

Higher Education and Lifelong Learning

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Most of the activity and high visibility of the lifelong learning movement in the United States seemed to burst forth rather suddenly in the early 1970s when colleges across the nation began to make special provisions for the education of adults. In fact, however, the lifelong learning movement had its roots in a number of earlier trends. Among the precipitating factors were the following:

1. Rising concern for equal opportunity focused attention on certain segments of the population that had been denied equal access to college in the past. Among these groups were ethnic minorities, women, and people older than the usual college populations.

2. In order to accommodate the unusually large youth population coming of college age in the 1960s and 1970s, higher education had more than tripled its capacity between 1950 and 1975. By 1980, most colleges are having trouble enrolling enough students to keep their faculties employed. Thus there is considerable motivation on the

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part of colleges to find new markets for their services. Adult learners constitute a promising new clientele.

3. The average adult in the United States now has more than twelve years of formal schooling. Research shows that the more education people have, the more likely they are to seek further educational opportunity. Thus, the rising level of educational attainment of the populace is creating a demand for continuing education.

4. The escalation of new knowledge and the rising requirements for advanced education in the labor market are creating an unprecedented demand for job-related education, especially among women who are entering or re-entering the labor force. Added to the self-motivated desire for job-related education is the legislation that requires professionals and others licensed to serve the public to keep up with new developments in their field through continuing education.

For all of these reasons, adult education is growing faster than any other segment of higher education in the United States. Nationally, more than 40 percent of all college students are part-time students, and approximately one-third are over the age of twenty-five. Public two-year community colleges serve the largest share of adult learners, most of whom live within commuting distance of the campus, are married, and working at full-time jobs.

The response of colleges to the rising interest in education for adults can be divided into two segments -- non-credit activities and regular degree programs. Non-credit education has been growing more rapidly than degree programs for adults, largely because non-credit

offerings can respond to the market more quickly. They do not require the approval of faculty committees, and they usually operate on their own budgets. Thus, the decision to offer non-credit courses is responsive to demand; a course will be offered if there is enough interest in it to support it financially.

The number of colleges offering non-credit education has more than doubled over the past ten years, going from 1,102 colleges in 1968 to 2,375 in 1978, and the number of students enrolled in non-credit courses sponsored by institutions of higher education now exceeds the number of students enrolled for credit. Non-credit activities come in a variety of forms, ranging from a two-day career development workshop for women wanting to enter the labor market to advanced professional training for tax accountants. Classes are usually taught by teachers from colleges or high schools in the area, but local businessmen, craftsmen, and housewives are also frequently recruited as part-time teachers of non-credit courses.

Among the most spectacular successes of the lifelong learning movement is a college for the elderly called Elderhostel. Elderhostel is a non-credit program involving a loose coalition of three hundred colleges that provide special summer programs for adults sixty years of age or older. The elderly students live in the college dormitories and attend classes taught by the regular college staff. Elderhostel seems to have found a formula that has great appeal to both students and colleges. To the elderly, it offers an enriching summer vacation at relatively low cost; to financially-strapped colleges, it offers a way to utilize fixed cost dormitories and campus facilities, while

providing educational programs of social value.

Another interesting non-traditional activity that is becoming popular at a wide range of colleges is the course offered as a joint enterprise of higher education and industry. The course may be offered for credit, but more often the employer specifies what kinds of education are needed for employees, and the college provides the instruction. Usually, the classroom is provided by the employer, and the college instructor travels to the plant or business site, but Stanford University has for some years now been using a closed circuit television system which transmits an on-campus class lecture and discussion to engineering firms within a thirty-mile radius of the Stanford campus. Two-way communication systems permit workers to participate in class discussions almost as though they were present on the campus.

Many two-year colleges are actively seeking contracts for instructional services with local business and industrial firms on the grounds that their mission as community colleges requires them to serve the community in whatever ways seem appropriate. The Governor of South Carolina, for example, has recently recruited businesses and industry to the state with the promise that local community colleges will provide whatever training is needed to furnish labor for the incoming business. State and federal agencies also frequently contract for job training designed to put the unemployed to work in local factories and businesses.

