



President Marx with friend Nelson Mandela at Amherst

A 21st century New England twist on a centuries old mission

By TOM ROBINSON

ANTHONY MARX • AMHERST COLLEGE

TONY MARX MAKES headlines in *Business Week* and *The Boston Globe* for opening up the elitist Amherst College to poor folk and eliminating student loans. In his mind, he's enriching the gene pool that will make an already great college even better.

"Amherst has been need blind and full-need for a long time, and proudly so," he clarifies. "What we are saying now is that we are still not getting the best students from all sectors of society. Even with 8,000 applications for 430 spaces, we need to be proactive in getting the word out to low income and international students to add to our mix. We don't want to wait and see who shows up."

From South Africa to western Massachusetts

AFTER GRADUATING from Yale, Marx began working in the development office at the University of Pennsylvania. "Issues about South Africa and investments there were all the rage then. I needed to know more about the country I was yelling and screaming about." He went there in 1984 and re-

turned two years later after earning his master's and Ph.D. from Princeton. He worked on a plan and garnering support for Khanya College to prepare black students to attend the great universities of South Africa, which then were desegregating.

Marx learned a powerful lesson. With a quality education and intense effort, it is possible to reverse the effects of Apartheid in one to two years. "There were great students there who were under-served or purposefully unserved. They overcame the lie that they deserved to be at the bottom of society." He reasons, "If that were true under Apartheid, it must be generally true in the U.S., where we also have unequal and under-funded education. Certainly we can reverse the damages and inequality

of our own education system."

Marx continues to write books on South Africa, and he's added Mandela Scholars to bring bright South African students to Amherst.

A surprising choice

WHEN AMHERST'S president Tom Gerety announced retirement, a friend put Marx's name in the hopper. He had never been a chairman, a dean, or a provost, and besides, he didn't go to Amherst. The search committee was unimpressed, but after failing to find a candidate, a student member remembered Marx and suggested that the group give him a second look.

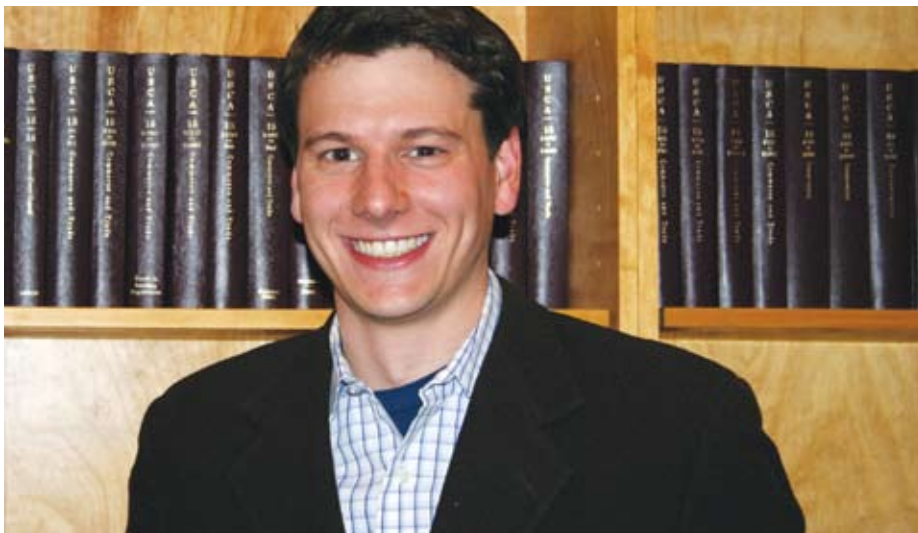
Luke Swarthout, then one of two students on the search committee, says Marx proved his supporters right. "He is an uncommonly bright, thoughtful and inspiring figure. He is conscious of the

place he is in, and he's not afraid to show

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“ My experience in South Africa was fundamental to shaping who I am. It was as intensive a political experience as you can have.”

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Former Amherst student activist Luke Swarhout now lobbies professionally at the Public Interest Research Group in Washington.

himself as a human, not just a figure. Tony has respect for young people and what they can do.”

Working with faculty to shape curriculum

JAN DIZARD, chair of American Studies, recalls Marx hit the ground running with some very explicit instructions about re-thinking what the college was doing and how to improve it. He encouraged faculty to pursue interdisciplinary issues. “While we need strong departments, I am worried about the potential narrowing and self-referential aspects of the disciplines,” Marx cautions. “What students need to learn doesn’t come in such neat packages.”

His bold ideas on diversity and larger-than-life enthusiasm took some faculty members aback initially. But he dangled some money — an “electrifying effect” that has borne fruit. For example, a new interdisciplinary environmental studies major spans philosophy to physics. Dizard points out that philosophers and physicists are working on curriculum together.

Traditional liberal arts with a capital T

AMHERST DOES NOT OFFER a pre-professional curriculum. Period. Rather, there is a single-minded focus on broad and deep undergraduate education fueled by an 8:1 faculty:student ratio. For Marx, the prize is 10 or 12 students around

a seminar table for a couple hours with a professor, along with one-on-one access with professors in their offices. “That model goes back to our founding. It hasn’t changed and we don’t think that it should,” Marx says.

