A Thumbnail Sketch of Research on Nontraditional Studies*

by

K. Patricia Cross

There is a saying that if you want an honest answer ask a child. But if you want an honest answer about education ask an adult. They are free to spend their time, money, and energy, on the things they really want to learn. And the great majority (over three-fourths) claim they would like to know more about something. To my way of thinking, a question that asks anyone if there is anything they would like to know more about--Yes or No--is stacked, but almost one-fourth of the adults did say No. Most of the No's came from men and women with less than an eighth grade education and from men over the age of 55.

It is also true, of course, that people are much more likely to say that they want to take a course than they are to actually register for one. But one-third of our respondents had engaged in some type of formal learning activity in the year prior to the study.

The things people <u>say</u> they would like to learn more about makes a fascinating study if a somewhat unreliable guide for planning. One of the things that stands out is that people want to learn how to <u>do</u> things--as opposed to how to think about things.

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Table 1 lists in order the preferences of the respondents when they were asked to check all subjects that they would like to learn more about. The top set of subjects were the most popular--endorsed by 25 percent or more--the bottom set consists of subjects that lack broad appeal, and the middle group is a mixture that has some messages of its own.

Notice that all of the top-ranked subjects concern what might be called adult universals--things that all adults do--handle money, run a home, use leisure time for pleasurable activities. The bottom group contains a few rather specialized occupational fields--engineering, sales, medicine--but it also includes all of the traditional academic subjects--with the interesting exception of the humanities--that were offered in the total list of some 50 subjects--social, biological and physical sciences plus English language.

The middle group of subjects is a mixed bag but a very interesting one. Most of the occupational curricula show up in the middle group, but so do the liberal arts courses that are taught primarily for personal enrichment (literature, philosophy and religion, and the arts) or for social responsibility (environmental studies, community problems, public affairs).

Thus although adults have made considerably less noise about it than some of the young people, it seems that they too are asking for relevance in education. They want first those things that relate to the necessities of everyday living, then come the interests in personal and community development, and finally the luxuries of the academic specialities of the social, physical, and biological sciences.

Having made that observation, it is important to say something about the bias of this group of respondents who represent the 77 percent of the population who want to learn more about something. The people in our sample most eager for

learning were young adults (age 25-29) who were somewhat more likely to be female than male. And the evidence is very clear that the more education people have, the more they want. For example, 94 percent of the female college graduates said they would like to learn new things compared to 54 percent of those with less than a grade school education. The pattern was consistent for both men and women; with each increment in educational level, there was a corresponding increment in desire to learn. Thus learning is habit forming--even if exposure to some of our most basic academic subjects doesn't result in their winning any popularity contests.

Table 2 shows the most common reasons for learning. This table really puzzles me when considered in conjunction with Table 1. The reasons people give for learning are enough to gladden the heart of the most high-brow educator whereas the subjects they say they want to learn--bridge, sewing, gardening--are middle-brow or low-brow. I have two explanations to offer. 1) They know what they are supposed to say on questionnaires and so they give socially acceptable reasons for learning, or 2) The apparent inconsistency between idealistic reasons and pragmatic choices lies in my bias and not necessarily in theirs. If I wanted to add to my personal enrichment, satisfy my curiosity, and become a happier person, for example, I might think about taking courses in the humanities--literature, music, art. But upon further reflection, I have to ask why learning more about gardening, or pottery, or cooking couldn't enrich life, satisfy curiosity, and make happier people.

(As a matter of actual fact, and to illustrate the range of individual differences which statistics tend to ignore, I found that spending the weekend learning more about these data did more to satisfy my curiosity and make me a happier person that I could have achieved through learning about either pragmatic gardening or uplifting literature.)

Now I'd like to move to a brief look at a comparison of what people say they would like to learn and what they pay their money and spend their time learning. In this analysis I am going to look mostly at the areas in which there are big discrepancies between desire and reality. In terms of subject matter, preferences expressed and courses actually taken are reasonably consistent--with occupational education, education for home and family living, and constructive use of leisure time all ranking high in preference as well as enrollment. The only subject that really seems out of order is religion. It ranked higher in courses taken than in courses desired. I suspect that the reason for this is its almost universal availability, its low cost, and the historic missionary spirit of churches that assumes it is their business to recruit learners. If those are the reasons for the relatively popular showing of religion, it implies success for the nontraditional studies movement where the major concern is to inform the public and to make education more freely available to those who want to learn.

Some of the most interesting gaps between desire and reality occurred not in the subject matter, but in the areas to which nontraditional study is directing its major attention--how and where education is delivered. By and large, our respondents are much more traditional than many of the leaders of the nontraditional movement might hope. Most adults want their education delivered in very traditional ways--via lectures and classes, on-the-job training, short term conferences and institutes, and independent study or private lessons. Notoriously unpopular--attractive to about one percent of the people with a desire to learn, are the new media delivery systems--T.V., audio and video cassettes, and records. I suspect that this is because of the unfamiliarity of people with these methods, but the age-old correspondence study wasn't much

more popular (three percent). It will be interesting to see if the emphasis on the media in models such as British Open University and Regional Examining University changes the picture regarding both the desire and the availability of new delivery systems for education.

