

ADULT LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Ten years ago the Carnegie Commission on the Future of Higher Education called the post-World War II years the "Golden Age" of higher education and predicted that the 1980s and 1990s would be the "Time of Trouble" for higher education. To many educators, heading into the 1980s with diminished resources, declining enrollments, and increased competition, it feels like trouble aplenty. But the 1980s might better be labeled "Time of Challenge" for educators.

Those of you who work primarily with adult learners are on the leading edge of that challenge. You are riding the crest of the demographic shifts, of course, but you are also closer to the real world that lies beyond the gates of the campus; ~~you have the exposure to the changing needs of society and the flexibility, and I hope, the imagination to respond.~~

My general thesis this afternoon will be that the role of higher education in the society is changing and that institutions that fail to recognize the emergence of the Learning Society and

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their new role in it are in trouble. For those looking toward a future of education to serve the new needs, ^{however,} it should be a time of exhilaration, change, and profound challenge.

You know the demographic facts. In this decade -- from 1980 to 1990 -- adults between the ages of 35 and 44 will be the fastest growing age cohort in the nation, increasing their numbers by 30 percent by the end of the decade. Young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, on the other hand, are the most rapidly decreasing age cohort; their numbers will decline by 16 percent by the end of the decade. Small wonder that colleges of every kind are looking covetously at adult learners.

The phenomenon of lifelong learning, however, goes beyond mere demographics to reflect changing needs and changing lifestyles. Almost certainly knowledge is power on the new frontier of the Learning Society -- for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. It is inconceivable that education will be less important tomorrow than it is today. From the ancient occupations of agriculture and fishing to the futuristic "high tech" occupations, workers will need to be better educated than ever before. Moreover, the continued expansion of education to previously unserved segments of the population is inevitable. Everyone is going to need more education -- women as well as men, old as well as young, rural as well as urban or suburban, poor as well as rich, handicapped as well as able-bodied, and the hard-to-teach as well as the easy-to-teach. And education

is increasingly important because there are simply more things to learn -- appreciations to enrich life, knowledge to enhance personal growth, and skills to improve performance.

More education for more people for more years of their lives would seem to make education a growth industry. The literature and gloomy prognostications of higher education notwithstanding, education in the broad meaning of that term, is of growing importance in the society. We have all heard it said that the railroads failed, not because there was no longer a need for their services -- indeed the need for transportation was growing at the time -- but because the tunnel vision of the railroad operators concentrated on running the railroad instead of exploring the new frontier of the transportation industry.

If we looked to the broad future of education rather than to the narrow future of any particular brand of education, what would we see?

First, we would see a greatly increased need for learning, for more people and for more years of their lives. Second, we would see a wider range of offerings and an explosive increase in the number of organizations providing education. Third, we would see a new worldwide perspective on education that raises questions no one ever thought to ask before. For how long is society responsible for the education of its citizens? In the past, that decision was made through increments added to levels of public schooling. As soon as most people completed eight

years of grade school, high schools were added for those who wished to continue, and when most people completed high school, an extensive system of low-cost open door community colleges was added. But education is not being added in increments anymore. Suddenly, we are looking at forty or fifty years of additional educational activity, and the question changes from for how long should education be the responsibility of ~~the state~~^{society} to who pays for what for whom? Similarly, individuals are looking at new patterns of learning. The tilt is already underway -- from four years of full-time study on a college campus to forty years of part-time study in a great variety of settings. A study just completed in California revealed that ^{in 1981} 42 percent of the adults in that state had participated in at least one course, class, or other organized learning activity, ~~during the previous year~~. Half of the instruction was provided by colleges and universities, with the remainder provided by a wide array of schools, associations, business, and community organizations (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1982).

The pattern of lifelong learning is so different from that for traditional front-loaded education that it should change the way schools and colleges prepare upcoming generations for their futures as lifelong learners, and it should change the way society plans for education.

