

ADULT EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Over the past decade or so "Demographics" has become a popular indoor sport among college planners. The rules of the game are fairly simple, but the stakes are high. The goal is to get as many adults as possible for your side, and the strategy consists of figuring out what adults want and need and convincing them that your college has it. The penalty for not winning the battles as well as the war may be severe. Since it seems clear that there are not enough young students of traditional college age (18-24) to go around to all of the colleges now in existence, survival may literally depend on the ability to attract adult students to the college.

In the United States, higher education is competitive, and the game of Demographics must be skillfully played. Each college is armed with data, charts, projections, and studies, and the skill comes in predicting what will happen and when to the traditional generation of college students. Once the slope of decline (and it usually is decline) has been established, trustees, faculty, and administrators can frighten themselves into action. A game well played would be one in which adults come in the front gates of the campus in sufficient numbers to provide a cover for the lack of students of traditional age.

Prepared for the Conference on "Adult Learners in Higher Education: Planning for Excellence." Central Michigan University, June 19, 1987.

This introduction to adult education in the United States is a bit cynical, perhaps, but it presents a fairly accurate picture of the motivation for the entrance of higher education into adult education over the past ten years. Overall, I would say that the game has been played exceptionally well by most colleges.

Although demographers have been crying "wolf" for almost a decade now, warning that college enrollments could fall as much as 15 to 30 percent, only once in recent years has total enrollment in higher education actually gone down. That was in 1984, when enrollment dropped from the all-time record of 12.46 million students in 1983 to 12.24 million in 1984. Last fall enrollments rose by 151,000 students, once again surprising demographers at the Center for Education Statistics who had predicted a decline of 80,000 students (OERI, 1986). The stability of enrollment is widely attributed to the ability of colleges to attract older, part-time students.

But there is another story to be told. While many colleges have been absorbed in the game of Demographics, the world external to higher education has changed substantially, and the goal of colleges that are alert to changing times is no longer to collect adults but to meet the learning needs of adults as well as to enter the "Learning Society."

The concept of the learning society has two interpretations. One refers to the fact that we live in a society which is increasingly dependent on knowledge. Know-how and ideas have replaced land and machines as the economic assets of our society. Where we once talked about the agrarian society and then the industrial society, we now talk about the learning society.

The second interpretation refers to the pervasiveness of the activity of learning. When learning spreads beyond schools and colleges to pervade the workplace, senior citizens' centers, and commuter trains, and when people of all ages and from all walks of life participate in learning activities, then we can legitimately refer to the society in which all of this takes place as the "learning society."

The theme of this conference is "Adult Learners in Higher Education: Planning for Excellence." The conference is studded with some of the best-known names from the field of adult education. Most of the speakers, I note, are addressing the general theme of how to design and promote the types of educational experiences that will enhance learning for adults. They will bring their expertise to bear on a wide diversity of topics, including curriculum, teaching, adult development, and other timely subjects related to planning for excellence in higher education. Mostly, they will be talking about the adjustment of the college to its adult students, i.e. about needed changes within the college to serve adults better.

To set the stage for this inward look, I would like to begin by looking outward--to the relationship between colleges and the society they serve. The question I have set for myself is the macro issue of how colleges can serve the society of the 21st Century with excellence. I should like to begin this excursion into the world in which colleges find themselves in the closing years of the 20th Century by a brief look at the changes in the mission of higher education that have occurred in this century.

Gradually, higher education in the United States has been

shifting from a privilege to a right. By the beginning of the next Century, it may be a responsibility. As we talk more and more about the personal and societal tragedy of illiteracy, about the dependence of the economy on ideas and the creative use of information, about the place of the United States in world markets, and about the quality of life, it becomes clear that education is a responsibility. Individually, we are responsible for making the best possible use of our talents; collectively, we are responsible for developing the talents of all our citizens through education.

Thus the first historical shift that I wish to illustrate is the shift in the stance of higher education from exclusiveness to inclusiveness i.e., from the college prerogative of selecting students to the college responsibility of educating them.