But the present message in these data lies in the discrepancies between expressed desire and enrollment. Table 3 shows the four most popular forms of study (anything with more than ten percent in either column). Under the column labeled "desire" is the percent of would-be learners who want to learn something more about some subject who expressed a preference for the method listed. Under the "reality" column is the percent of those engaged in study during the past year and the form in which they received their education.

We can look at these data focusing on either of two interpretations. One interpretation would be to say that people who actually take courses are, by predilection, more likely to register for lectures than they are for on-the-job training. But we might also look at the data as commentary on availability. This would suggest that the reason for high enrollments in lectures is that that is what is available. Both interpretations conform to common sense and both are probably involved to some extent. But the question that is worth pursuing is, Is there more market than supply for on-the-job training and short term conferences?

Another question raised by Table 3 concerns the data on independent study. There are quite a few people out there who say they are studying on their own. It is the second most common way of learning even though it ranks quite low in desirability. This has three implications for action: 1) We should offer more options, 2) The low desirability of lonely learning spells caution for those launching home study kits (the regional learning centers of British Open

University and New York State probably serve very important socialization functions), and 3) The relative frequency of independent study may suggest a fairly substantial market for credit-by-examination--depending, of course, on what it is they are learning on their own. If it is gardening or pottery making, there is a pretty good competency-based exam built into the learning and probably no further reward is needed or desired.

Incidentally, a fairly simple analysis of the data on hand would tell us what kinds of subjects independent learners study and whether they want credit for it.

But the data in Table 4 sheds some light on the question of credit generally. Those data are usually interpreted as showing that adults are not hung-up on credit. The largest percentage say they don't care about credit and an even larger percentage engage in learning for no credit. On the other hand, two-thirds of the people desiring to learn would like some kind of credit, and credit seems to be generally more desirable than available. And that is good news for ETS and others interested in helping people get credit for what they know.

Having salved my research conscience by mentioning the variety of interpretations that can be given to the data at this stage of the analysis, I'm going to discuss the remaining tables in terms of the gaps between desire and reality--both to save time and because I think the hypotheses arising from that interpretive emphasis have more implications for practice than do those positing inherent differences between learners and would-be learners.

Table 5 shows the gaps between desire and reality for the sponsors of education. In the top set of sponsors, there is more opportunity than desire, while the bottom set indicates that more people want courses from these sponsors

than take them. People seem to be asking for more offerings from the educational establishment. The fact that Table 3 showed that people want more on-the-job training than they get but Table 5 shows that they reject employers as the sponsor makes me hypothesize that they would like legitimization of on-the-job training by the educational establishment, and perhaps it is also an indication that they want broader occupational training than they think the employer might offer.

Table 6 shows a pretty good correspondence between the desires and opportunities for satisfaction of the rather pleasurable aspects of learning (first four items). Apparently we are offering a reasonable opportunity to satisfy these desires. The second set of two items shows a little less desire than reality but that can probably be interpreted as the reality pressures for advancement and upward mobility. The third set of items shows more desire than opportunity and I think represents a kind of idealized picture of education. It would be nice to be happier and be a better parent and a more effective citizen, but that isn't really why many of us go to the work of taking classes. The other group of items in that category also represents frequently unfulfilled dreams such as getting a degree, a certificate or a new job. They represent things that people tell themselves they should do sometime, but don't often get around to doing.

These tables that I have labeled "discrepancy tables" are one way to look at the difference between what people want and what they get in education. But I want to turn briefly now to data that comes from a different source than learners and potential learners.

We surveyed colleges and universities to ask them what they were offering in the way of nontraditional studies. This survey was done under a subcontract

to the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education. The task here was to send a questionnaire to more than 2600 institutions. We got a 72 percent response rate (some simply returning a post card saying they had no nontraditional programs) with about 1200 usable questionnaires. This gives a quite representative picture of what's going on out there.

Although there was a strong tendency for institutions to think that they were more innovative than our tough-minded staff considered them, there is a lot of experimentation going on and it is of quite recent origin--with 62 percent of the programs that sponsors claimed were nontraditional not more than two years old and only 7 percent in existence for more than a decade. Nearly one-half of the colleges reported that they had some kind of nontraditional program in the sense that they did at least one of the following four things. 1) Served a new kind of student (working adults, housewives, etc.), 2) Had a nontraditional location for the learning experience (field work, home study, etc.), 3) Offered a distinctive method of instruction or learning experience (non-classroom or non-lecture methods), and 4) Offered an unconventional content (human studies, ecology, a special curricula or skill area). When the staff applied some more vigorous criteria to the institution's description of its nontraditional programs, we found that the proportion of institutions doing something that met at least one of the four criteria, shrunk from about one-half to about one-third of the institutions. It was also very apparent that the most common form of nontraditional study was to offer the traditional content via the usual methods of delivery to a new clientele. The University of California's extended campus program is typical as are the rash of special programs springing up for older women returning to colleges. The innovation is to finally let part-time students

study toward a degree--same place, same courses, same teaching methods, but new kinds of students. Running a close second to serving a new clientele were the programs that took education off the campus--non-traditional with respect to location. This could cover extension courses, T.V. courses beamed to remote stations, etc. In fact, most nontraditional programs reported distinctiveness in both location and student served--the typical extension course syndrome.