Although most of the lifelong learning literature is inspirational and somewhat idealistic, its implementation in the United States is

highly pragmatic on the part of both colleges and students. Job-related education is the most popular form of continuing education for adults, and I am predicting that higher education and industry will become closer partners in the years ahead. Public funds for education are in short supply now, and the recent elections provide no assurance that even public colleges will be able to survive on public funding. Thus, there is a strong motivation for colleges to provide services to those who can pay for them. Industry will almost certainly be one of those new clients.

To most colleges and universities, however, their identity lies largely in degree programs and credit classes. While traditional faculties and curricula are slower to respond to the expanding market of adult learners, there is a great deal of activity in degree as well as non-degree programs for adults. It will be helpful to organize the degree credit activities of colleges under four major responses: 1) administrative arrangements, 2) delivery methods, 3) program content, and 4) non-instructional services. These are not exclusive categories, of course, since some programs designed from the beginning for adult learners may involve all four departures from traditional educational practices.

Administrative Arrangements. Modification in academic scheduling is the oldest and most common administrative arrangement to accommodate the needs of working adults. A national survey sponsored by the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (Ruyle and Geiselman, 1974) showed that 88 percent of the colleges departing from traditional programs in some way offered new flexibilities in scheduling. The options ranged

through the standard evening college to block scheduling on weekends or in the summer, to completely self-paced programs permitting people to enter and exit at their own convenience. The largest number of working adult students attend evening classes, but one of the complaints about evening college is that it offers no immersion in the academic experience. To counteract that limitation some programs provide a mix of independent study and residential experience by having adults study independently at home most of the year, coming together on the campus for a week or two in the summer. Other colleges offer programs concentrating on an intensive block schedule. Weekend colleges, for example, typically conduct classes for ten to fifteen hours on Saturday and Sunday, offering adults an intensive experience wherein they can come to know fellow students and teachers better than is possible in the evening colleges.

Next to schedules compatible with the hours of working adults, the most common non-traditional administrative arrangement is the provision of convenient locations. The need for convenient locations was articulated most clearly in the 1960s when the common recommendation of a number of study commissions was to place colleges within commuting distance (typically forty-five minutes or forty-five miles) of all potential learners. Many states have now achieved that goal and both research and experience give clear evidence that location does make a difference. California, with 106 low-cost open-admissions community colleges, places a college within commuting distance of every citizen and has the highest educational participation rate in the nation for both adults and young people.

The newest model for convenient locations, however, involves making classrooms rather than campuses convenient for learners. Some colleges offer classes in 80 or more separate locations, including shopping centers, church basements, jails, factories and offices, and even commuter trains. One increasingly common model for colleges interested primarily in serving adults is to have no campus at all. The administrative offices of a number of colleges are now located in a downtown office building with administrative matters being handled by mail or decentralized to the various learning sites. Deans of students or career counselors, instead of having offices on a campus, travel from class to class to introduce themselves and their services and then do their counseling by telephone.

The most dramatic departure from the tradition of residential colleges is probably the external degree that places minimal emphasis on campus life and location. Students in external degree programs put together a program that consists of combinations of classes, independent study, credit for experiential learning, credit by examination, and other learning experiences until they add up to a college degree. In 1976, more than 54,000 adults were enrolled in almost 250 external degree programs in the United States (Sosdian, 1978).

It is impossible to cover the wide range of options with respect to locations that are offered in the United States today. The fact is that colleges have become so flexible and adaptive to work schedules that difficulty in getting to a college campus is no longer a valid excuse for not participating in lifelong learning.

Delivery Methods. New methods for delivering education to adults is more likely to revolutionize education than any other single factor. The new delivery methods offer maximum flexibility in location and scheduling, of course, but they also change the traditional role of teachers and learners. Teams of educational specialists, consisting of experts in content, instructional design, evaluation, and technical procedures, supplement the generalist teacher, and students may have their questions answered by computers, telephones, or audio tapes, as well as by the classroom teacher or study center tutor.

There is nothing in the United States at present to compare with British Open University in England. We do not have a national university with the mission to serve adult learners through television, correspondence, and other delivery systems known as "distance learning" methods. There is, however, a proposal for an American Open University that would offer a wide variety of educational services, including counseling, assessment of prior learning, consolidation of academic credits earned elsewhere, and home delivered courses. Since there is little hope of full federal funding, the proposal calls for substantial funding from industry, private foundations, tuition fees, and sales of materials and services. It is unlikely, however, that the United States will ever have a single provider emphasizing new delivery mechanisms; growth will no doubt continue to occur in a variety of ways. There are already numerous colleges and consortia offering college instruction via new delivery methods.

