

ADULT EDUCATION: CURRENT TRENDS AND PROBABLE FUTURES

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I have entitled my remarks this morning "Current Trends and Probable Futures" to suggest that there is a relationship between what is happening now and what will happen in the future. Optimists, quite happy with current trends, see a bright future for adult education. Pessimists, on the other hand, see some clouds that they fear may eclipse adult education's day in the sun. There are some adult educators who, as Rex Harrison sings it, had "grown accustomed to their place," which seemed to be somewhere in the wings waiting to be discovered or waiting for their time, however brief, on center stage. Suddenly adult education is on center stage, and we aren't sure whether to act like stars or understudies. Is this a temporary role we are playing or should we get ready for a long run?

There are a number of ways of forecasting the future, ranging from sheer fantasy to horoscopes and Tarot Cards to scientific projection. And then there is the very appealing suggestion that

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educators should spend less time predicting the future and more time determining it. How much control do we have over the future role of adult education in this society? Can we look at current trends and ask what we like or don't like and take steps to strengthen the former and weaken the latter and so determine the future? Or is it more realistic to use our graphs and charts in a more neutral scientific way to predict an undeflected future?

Those using demographic charts quickly discover a big difference between projecting enrollments for adult education and projecting them for elementary schools. Adult education has a long lead time. We know, with a high degree of accuracy, how many adults will be in the population twenty-five to eighty years before they become adult learners. What we don't know is how many of those adults will choose to become engaged in continuing education or what forms of education will best meet their needs at what times in their lives. Elementary school educators, in contrast, spend a lot of time conjecturing about fertility and birth rates because they know, with a high degree of accuracy, that almost all those born in a given year will become first-graders six years later.

The demographic facts are that 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 decrease by 16 percent by the end of

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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 --

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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.

Many educators within the higher education establishment today are so consumed with managing their institutions that they are in danger of giving more attention to running the college than to exploring the new frontier of the Learning Society. Those of you who work on the frontier of bringing education and learning to adults may not feel like pioneers anymore, but to a world that has become dependent on adult education to accomplish its work, you are on the cutting edge of major change in the role of education in the society.

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 and learning 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

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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 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 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.

The handwriting is on the wall. The people and organizations that will be able to improve themselves and their position in the years ahead will be those who are able to adapt to change. And that means they must possess the capacity for continuous life-long learning.

Unfortunately, not everyone is a participant in the emerging Learning Society. For those who are not, the future holds little promise, not even the faintly reassuring thought they can retain their present position while the world changes about them. For what the world seems to be doing is leaving the poorly educated sidelined while the already well-educated are taking the fast track to ever more education. One of the most consistent findings of all the research in adult learning is that the more formal education people have, the more they want, and the more they participate in a wide variety of educational opportunities (Cross, 1981). A college graduate is seven times as likely as a high school dropout to be participating in some form of organized learning, and the gap between the well-educated and the poorly educated is widening rather than narrowing as the Learning Society picks up speed. The almost certain result is that as opportunities for education grow, so will the gap between the educational "haves" and "have-nots."

What is needed, I suggest, is a far wider and more varied system of entrances into the Learning Society. Many colleges have devised special programs such as those for "re-entry" women

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that give adults who have been out of school for some years the support, self-confidence, and skills that they need to participate fully in college classes. Equally important, however, is the encouragement of "low-threat" learning opportunities that may be offered by other providers of education, such as community agencies, television, and employers.

In these times when most colleges are beating the bushes for more students, there is a tendency to feel that other providers of educational services 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

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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 desirable for} the adults concerned 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 every 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.

The second characteristic of the future that I mentioned in my introductory remarks is the proliferation of providers of education. Industry 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 education networks. The American Management Association conducts 3200 programs annually and enrolls 100,000 learners, but even they have no corner on the market of education for business. It is estimated that 3000 different providers conduct some 40,000 public business seminars each year (Maxwell, 1980).

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

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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 3 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 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 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 their campuses. Today it is the norm rather than the exception for degree-granting institutions to be involved in non-degree instruction.

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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 education is not alone out there. There are new obligations to work with others to build a lifelong education system that will meet the demands of the Learning Society.

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Adult educators, especially those in colleges and universities, should take the leadership in shaping the new education. There is a tendency now, I think, for the various providers in the Learning Society, to see themselves as competitors in the race for the adult market. Instead of cooperating and making statesmanlike decisions about how to best serve the public, there is the scramble for one-upsmanship and competitive advantage that is more destructive than constructive to the future of the learning society. Such behavior leads to the selling of cheap degrees, to waste in the use of precious resources, and to a fragmented and competitive menu of learning options for adults. If the profession of adult education is to assume major responsibility for leading society into a new era of lifelong learning, we need to look beyond the short-term tasks of running the railroad to the long-term decisions about how education in the Learning Society can do the job that it will have to do. Creative new initiatives will be required, but we also need to stop and take stock of where we are going and whether we like where we seem to be headed.

My intention in this keynote address is to raise some issues that might stimulate thinking and spark discussion over the next few days of your conference. Thus I would like to set before you four major issues that seem to be emerging from the trends I have been discussing.