Seventy percent of the institutions reported they served nontraditional students, and 66 percent reported that location of instruction was a distinctive feature. Then a little more than half said they were offering something new in the way of method--individualized instruction, practicum, cooperative education, etc. Finally, somewhat less than half (48 percent) offered something new in the way of content

If we compare the priority desires of students as reported in the first questionnaire with the offerings of institutions reported in this one, the order is somewhat different but it is obvious that the adult market is pulling colleges and universities away from their traditional stance to some extent. The fact that occupational and career education ranks at the top of the offerings of the educational establishment is a nod to the market as are the relatively frequent offerings of courses in liberal studies and social problems which are also fairly popular with adults. It is to be expected, and probably quite appropriate, that the traditional curriculum would rank much higher in university and college priorities than in the priorities of the general populace. When our percentages from the research sample are translated into numbers of people, however, there are some 38 million people who express an interest in the traditional subject matter of colleges. (This has to be compared with the market of 62 million for occupational training, but it seems there is plenty of demand

to justify the growing supply.) Table 7 shows that the top priorities of adults in the general population--home responsibilities and recreation and leisure--are almost missing from the offerings of higher education establishments. It seems apparent that the major market for adult studies will continue to be supplied by the more typical high school and community adult education courses.

But the offerings of colleges and universities are growing at a rather rapid rate. Sixty percent of the responding institutions expected to expand their enrollment in their nontraditional programs next year. This expansion of nontraditional studies represents something rather different from the general growth of adult education. Most of the programs nominated as "non-traditional" by the institutions are not set up in the extension or evening divisions or under continuing education generally. Only 20 percent operate under the aegis of a separate administrative division, while 62 percent report directly to the usual academic administrators of the institution--dean of the faculty, academic vice president, dean of a college, etc. Likewise the respondents reported that in the vast majority of programs the regular faculty play the major role in both teaching and in policy making. Roughly 15 percent use adjunct faculty and about the same number use a special faculty that do not teach in the conventional programs of the institution.

The methods of instruction offered by nontraditional studies programs parallels so closely the preferences of adults that one wonders if the respondents simply like what they know or whether the institutions are being responsive to the market. In any event, the ranking of methods is stuffily traditional for both institutions and learners--with classroom lectures in the lead, followed by field work and then tutorial. Very few institutions (about 2 percent) do

anything with media such as radio, T.V., video tape, CAI, telephone. You will remember about the same proportion of adults expressed interest in these devices. The miracle of the new media seem to exist more in the minds of futuristic writers than in actual use in the field. There is more experimentation apparently with programmed instruction and with tape cassettes, with about 10 percent of the institutions reporting some use of these methods.

I shall conclude this thumbnail sketch of selected aspects of our research on nontraditional studies with a quick look at the problems reported by institutions. Table 8 shows the percent of institutions indicating factors posing problems to the implementation of nontraditional studies programs. There are no surprises in this table. The themes of money and difficulties in assessing learning run throughout the major problem areas. Although "lack of funds" serves as the whipping boy for lots of things in higher education, the much touted low cost of nontraditional study seems not to exist in reality. It is not shown in Table 8, but we found that most institutions with experience in nontraditional programs reported that the cost was the same or more than in conventional programs. Only 20 percent reported that they could save money, and another 22 percent admitted that they didn't know.

As to problems in assessing learning, our data show that there is extensive dependence on examinations--led by none other than our own CLEP with 65 percent of the institutions saying that they actually granted course credit on the basis of CLEP exams. Neck in neck with the CLEP exams were the much older Advanced Placement tests. The only other examinations with a substantial following were the USAFI tests. An interesting fact showed up in the data regarding credit-by-examination. I am not quite sure what the rationale is but the data from

colleges show that you are more likely to get credit by examination if you present the examination scores directly to the institution than you are by showing a transcript in which another college has granted credit for nationally recognized exams. I guess that has implications for continuous transcript service from ETS.

The figures are not shown in Table 8, but very few institutions expect any obstacles to nontraditional studies from outside the institution. All of the following problems were reported by 15 percent or less of the institutions; lack of demand, difficulty in the recruitment of students or faculty, lack of interest among the institution's constituency, accreditation problems, or difficulties with employers or licensing agencies. I assume, from the distribution of the problem areas, that institutions feel quite autonomous in pushing in these new directions. The real problem apparently is for those in the educational establishment to convince themselves that the nontraditional is as good or better than the traditional. And on that happy note that ETS has a major role to play in the assessment and evaluation of the educational value of the nontraditional programs, I will conclude this report.

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