Let us look first at some of the general issues raised by

changing student constituencies. Some of the questions are conceptual. For example, if students change, should the educational institutions that serve them change? Is such change to be considered "responsiveness" or merely "consumerism"? If the latter, is giving students -- or taxpayers, parents, legislators, employers -- what they want necessarily bad, and in any case, in these times of competitive struggle for funds and students, is it realistic to be less than maximally responsive? Can we -- should we -- meet the demands of the marketplace, or is there some unchanging "standard" of education that must be protected?

A few people in our society are clear in their own minds that education must stand firm in the protection of traditional values, while others are equally convinced that meeting the new clientele wherever they are is paramount. Most of us, however, want to have our cake and eat it too. We want education to do for the new populations what it has done for the old. Presumably, that means maintaining recognized, or at least recognizable, standards while responding to the special needs of the new populations. Easy to say, but not very easy to do.

The second set of questions surrounding the education of new populations is conceptually easier -- maybe -- but implementation is difficult. Those are the practical questions concerning the creation of new programs and services and the preparation of

teachers and faculty to deal with new kinds of students, all in times of severe financial stress. Some of the new students lack even the most basic academic skills; some have little understanding or appreciation of the intrinsic values of education; some are older than their teachers and more experienced in the ways of the world and in the application of knowledge to specific careers. Difficult as it is, responding to the needs of one constituency at a time could be considered a luxury compared with the reality of responding to the incredible diversity introduced by the impact of all these new constituencies with their array of different needs. Teachers in many ~~high schools and~~ open admissions colleges, for example, are now trying to teach students ranging in reading skills from the fourth to the sixteenth grade levels. As Gertrude Stein put it in a somewhat different context, "There's no there there." Where has the average student gone? Where is that reassuring hump in the normal curve that suggested that the majority of students are average and can be reached through gearing the group to the needs of the fiftieth percentile? Our system of education is based pedagogically and financially on the premise that group instruction is effective and efficient. If that premise turns out to be suspect, then an educational system based on classrooms, semesters, and a fairly narrow range of teaching styles is facing major renovation.

It won't be easy to resolve either the conceptual questions or the implementation questions regarding education's response

to the new constituencies. However, clarifying the alternatives and marshalling the leadership to find our direction through these questions is, I suggest, the major task for education in the 1980s. What has happened, I think, is that while higher education was getting itself together to look at the demographics of the birth rate and the implications for college enrollments, a whole new world was growing outside of the formal establishment.

That world is made up of a vast array of diverse providers of adult education who have limited communication with one another. Thus while trainers in industry read about the revolution in "human resource development," they remain generally unaware of the so-called nontraditional movement in higher education. While librarians talk and write about their own obligation to serve and counsel adults as learners, they write and talk about those concerns in their own journals and professional meetings which do not reach community college educators who are planning among themselves how to serve their burgeoning populations of adult part-time learners. What has happened, in short, is that adults have brought all of the providers of education together and exposed an ongoing Learning Society that was not fully apparent to us as individual providers. So far, few people in or out of education, have looked across providers at the new shape of the Learning Society. For that reason, I concluded that one of the most useful things I could do in the next half hour or so was to pull together a sampler of some of the things that are

taking place in the Learning Society. Let me set forth four propositions to make concrete my basic thesis that the very presence of adults on the scene as lifelong learners is changing the role of education in the society and that planning for adult learners means thinking about new roles, new missions, and new relationships, as well as thinking about the needs and interests of adult learners.

Proposition One is that higher education no longer enjoys a monopoly on education. In yesteryear when college students were typically late adolescents whose primary occupation was going to school, if they were engaged in education at all, it was full-time at an institution of postsecondary education. They were not exposed to other options, nor did it occur to them to shop around. Colleges sometimes competed with one another for students, but higher education in the aggregate enjoyed a near monopoly on formal education.