Television and its assorted technological cousins, such as video cassettes and video discs, remain the glamour children of new delivery systems in education. Such systems are usually the result of cooperation among groups of colleges. In the beginning, telecourses were produced at reasonable cost because people were content with the so-called "talking head" which was simply a video recording of the standard classroom lecture. Today, however, the cost of telecourses runs into millions of dollars because the industry has grown sophisticated and wants to present the full educational power of television. And so we have historical documentaries, lapsed time photography for science courses, beautiful color photography for art treasures, and other powerful visual presentations. For the foreseeable future, the use of telecourses will require the combined resources and markets of many colleges. There no longer seems to be much resistance to the use of telecourses; the problem is the lack of high-quality programs. Although there are nearly 100 distance delivery courses listed in a new catalog, only about thirty are considered adequate for use as college courses. It is estimated, however, that nearly 600,000 students have enrolled in five of the most popular telecourses and have received college credit from some 500 colleges and universities throughout the United States.

A less costly approach to producing telecourses is for colleges to provide "wraparound materials," that is, study guides and textbooks for documentaries or quality cultural programs produced by public or commercial television. "Roots," the documentary on black history,

for example, was not originally produced as a college course. However, Miami-Dade Community College obtained permission to produce wraparound study materials and to promote it to other colleges as a college-level course worthy of credit. Thousands of students received credit from local colleges for their completion of the course materials accompanying "Roots."

Non-traditional methods need not involve technology. Last year, newspapers throughout the country carried ten adult education courses with lessons prepared by notable scholars. More than 50,000 students received college credit for the courses by reading their newspapers and coming together under the direction of a local college faculty member for group discussion and testing. Uncounted millions more, no doubt, read the material but did not apply for college credit.

Program Content. The national survey of non-traditional practices in higher education in the United States showed that designing special courses was the least likely concession to adult learners. Fewer than half of the college programs tried to attract adult learners through offering content that differed from traditional, discipline-based subject matter. Nevertheless, there are some notable examples of special programs designed for adult interests. The Bachelor of Liberal Studies degree at the University of Oklahoma was designed from the beginning to appeal to adults who wished to be liberally educated, as opposed perhaps to prepared for a job. The program is considered academically rigorous but it is inter-disciplinary and it, and others like it, attract primarily older adults who may have reached the point in their careers where the direct relationship

between job skills and lessons is no longer so important.

A second increasingly popular program option for adults is illustrated by the learning contract. Because the learning contract is so important to the lifelong learning philosophy, a brief illustration of how it works may be helpful. The student entering Metropolitan State University, to cite one model, develops with the help of a faculty advisor, an Educational Pact setting forth his or her educational goals, the competencies to be mastered, the learning strategy, and the evaluation methods that will be used to determine the attainment of the goals. There is no formal curriculum, but students are encouraged to develop competencies in five areas: basic learning and communication, civic involvement, vocation and career, leisure and recreation, and personal growth and self-assessment. Such programs offer maximum flexibility to the highly motivated, self-directed adult, but they have not proved especially attractive to the under-educated, the unemployed, or the occupationally disenchanted.

Although modifications in program content to meet the needs of adults who want college degrees, but not traditional discipline-based subject matter, frequently raises questions about the quality of the program, research on the characteristics of the students in such programs generally shows them to be superior learners with clear goals and high motivation.

Non-instructional Services. The need for non-instructional services to facilitate student access to educational opportunity has emerged as a major component in lifelong learning. For discussion purposes, I shall divide non-instructional services into three categories --

financial aid, information and counseling, and assessment and evaluation of learning.

a) Financial Aid. The response to the financial needs of adults has lagged behind responsiveness to other needs. The assumption at the level of higher education has been that adults can pay for their own education, and most financial aid programs have openly discriminated against part-time learners. As recently as 1973, only four state student aid programs offered eligibility to part-time students. There is now a general awakening to financial needs, but little consensus on what to do about it. With new financial pressures on state and federal budgets, it seems unlikely that financial aid will be generally available to adult learners, although traditional forms of financial aid may cease to discriminate against part-time students.

