

# AN INTRODUCTION TO NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES\*

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## Definition

It is difficult to give a precise definition of non-traditional study. The Commission on Non-Traditional Study, after groping for a succinct definition, finally concluded that non-traditional study "is more an attitude than a system and thus can never be defined except tangentially" (Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973, p. xv). The name itself implies a protest against "traditional" education, but the approach taken by the advocates of non-traditional education is not negative in the sense that they would abandon or diminish traditional education. Rather, they call for positive action in the form of new alternatives that add flexibility to traditional education. In particular, non-traditional study is concerned with creating alternatives to the time and place requirements of traditional education. The rationale for non-traditional study is that where or when learning takes place is not nearly as important as its impact on the learner. Thus, non-traditional study is said to emphasize learning more than teaching, competencies more than credentials, and convenience for the student more than convenience for the institution.

Although the philosophy behind non-traditional study is unrelated to the age of the student, it is nevertheless true that flexibility with respect to

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the location and time frames of education has a special appeal to adult learners, whose job and family responsibilities often prevent residential study in a conventional college classroom. Thus, the non-traditional student is commonly defined as a learner who would be denied educational opportunity without the time-free, place-free arrangements of non-traditional study -- which means, usually, an adult, part-time learner. Similarly, non-traditional programs are most often characterized by off-campus locations and by a commitment to adapt education to the special needs and interests of adult learners. These characteristics are brought into being by delivery systems that take education to the learners, by independent study that permits learners to schedule and pace themselves, or by "experiential education" that takes advantage of learning resources outside the classroom.

#### A Brief History

Although virtually all of the components of the non-traditional movement existed in the United States prior to 1970, the articulation of goals has occurred more recently, along with dramatic increases in the number of non-traditional programs. The stimuli for the non-traditional movement were present in a variety of forces for change in higher education, but the movement was sparked into action and given visibility largely through the initiatives of a private foundation -- the Carnegie Corporation of New York. A widely quoted speech on the need for an external degree by the president of the foundation (Pifer, 1970-71) was followed by the creation of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, funded by the Carnegie Corporation and

sponsored by the College Entrance Examination Board and the Educational Testing Service. The Commission brought together a group of national leaders to discuss issues, formulate recommendations, and bring national attention to the need for new flexibility and alternatives in higher education.

Concurrently with the work of the Commission, two widely read reports stimulated interest and accelerated the growth of the non-traditional movement. The Carnegie Commission on the Future of Higher Education, a study group also funded by the Carnegie Corporation, published a report calling for "Less Time, More Options" (Carnegie Commission, 1971), and the U.S. Office of Education issued a "Report on Higher Education" (Newman, 1972) which urged the creation of alternatives to traditional education. At about the same time, the federal government took a clear position on the need for innovation in higher education by creating the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to finance assistance to public and private postsecondary institutions interested in a variety of reforms that lay at the heart of nontraditional education (Public Law 92-318, enacted in 1972).

Within a very short period of time, the non-traditional movement was full-blown. The Commission on Non-Traditional Study issued its report containing 57 recommendations in 1973 (Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973), and this was quickly followed by two books growing out of the work of the Commission. One was a comprehensive treatment of the external degree (Houle, 1973); the other reported the findings of a national research program which provided information about non-traditional students, programs, and issues (Cross and Valley, 1974). Among other things, the research report

documented the full reality of the non-traditional movement. Approximately one-third of the 1185 colleges and universities responding to the survey reported that they offered at least one non-traditional program, and almost two-thirds of those programs had been established since 1970 (Ruyle and Geiselman, 1974). Thus, in an incredibly short time span, hundreds of new programs had been launched in response to the demand for unconventional forms of education, free of the time and place limitations of traditional classroom instruction.

