

PLANNING FOR THE LEARNING SOCIETY

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I want to look at the future of adult learning this evening. It is a rising phenomenon inside and outside of formal institutions of higher education, and its future lies in coherent planning for the Learning Society. When anyone announces an intention to explore the future, most of us conjure up images, not of tomorrow, but of some comfortably distant future that is sufficiently unfamiliar that we need feel no responsibility for it. Star Wars are far enough away to be fun, while cold wars are near enough to be scary. But the future has a way of arriving, and we have the responsibility of living with it. So here we are, right on the edge of 1984, and if it is not exactly Orwellian, it doesn't have the comfort and familiarity of the old home town either. Satellites in space, wired cities, and computers conversing with computers are phenomena that we know exist, but most of us still find them futuristic and somewhat removed from our daily lives. But sidewalk bank tellers and supermarket computers that print out our grocery list in unbelievable detail are part of our lives, and they seem to have arrived so fast that it is hard to assimilate

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the notion that the future is here.

In education the future has arrived almost as fast as in technology. While colleges are being warned to prepare for new kinds of students, statistics document their quiet arrival. Over 40 percent of this year's entering students are part-time students, up from 30 percent just a decade ago, and a third are over the age of 25. While we talk of the coming necessity for lifelong learning, millions of adults are engaged in teaching and learning, in traditional schools and colleges, downtown office buildings, corporate-run campuses, church basements, hotel conference facilities, living rooms, and commuter trains. While the literature exhorts us to consider changing our ways to accommodate the new learners, quite traditional colleges are instituting non-traditional practices at a very fast clip. While we debate the merits of the external degree, some 54,000 students are enrolled in external degree programs offered by some 240, mostly traditional colleges (Sosdian, 1978). While the literature is still explaining why television never caught on in education, thousands of students are enrolled in televised courses, and millions more are watching without registering.

The future is now, and we seem to be adapting to it rather well--although with the breathless realization that change is so fast that we have to do a lot of running just to stay in place. Some of that running seems to be in compensation for our failure to take into account events that were taking place twenty to thirty years ago.

You know the demographic facts. In this decade, 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. Those figures have obvious implications for colleges as well as for the entrepreneurs of business. The makers of Johnson's Baby Shampoo, for example, are advertising their product for the personal use of thirty-year-old football players; and Levi-Strauss is promoting "fuller-cut" blue jeans for the more mature figure. Educational entrepreneurs are not far behind. Some are using the baby shampoo approach, trying to convince adults that educational programs designed for eighteen-year-olds are equally good for thirty to eighty year-olds, while others are moving to the Levi-Strauss approach and redesigning educational programs for the mature learner.

Whether one would like to argue for or against increased public attention to education for adults, the simple political reality is that any society attends to the needs of the predominant group in that society--which until the end of this century will be adults over the age of 25. New York is a harbinger of things to come. Last year the New York Regents adopted eight new goals for adult education, and announced to the press their intention that, "no later than the year 2000, New York will be leading the nation and the world in its commitment to lifelong

learning" (New York State Education Department News Release, December 17, 1981).

The phenomenon of lifelong learning goes beyond demographics to reflect changing needs and changing lifestyles. Almost certainly knowledge is power in the emerging technological 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.

More education for more people for more years of their lives would seem to make education a growth industry. It is only higher education's obsession with the demographics of the birth rate that obscures the fact that education in the broad meaning of that term, is a growth industry despite the decrease in the number of young people in the population. 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. There is a danger that the new breed of managers in colleges and universities are so busy attending to the running of their colleges that they are unaware of the changes in the external world that constitute an expanding education 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 lifelong learning.

Let me set forth five propositions to make concrete my basic thesis that the role of colleges and universities is changing dramatically and permanently under the impact of the Learning Society.

Proposition One. Proposition One is that higher education no longer enjoys a monopoly on the provision of educational services. 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 a college. Colleges sometimes competed with one another for students, but students didn't have a lot of other options.

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, 1982). 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 educational 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 education. It is estimated that 3000 different providers, many of them private entrepreneurs, 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.

