's founders clearly intended to establish an elite school.

Figure 6



It was obvious to us that the institution built with the participation of foreigners would change both the mind-set and the local culture of Nowy Sącz. For decades, Nowy Sącz was a regional administrative center, a set-off point and supply base for a tourist industry supported, thanks to urban planners, by a few big companies providing a substantial (by local standards) number of jobs for manual workers. The transformation of the economic system that took place at the turn of the 1990s resulted in a substantial reduction of jobs in big companies and, although only two big firms went bankrupt, the unemployment rate quickly reached 15%, despite the fact that a few big private, nationally recognized companies were set up by Nowy Sącz residents. Additionally, the voivodship of Nowy Sącz ceased to exist and local politicians realized that the town's development could not be based on tourism. A new plan of the development of the town was badly needed.

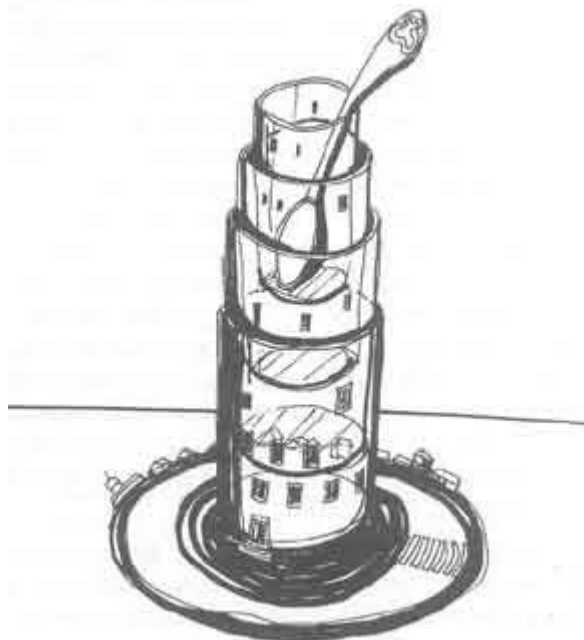
At a time when intellectual capital is becoming more and more important and information technologies (Internet) radically change the notion of distance and allow the creation of virtual enterprises, almost devoid of classical permanent location, WSB-NLU has become a natural center for local development, a development well correlated with global developmental trends:

- a) The School has become a big employer (on a local scale). At present, there are over 200 people directly employed at WSB-NLU and its related institutions. Moreover, the School has become a major source of income for another few hundred residents of Nowy Sącz. Over 1,700 students who come from out of town had to find accommodation and entertainment in Nowy Sącz. There are private dormitories being built for WSB-NLU students. However, a direct influence of the School on the residents' welfare is

strongly correlated with its size. We plan to stabilize the number of full-time students (who mainly create opportunities for residents to earn additional money) at 2,000, which will limit such opportunities.

- b)* An increase in the level of education among Nowy Sącz residents will be another important factor, though not fully apparent yet, determining the long-term development of the town. WSB-NLU part-time programs attract mainly inhabitants of Nowy Sącz and neighboring towns and villages. The majority of these people are young, working (over 90%), strongly connected with Nowy Sącz by family ties and home/flat ownership. Over the next several years, 200-300 people will be graduating from WSB-NLU part-time programs each year. Most of them will stay in Nowy Sącz. In ten years' time, a group of several thousand people will appear in the town not only armed with a degree and new skills, but also inspired intellectually and convinced of their own new capabilities. These dynamic individuals will influence the economic reality of the town that has now a total of 33,700 jobs and where, until recently, the number of people with a degree reached 10,000. On the one hand, there should be an increase in quality and efficiency of actions on behalf of existing small companies, operating with employees who are aware of their own capabilities and understand the importance of intellectual capital; on the other, some graduates will set up new firms and seek their fortune as individual entrepreneurs.

Figure 7



- c)* More and more scientists dealing with issues of regional development are convinced that development will occur through regional or local innovation centers and that the so-called sustained development methods are ineffective and bring few results. One of the essential features of an innovation center is an institution of higher education that influences and co-operates with its environment in a creative and entrepreneurial way. Establishing an innovation center is a long-term and costly venture that requires the active involvement of local and regional authorities. However, for a town with no other perspectives, the only chance is development through building an economy based on knowledge generated and inspired by a local university/business school whose faculty constitute also a group of founders, managers and consultants for local businesses.

It is obvious to the founders of WSB-NLU that the School cannot become yet one more ivory tower of knowledge. It must become an institution whose mission is to produce intellectual capital and external entrepreneurial activities which propagate the active growth and dissemination of knowledge.