

External Degrees*

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The external degree is one of higher education's most talked-about innovations. Some say that it is a passing fad, but I think that it is too philosophically interesting and too politically paradoxical to pass from the scene without leaving permanent imprints on the form of education as we know it.

It is philosophically interesting because it challenges almost everything we know, or think we know, about how to present and measure education. It is politically paradoxical because its most visible spokesmen are busy putting the brakes on what seems to be run-away enthusiasm for non-traditional alternatives. Steve Bailey, who has been developing model external degree programs in New York, gave a speech

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before the American Association of Higher Education warning about serpents lurking at the bottom of this basket of shiny apples (Bailey, 1972). At the same professional meeting, Sam Gould, the chairman of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study, admitted that the demand for change in higher education is so great that it cannot be ignored, but he spent the major portion of his time discussing the dangers of overeager acceptance of change on the part of some of the devotees of non-traditional study (Gould, 1972).

Perhaps the almost schizoid reaction to the promotion of the external degree arises from the fact that its architects and proponents are usually "insiders" in traditional education. On the one hand, state chancellors such as Ernest Boyer of New York and Glenn Dumke of California are seeking legislative funds and support for the ~~traditional~~ colleges and universities in their states, and on the other they are advocating changes that could be considered ^{FIERCE} competition for traditional education. In reading speeches and publications of this era, one cannot ^{hardly} avoid feelings of uneasiness over the unspoken question, "What ^{will} ~~would~~ happen if the external degree proved ^S more effective, or less costly, or more popular with learners than traditional education?" Opening its program before anyone knew the answer to the question, England's now famous Open University played it safe by starting with an age limit that excluded young people of traditional college age. The Commission on Non-Traditional Study, however, has come out forthrightly recommending that "Students of traditional college age should have available to them the same non-traditional opportunities as adult students, including the external degree" (Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973). Nevertheless, at present the external degree is usually regarded as an educational alternative for people who are not now attending institutions of postsecondary education at all--largely adults. ~~Given the gloomy statistics just presented~~

What really is this proposed challenge that might attract a new population of learners to colleges and universities, that might introduce major reforms into the measurement and delivery of higher education, or that might turn out to cheapen the college degree through granting academic credit for a wild collection of so-called "learning experiences?"

~~it?~~ There is no hard and fast definition for the external degree. A leading authority on the subject (Valley, 1972) identifies six major models and illustrates each model with several specific programs. As we shall soon see, there are more than 100 different programs in this country today that qualify as variations of the external degree.

One definition of the external degree maintains that it concerns credit granted for competencies developed independently of the awarding institution (Warren, 1973). This might include credit for work experience, credit by examination, credit for foreign travel, etc. A more inclusive definition is that used by Howard Bowen (1973) in discussing the costs of external degrees. *includes in his the costs* He ~~figures a~~ budget ~~for~~ instructional components, assuming that the external degree is any program involving off-campus learning. This might include among other things, extension courses, or television, home study, or industry-based courses offered by the institution.

Whether the definition is narrow or broad, there are some characteristics of the external degree that are assumed by all. Central to the concept is

the notion that learning must be defined as a quality of the student rather than an offering of the college. There is more interest in what has been learned than in what has been taught; education is student centered. The report of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study struggled with ^a the definition of ~~non-traditional study (the external degree is an important variation of non-traditional study)~~ and finally concluded that *non-traditional study*

It is an attitude that puts the student first and the institution second, concentrates more on the former's need than the latter's convenience, encourages diversity of individual opportunity, and deemphasizes time and space or even course requirements in favor of competence and, where applicable, performance (Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973).

This definition reminds us that another hallmark of the external degree is its emphasis on flexibility and individualization. There is a conscientious attempt to design the educational experiences to fit the schedule and circumstances of the learner.

The external degree is usually distinguished from the broader concept of non-traditional study by its concern for certifying that the student meets certain standards set by the institution. The University of London, for example, conferred ^{*the first*} ~~its~~ external degree on anyone who could pass examinations taken by regular students who had received their instruction from the University. Thus, another characteristic of the external degree is that it carries the stamp of approval of a degree-granting institution. Usually the first pledge of institutions or systems of higher education considering an external degree is that it shall be of the same quality as their regular degree.