While the full fruition of the non-traditional movement burst forth in the 1970's, it had its roots in the confluence of a number of trends and concerns occurring in the 1950's and 1960's. A brief description of these concerns follows:

1. Historically, higher education in the United States has been characterized by an egalitarian thrust, i.e., continuing societal pressures to include broader segments of the population in the opportunities for higher education. The egalitarian pressures were strong following World War II, when returning veterans were given federal grants that enabled them to finance their college educations (the so-called "G.I. Bill"), and as a result they flocked to the colleges. This huge influx of students created a demand that far exceeded the supply, thus helping to stimulate a great growth period for higher education. It was not unusual for existing colleges and universities to triple in size within ten years, and literally hundreds of new colleges were created in the 1950's and 1960's.

Most of these new colleges were public two-year colleges, usually established by local communities to provide vocational and technical programs as well as the traditional academic programs which would enable students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Typically, the community colleges had no requirements for admission except graduation from high school. They were oriented and dedicated to serving the needs of the residents of the local community -- in contrast to the four-year institutions that were predominantly residential campuses, drawing students from hundreds and even thousands of miles away.

The community colleges welcomed all segments of the society and made it realistic, for the first time in the history of education in the United States, for the majority of citizens to aspire to a college education. The low cost of the community colleges removed the barrier to college for economically disadvantaged segments of society; then open admissions policies removed the barrier of poor records of past academic achievement; and the nonresidential campus opened college opportunities to students who could live at home and fulfill job and family responsibilities while commuting to college. To adults, of course, these "commuter colleges" opened up all kinds of new possibilities, and they attended in great numbers, thus calling attention to the past unwitting exclusion of adult learners from conventional higher education.

2. A second factor contributing to the rise of non-traditional education also has its roots in the years following World War II. The high birth rates of the late 1940's created a bulge in the educational system, as the babies

born in returning veterans' families moved through the schools. By the 1970's, this generation was moving out of the colleges, reversing the previous situation: supply began to exceed demand in higher education. Furthermore, the birth rate of the 1960's and 1970's showed a substantial decline. As colleges became familiar with the birth-rate statistics, it became quite clear that enrollments would continue to decline, forcing reductions in personnel and resources unless some new market of college students could be found. Adults, of course, presented a potentially inexhaustible supply of students to cushion the drop in enrollments of traditional college-age students. It is probably no coincidence that the proliferation of non-traditional programs in the early 1970's came at the same time as the predicted diminution of the traditional youth market.

3. For some years prior to the rise of the non-traditional movement, the Ford Foundation and other organizations had encouraged the adoption of television and other new forms of communication for educational purposes. Their efforts went largely unheeded, however, as long as colleges had more students than they could handle with the known and familiar methods of instruction. But the slowing growth of enrollments, as well as a new emphasis on off-campus learning for adults, created an interest in advanced delivery systems, and the use of the new media for education took on a new life.

Added to the growing sophistication of communications technology and delivery have been new developments in instructional design. Programmed instruction and computer-assisted and computer-managed instruction are all

giving rise to realistic expectations for independent, self-paced learning that can be effectively guided and monitored.

4. The continuing "knowledge explosion" has probably contributed two motivators to the non-traditional movement. First, advanced technology has saved human labor and created more leisure time for the average adult. Women, in particular, are beginning to use their new-found leisure by seeking further education and work opportunities. Secondly, the rapid obsolescence of knowledge is forcing workers back to school for continuing education. Increasingly, states are passing legislation requiring periodic study for professional and technical workers. Lifelong learning, whether for jobs or leisure or personal development, is becoming a clear need or desire for many adults.

Thus, the rise of the non-traditional movement in the U.S. is the result of a complex tapestry of motivations and actions -- some altruistic and some self-serving; some government-sponsored, others privately sponsored; some spontaneous, others carefully planned. What they seem to have in common is a commitment to provide the options and flexibility that will permit people of all ages and from all walks of life to pursue college educations.

