

Energizing and Focusing the Movement: National Organizations

Impacting Community, Technical and Junior Colleges

Lee John Betts

College and University Personnel Association, 1992

Reviewed by:

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If you are strapped for time, the short review is:
This is a useful book. You oughta keep it near your desk.
Buy it. But if you have a little more time, let me tell you
a story about this book and this review and a fellow who
told me something useful.

In the late 1970s I coordinated the academic and
continuing education program for a branch campus of
Northwestern State University, Natchitoches (Nak-a-tish--
you saw the town in the movie *Steel Magnolias*), Louisiana.
The campus, at Fort Polk, provided undergraduate and
graduate level credit classes and a variety of noncredit
learning experiences for civilians and military personnel.
I was responsible for much of the administration of the
program and for maintaining close liaison between the
activities that occurred at the branch campus at Fort Polk
and their on-campus host departments and our on-campus

continuing education office.

Each day I arrived at our on-campus CE office; met with the director, Hoyt Reed, for a coordination visit; circulated through various offices on campus for other coordination and information exchange; and then, for the next hour-and-a-half, two or three other employees and I drove through the Kisatchie National Forest that stretches between Natchitoches and Fort Polk. When we left the main campus in the mornings, we usually never knew what time we would return; and no matter when we left Fort Polk, we still had the hour-and-a-half ride back to Natchitoches. Many of you have had jobs like that; if you work in continuing education now, you probably still do.

I usually had an interesting group of riders: John Decker, in charge of our high school prep program; a variety of graduate students and faculty, all certain that someone had it in for them because they were being sent miles and miles away into never-never land; and Sam Masson, who is the point of this part of this review and who is the fellow who told me the something useful.

Sam was a farm boy from Cloutierville, Louisiana (he and his brothers raised crawfish), and he was a wizard with

computers. He ran our data system at Fort Polk, insured our information would interface with that of the main campus, and taught computer science classes in his spare time-- at night before we came home. Sam introduced me to *utils* late one night somewhere on the road between Fort Polk and Natchitoches.

"Dave, my boy," Sam began the conversation. "I wanna tell you 'bout an interesting little thing I learned today."

It would really have done me no good to tell Sam I wasn't interested. I had nowhere to go, I needed his conversation to keep me awake, and he wouldn't have stopped anyway. That drive, with me concentrating on the road and him, the eternal passenger, was his favorite place to rail at me for things he was uncomfortable with, to fuss about things he felt I was not doing quite right, or to conduct his usual one-sided conversation like this one I felt coming.

"Tell me," he asked, "how you determine the value of the use of something."

"I thought you were going to tell me about an interesting little thing you learned today," I said tersely

as I swerved and missed an armadillo waddling across the road. It had not been a good day.

"Patience, my boy, patience. Answer the question. How do you determine the value of the use of something?"

"I don't know, Sam." I closed one eye and thought about it a moment. "I guess you use it and see if it fills some kind of need and if it does, you use it again. The fact that you use it more than one time indicates that you value its use." I rounded three curves, floated over two small rises in the road, and hit the only straight and level stretch of road between Leesville and Keatchie. I pushed the car on up to 70.

We sped down the road. The pavement stretched on before us, a ribbon of silver in the moonlight. Three deer standing by the road, startled by the glare of the headlights, bounced beside us for a moment then faded away in the dark, and Sam droned on and on about *utils*, and I swerved occasionally, missing armadillos.

It finally dawned on me what he was telling me...that things have a value that may be expressed in terms of *utils*--the computer has a *utile* value, as does a horse, a cow, a cat, a husband, a book. Each has its own intrinsic

value, and so...

"Damn!" I swerved again and narrowly missed another armadillo.

"...and so," Sam continued, "you see, this car has a *utile* value that can be expressed in terms of its usefulness as a means of personal transportation, or its usefulness as a means of product transportation, or its usefulness as a ..."

I swerved again. BAM! "Got 'im!" The armadillo went tumbling over and over into the ditch.

"...uh, as a measure of its usefulness as an armadillo killer."

And so, when I considered Lee Betts' book, I thought about Sam and that trip and the idea of *utils* as he defined it and as I understood it.

Now Sam may have been wrong. The definition he gave me may not be what a *utile* really is at all, but I accepted his meaning that night and if you don't mind, let's leave it at that for now--which brings us to the point. Using Sam's definition, Lee's book is, for me at least, a book that has a certain utility, a certain value, a *utile* value. Why?

The day after I received it in the mail from Darrel Clowes, I used it--not, as you might imagine, to swat flies with, but to find the address of an organization I needed to contact. The book was at hand. On the off chance the information I needed was inside, I picked it up and looked. It was in there. The next day, someone asked me if there was a correlation between SAT and ACT test scores. Again, I referred to Lee's book, found both SAT and ACT referred to, and contacted one of their offices using the information in the book. (There is a correlation/concordance by the way. See the Summer, 1991 issue of *College and University*.)

The next day, I didn't need to find anything in the book, so, near the end of the day, it being close at hand, and I having time, I thumbed through it all for the first time to see what else was in there. At its heart were profiles of some 88 national education organizations, councils, and university programs developed to assist community, technical, and junior colleges. These 88 organizations, according to Betts, have served to energize and focus the community college movement. I suppose we could stop here and argue over the ones left out or the ones included, or we could even argue that what really

energized and focused the community college movement was not these organizations but was, instead, the thousands of men and women who lent their energy and spirit and focus to their colleges and who shared their vision with others. But this is not really the place for that argument. All I want to do here is tell you about the book and how I found it useful. It was interesting to read about the study that led to the book, but I found the testimonials (Betts calls this section "Extolling Their Virtues") one of the most interesting parts of the book.

When I saw the names of a few people I knew, I stopped to read their comments. They wrote about the organizations they were affiliated with, how those entities were connected to community colleges, and how those organizations had transformed and energized the community college movement and, in some cases, how they had transformed and energized the speaker as well.

The next day, I didn't pick up the book at all except as a part of the usual ebb and flow of moving things around on the top of my desk. But a week later, I used it again. It took me longer to find it under some papers over on a corner of the desk, but I knew the information I was

looking for was in there.

Now I have to return the book to Darrel, and I'm not sure I want to. I guess I'll buy a copy. I figure I know what's in there now. As for Betts' claim that the profiles of the organizations will help administrators spend their decreasing "joining" dollars more wisely, that may be true; but I think there's just not enough information in the book on the organizations to justify that claim, and I'll tell you why I believe that.

It has been my experience that the organizations a college belongs to serve the college best when they match the college's needs. I recall a comment (I believe it was from George Vaughan) something to the effect that the mission of the community college ...should be a locally developed mission, i.e., the college's mission ought to be about what the community's about and stem from the needs of the community. I'd guess the same concept ought to drive the decisions a college makes about the organizations it joins. If the organization works for the college, it's worth the investment; if the organization is about what the college is about, it should be a part of the college's inventory of organizations it belongs to; if the community

drives the college, then the community should also drive the college's involvement in organizations.

Sometimes that takes experimentation with the "joining" funds. The problem is, the people who sometimes make the decision about the expenditure of the "joining" funds are often *not* the ones in a position to judge the *utile* value of the organization joined.

But enough of the soap box. I said I will probably buy the book and I will. The next time I need something out of it, I'd like to know it's there, shelved between the dictionary and a guide to colleges and my stuffed armadillo.

The way I figure it, if each question I answer out of the book saves me a dollar's worth of time looking elsewhere, I've already got it half paid for. And if I convert dollars to *utils*, it's easily worth 15 or 20 *utils* a year. See how it works? Anyway, I suppose I could always swat flies with it.