- 1) What are we to do about the growing gap between the well-

educated and the poorly educated? Adult education has a long tradition of being voluntary. But virtually every study undertaken to describe volunteer learners concludes that those most likely to volunteer are the well-educated; the poorly educated stay away in droves. What if anything can we do about that? Do we preserve the right of free and individual choice or do we require certain people to participate, presumably for their own good as well as for the collective good? Education requirements for young people have usually been enforced without controversy because there is widespread agreement that education is good and necessary for children. Now that we know that learning is equally important for adults, do we have as much right to mandate continuing education for adults as we have to make education compulsory for school children? Education is being mandated in many professions by licensing agencies and state legislatures, and although the trend toward mandated continuing education seems to have slowed in recent years, the conflict between the rights of the public to quality services and the rights of the individual to freedom of choice will continue to be an issue in adult education.

2) My second issue is closely related to the first, but it involves the growing educational inequities among states and regions of this nation. In the absence of any federal policy regarding adult education, states with high levels of education

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attainment will gradually pull away from states with a poorly educated populace. California already has one of the best-educated adult populations in the nation. With four out of ten adults in California now participating in some form of organized instruction, they will be pulling far ahead of states with poor resources and low participation rates.

The problem, if one chooses to call it that, is that adults with high levels of education are more interested in education than their less well-educated peers; they are more articulate and effective in expressing their demands for education; they create a climate of acceptance for adult learning that is contagious throughout the state, thereby driving up the participation which drives up the demand. Indeed, some community colleges have been so effective in stimulating interest in adult learning that states have built disincentives for expanding enrollment into their funding formulas. Community colleges that grow beyond "acceptable" levels are not compensated for additional students. Is that the way to deal with the "problem" of too much demand for education? Should the nation be concerned about the growing gap in the human resources of poor states versus rich? Should federal policy strive for some sort of equitable development of adult education?

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3) The third issue that is demanding attention now and in the years ahead is the question of how quality shall be defined in adult education. In traditional institutions, quality has been defined largely by input measures -- faculty degrees, selected students, resources in the library, and classroom facilities. While such measures may still have some relevance on the traditional campus, they are clearly inappropriate for assessing quality across the broad range of adult learning options. Yet traditional adult education does not seem to have notably better answers. Adult education is largely consumer driven; it is the learner who determines what is offered, and quality is in the eye of the beholder. There is plenty of logic to the notion that adults should be able to define for themselves how they wish to spend their time and money, whereas children and young people can be assumed to require guidance, occasional forced feeding, and the ultimate control of those in society deemed responsible for standards -- namely faculty, trustees, and accrediting agencies. But adults, especially those with little experience and great need for education services, are being duped by unscrupulous providers every day. What are we to do about that? Do we want to regulate -- even modestly -- adult education? Isn't its enormous diversity and quick responsiveness to changing conditions part of its value? Could we, even if we wanted to, get any control over the far-flung and widely diverse providers of the Learning Society? One possible solution is to

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practice our trade and educate the consumer to the value of the product. Sophisticated consumers have done more to raise the standards of the gourmet cooking and dining industry than any amount of regulation, and they have created a huge and flourishing industry based almost solely on consumer demand. Growing side by side with the fans of Julia Child and Craig Claiborne are the fans of McDonalds and Pizza Hut. Although the fast food services rarely meet my needs, I am grudgingly prepared to acknowledge that as long as they are not harmful, they should grow and flourish along with the so-called finer experiences of dining. But even the fast food chains must meet standards of hygiene and cleanliness. Do we want minimal standards in adult education? If so, what should they be, and who should decide? Do educators have any responsibility to the adult public beyond consumer education to protect them from fraud? If so, what are those responsibilities and what is the role of the profession in defining and enforcing them?

4) Finally, I don't know whether to call this fourth issue a "trend" or not, but there appears to be an increasing tendency for adults to seek formal recognition for their participation in educational activities. The Continuing Education Unit (CEU) is increasing in availability as well as in popularity. Some corporations are seeking degree-granting authority. Most significant, perhaps, is the growing interest on the part of adults in traditional college credit. Folklore, bolstered by research, has long maintained that adults are "mature" learners, more interested in learning than in credit. Now it appears that adults are just as

interested in credit as young people -- a rude shock to those who held out hope that the Learning Society would help correct some of the faults of the credentialed society. Two factors, I suspect, are responsible for the rising interest in credit for adult learning: First, adults are beginning to use education in much the same way that youth use it -- to enhance job qualifications. Second, obtaining college credit for adult learning has become a realistic expectation because colleges are interested in adult part-time learners and are giving their support and blessing to a great variety of efforts to convert non-collegiate education into college credits.

What is the appropriate role of credit in the Learning Society? ~~Are we reschooling rather than deschooling society through the extension of the traditional trappings of schooling into the adult years?~~ Do we need a common currency for lifelong learning; if so is college credit an appropriate standard? If the courses taught by industry are deemed equivalent to those taught by colleges, should industry be given degree-granting authority? If industry offers degrees, can professional associations be far behind? I don't know the answers to these questions, but I believe that it is the solemn duty of educators to direct the development of the Learning Society rather than just let it happen. Lifelong learning is neither a fad nor a temporary salvation for colleges worried about keeping their faculty employed until the echo of the baby boom increases traditional college enrollments. Lifelong

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learning and the development of human capital will be as important to life in the the 21st Century as schools and industrial development were to life in the 20th Century. I hope that groups of experienced educators like this one will prepare for your role as stars in the long-running Learning Society.

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