Tough Love

Harvard and other celebrated research universities “succeed, better than ever, as creators and repositories of knowledge,” declares Harry R. Lewis, dean of Harvard College from 1995 to 2003, in Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education, published in early May by PublicAffairs. But they have forgotten their larger educational role for college students. They have forgotten “that the fundamental job of undergraduate education is to turn eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds into twenty-one- and twenty-two-year-olds, to help them grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a larger purpose for their lives, and to leave college as better human beings.”

Instead, universities are permeated by “Today’s consumer culture, in which the college’s job is to make its students happy rather than to educate them…. Moreover, “the greater the university, the more intent it is on competitive success in the marketplace of faculty, students, and research money. And the less likely it is to talk seriously to students about their development into people of good character who will know that they owe something to society for the privileged education they have received.”

Lewis is a 1968 graduate of the College and earned his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1974, when he joined its professoriate. He is now McKay professor of computer science and a Harvard College Professor (an award for excellence in teaching) and ordinarily writes books with such titles as Data Structures and Their Algorithms. He was removed from the deanship in 2003 when Faculty of Arts and Sciences dean William C. Kirby merged Lewis’s office with the office of the dean of undergraduate education to create one centralized position, now held by dean of the College Benedict H. Gross. This magazine’s report on the shakeup, “Deconstructing the College Deanship” (May-June 2003, page 48), characterized Lewis as “a direct man,” and that directness may have collided with President Lawrence H. Summers’s own blunt and directive style. Lewis is married to Marlyn McGrath Lewis ’70, Ph.D. ’78, director of admissions for the College. They have two children: Elizabeth ’01, M.B.A. ’06, and Anne ’07. “My loyalties are to Harvard,” Lewis declared in a late-May e-mail interview, “and I want Harvard alumni/ae to understand the place.”

While the big picture in Lewis’s book is that Harvard is less educational than it used to be—less morally and ethically elevating—many of its details concern struggles he and the College faced during his years as dean. His positions are often contrarian. He can seem liberal, on grade inflation, for example—not being concerned by it and explaining that the perpetual cycles of complaint and reaction occur because faculty members have not agreed on the purpose of grading. He seems a social conservative on such matters as drinking and date-rape.

“The new way to run Harvard,” he opines, “resembles a daycare center for college students.” Because “we strive to make students happy, we cannot say that they are wrong.” Lewis is a booster of college athletics, valuing the lessons the participants learn from their sports; he quotes a colleague who notes that athletes “are the only people here who know how to lose.”

The question of what and how Harvard should teach undergraduates, most recently raised in a curriculum-reform effort begun in earnest in 2003, may be near official resolution (see page 65). Lewis writes of the process, “From the beginning, science and globalization drove the review. These would be the engines of human progress in the coming decades, and Harvard College needed to make these themes central to undergraduate education. The new curriculum would marginalize the humanities…. But not so fast. By late 2005, he continues, “Harvard’s academic self-study was meandering toward an uncertain result…. The bottom line was that nothing in Harvard’s curriculum was held to be more important for Harvard students to learn than anything else…. The president, having failed to stamp his plan on the Faculty’s thinking, withdrew from the process entirely. The professors who carried out the review proposed instead a curriculum with no meaningful expectations at all, a formula they hoped would please their students and avoid academic turf wars among the Faculty.” Looming was another manifestation of what Lewis calls “the development of the college into a shopping mall.” He judges that, “Whether the faculty resists or endorses the proposed low-stress curriculum will test Harvard’s claim to leadership in American higher education.”

“Lawrence Summers was the product, not the source, of the trends that brought Harvard to its present predicament…. Lewis writes in the conclusion to his book. “At every step, Summers played the role cast for him by the large forces shaping research universities today, which are the very forces that led the Corporation to think he was the man for the job…. “The lack of confidence of the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences in President Summers was widely caricatured as stemming from a complacent Faculty’s resistance to his controversial and innovative ideas, a backlash resulting from his abrasiveness, or more simply an attack by feminist harpies allied with leftist crazies. However, the reality is that the ideas Summers offered did not meet the Harvard standard.” Elsewhere he writes, “A college needs ideas and goals; it needs an intellectual framework and a purpose. What Harvard offers instead is only a list of ingredients.” In this context, Lewis argues, there was, in the Summers presidency, “a glaring absence of the balanced, thoughtful, and informed analysis that characterizes the academy at its best.”