Proposition Two is related to Proposition One. It states that the roles of educational 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 dis-

tinctions 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 college of business for example. 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 educational functions occurs in the distinction between credit and non-credit learning. Within 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. In the Boston area alone there are four new degree-granting programs founded by non-colleges-- 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 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 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 an unreal "city of youth," and their full-time occupation was with the social and intellectual demands of college. Formal education is now changing 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 the adult learner 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.

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 life-plan" 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. Although that problem is especially critical right now, it is not new. For the past fifty years, society 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).

A statewide survey completed last year in California showed that 42 percent of the adult population had participated in at least one course, class, or other organized learning activity in 1981. Your participation in MLE is another example of the pervasive spread of education and learning across the lifespan. One of the most spectacular examples of lifelong learning, however, is seen in the success story of Elderhostel, which started with a few colleges in New Hampshire offering a week of college classes in the summer for people 60 years of age or older. This summer over 600 colleges will be offering courses to some 78,000 elders studying in the United States, England, and Scandinavia. Thus Proposition Four states that learning will be lifelong and widespread, and that it will be blended with other adult activities.

Proposition Five comes full circle. It concludes that education will play new roles in the society of the future. There is widespread agreement now that we are facing a major revolution in society. It has been called The Third Wave, the Information Society, and the Technological Revolution. Whatever its nomenclature, the direction seems clear. Jobs, the economy, and lifestyles will be based on the creation and distribution of information. In 1950, only 17 percent of the jobs in America involved the processing of information; today more than 60 percent of all workers are creating, processing, or distributing information.

Taking note of such changes, the Office of Technology Assessment of the United States Congress concluded that "The so-called information revolution, driven by rapid advances in communications and computer technology, is profoundly affecting American education. It is changing the nature of what needs to be learned, who needs to learn it, who will provide it, and how it will be provided and paid for" (OTA, 1982, p. iii).

Our neighboring university in Cambridge gives vivid testimony to the call for dramatic changes in the way education is provided and paid for. The Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at M.I.T., on the occasion of their hundredth anniversary, issued a report called Lifelong Cooperative Education (M.I.T., 1982). The title is significant; it suggests that the future of engineering education should be continuous throughout the working life of the engineer and that it will be provided by industry and education working in partnership. The report rejects the notion that a few years of formal education can provide an adequate foundation for half a century of professional work. They note that in engineering it is more than a question of keeping up with new developments. Recent technological developments have not even been based on the same scientific and mathematical knowledge that provided the foundation for earlier models. Thus engineers who have been out of school for more than a few years face the probability that the very foundations of their knowledge are obsolete. Professor Louis Smullin of M.I.T. was quoted in a recent issue of Time magazine (October 18, 1982, p. 100) saying

that engineers "are washed-up by the time they are thirty-five or forty, and new ones are recruited from the universities."

But as the M.I.T. report observes, the demand of the 1980s cannot be met by replacing "obsolescent" engineers with new graduates, even if that were a humanly acceptable plan. Thus they conclude that, "the only apparent alternative is better utilization of the presently available engineering workforce through continuing education at the workplace, with the active encouragement and support of employers" (M.I.T., 1982, p. 6).

To the Centennial Study Committee, lifelong cooperative education is essential for three reasons:

1. Universities acting alone have neither the human nor the financial resources to carry out a lifelong educational program on the scale required....
2. Engineering faculties cannot by themselves keep up with the knowledge explosion. Close collaboration between engineering faculties and their industrial colleagues is essential if new knowledge is to be distilled from the literature and widely disseminated at the rate at which it is being generated.
3. Engineers in industry and their university colleagues need a supportive environment in which they can teach and learn from one another.

Although these recommendations for radical change in education come from an educationally conservative engineering school, they are a precursor of things to come across the wide variety of educational institutions. Community colleges, with a tradition of working closely with employers, are at the forefront of the new cooperative efforts between education and industry. In 1981, more than 40 percent of the community colleges in the nation had formal cooperative agreements with employers--up from 20 percent just five years earlier (Young, 1981).

Thus Proposition Five asserts that the providers, the organization, and the role of education in the society is changing.

These five propositions taken together will, I believe, change profoundly the role of 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.

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