Gradually at first, and then with increasing momentum, the barriers to college admission have come tumbling down. In the early days of private colleges, criteria for admission were social and financial. Those excluded were primarily those who lacked family status and money for tuition and expenses. With the advent of public colleges, the meritocratic phase of higher education appeared, and education was offered to those who "merited" it by virtue of their performance in school. Those excluded were those who lacked the high school grades and/or test scores to suggest academic promise. Ultimately, it became clear that most barriers to higher education were highly interrelated, operating to exclude quite consistently certain groups of people. With that realization, the national picture changed abruptly, and there were earnest efforts to abolish all remaining barriers.

The call for equality of educational opportunity brought the establishment of low tuition, open-admission community colleges at the rate of one per week throughout the late 1960s. Then higher education began actively recruiting previously excluded poor people, ethnic minorities, and women. Now colleges are looking for ways to abolish other exclusionary practices, including discrimination because of age, part-time student status, and geographical isolation.

Higher education in the United States today is largely non-selective; only 16 percent of all American colleges can be considered "selective," and it is estimated that two-thirds of all freshmen attend open admission colleges (OERI, 1986). That includes some 1300 open door community colleges that enroll more than four million students--a majority of all college freshmen and sophomores in the United States, as well as a majority of so-called nontraditional students.

In recent years, virtually every category of "non-traditional" student has grown at a faster rate than traditional groups. Between 1972 and 1982, for example, the rate of growth for women was 61 percent, compared to 15 percent for men; minority enrollments increased 85 percent, compared to 30 percent for whites; students 35 and older increased by 77 percent, compared to 23 percent for students 18 to 24 years-of-age, and part-time students increased by 66 percent compared to 19 percent for full-timers (NCES, 1983).

This notion of offering education to everyone who wants it has a profound effect upon the design of higher education. Selecting those who are predicted to succeed in the type of

college education that we offer is a very different task from educating all who come. Under selective admissions, the emphasis is on improving prediction. If a student fails, we look for more accurate measures of predicting success. The questions we ask are these: How can we enter measures of motivation into the prediction equations to make them more accurate? Do admissions tests predict performance as well for minorities as for Caucasians? How can we recruit the kind of student who will succeed in college?

In the meritocratic era, we directed our research to improving the accuracy of prediction formulas about who would succeed in college. Today we are directing our attention to improving education for everyone. The big questions in egalitarian higher education are not how can we predict motivation, but how can we create it? Not how well tests predict grades, but how well they diagnose learning strengths and weaknesses. Not how to recruit those who will be successful, but how to make successful those who come. A national mission of equality of educational opportunity has considerable impact on each institution of higher education as well as on our conceptualization of educational excellence.

The second trend I want to talk about in connection with the learning society I shall label campus-expansiveness. Geographically, as well as conceptually, colleges are reaching out to include a broader community. Early in the history of higher education, colleges were deliberately located in small towns. Faculty lived around the campus and students lived on the campus, and college was a community unto itself--its geographical

isolation a symbol of its removal from the worldly concerns of the masses.

Things are quite different today. Colleges pride themselves on being very much a part of the real world. College professors serve as mayors, and students run for city council; hotels abound with visitors from every corner of the earth, and airports bustle with professors off to consult with business and government about solutions to very practical problems. Not only have colleges moved from campus into town and more broadly into the world, but the new strategy is to take the colleges to the people either by locating them in population centers or by extending them into rural areas. Our host--Central Michigan University--is a perfect example of the expansion of the campus. Located in a small town, it now reaches out to more than fifty locations throughout the world.

Where off-campus learning facilities do not exist naturally, they can be created through imaginative use of technology. Talk-back television permits isolated learners to join in class discussions conducted hundred of miles away. Cable television is reaching into a majority of American television homes, and video disks and personal computers, are spreading information more rapidly than we can absorb it.

The trend is as clear as it is steady. The college campus has burst explosively from its boundaries, and decentralization of learning is a major trend of our times. The demographics of the birth rate, combined with the explosion of knowledge in the information age, are pressing even thoroughly traditional colleges into looking for new clienteles to serve and new

locations of operation. Thus, one of the consequences of the decision to include rather than exclude people from postsecondary learning opportunities is the expanded campus that takes learning to the people. The two movements that I have described as people-inclusive and campus-expansive are fully underway, and they pave the way for the subjects to which I turn now, which is the changing role of higher education in the Learning Society.