#### An Overview of the Components of Non-Traditional Education

While variety and diversity characterize non-traditional education today, the programs have some characteristics in common. Most importantly, non-traditional education is student-centered, as distinct from being faculty-centered or institution-centered. It "puts the student first and the institution second, concentrates more on the former's needs than the latter's convenience, encourages diversity of individual opportunity rather than

uniform prescription and de-emphasizes time, space, and even course requirements in favor of competence and, where applicable, performance. It has concern for the learner of any age and circumstance, for the degree aspirant as well as the person who finds sufficient reward in enriching life through constant, periodic, or occasional study."

That statement, made by the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (1973, p. xv) and widely quoted by educators, has important ramifications with respect to the students, content, location, and methods of instruction. It may be helpful to provide brief explanations of these components of non-traditional education before proceeding to more detailed descriptions of some of the programs that constitute non-traditional education.

Students. A non-traditional student is one who needs or desires one or more of the kinds of flexibility introduced by non-traditional programs. More than one-third of American college students today are over the age of 25, and the average age of students in the community colleges is about 28 years. Furthermore, the number of part-time learners in college has already surpassed the number of full-time students, and the number of part-time learners is continuing to increase about three times as rapidly as full-time learners.

Content. In keeping with the student-centered orientation of the non-traditional movement, the content of non-traditional programs is frequently determined by a market survey to discover what adult learners want. Most market surveys conducted by institutions follow the general pattern revealed in a national survey of the learning interests of adults between the ages

of 18 and 60. The data show education related to job training and advancement in the lead, with 43 percent of the potential adult market expressing greatest interest in vocationally relevant education. Other learning interests were as follows: general education, 13 percent; hobbies and recreation, 13 percent; home and family living, 12 percent; personal development, seven percent; and public affairs, religion, and other subjects, nine percent (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974). Thus the content of non-traditional programs is likely to emphasize the utilization of knowledge for practical purposes such as job advancement, home management, recreation, and other areas of importance in the daily lives of adults.

Location. The location of learning opportunities is probably the most distinctive mark of non-traditional programs. Although evening colleges and extension divisions are frequently included as non-traditional programs because they provide scheduling alternatives for adult learners, the newer non-traditional programs operate completely free of "place" requirements. Education may be delivered almost anywhere -- home, office, or even commuter trains. Or education may be achieved through "learning contracts" that enable students to utilize a great variety of formal or informal learning resources, wherever they are found.

Method. In keeping with the spirit of providing maximum flexibility for the student, non-traditional programs make use of some of the newest methods for individualizing education. Non-traditional methods are often designed to give learners the freedom to pace and direct their studies.

Because of its critical role in non-traditional education, the component of method is given further attention below.

In summary, this overview illustrates the major forms and components of non-traditional education. Programs may be non-traditional in four ways -- students, locations, methods, or content. In 1972, 70 percent of the college programs claiming to be "non-traditional" were non-traditional with respect to the type of students served; 67 percent claimed non-traditional locations; 57 percent used non-traditional methods; and 48 percent offered non-traditional content. Only 20 percent of the programs were non-traditional with respect to students, location, methods, and content. But most of the programs were distinctive on two or more of the characteristics (Ruyle and Geiselman, 1974).

#### Methodological Components and Illustrative Programs

The most visible components of the non-traditional movement are the older adult students and the off-campus locations. Indeed, most colleges joining the non-traditional parade are emphasizing these two components. But in the long run it is probably teaching and learning methods that give sustaining life to the movement. The new delivery systems and recent advances in instructional techniques are the foundation for some of the more sophisticated non-traditional programs that are receiving great national attention. It may be helpful now to describe some of the methods of non-traditional education along with a few illustrations of how programs combine non-traditional components in unique ways.

(1) Delivery systems. The United States has been involved for hundreds of years in facilitating the delivery of education to citizens. The "extension services" that began in the last century taught the latest knowledge about farming to rural populations by transporting the "teacher" to the "students" who were living on farms and in small towns. In this century, the physical extension of education has been accomplished largely through the ambitious effort to establish entire colleges closer to the people. This effort culminated in the recommendation of the Carnegie Commission to create public community colleges "within commuting distance" of all citizens. Today's non-traditional movement continues the extension thrust by providing the ultimate convenience of delivering education into the living rooms, neighborhoods, and offices of learners. Correspondence study and television, in an infinite variety of forms, provide the basis for distant-learning systems.

