The quiet American?

A quiet, friendly and unassuming man, Edward Snyder is still not averse to occasionally throwing a cat into a pigeon loft. And as dean of the University of Chicago’s Graduate School of Business (GSB) people tend to take notice when he does.

He certainly ruffled a few feathers in January 2007 when in the “Deans’ Corner” slot in the AACSB’s online newsletter he castigated what he sees as the growing trend to describe (and treat) business school students, and especially MBA students, as “customers.”

The problem with this, he wrote, is that the model “is corrupt and corrupting.” Treating students as customers doesn’t help them develop. Do we really want to tell them that they are customers – and that they are always right – when we are in the last, best position to influence their overall academic, ethical, and professional development? Of course we shouldn’t. What other responsibilities should we abdicate?

His answer is what he calls “stretch and support.”

“We should set high expectations of our students. When they meet them, shine the light and recognise them. When they don’t, kick them in the butt,” his article prescribed.

Typically self-deprecating, he comments on the article now that: “I don’t want to overplay it and I know students pay a lot of money. But I think it’s [the students as customers model] a bad paradigm. I think students get more out of
Snyder contends that by most criteria business schools have been a very successful ‘industry’ over the last few decades, growing in real terms at around 3% a year.
I don’t worry about people earning a lot of money. That’s a fine thing. Success is great, but I do worry about the narrow orientation [towards high earning power] in a lot of society and I don’t think that serves students well so that it can continue to help improve business practices, increase performance, and strengthen the world’s market-oriented economies.

That reference to market economies is significant. There has been some debate in the business academia world in recent times about the importance, and in particular relevance to the real world, of some academic business research. The old charges of esoteric research in obscure journals with no relevance to business have been receiving some energetic re-polishing.

Prof Snyder comments that “I really think that not all schools have to be research oriented. And not all that are research oriented should do the same type of research.” However, he does really share the concerns about the relevance of research – at least at Chicago. He says he is confident about what the school has to offer and points out that in his experience the faculty who students really value are those who are leaders in their research field. But he does caution that it is very difficult to know which research is relevant.

In any case, he argues that the contribution business schools have made to business is considerable. He contends that by most criteria business schools have been a very successful “industry” over the last few decades, growing in real terms at around 3% a year.

And more importantly, he says, they have been largely instrumental in helping create the conditions to establish a global economy that has brought (through China and India and other countries) many billions of people into economic activity.

At the very least, he says, business academia has created “a common language for people to do business around the world.”

Under Prof Snyder, Chicago’s own global ambitions have been undertaken cautiously and on its own terms. It has steadfastly refused to follow many other schools in establishing strategic partnerships and what he calls “hyphenated degrees”, preferring instead to establish its own campuses outside the US, first in Barcelona (now transferred to London) and then Singapore.

It was a strategy in place at the GSB when Prof Snyder arrived and one he has been happy to maintain (overseas business strategy is one of his own areas of academic research).

“Businesses might use joint ventures as an initial strategy to enter a market but they don’t use them long term,” he points out. “The joint venture model has problems. I’m not saying we are perfect or anything but if we have problems with a curriculum or with operations, then no one is pointing a finger at anyone else. It’s hard to get things right with two cooks in the kitchen. Joint ventures aren’t impossible to pull off or wrong in themselves – they’re just not for us.”

But Chicago GSB seems definitely for him.

A question about whether he has any regrets about his time there so far leaves him nonplussed. Instead of answering he ruminates about the lessons he has learned. The main one, he finally decides, is that he has learned how to ask for help.

Not that he really seems to need it.

Snyder has also helped to increase the school’s endowment from $187m in 2002 to its 2006 level of $346m