The Changing Role of Higher Education in Society

Most change in higher education comes not from initiatives on the part of the faculty, but rather from forces external to the institution--factors such as the demographics of the birth rate, migration patterns, directives from the state board of education, sweeping court decisions, shifts in job markets, and the like. These external pressures for change are sufficient now to call for a new lens through which to view the role of higher education in society. That new lens might be likened to a wide-angle lens which includes a great variety of educational providers and an unprecedented diversity of learners of all ages.

I would like to look at the education industry through the wide-angle lens of the learning society. To do that, let me set forth five propositions. The propositions are derived from an analysis of current trends and happenings, but they set the stage for thinking about how colleges and universities can serve with excellence, both adult learners and the learning society.

Proposition One. Proposition One states that institutions of higher education no longer enjoy a monopoly on the provision of educational services. In yesteryear when college students were late adolescents whose primary occupation was going to school, if they were engaged in education at all, it was typically as a full-time college student. Colleges sometimes competed with one another for students, but students didn't have a lot of other learning options.

Today, the most rapidly growing population of college students consists of adult part-time learners who have plenty of other options. Nevertheless college enrollments of part-time students between 25 and 34 years-of-age increased 70 percent between 1972 and 1982; for those over 35 years-of-age, the increase was 77 percent. More than 40 percent of all college students in the United States are now 25 or older, and 42 percent attend part-time. Adults who enroll in college classes choose that option from a large number of possible alternatives, including courses offered by employers, labor unions, professional associations, community organizations, television, and a host of other providers. Higher education today provides a little over a third of the organized learning opportunities for adults; the remaining two-thirds is provided by a vast array of schools and non-collegiate providers, many of whom offer everything colleges do and more. They may offer credit, degrees, education leading to promotion, licensure, personal fulfillment, intellectual stimulation, and practical skills. Industry today spends 30 billion dollars annually on the education and training of employees (Carnevale, 1986). That means that business

currently allocates more money for education and training than all fifty states combined allocate for higher education (Lynton and Elman, 1987). Aetna, Xerox, IBM, and other corporate giants have built campuses with classrooms and residence halls that rival anything offered in our most exclusive and expensive colleges. Some corporations have the largest teaching forces in the nation. IBM employed 6,000 full-time instructors last year, and the banking industry offered 1.3 formal courses for every employee (Carnevale, 1986).

Professional associations, too, are becoming the builders of vast education networks. The American Management Association conducts 3,200 programs annually, and enrolls 100,000 learners, but even they have no corner on the market for the most popular of all adult education courses--business. It is estimated that 3,000 different providers, many of them private entrepreneurs, conduct some 40,000 public business seminars each year.

Added to these providers are the military services, which provide education and learning for 4 million students, and government which claims 15 million workers, half of whom undertake some form of organized instruction each year (Hodgkinson, 1985).

While colleges have seen the rising interest in adult education as a godsend to compensate for the declining youth market, the concurrent rise of other providers of educational options has placed higher education in unaccustomed competition with industry, government, the military, and others for students. And so Proposition One states that the learning society has given higher education new competition for the growing adult market.

Proposition Two is related to Proposition One. It states that the roles of education providers, once reasonably distinct, are increasingly blurred. It is no longer clear what courses merit academic credit, who may offer it, or who needs it. Indeed the distinction that we used to make between the education offered by colleges and the training offered by industry, is difficult to maintain when applied to providers. Colleges today are heavily involved in training as well as in education, and the programs of many corporations contain as much emphasis on theory, research, and personal development as those of any college. Consider, for example, this description of IBM's Systems Research Institute:

The Institute's educational philosophy is in many ways that of a university. It stresses fundamental and conceptual education and allows students to choose those courses that will best nurture their own development. The intent is to stimulate and challenge, to teach the theoretical and the practical, to discuss and argue differing viewpoints, to broaden the individual, focusing on his or her special skills.

(IBM Systems, 1981, p. 6)

Contrast that broad educational philosophy with this course description taken from a college catalogue. The course is called Airline Reservations and carries three academic credits. The description reads as follows:

Prepares students for airline employment opportunities through a familiarization of the procedures involved in airline reservations, the use of official airline guides, and airline route structures.

If one were given a blind sample of course descriptions today, it would be hard to tell whether they came from industry, colleges, museums, labor unions, or professional associations.