Today adults who enroll in college classes, whether for credit or not, voluntarily 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 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, practical skills. You name it and you may be sure someone offers it. Industry, for example, spends not mere millions but billions of dollars annually on the education and training of employees. Business currently allocates more money for education and training than all fifty states combined allocate for higher education (Lynton, 1982A). Aetna, Xerox, IBM, and other corporate giants have built campuses with classrooms and residence halls that surpass anything offered in our most exclusive and expensive colleges. Professional associations too are becoming the builders of vast education networks. The American Management Association conducts 3200 programs annually and enrolls 100,000 learners, but even they have no corner on the market for business. It is estimated that 3000 different providers conduct some 40,000 public business seminars each year. Thus Proposition One states that higher education faces unaccustomed competition from other providers of education in the society.

In these times when most colleges are beating the bushes for more students, there is a tendency to feel that these other providers are in competition with colleges. There is good reason to think, however, that there is a hierarchy of threat in educational opportunities and that adults will enter the Learning Society at the threat level that is tolerable for them. (See Cross, 1981, Chapter 6.) We know, for example, that adults who

build self-confidence as learners by taking a televised course at home may soon venture onto the campus to try the on-campus competition. Similarly many employees, introduced to classes on the familiar turf of the workplace, may build enough confidence and interest to venture out on their own to off-campus centers and then to classes on campus.

Higher education should, I believe, encourage and help build a wide variety of low-threat entry-level learning opportunities. The so-called nontraditional forms of education, far from competing with traditional education, are engaged in the critically important business of making education convenient and attractive, and in some cases just downright possible, for many adults who are potential college students. Whether the new entry-level opportunities are offered by college divisions, such as extension or community education, or by other providers such as television or employers, there is every reason for higher education to take the broad view in developing the Learning Society. Getting more adults introduced to the satisfactions of lifelong learning is of benefit to everyone concerned. It is a plus for adult learners because it is the essential route to upward mobility and necessary even to keeping abreast of the fast pace of change. It is advantageous to society because the wheels of change and progress are fueled largely by adults learning new ways to accomplish society's work. Finally, higher education itself stands to gain from the fullest possible blooming of the Learning

Society because once people have been introduced to the satisfactions of adult learning, they are quite likely to seek new opportunities and to move to ever more advanced and sophisticated levels of learning.

This analysis, plus the past experience of the decline of the railroads because they saw themselves as railroads and not as part of the larger transportation industry, should suggest to higher education that the development of the Learning Society is a long-term investment that is every bit as important as the short-term concerns about running the college.

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 credit, who may offer it, or who needs it. Academic purists like to make a distinction between the education offered by colleges and the training offered by industry, but such distinctions are difficult to maintain. Non-collegiate organizations have moved into education almost as fast as colleges, especially community colleges, have moved into training, and the distinction is now blurred beyond usefulness -- at least when applied to providers. Colleges 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 business school. Listen to 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 education functions occurs in the distinction between credit and non-credit learning. Within public higher education we have certainly muddied the waters 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. Within commuting distance of my home near Boston are four new degree-granting programs founded by corporations -- a hospital, a bank, a consulting firm, and a computer manufacturer. While the image of Bachelor's and Master's

degrees offered by these non-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 institutions 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 84 percent of all colleges grant credit by examination. Ten years ago, only 14 percent of the colleges would consider granting credit for experiential learning; today 41 percent do (Stadtman, 1980).

Historically, colleges have been reasonably generous in accepting credit from other colleges; today they are increasingly likely to endorse learning regardless of its source. The American Council on Education's Office of Education Credit lists over 2000 courses offered by more than a hundred corporations, that appear worthy of college 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, and that blurring of functions rather than distinctiveness seems to be the trend.

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, and 52 percent seems likely before the end of the decade. We used to think that the growth of part-time students was primarily a community college phenomenon because part-timers now make up more than two-thirds of the community college enrollments, but part-time students between the ages of 25 and 34 are now growing twice as fast in four-year institutions as they are in community colleges. Thus the rise of the part-time learner seems a universal phenomenon for all providers of educational services.

