

CHANGING ROLES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

K. Patricia Cross

Harvard Graduate School of Education

I'm going to run the risk of starting this unit on adult learners with a brief but formal lecture. Now no one has written more disparagingly than I of the over-dependence of traditional education on the faculty lecture. There are, however, some situations where a carefully prepared lecture has a legitimate function, and after considerable internal struggle, I have convinced myself that this is one of those situations. The situation that justifies this lecture is this. About five years ago I began to immerse myself in research and writing about the flood of adult part-time learners into higher education and what difference that would or should make to higher education. What started out to be a fairly leisurely academic exercise of reviewing the research and synthesizing the findings about adults as learners has turned into an unexpected foray into a world that is changing so fast that the literature simply cannot keep up with the pace of the reality. We used to bemoan the fact that it took twenty or thirty years for research on education to

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find its way into practice, and so life for the researcher has generally had a leisurely flavor about it. No big deal to rush into print -- unless of course your tenure committee was meeting -- because the trickle-down course of knowledge was inevitably slow and the path liberally strewn with diversions and barriers. But trickle-down has turned into a torrent of change, and the world of formal education, most especially adult education, is not what it used to be.

Suddenly it seems, the role of higher education in the society is changing, and it seems to me few people are aware of the massive implications for education. 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 communications with one another. Thus while trainers read about the revolution in human resource development in industry, they remained generally unaware of the so-called nontraditional movement in higher education. While librarians talked and wrote about their own obligation to serve and counsel adults as learners, they wrote and talked about those concerns in their own journals and professional meetings which did not reach community college educators who were 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. Within the last few years we have discovered one another and increased by five or ten-fold what any of us knew individually. 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 for this institute was to pull together in a half-an-hour or less a sampler of some of the things that are taking place in the Learning Society. My position is going to be that planning for adult learning is more than a question of accommodating adults in colleges or even in specially designed programs. The new presence of adults on the scene as lifelong learners is changing the role of education in the society. Thus 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.

Let me set forth four propositions to make concrete my basic thesis that the task for education in the next decade is more complex than marketing new programs to an older student clientele.

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, 1981). 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, with an annual education budget of fifty million dollars, uses 7500 lecturers and discussion leaders to conduct 2000 education programs 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. Educational 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 airling route structures.

If one were given a blind sample of course descriptions today it would be hard to tell whether they come 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. 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 educational 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 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 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 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 American 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 (1982) 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 statistical fact has powerful implications for the future of adult education and higher education.

This nation has attained truly remarkable increase in the levels of educational attainment among the three generations now living. Only 38 percent of today's grandparent generation graduated from high school. Their children, today's parent generation, had far greater opportunities; 66 percent completed four years of high school. But among today's young people between the ages of 20 and 24, 84 percent are high school graduates or more. That is astounding progress in just three generations. What it means is that a better educated populace will be pressing for evermore 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. 43). 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.

Ironically, in the years of greatest expansion of higher education, i.e., the post World War II years, the growth of senior universities was driven largely by internal considerations, that is, the universities became their own dominant markets (Lynton, 1982, p. 10). Graduate departments grew by supplying the heavy demand for college faculties in the 1950s and 60s to teach and do research, and undergraduate enrollments grew by supplying potential students for graduate and professional schools.

As we can now see in hindsight, there are some real dangers in being your own best customer, unless you live in a totally closed society where external events can be kept at bay and you can control internal forces. With the internal markets in higher education drying up for both teachers and researchers, higher education is facing a reexamination of its role. The most popular academic stance is to proclaim society's need for independent thought and leadership, unsullied by politics, business, or consumer demand. There is what might be called a "respectable resistance" to an external orientation for higher education. The resistance is strongest, and I think appropriately so, in the research universities who prize their independence from the forces of society that might compromise intellectual leadership and criticism. Community colleges, on the other hand, with no internal markets of their own, tend to look outward and to market their wares to consumers, whether they be potential students or potential

employers. Indeed, over the past several decades, community colleges have been charged with looking outward to some of the societal problems associated with undereducated populations.

The different roles played by different kinds of institutions makes it important for all educators to recognize and value the special functions of their colleagues. It is as inappropriate for university professors to look down their noses and deplore the "consumer orientation" of the community colleges as it is for community college faculties to take cheap shots at the presumed arrogance and isolation of the universities. Nevertheless, to be in touch with today's reality is to recognize that no part of higher education is a closed system sufficient unto itself. Education is a creature of society, founded and supported to further the common good, and ultimately higher education is dependent on society for its life blood. What society wants and needs from institutions of higher education today is very different from what it was twenty-five years ago.

Although different institutions will play different roles in the emerging Learning Society anything that affects the fundamental role of higher education in the society affects all higher education. It seems to me that there is considerable danger in the present preoccupation of college administrators with the problems of their own institutions, to the ultimate detriment of the higher education enterprise. The situation for colleges today is not unlike

the situation of the railroads in an earlier when some railroads faced almost certain extinction because of the competition from other forms of transportation, while other railroads remained relatively immune until the transportation industry as a whole changed so much that the role of railroads in the society changed.

The parrallel between colleges and railroads can be extended. The failure of the railroads is classically traced to the narrow preoccupation of railroad operators with running the railroad instead of thinking more broadly about the new demands and opportunities of the transportation industry. Ultimately, it would make no difference how well a railroad was managed if what was managed was no longer relevant to the needs of society. The preoccupation of today's educational leaders with management and the preservation of its faculty's traditional functions may also be questioned on the grounds that the management of individual institutions may be over-emphasized at the expense of developing new leadership for the education industry. To paraphrase an old academic axiom, management without leadership is blind, while leadership without management is barren.

My purpose in this stage-setting lecture is to set the management of adult or lifelong education in the context of the changing educational enterprise.