A related blurring of educational functions occurs in the

distinction between credit and non-credit learning. Within higher education the waters have been muddied by some shifting of non-credit, non-funded courses to the credit, funded side of the ledger. Outside of higher education, non-colleges are beginning to offer not only fully legitimate credit courses, but full-scale degree programs.

A 1985 study (Eurich, 1985) identified 18 corporation-founded institutions that have been accredited (or have applied for such status) and granted permission to give academic degrees. Most grant bachelors and masters degrees, but they range from Associate through Ph.D. Nell Eurich, who directed the study, concluded that "it would not be too fanciful to foresee 100--if not hundreds--of corporate degree programs in the next fifty years."

While the image of academic degrees offered by these corporate colleges is still mildly sensational, the movement of collegiate institutions into the realm of non-credit instruction is now commonplace. Between 1968 and 1978 more than a thousand colleges introduced non-credit programs on--or more likely off--their campuses. Today it is the norm rather than the exception for degree-granting colleges to be involved in non-degree instruction.

But whether a course was originally taken for credit is not especially important today. It is increasingly easy to convert non-credit learning into college degrees. Just a decade ago only about a third of American colleges granted credit if students could demonstrate on standardized examinations that they knew the material; today 93 percent of all colleges grant credit by

examination, and 90 percent accept GED test scores as the equivalent of a high school diploma. Ten years ago, only 14 percent of the colleges would consider granting credit for experiential learning; today more than one-third do (Stadtman, 1980; Hexter and Andersen, 1986).

Historically, colleges have been reasonably generous in accepting credit from other colleges; today they are increasingly likely to endorse learning regardless of its source. More than three-quarters of all colleges grant credit for courses offered by the armed services, and 38 percent grant academic credit for courses conducted by business and industry (Hexter and Andersen, 1986). The American Council on Education's Office of Education Credit lists over 2,000 courses offered by more than 180 corporations and government agencies. College and university faculty members conduct site visits at these nontraditional campuses in order to verify quality and recommend credit.

Illustrations of the blurring of once distinctive functions for higher education could be extended, but my point is that the education frontier is very large, and higher education is not alone out there. Thus Proposition Two states that the roles of the various educational providers in the learning society are far from clear. Defining the "mission" of the college has become a major issue for many colleges.

Proposition Three states that higher education no longer has the full-time commitment of students--or for that matter of faculty. In the past decade, the proportion of part-time students enrolled for college credit has gone from 32 percent to

42 percent. While there is some leveling off now, part-time enrollments continue to grow faster than full-time. In the fall of 1986, part-time students increased by 2 to 3 percent in all types of colleges except for private four-year colleges, which showed a drop of one percent in part-time students and a rise of 2 percent in full-time students (OERI, 1986). Projections are that part-time students will constitute 47 percent of the college population by 1995 (OERI, 1987).

But if the part-time student has presented a challenge to colleges, the phenomenal rise of the part-time faculty member is even more perplexing. About one-third of all faculty teaching in American colleges and universities today are part-time. In community colleges, they constitute a majority of the work force, and in some colleges, especially those serving an adult clientele, all students and all faculty are part-time. The number of part-time college teachers numbers 220,000, and it is estimated that they handle about a quarter of all credit hours generated across all institutions of higher education. The teachers range from CEOs and governors of states, to bank tellers and auto mechanics. Some are gypsy faculty, holding as many as three part-time appointments because they cannot find a full-time appointment. Occasionally, they are technical experts in scarce supply who want to teach, but cannot afford to do so when private industry pays two-to-three times the salary that colleges can afford.

Most colleges frankly exploit part-timers because they cost very little, and they offer maximum flexibility in times of uncertain enrollments. When a course section fails to meet

minimum enrollment requirements, or when full-time faculty have to be guaranteed an assignment, part-timers are released to accommodate last-minute changes (Gappa, 1984).

Thus Proposition Three states that the nature of the undergraduate experience is changing because of the transient nature of both students and faculty. This is a result of the learning society, and it represents major change in the way colleges are perceived and the way they perceive themselves.

Proposition Four states that learning has become a lifelong necessity for almost everyone. There are very few jobs left in this world that are immune from the necessity for retraining and constant upgrading of skills and knowledge. The development of human capital is now recognized as a fundamental and necessary component of progress in this era of technological change and labor-intensive services. In today's climate, the widening gap between the skills available in the work force and the skills needed for social welfare and economic productivity is nothing short of alarming. There is a growing gap between the supply and demand for educated workers.