Since the lifelong learning movement in the United States consists largely of the already well educated getting better educated, the lack of public financial assistance is likely to increase the gap between the poorly educated and the well educated. Private sources of funding such as employers and professional associations will further exacerbate the problem since employers are most likely to fund executives and managers, whereas professional associations subsidize the education of the best educated adults in the nation.

b) Counseling and Advisory Services. The availability and adequacy of counseling and information services has a powerful impact on access to educational opportunity. The foremost group taking the position that new models of support services are needed for adult learners is the National Center for Education Brokering established in 1976. The

Center acts as a central clearing house to coordinate communication among agencies involved in advising adults about educational opportunities. The function of "educational brokering" is to help adults define goals for their personal and working lives, to assist in setting objectives for further education, to help select learning experiences to achieve competencies and certification, and to help adults gain access to appropriate learning opportunities.

Some educational brokers are volunteers with little more than a telephone and a list of educational opportunities; others are counselors with federal and state grants to provide information services to adults; still others may be the human components of extensive computerized systems of information. For three years now, the federal government has made small grants to each of the fifty states to assist in establishing Education Information Centers. The common finding of research studies is that there are far more opportunities available for adult learners than there are people who know about them. Thus one of the major problems facing the learning society is the development of efficient and effective methods for getting learners and opportunities together. So far, information centers for adults vary greatly; some adults have good access to information, others have almost none. With the new wave of political conservatism throughout the country, it seems unlikely that there will be much public funding available. Providers of educational services will be left to their own devices to publicize their offerings.

c) Measures of Educational Accomplishments. The newest and probably the most controversial component in non-traditional programs

has to do with the measurement of educational accomplishment. Whereas traditional degree certification depends heavily on process measures, such as documentation of courses taken, credit hours accumulated, residency requirements fulfilled; non-traditional programs are beginning to emphasize outcome measures, such as competencies achieved, skills learned, knowledge demonstrated. The arguments for the new alternative measures of learning are especially important since adults come with such a variety of backgrounds. Some form of collecting, assessing, and certifying learning from a variety of sources is responsive to the needs of many self-educated adults.

There are currently three measures of educational accomplishment that are visible in the lifelong learning movement. One that is accepted by almost all colleges today is credit-by-examination, through which an adult learner may demonstrate on a suitable examination that he or she has achieved the same level of learning as a college student taking the traditional course on campus. A second form of assessment is practiced by fewer than 15 percent of the colleges today, but it seems to be gaining acceptability under the leadership of the Council for the Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL), which is a consortium of approximately 350 colleges working together to develop improved methods for assessing experiential learning. This method requires a varied battery of assessment tools and techniques, and it is usually quite expensive to conduct an individual assessment of the college-level learning of an adult. Some colleges, however, have established assessment centers where the applicant's learning from a variety of sources -- previous college work, job

experience, non-credit learning activities, and self-directed learning projects -- may be considered for college credit. A third measure of educational accomplishment is operated by one of the major professional associations of higher education. The American Council on Education has established an Office on Educational Credit (OEC) which has taken on the formidable task of sending a team of subject matter specialists to the site of any organization (usually a non-college provider of educational services) wishing to nominate a course for college credit recommendations. In its first two years of operation the OEC evaluated more than 800 courses offered by more than fifty organizations in every state in the nation, involving nearly 200,000 students. The OEC publishes a guide with recommendations regarding the amount and category of credit which might legitimately be awarded. The "legitimacy," of course, derives from the national prestige of the ACE and from the rigorous standards established by the OEC for the evaluation of courses.

Conclusion. In a paper of this length, it is possible to present only the briefest overviews of how higher education in the United States is responding to the lifelong learning movement. Without question, there has been a remarkable response on the part of a basically conservative system of higher education. My major observation, however, is that the ideal of lifelong learning will be implemented to the extent that it serves basically pragmatic needs. At present, it seems to be serving colleges' needs for a new clientele to replace diminishing numbers of eighteen-year-olds. It serves the needs of adults who wish to develop more complex job skills, and it provides

industry with more highly educated workers. This is not to deny that the lifelong learning movement may eventually fulfill its mission to enhance the quality of life. It is only to state that in the present fiscally conservative environment, the trend will be business before pleasure.

References

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