In Iowa, a Life of the Mind, Heart, and Soul

A physician-president sees patients and can still blow a mean sax

By JEFFREY SELINGO

In a makeshift studio at the Iowa City Public Library, Our Big Brain is about to go on the air. The public-radio show promises to solve life's little questions, and today's guest, who is supposed to ask a few of his own and take a crack at answering some from listeners, is the president of the University of Iowa.

"If we're not limited by truth and accuracy, then we can answer any question," the president, David J. Skorton, deadpans into the microphone.

Over the next hour, he plays the role of expert, responding to listeners with sincerity and wit. When asked why people close their eyes when they kiss, he chuckles and suggests that "you don't want to see who you're kissing."

If he wanted, though, he could dominate a show with much tougher questions than that. Unlike most academics who give up their day jobs when they become college presidents, Dr. Skorton, 55, kept his when he took the reins at Iowa two years ago. A cardiologist by training, he still sees patients with congenital heart disease and genetic disorders twice a month in a university clinic and makes time to take their telephone calls.

Even while serving as president, he holds academic appointments in internal medicine, electrical and computer engineering, and biomedical engineering. And despite that background, he actively promotes the arts and humanities.

At a time when many college presidents seem like corporate chief executives, and jump from institution to institution, Dr. Skorton -- who has spent almost his entire career at Iowa -- stands out as an intellectual in an administrative job who continues to do scholarly work. While he appears at ease in both roles, he sometimes seems to prefer the life of the mind: On a recent trip to Washington, he wanted the university's
lobbyist to ensure that there was enough time on the schedule to visit two art galleries after appointments with members of Iowa's Congressional delegation.

"He's often the smartest man in the room, but yet he's comfortable talking to anyone," says Larry T. Mahoney, who co-founded the University of Iowa Adolescent and Adult Congenital Heart Disease Clinic with Dr. Skorton in the early 1980s. "People are immediately enthralled with his insatiable curiosity."

The president often applies scientific standards to management problems. For example, at a meeting with lieutenants about building dormitories, he presses them for data on enrollment growth to back up their assumptions on how to retire the debt on the facilities. While that approach lets him consider many sides before making a decision, a few faculty critics say his style lets him seem to want it both ways on such matters as a recent dispute over animal research on campus.

"I do think that I could be more courageous to speak out on more issues," Dr. Skorton says while sitting in his office, which is adorned with artwork by faculty members. "But in general presidents are more timid now, more concerned, especially at public universities, with the political ramifications in their state and the ramifications with donors."

A Battle Over Rights

For the past six months, Dr. Skorton has navigated, on and off, a political minefield that landed him in a politically charged hearing on Capitol Hill last month.

The controversy started in November, when research laboratories and offices in the psychology department were vandalized. The intruders smashed lab equipment, poured acid on papers, and removed more than 300 rats and mice. The Animal Liberation Front, an extremist group tied to similar acts at other colleges, later claimed responsibility for the Iowa attack in an e-mail message to the news media. The message also listed the names, home addresses, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, and spouses or partners of faculty members, graduate students, and lab assistants who conduct animal research at the university. As a result, five faculty members and some of their spouses received more than 400 magazine subscriptions they had not ordered.

In the aftermath of the attack, Iowa agreed to consider adding more security to the labs but then balked at the cost. So the psychology department hired its own consultant to provide advice and install security hardware. The university later paid
for those upgrades.

Then in January, Steven Best, a professor at the University of Texas at El Paso who is a supporter of the ALF, gave a speech here after being invited by a law-student organization. A few of the professors whose research had been ruined tried unsuccessfully to get Dr. Skorton to cancel the speech.

"The whole process was handled pretty poorly," Mark S. Blumberg, a psychology professor and one of the researchers whose lab was attacked, says of the security concerns and Mr. Best's appearance. "I'm not in favor of quashing speech, but it would have been nice for Skorton to call a meeting with us to explain the conditions [under which] he was brought to the university."

Dr. Skorton agrees that the university failed to act quickly enough to respond to the worries over security. As for Mr. Best's speech, Dr. Skorton says he followed the institution's policy for controversial speakers by requiring a question-and-answer period moderated by a tenured faculty member. "It's corny to call the campus a marketplace of ideas, but it has to be," says Dr. Skorton, a longtime vegetarian who calls animal research "absolutely necessary."

The Iowa researchers weren't the only ones who questioned Mr. Best's appearance at Iowa. At the hearing last month before the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, the chairman, James M. Inhofe, a Republican from Oklahoma, wondered aloud why Mr. Best had been invited, especially after federal law-enforcement officials testified that the Animal Liberation Front, along with a related group, the Earth Liberation Front, were the most serious domestic-terrorism threats facing the country today.