(a) Correspondence study. The oldest educational delivery system designed to take education to the learner is correspondence study, introduced in the United States by the University of Chicago in 1892. Gradually, simple paper-and-pencil correspondence courses have evolved into learning systems with considerable reliance on modern instructional design. Materials are likely to consist of study guides, programmed texts, self-administered tests, and the like. Furthermore, today's correspondence course is likely to be coupled with telephone, radio, television, or tape cassettes. Correspondence courses are common throughout the United States and they are offered by even the most traditional universities. For

example, five of the ten largest state universities in the central portion of the United States offer large correspondence programs. In 1974, one state university offered 300 correspondence courses enrolling nearly 10,000 students.

A more novel correspondence model of current interest is the newspaper course launched in 1973 by the University of California at San Diego. The course, consisting of 20 lectures written by American scholars, was carried in 250 newspapers across the country. While many readers probably read the series for their own enjoyment, 5,000 students were enrolled for credit with some 200 cooperating colleges. The newspapers published the course materials without charge; the colleges provided instructors, tests of student achievement, and degree credit.

(b) Television. In its various forms, television constitutes the glamour delivery system for education. Chicago TV College, founded in 1956, is the oldest media-based, degree-granting college in the United States. It is a two-year public community college, supported by state and local funds. It has no campus but delivers about four credit courses each semester to approximately 2,300 students over public (i.e., noncommercial) television. Seventy-five percent of the students are women who find it convenient to participate in the two lessons per week at home. In the 20 years of its existence, Chicago TV College has provided over 150,000 metropolitan-area residents with approximately 215,000 credit hours of education, and it is estimated that approximately 20,000 viewers watch each program. Most of the credits are used by students to apply toward conventional degrees, but

the college has granted 400 degrees that were earned entirely by television. Most of those degrees were granted to confined learners -- prisoners, and patients in the veterans' hospitals -- for whom a higher education would have been impossible without TV College.

Chicago TV College still places heavy emphasis on the television presentation, but the emerging model is to use television as only one component of the course. The most sophisticated use of educational television is seen in the new University of Mid-America (UMA), founded in 1974. It is operated by a consortium of six large state universities located in the relatively rural central portion of the United States, where "distant learning" is a necessity for many geographically isolated learners. The UMA project is heavily funded by the federal government and by some private foundations. The courses, which were developed at high cost, will be available for lease in other open-learning systems, and the extensive evaluation and research program which is part of the project is also expected to be a national resource for those interested in non-traditional education that makes use of the new media.

UMA places heavy emphasis on instructional design and uses a wide range of methods, including broadcast television, workbooks, textbooks, long-playing records, audio- and video-cassettes, tutors, and local newspapers. One of the objectives of the UMA project is to carefully integrate the "media and the message," i.e., to establish sound guidelines for the selection of media appropriate to various instructional goals. In contrast to the low-cost, modest productions of Chicago TV College, UMA represents a highly

sophisticated and expensive delivery system. In addition, UMA emphasizes the importance of personal contact, through the operation of geographically-dispersed learning centers where students may engage in a variety of learning activities, including viewing video-cassette lessons and talking with academic counselors. The mail and toll-free telephone lines provide other means for personal contact.

At the Open College of Miami-Dade Community College in Florida, a computer-managed system is used to provide personal attention. Learners enrolled in media-based courses in Open College mail survey tests to the computer center and receive in return a "personalized" diagnosis of their learning problems, along with a prescription for appropriate learning activities. The computerized messages have proved very popular with students, who consistently rate this service as one of the most popular features of the courses.