Lifelong education for jobs is the most visible symptom of social change. But in that change, from full-time education for a few years to part-time education for a lifetime, lie changes for curriculum, instruction, delivery systems, and lifestyles. So far in the history of industrialized nations, there has been a pronounced tendency to increase the separation between education, work, and leisure. The result has been termed the "linear lifeplan" in which education is for the young, work for the

middle-aged, and leisure for the elderly. But a study of the progression and influence of the linear lifeplan in the United States warns that "There can be little doubt that many of our most serious and persistent problems stem from the ways in which education, work, and leisure are distributed throughout lifetimes" (Best and Stern, 1976, p. 24).

The major social problem is unemployment which, of course, is not new. For the past fifty years, the United States has been unable to provide jobs during peacetime for everyone willing and able to work. A blended lifeplan (Cross, 1981) in which education, work, and leisure are concurrent throughout the lifespan can address not only the urgent demands for lifelong education for the workforce, but it can also address personal and societal problems that are arising for youth, the elderly, two-career families, and mid-career executives. There are increasing demands from a variety of people for greater balance in their lives--more job-sharing, more part-time educational arrangements, more leisure (Cross, 1981).

Viewed through the lens of the learning society, the shift to lifelong learning, which tends to be intermittent and part-time, suggests demands for flexibility and responsiveness to change on the part of higher education.

Proposition Five pertains to the emergence of a world-wide learning society. In the United States, we tend to equate lifelong learning with education for adults. In Europe, and especially in the publications of UNESCO, they make quite clear that lifelong learning begins at birth and ends at death. The

official UNESCO definition is that:

The term 'lifelong education and learning' denotes an overall scheme aimed both at restructuring the existing education system and at developing the entire educational potential outside the education system; in such a scheme men and women are the agents of their own education. (UNESCO, 1976)

That definition contains, among other things, a basic challenge to schools and colleges to develop the educational methods that will prepare young people for their futures as lifelong learners. Ted Sizer (1984), in discussing the needed reforms in high school programs in the United States, claims that "A self-propelled learner is the goal of a school, and teachers should insist that students habitually learn on their own" (p. 216). That becomes especially important as we envision a future in which millions of adults are added to the ranks of learners. Most traditional education is still geared to the notion of teachers as experts and students as empty vessels to be filled. Alvin Toffler, futurist author of The Third Wave, claims that "the reasons schools are in deep trouble today is that they no longer simulate the future, they simulate the past" (Toffler, 1981). Schools devised for the factory world emphasized virtues such as obedience, punctuality, and the willingness to do rote work because those were the demands of the Second Wave workforce. Despite the arrival of the Third Wave, dominated by electronics, telecommunications, and the information society, schools still simulate the standardized work patterns of the factory. Everyone arrives for class and departs at a common time; students move on to the next lesson en masses, whether they have learned the material or not, and there is still an emphasis on absorbing

information, despite the futility of that mode of education in the era of the knowledge explosion.

The drive for educational excellence, which started with some vigor in 1983 and continues unabated into 1987, is placing heavy emphasis on the development of higher level cognitive functioning. There is a great deal of talk about the need for broadly educated people with the skills that will serve as the foundation for a lifetime of learning. That, say the reform reports, calls for fewer information-laden lectures and more active analysis, synthesis, and application of knowledge on the part of students.

Thus Proposition Five emphasizes a change in the methods of teaching and learning, not just to accommodate adult learners, but to provide for the long-range needs of the learning society.

These five propositions taken together will, I believe, affect higher education profoundly. They raise questions about how higher education should respond to extensive societal and technological change. I have contended in this keynote address that educators should be thinking about more than new ways to deliver the standard curriculum, about more than convenient schedules and locations for new populations of learners, about more than increasing the accessibility of lifelong learning opportunities. Rather, it seems to me that the task is to reconceptualize the role of higher education in the learning society.

Higher education no longer offers a four-year period in which students have the luxury of making the transition from child in

one family to parent in another. If we are to reach for excellence in higher education, then we need to plan for continuous transitions--transitions in the lives of individuals as well as transitions in society. Planning for excellence means looking inward to the tasks of improving education for people of all ages, and it means looking outward to serving a society that is necessarily dependent on education as its only means to a better world.

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