While faculty of an earlier era may have complained that students were not giving undivided attention to their studies, traditional students were at least in the college environment twenty-four hours a day. They lived in the unreal world ^{frequently} referred to by Wharton (1981) as the "city of youth," and their full-time occupation was with the social and intellectual demands of college. ~~Formal education is now changing rapidly from a full-time commitment for four years of a student's life to a part-time~~

~~commitment for forty years.~~ The first priority of ^{today's} ~~the~~ adult learners ^{however} ~~of today~~ is not college, but job, family, and an array of other adult responsibilities that serve as enhancers, detractors, and sometimes inhibitors of education. Thus Proposition Three states that higher education faces unaccustomed competition for the time and attention of students. Education cannot do whatever suits institutional convenience and assume that students can and will go along with it.

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 international competition. In today's climate, the widening gap between the skills available in the work force and the skills needed for economic productivity is nothing short of alarming. While the want ads burgeon with appeals for technically competent personnel and employers offer bounties for employees with the basic skills necessary for learning new tasks, thousands of unemployed provide tragic testimony to the gap between supply and demand for educated workers.

In 1950, only 17 percent of the jobs in America involved the processing of information; today more than half of all

jobs demand information processing skills. No wonder that corporate education is the fastest growing educational enterprise in the nation. But most educators remain relatively unaware of the tremendous growth of education beyond their walls. Ernest Lynton (1982B) observes that,

It is astonishing how little this profound change in the nature and purpose of continuing education has been perceived even -- or perhaps especially -- by the most fervent advocates of 'lifelong learning' and the 'Learning Society.' Generally, adult education is still viewed as a private and voluntary activity benefitting the individual through personal enrichment or the potential for upward mobility. There exists as yet no widespread recognition that continuing education has become essential for job maintenance, needed to insure collective productivity and economic return. As such it is now a matter of concern to the employer and indeed an issue of public policy (p.3).

None of this is to deny the importance of continuous learning to the individual. One of the things that we know for sure from all of the research on adult learning is that the more formal education people have, the more likely they are to be engaged in adult and continuing education. A college graduate is seven times as likely to be a participant in some form of organized learning as a high school dropout. That means that a better educated populace will be pressing for ever more education -- for their jobs, for personal growth, for practical skills, for enhancing the quality of their lives. In a very real sense, the more education people have the more they will demand.

Finally, lifelong learning is essential not only for business

and individual growth, but for our collective growth and development as a society. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has called for attention to civic learning as one of higher education's most essential goals (Boyer and Hechinger, 1981, p. 47). Their research led them to conclude that,

"As a nation, we are becoming civically illiterate. Unless we find better ways to educate ourselves as citizens," they claim, "we run the risk of drifting unwittingly into a new kind of Dark Age -- a time when small cadres of specialists will control knowledge and thus control the decision-making process. These high priests of technology will understand, or claim to understand, the complicated issues, telling us what we should believe and how we should act. In this new age of growing confusion, citizens would make critical decisions, not on the basis of what they know, but on the basis of blind faith in one or another set of professed experts."

The report of the Carnegie Foundation goes on to observe that "education for citizenship must become a lifelong process" (p.48). Thus Proposition Four asserts that lifelong education is a necessity for individual, corporate, and social progress in a world that changes many times in the span of a single human life.

These four propositions taken together will, I believe, change profoundly the role of higher education in the society. The essence of the conclusion is that adult education is more essential than ever before, but institutions of higher education per se are less important. At least they will decline in relative importance unless we can begin to deal more adequately with the realities of the external world.

You, who work primarily with adult learners, are the closest thing we have to a bridge between the sheltered environment of the college campus and the emerging world of the Learning Society. ~~You are in a position to help your institution and your community come together for a decade of challenge in the 1980s.~~

The School of General Studies is a college for our times. It came ~~✓~~ being 10 years ago as a response to the new needs of the Learning Society. Because you are attuned to lifelong learners and the needs of society for the development of our human resources, your 2nd 10 years is destined to be even brighter than your first 10 years. Happy 10th Anniversary.

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