At the present time, there are numerous models of open learning systems built around the component of public television. Almost all of the population of the United States has access to television. Indeed, there are more television sets than bathtubs in the United States -- one television set for every two inhabitants. Moreover, the average household operates its set(s) more than six hours per day. Many people are convinced that the major impact of education delivered over the public broadcasting system may be on the viewer who watches an instructional program without taking it for credit. One course, with an "official" enrollment of only 18 students, for example, sold 1300 study guides, and thousands more than that number undoubtedly viewed one or more presentations.

There are also closed television methods, known as instructional television fixed services (ITFS), which use low-power, point-to-point transmission. This method is frequently used for cooperative programs between universities and industry. The university simply transmits an on-campus class to a distant classroom provided by an industrial firm. Two-way communications permit workers at the firm to participate in class discussions almost as though they were present on the campus.

ITFS arrangements are not expensive, and they frequently pay for themselves without governmental assistance. Companies may pay anything from \$15 to \$6000 per year to participate, and the universities have few costs beyond those required for on-campus classes. While the use of ITFS is not extensive at present, the potential is quite great. One university in California is presently offering 30 courses per semester via ITFS, and its equipment could handle 80 courses without additional cost.

There are also other forms of media used to deliver fairly traditional college courses to non-traditional learners. Among these are audio- and video-tapes which offer the ultimate in scheduling convenience and an educational telephone network which permits low-cost, two-way audio communication.

(2) Learning Contracts. Philosophically and pedagogically, "learning contracts" represent the other end of the spectrum from the media delivery systems described above. Whereas non-traditional delivery systems tend to emphasize courses carefully designed by teams of highly trained experts in instructional design and media presentation, non-traditional programs based

on the learning contract emphasize student responsibility for the quality of learning. In this model, the student, with the help of faculty advisors, draws up a learning contract, which is a written plan for his or her education, with objectives, learning activities, and assessment procedures specified. The system of learning contracts is well illustrated by one of America's best-known non-traditional institutions -- Empire State College, founded in 1971 as one of 64 degree-granting colleges in the public higher-education system of New York. Empire State has no campus. Rather it has 30 learning centers located primarily in the population centers of the state. In 1975, there were over 3500 students enrolled, and another 800 applicants were awaiting openings. The students ranged in age from 16 to 72, with an average age of 37. The majority were employed full-time.

When the student enrolls at Empire State, a learning contract is negotiated between the student and a faculty member who is known as a "mentor." The contract describes the educational goals of the student, the planned learning activities, length of learning time, amount of credit, and procedures for assessment. The student typically carries out several contracts before receiving an associate or bachelor's degree (the degrees normally awarded upon completion of a two-year or four-year higher educational institution, respectively).

The purpose of the learning contract is to create an educational program uniquely tailored to individual needs. Learning activities specified in the contract may involve a great variety of activities, including independent study under the guidance of a mentor, a formal course at another college, a

correspondence or media-based course, an internship in a government or social agency, a cooperative project with fellow students, or foreign travel. A student may also receive degree credit for relevant competencies developed prior to enrollment at Empire State. Such competencies may be demonstrated in various ways -- through satisfactory performance on tests, submission of a portfolio of accomplishments, documentation of appropriate experiential learning, etc.

Empire State College has a research staff that evaluates virtually every phase of the program -- from the backgrounds of students (most are middle-class with some previous college experience) to their destinations upon leaving Empire State (most go to graduate school). Program evaluations show a high level of student satisfaction and a high level of faculty dedication. But a major complaint of faculty is that the learning contract method requires considerably more work than other models of higher education. So far, the costs of the individualized program of Empire State are somewhat lower than those of the more conventional colleges in the New York system.

#### Noninstructional Components

The off-campus, non-classroom learning espoused by non-traditional education has raised two fundamental noninstructional issues. First, if "time" and "place" are considered irrelevant as measures of learning, what measures will replace the credit traditionally granted for time served in classroom study? Second, how can information and guidance be made available to off-campus learners? Both questions are being attacked with vigor, and solutions are sought in a variety of ways.