Still another characteristic of the external degree is that learning takes place off campus. It may consist of independent study, a television course, language competency developed abroad, correspondence study, work experience accepted for credit, advanced placement credit, learning units completed in

a regional learning center or with a faculty mentor or any of a variety of other experiences that a college is willing to certify as creditable.

In the abstract, most educators would be willing to endorse these characteristics as thoroughly good educational practice. And yet, the external degree with its transfer of traditional responsibilities and controls makes many people nervous. Aside from cost, the most common reasons given by institutions for not introducing various non-traditional alternatives are difficulty in assessing non-classroom learning, faculty resistance, and concern about academic standards (Ruyle, et al, 1972). Despite these concerns, non-traditional alternatives are a rapidly growing phenomenon, and by the spring of 1972, half of the traditional colleges and universities across the country had introduced one or more programs that they regarded as non-traditional in terms of students served, place or method of instruction, or content (Ruyle, et al, 1972). A smaller group of colleges are introducing programs that may be considered varieties of the external degree.

by my friend and colleague, Lyman Glenny, it is perhaps not altogether coincidental that colleges are more eager to create the reforms necessary to attract new clientele than they are to reform education because it needs it.

The Need

Which came first, the perception of the new educational needs typified by adult learners or a growing dissatisfaction with some of the procedural rigidities of traditional colleges is, ~~however~~, a chicken and egg question. Perhaps the most accurate observation is that many factors converged to make the external degree an idea whose time has come.

First, there is the egalitarian mood of the country accompanied by great faith in educational opportunity as an equalizer. The idea that all persons should have the opportunity to better themselves through hard work and study is compatible both with our meritocratic past and our vision of an egalitarian future. There is no longer any strong opposition to the notion that everyone who wants to learn should have the opportunity to do so--regardless of color, sex, age, financial resources, or geographical location. Parenthetically, I guess I should add that some--notably Christopher Jencks and his colleagues at Harvard (1972)--are questioning whether providing equality of educational opportunity will close the gap between the haves and the have nots. But as the storm of controversy surrounding his book indicates, the majority of Americans are still placing their bets on education. Since educational egalitarianism is the prevailing mood of the country, it seems unlikely that the drive to make quality education accessible to all will be quashed.

The second reason for the enthusiasm about the potential of the external degree is the recognition that one of the largest groups of educationally

motivated people not now attending college are those who grew up in an age when neither the pressures nor the opportunities to attend college were as great as they are today. About ten years ago, we passed a point when college attendance became the norm rather than the exception. In 1950 less than half (43 percent) of the high school graduates were entering college; by 1970, more than half (60 percent) were continuing their formal education (Haggstrom, 1971). This reserve of capable and motivated potential students in their 30's, 40's, and 50's form a substantial pool of undereducated talent. They are undereducated compared with today's youth and in relation to today's demands. Thus there is pressure to extend educational opportunity to adults.

A third factor catapulting the external degree into the limelight is the growing realization that the world is changing so rapidly that "an education" will no longer last a lifetime. People in a great variety of occupations are accepting the fact that they will need to keep learning in order to keep working. The steady advance of science will result in the technological unemployment of the telephone operator and in the obsolescence of the doctor. Thus it behooves us to demonstrate that adults can (and must) engage in formal learning too. The dean of extension at Berkeley speaks of compulsory education for adults in the very near future (Stern, 1972). He bases his prediction on legislation passed in California and other states requiring additional schooling to keep or renew licenses in fields such as optometry, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, and accountants in public service.

A fourth stream of pressure for bringing adults into the mainstream of learning arises out of our advanced scientific society. The information explosion coupled with the technology to deliver an incredible variety of

Learning options to people all over the country has made the idea of "campus" as a repository of all teaching and learning obsolete. Most of us now live in a network of learning resources, and the stimulation and the opportunity for learning surround us. The complex questions of how much and what kinds of learning constitute a college education are forcing themselves on our attention.