Several times Senator Inhofe attempted to get Dr. Skorton to label animal-rights groups, including the ALF, as terrorists. But the Iowa president never did. "I called this a criminal act, and I am always careful with the words I choose," he told reporters after the hearing. "It is criminal because it broke laws."

Dr. Skorton's characterization disappointed Mr. Blumberg. "I feel terrorized," he says. "The FBI considers them to be terrorists. I'm curious as to why he can't call them terrorists."

A Favored Insider

When Dr. Skorton was tapped as Iowa's president, in 2003, his appointment was widely favored by faculty and staff members. The audience for the public portion of his interview was about twice that of other finalists.
"He sees the entire range of a university, as opposed to only one portion of it," says Katherine Tachau, a history professor and immediate past president of the Faculty Senate. "He understands why the arts and humanities are critical to humankind, understands engineering, is conversant in medicine, and is the kind of physician who doesn't think that nursing and pharmacy are second-rate. There's no such thing as a perfect president, but I tell my colleagues around the country that we picked the best."

At the time, the 28,000-student campus was going through one of the most difficult periods in its history, and many here saw Dr. Skorton -- an internal candidate who would need little time to adjust to the job -- as best equipped to lead them through tough fiscal times. State lawmakers had cut the university's appropriations by $23-million over two years, reducing the state's share of the university's budget to 17 percent from 21 percent. Some 300 jobs had been eliminated, mainly through attrition.

The budget cuts were felt all over the campus. One major loss was the herbarium, with its collection of more than 250,000 dried plant specimens, which was moved to Iowa State University to save money and consolidate resources. The decision had been made by Dr. Skorton's predecessor, Mary Sue Coleman, but he refused to reverse it, despite calls to do so. This month a state court will hear testimony in a lawsuit brought by two undergraduates who say the move adversely affected their education.

"We're the only institution in the Big 10 without an herbarium," says Diana Horton, an associate professor of biological sciences. "I never imagined that Skorton would let it go."

Of most concern to professors, though, was the effect of the budget cuts on their salaries. By the time Dr. Skorton took office, Iowa had slipped from the top third to the bottom third of 11 peer institutions in terms of faculty pay. An associate professor here now earns $69,100 annually, according to the American Association of University Professors, compared with $75,100 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and $81,600 at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Even bigger differences are found between Iowa's 600 tenure-track medical professors and their colleagues elsewhere.

Dr. Skorton feared that salaries would continue to slide and the best professors would leave for other institutions. But with money tight, he had few choices. Along with other administrators, he developed a plan that called for increasing salaries over four years to move Iowa once again into the upper third of its peer group. The money for the raises, which are to
start this fall, will come from a combination of tuition increases, state appropriations, and a redistribution of existing dollars.

"Skorton knows you can't become excellent by cutting budgets," says Douglas K. True, senior vice president for finance and operations and the university's treasurer. "He didn't just come up with this plan in the last three months. He's been thinking about faculty competitiveness since he came into office. He wanted to be ready to make a move when we could, and now we can."

**Life as a Musician**

Dr. Skorton never planned for a career as an academic -- or for that matter, in medicine. He wanted to be a musician almost since the time he started to play the alto saxophone at age 9. But his father, Sam, who as a boy fled what is now Belarus with his mother after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, was not enamored with the idea. Although Sam Skorton never finished high school (he owned a shoe store), he wanted his son to get a college education.

David Skorton studied comparative religion and philosophy at the University of California at Los Angeles before transferring to Northwestern University to major in psychology. While there he played tenor saxophone in an otherwise all-black blues band that worked small Chicago clubs.

Eventually music would take a back seat to his growing interest in medicine, which combined his fascination with the sciences and philosophy. He earned a medical degree at Northwestern and returned to UCLA for his residency. There he worked with electrical engineers to apply declassified remote-sensing technology used by spy planes to medical imaging.

In 1981, after Dr. Skorton was hired as an assistant professor at Iowa, he called his dad with the good news. "He asked when I was going to finish my training and get a regular job," Dr. Skorton recalls. "I told him I did. 'Then why do they call you an assistant?' he asked. 'Why aren't you just a professor?' I tried to explain to him and he said, 'I just don't get it. It sounds like you really haven't accomplished anything.' Then I thought, how would he know how the hierarchy of a university works?"

The exchange taught Dr. Skorton an important lesson: College officials too often speak from the ivory tower, "looking down on those who don't share our passion for higher education." Public colleges in particular, he says, need to better explain their value rather than just complain about declining state support.
"We bellyache way too much in higher education," he says. "How many other professions are there besides the public professoriate where one can get paid from public funds to pretty much do what you want? The faculty control the curriculum, the individual professor controls the syllabus, and so on. I don't know any other profession where you can get public money for blazing your own path."