Students who self-select a college like this understand and value the education Amherst provides. Marx recognizes they are of course looking for a leg up on a career, but he adds that was true in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Marx boasts his faculty are doing scholarship on the same level as the great research universities, but at the same time they spend most of their time on undergraduate instruction. A classic example is William Taubman, who won a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his biography of Khrushchev and still teaches undergraduate seminars in political science.

Senior Eddie Ramos, a history major who plans to teach English in Japan for

a year before law school, says Tony Marx practices what he preaches. In a replay of the South African situation, students raised concerns about genocide in Darfur. Marx heard them out, and the Amherst Endowment divested itself of certain investments, a demonstrable lesson about acting on one’s convictions.

Marx asserts that liberal arts education is valued in American society partly because of the prestige of the institutions that offer great liberal arts educations, but also because the effectiveness of liberal arts has been proven over hundreds of years.

Measuring success

HOW DOES ONE MEASURE the success of a liberal arts preparation? Marx says it’s tricky. Shortcuts or formulae can be helpful. They can also be misleading, as has been seen in K-12 and No Child Left Behind.

The best indication of effectiveness is the “lives of consequence” led by alumni. He cites U. S. president Calvin Coolidge, abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, World Bank president John McCloy as a few examples. “We punch way above our weight.”

Beyond that, he notes a 98 percent graduation rate, with 75-80 percent of those going on to graduate or professional school, and alumni from varied backgrounds who become more successful than their families may have been — both in financial terms and fulfillment in life.

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On shaping higher education

I AM CONSCIOUS of that Amherst stands at the top of the pecking order. We are the most selective liberal arts college in America, and we are also the most diverse. That is a difficult and powerful combination. What we are trying to do and are able to do is not right for everyone else. We can make moves that not

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Tony Marx shown here teaching a freshman seminar in 2003 with student Eddie Ramos.

only serve the interests of the college, but also are useful to higher education generally, because of our standing.”

Marx believes that higher education would perform better if schools cooperated as a sector. Competition is important to maintain quality, but colleges should also compete to assure the best students have the best opportunities.

He believes in vertical cooperation as well. The year before he came to Amherst, he directed the Gates Foundation-funded Early College/High School Initiative at the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, which establishes model public high schools. Higher education needs to pay more attention to K-12 because, “we can’t do our job if they don’t do theirs.”

Meanwhile, Bologna Accords’ three-year initiative and other accelerated undergraduate programs be damned. Marx is not ready to give up on the four years of undergraduate education that creates what he calls ‘intellectual seed corn.’

Maintaining an old campus

AN EDUCATOR FIRST, Marx is quick to point out, “I take all parts of my job seriously.” That includes managing a 200-year-old campus.

Much of the last decade was spent restoring the historical buildings around the quad, so freshmen could live together for the first time in more than a generation. Fraternity houses have been restored to former grandeur. Ironically, buildings from the 1960s are not aging as well; the ones built in the 18th century are in much better condition. During the next decade, he will have to replace residence halls that house a quarter of the students.

The science building needs to be redone to accommodate 21st-century teaching, and the library presents a challenge to figure out the right mix of books and digital resources.

Marx feels a public responsibility, as well. Amherst has a unique collection of dinosaurs and dinosaur footprints, now housed in a new building for better public access. The college also owns the Emily Dickinson homestead and the Folger Shakespeare library, which is located in Washington, D.C. next door to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Paying to be the best

PRESIDENT MARX and the faculty and colleagues on the board have crafted an agenda. Now, it’s time to find the resources. The Amherst endow-

ment stands at \$1.7 billion — that’s three quarters of a million dollars per enrolled student. The foundation also manages another \$300 million for Folger.

This summer, Amherst decided to no longer ask students to take loans. The college will replace borrowing with scholarships. Loans were scaring away the middle class, especially those who wanted no restraint on their career choices. “We are about opening opportunities, not foreclosing on opportunities.”

Marx and the board acknowledged they have the resources to do this. They decided, let’s do it and

hope the alumni will be inspired by our efforts to live up to the ideals of higher education and Amherst — and therefore provide us with additional resources. Seventy percent of Amherst alumni give every year, the highest level of any college.

Marx acknowledges, “The financial model we are working on has problems. The \$45,000 sticker price is of some concern to us. That’s why we had the lowest tuition increase among comparable U. S. universities.”

Half the students don’t pay that, and a considerable number of the students on financial aid don’t pay anything. Even for those students who can afford the sticker price, the college is still subsidizing their education by almost that amount again. It costs \$80,000 to educate a student here, an astonishing sum.

Unabashedly Marx rationalizes, “We pay the faculty competitive wages and an 8:1 ratio is not highly efficient. We don’t want it to be highly efficient. We are providing the finest education possible and have been successful at providing society’s leaders for 186 years.” ■

Tom Robinson is an editor of *The Greentree Gazette*.

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