Fifth, we should not underestimate the instinct for self-preservation that exists in colleges. We have now reached the point where we can expect no appreciable growth from that segment of the population that have traditionally been considered college material. Nationwide, over 80 percent of the young people graduating in the upper half of their high school classes, socioeconomically and academically, are now entering college. That leaves us three options for growth in the near future. We can try to attract young people from the lower half of the socioeconomic strata. We are doing this, but with the recognition that they require substantial financial aid in a period of financial austerity. Many colleges are unable to pursue that course of action except through pressure on external sources of funding. A second option enhancing self-preservation is to increase the numbers of students from the lower academic half of the high school graduates. The community colleges are working hard at this task with their open door admissions policies and programs of remedial education, but for more traditional faculty that raises the spectre of lowering academic standards. Finally, we can look to expanding the market of academically-motivated, financially self-sufficient adults who might be attracted to college. In most ways, the group posing the lowest threat to fairly traditional colleges (which is most of them) are the adults.

But in the final analysis, let us hope that the growing maturity and

sophistication of education is a powerful influence behind the popularity of the external degree. We are no longer content to equate hours in the classroom or years on the campus with educational competency. Adults present us with visible proof that learning takes place everywhere-- whenever learners give sustained attention to expanding their base of knowledge. Education is beginning to face the challenge of measuring education as a quality of the individual rather than as an offering of the institution. For all of these reasons, the concept underlying the external degree is an idea whose time has come.

We can take a research look at what the external degree looks like in the United States today. In the spring of 1972, the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education at the University of California in Berkeley conducted a survey for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study asking all of the colleges in the country what they were doing about offering non-traditional alternatives. I selected from this group 122 colleges that could be said to offer some variation of the external degree.¹ The programs selected met all of the following conditions:

- 1) The principal location of the learning activity was off-campus (in regional learning centers, business sites, community ~~centers~~ ^{agencies}, homes, in the field, etc.).

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- 2) Degree credit was awarded at the associate, bachelor's, or graduate degree level or a special degree was granted.
- 3) The program was designed for non-traditional learners (housewives and working adults, people beyond commuting distance, independent learners, special occupational groups, etc.) or for both traditional and non-traditional students.

This definition, it should be noted, excludes a variety of innovative off-campus learning programs designed for traditional full-time college students, and it also excludes non-credit extension courses. It does not, however, demand that students be able to complete all work for a degree off campus. Such a degree is still a rarity in this country; only eight percent of our sample offered a degree program without any residency requirements. The most common requirement for the undergraduate degree at institutions offering external degree programs is one academic year or 30 semester hours (59 percent), but a significant minority (23 percent) require less than a year of residency.

A Profile of External Degree Programs

Despite claims that the external degree is one designed primarily to meet the needs of a new clientele, the external degree as it exists today looks very much like the internal degree in many respects. Only about half of these new programs even claim that there is anything unconventional about their methods of instruction or the content offered. Indeed, 85 percent of the programs make "much use" or "some use" of traditional classroom lectures, and, not surprisingly, it is primarily the regular faculty who are delivering these lectures. Use is also made of adjunct faculty, however, and nearly two-thirds of the programs recruit some instructors from the community in the professions, business, and the arts.

Apparently adjunct faculty, too, soon adjust to the age-old teaching device of the lecture. Certainly, not many programs yet incorporate the much publicized new media. Over 80 percent of the programs make no use of media such as talk-back television, telephone, radio, or computer assisted instruction. Tape-cassettes, however, appear to be pulling ahead of other media as a viable vehicle for delivering education; over one-third of the programs use it to some extent, and nearly 10 percent say they make extensive use of tapes.

The most frequently used innovation in methods of instruction, however, occurs through providing increased opportunities for field work, internships, and cooperative study. Over 70 percent of the external degree programs make at least some use of these forms of education, and cooperative work experience is more likely to earn credit for a student than any other form of non-course learning.

The much-touted flexibility of the external degree presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, roughly half of the programs state that the curriculum is structured or prescribed, and the usual major and distribution requirements are adhered to. But on the other hand, about one-third of the programs offer real opportunities to break the lock-step of education by devices such as permitting students to negotiate learning contracts (28 percent), to design unique programs (30 percent), to enter the program at any time of the year (30 percent), and to determine the pace of the learning (46 percent).