Dr. Skorton was prepared to go back to the faculty ranks himself during Iowa's presidential-search process two years ago. As vice president for research, he had been the runner-up for the top job the previous time it was open, in 1995, when Ms. Coleman was hired. Afraid of being passed over again, Dr. Skorton got recertified in cardiology even while he was a candidate for president, with plans to leave the administration when Ms. Coleman's successor arrived.

**The Artistic Scientist**

Instead of returning full time to medicine, he moved into a tiny duplex that served as a temporary residence while the 12,000-square-foot presidential house was undergoing renovation. Now he and his wife, Robin L. Davisson, an associate professor of anatomy and cell biology at Iowa, whom he married last fall, are trying to figure out how to use the place. He's thinking about a block party for this fall's 4,000 incoming freshmen. For now, the couple's two Newfoundland dogs love running the length of the home's attic, which was once used for ballroom dancing.

On this night, over a dinner of salad and olive-and-garlic pizza at a small table in his kitchen, Dr. Skorton -- who prefers to be called "David" or simply "Skorton" -- is talking about the university's Year of the Arts and Humanities, which he proclaimed last July. He is a tall man with round glasses who mostly speaks in a soothing monotone, befitting his experience as comforting physician and as DJ of a Latin-jazz show on the campus radio station. But when talk turns to the arts and humanities, he becomes animated.

Dr. Skorton decided to dedicate each year of his presidency to a specific topic as a small way of focusing the campus on one unifying issue, he explains as he races to his basement computer to call up the university Web site showcasing the arts-and-humanities year ([http://www.yah.uiowa.edu](http://www.yah.uiowa.edu)). He chose that topic for his first year because "many people will advocate for the sciences, but support for the arts and humanities has been slim."

The year featured two major arts festivals as well as dozens of events at museums, public schools, and other venues. Dr.
Skorton set aside $120,000 in competitive grants to support faculty projects in towns throughout the state, such as storytelling and an online art show that features a different work by an Iowa artist each day. While he acknowledges that the money will be used up this month, at the end of the academic year, he hopes that the effort has persuaded some faculty members to apply for federal or corporate grants.

"Part of this was to demonstrate that, damn it, you can just get off your butt and get some of these things done, and that it's possible to take a few bucks out of a research university and create new works of art," he says.

Next up is the year of the Year of Public Engagement. It will focus on volunteerism and charitable giving, particularly donations to nonprofit community groups. In a speech last fall, Dr. Skorton noted that just 4 percent of Iowa's faculty and staff members participated in the annual United Way campaign in 2003.

Encouraging charitable donations elsewhere is risky for a man who is leading the university's own $1-billion capital campaign, but he professes no worry about siphoning away support. (So far Iowa's campaign has raised $890-million.) After all, he doesn't always think like other college presidents. In April, the day before a tribute to the late Frank Conroy, longtime director of the university's renowned Writers' Workshop, Dr. Skorton turned down a six-figure gift to name a reading room for Mr. Conroy, who had performed in a band with him.

"I felt it was dishonest because I knew I was going to name a room from the day Frank got terminally ill," Dr. Skorton says after getting off the phone with the donor, who he promises to have coffee with to discuss other gift opportunities.

It's a rare moment of reflection for a college president, but a lesson Dr. Skorton learned while working in his dad's shoe store as a teenager. "As a salesman, you had to understand someone's needs and match that up with your need to sell shoes," he says. "But customers also had to trust you, or else they wouldn't come back. So you had to be honest. If you didn't have anything for them, you had to tell them."

DAVID J. SKORTON

Born

November 22, 1949, in Milwaukee; family moved to Los Angeles when he was 9.
Education

- B.A. in psychology, Northwestern University, 1970
- M.D., Northwestern, 1974

Academic career

- President, University of Iowa, since 2003; vice president for research and external relations, Iowa, 2002-3; vice president for research, Iowa, 1992-2002; associate chairman for clinical programs, department of internal medicine, Iowa, 1989-92; director, cardiovascular-image-processing laboratory, Iowa, 1982-96; director, division of general internal medicine, Iowa, 1986-89; professor, associate professor, and assistant professor in departments of internal medicine, electrical and computer engineering, and biomedical engineering, Iowa, since 1981
- Chief resident, department of medicine, University of California at Los Angeles, 1978-79; medical internship, residency, and fellowship, UCLA, 1974-79

Personal

His wife, Robin L. Davisson, is an associate professor of anatomy and cell biology at the University of Iowa; he has one child from a previous marriage. A jazz musician, he plays saxophone and flute and is the host of a weekly program, As Night Falls--Latin Jazz, on KSUI-FM, the university's public radio station. One way he relaxes is by playing with his two big, slobbery Newfoundland dogs, Miles and Billie. Most of his "pleasure reading" these days is taken up by medical journals, although he recently finished Cold Service, a mystery novel by Robert B. Parker.