New measures of learning. The need for non-traditional measures of learning has stimulated several interesting efforts. One of these seeks to convert non-traditional learning into traditional credit, whereas another is concerned with breaking away from credit-hour measures altogether. The conversion tactic is represented by two different nationwide projects, both sponsored by nongovernmental educational agencies. The College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) was launched in 1967 by the College Entrance Examination Board to help non-traditional learners demonstrate academic knowledge by offering them 60- or 90-minute objective tests in many different fields. In 1975, almost 100,000 people showed up at about 900 test centers across the country to take examinations that would lead to college credit. About 1800 American colleges and universities now grant academic credit for satisfactory performance on CLEP examinations. While most people earn relatively few credits by examination, it is now possible to earn a bachelor's degree on the basis of examinations alone.

Another approach to the conversion of non-traditional learning to traditional credit is taken by the Office of Educational Credit of the American Council on Education. This office was established to make recommendations to colleges regarding credit for instruction sponsored by noncollege organizations. The office sends a team of subject-matter specialists to visit the site of courses that may be offered by government agencies, industrial or commercial firms, labor unions, and the like. The team scrutinizes the courses and develops recommendations regarding the amount and category of credit to be awarded, and the Office of Educational

Credit publishes a catalog of such recommendations for use by higher educational institutions. As of November 1975, this program had reviewed 722 courses offered by 45 organizations, involving about 140,000 students in 18 states.

A third and somewhat different approach to the measurement and crediting of non-traditional learning is illustrated by the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL), a project in which approximately 200 colleges are working with Educational Testing Service to develop and test new measures of nonclassroom learning. The goal of CAEL is not so much to convert non-traditional learning into traditional credits as to make more useful assessments of the skills and competencies of non-traditional learners. CAEL is studying the usefulness of measures such as portfolios (dossiers on evidence of learning assembled by the learner), produce evaluation (essays, paintings, etc.), and the assessment of occupational and interpersonal competencies via performance tasks. Such measures are of considerable importance to the entire concept of the "learning contract" model of Empire State College and an increasing number of similar programs.

Information and guidance for off-campus learners. Another noninstructional issue which is receiving increasing attention is the provision of information and guidance for non-traditional learners. A recent study of the learning needs of adults in the state of California concluded that the most immediate problem for the state lay not in the creation of new instructional programs, but rather in better dissemination of information about existing opportunities

(Peterson and Hefferlin, 1975). A survey of California adults revealed the widespread desire of adults for help in locating information about present educational opportunities and for help in assessing their own capabilities and potential.

The varieties of efforts made to meet these needs seem unlimited. They include expanding on-campus counseling facilities to accommodate the schedules and interests of adults, forming consortia of educational and community agencies, and creating completely new "information and referral" centers. The methods used range from providing information by telephone or mail, or having a counselor in a shopping center or on a mobile van that travels through neighborhoods, to designing computerized guidance systems that may furnish anything from up-to-date information about learning and career opportunities to an opportunity for interaction with computer programs that take into account the values and priorities of the individual. It is not unusual for some of the information and counseling centers to receive as many as 1000 requests per month for assistance with educational and career information and decisions. Whatever the form, there is now widespread agreement that the non-traditional educational movement must provide auxiliary services to meet the individual needs of adult learners.

### Summary

The non-traditional education movement is a natural outcome of the continuous societal press for educational opportunities for broader spectrums

of the population. It is also a recognition of the knowledge explosion and the need for lifelong learning. Up until about 1970, adult learners were not a visible segment of the collegiate population, but today they constitute a major and rapidly expanding group of college students. Colleges are moving to meet the needs of adult learners with an enormous variety of programs designed to offer new alternatives. Programs launched in the 1970's tend to emphasize flexible arrangements with respect to the time and place of learning, but these new options are also leading to greater interest in and experimentation with the more basic elements ~~of elements~~ of education -- content, method, and measurement.

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