By definition, the principal learning activities of external degrees take place off-campus, and a great variety of locations receive at least some use. Regional learning centers are a growing phenomenon, and almost half of the external degree programs utilize these off-campus classrooms, but business and

and field sites are also very popular. In fact, the only learning sites that seem dramatically underutilized are the public library and the home. The home-study approaches of England's Open University seem not to have caught on to any great extent in this country; two-thirds of our external degree programs make no use of home study, and about the same number claim that the public library is not used as a location for their learning activities. Thus the Commission on Non-Traditional Study seems on-target when they recommend that, "The public library should be strengthened to become a far more powerful instrument for non-traditional education than is now the case" (Commission on Non-Traditional Study, 1973).

Two problems have been of major concern to developers of the external degree--one is cost and the other is the difficulty of assessing non-classroom learning. Howard Bowen (1973) the economist who is also chancellor of the Claremont University Center, has estimated the costs of an external degree at about \$1,675 per full-time equivalent student. This figure does not represent a significant saving over the \$2,127 that is the average cost per student FTE in public colleges and universities in the United States. It should be noted, however, that Bowen's fairly luxurious model includes costs for recruitment, evaluation of student educational history, a program of student counseling, the development of 10 new courses a year at a cost of \$10,000 each, instructional costs, examination, campus conferences, administrative costs, and overhead.

Admittedly, some programs do not create special courses for the external degree program and some try to get by with minimal counseling services, but it is generally agreed that both counseling and new instructional programs geared to a new audience and different forms of presentation are absolute necessities if external degree programs are to provide quality educational experiences.

Perhaps it is some reflection of quality then that the 122 institutions with experience with external degree programs seem not to be experiencing any great cost advantages. The largest number of colleges included in the survey of external degree programs (41 percent) say that the costs of the external degree program are generally comparable to those experienced in their conventional programs. Twenty-one percent say that the external degree is costing them more money, and about the same proportion (23 percent) claim that they can offer their degree externally for less money than their internal degree. Since only a fourth of the programs enjoy the luxury of institutional subsidy, while many are self-supporting (38 percent) or financed on "soft-money" from outside grants (17 percent), problems of financing external degree programs remain a deterrent to more rapid implementation of new programs.

Questions of credit seem to be finding a variety of answers. (See Warren, 1973). Institutions offering an external degree program are considerably more lenient about credit than are institutions in general, but increasingly flexible credit arrangements seem to be pervading all of higher education. For example, credit-by-examination is now the norm rather than the exception in undergraduate degree programs of all kinds. Almost two-thirds of the nearly 1200 institutions responding to the Commission survey (Ruyle, et al, 1972) claimed that they presently award credit on the basis of the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) or the Advanced Placement examinations. These two national testing programs are far and away the most common vehicles for awarding credit, but institutional or departmental exams are also used, with roughly half of all institutions granting credit on the basis of locally constructed examinations.

Credit for learning without validation by examination requires a greater

leap of faith, and institutions with external degree programs are clearly in the vanguard here. Among the selected group of 122 colleges and universities with external degree programs, over half grant academic credit for cooperative education or for volunteer work in a community agency (much of which is attained through work-study programs). But about one-fourth recognize participation in a community theater or holding office in student government as creditable learning experiences. A significant minority of these institutions (15 to 18 percent) are now granting credit to students such as these: A 25 year-old with two years teaching experience in the Peace Corps, an older man with ten year's investment counseling experience, a middle-aged woman with five years of volunteer social-work experience, or a sophomore who dropped out of another college and worked in a newspaper office for a year.

It is increasingly difficult to distinguish external degree programs from the more flexible arrangements regarding credit, place, and time that are now being offered by so-called traditional education. Many people are experimenting, and it is important to emphasize that most (61 percent) of the programs defined here as external degrees are not more than two years old. I think that we may expect substantial trial and error before adequate models are developed. But there are so many good reasons--educational as well as social--for moving responsibly toward implementation of the concepts embodied in the external degree that there is much to be gained by some bold experimentation with those aspects of the external degree that make sense in your situation.

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