

## Challenges From New Learners

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My mission at this conference is to say something useful about educational programs to serve the new clientele. That is a tall order, but it gives me a lot of room to maneuver, and I appreciate that.

As you all know, just about everyone is proclaiming their eagerness to serve the new learners. There are some institutions that think that the most useful thing I could say would be to give a formula on how to attract the greatest amount of new tuition or enrollment money for the least expenditure of institutional resources. And I guess that would be useful, economically if not educationally, if I had any such formula. I don't. But beyond any economic motives for attracting the new learners to educational programs, there lies the sincere and genuine concern of most educators as to how education should serve the needs of the learning society in the decades ahead.

The questions of how to attract the new learners and how to serve them well are intimately interrelated, but it may help us to get a handle on the issue if I talk first about what nontraditional learners perceive to be the barriers to their further education. Then I shall move to some discussion of what we might do to lower the barriers and to design educational programs to meet the needs and desires of the nontraditional learners.

The research of the Commission on Non-Traditional Study found that 80 percent of the adults between the ages of 19 and 60 expressed an interest in continued learning, and indeed, nearly one-third of them had engaged in some type of formal learning activity in the 12 months prior to the study (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974). Despite this rather remarkable tribute to education, it is perfectly logical for a country that values education as much as we do to ask what prevents the majority of people who say they are interested in further learning from registering for classes. Research from the Commission studies shed some light on the issue.

The barriers to education today can be roughly categorized under the headings of situational, dispositional, and institutional. By situational barriers, I mean obstacles arising out of one's situation in life at a given time that prevent further education, such as heavy commitments to job or family. By dispositional barriers, I refer to attitudes that preclude further learning such as not liking study or feelings of being too old to learn. By institutional barriers, I mean educational procedures or practices that prevent or discourage adults from learning--things such as residency requirements, full tuition for part-time study, lack of flexible scheduling, etc. Obviously, these are not mutually exclusive categories and some are more amenable to change by the efforts of colleges than others. One can easily argue, for example, that a college could eliminate an important situational barrier for young mothers by providing child care facilities or TV and correspondence courses for home study. It can likewise be argued that colleges could eliminate the dispositional barrier of people feeling that they are "too old to learn" by introducing a special program and accompanying publicity campaign showing retired workers in a variety of educational pursuits. But

there probably is a hierarchy of effort involved in the elimination of the three classes of barriers--institutional barriers being the easiest for colleges to do something about.

The research team working for the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974) asked adults who were not engaged in learning activities but who said they would like to learn more about some subject, to check from a list of 24 reasons all those that they felt were important in keeping them from learning what they wanted to learn. I attempted to classify those into categories of situational, dispositional, and institutional. Such classification indicated that situational reasons constitute the greatest barrier. Nearly half of the respondents, for example, said they lacked the time for study. Lack of time follows a predictable pattern, with men between the ages of 30 and 55 listing it barrier No. 1 and women between the family-raising ages of 30 and 45 also giving it high priority. Men offered job responsibilities, while women were likely to check home responsibilities, as leading reasons for failure to continue their education. Other situational barriers that were mentioned were lack of child care, no transportation available, and no place to study, but each of these was checked by less than 12 percent of the sample.

It should be remembered, however, that if a college could tap even that small 12 percent of the potential adult learning market, they would be serving large numbers of people. I talked recently with the president of a small college in New Jersey who was jubilant over the quality and quantity of students that a free child care facility had brought to their college. Although lack of child care may not be important to large numbers of people, it is extremely important to some highly motivated learners, and it undoubtedly makes the difference between opportunity and no opportunity for some young mothers.

The barrier checked by more respondents than any other in the list of 24, however, was the expense of education. Over half of all respondents perceived cost as a major barrier. If or when we get around to implementing the recommendations of the Carnegie Commission to provide educational leaves of absence to adult employees and to provide a national endowment of two years of subsidized postsecondary education to be cashed in at any time, we will go a long way toward lowering what appears to be the major barrier to the full flowering of the learning society. But in the meantime, let me confess that I had a harder time categorizing expense than any other barrier. For men, the cost of education seems to be a situational barrier. It behaves in a logical way, posing more problems to men with lower-paid jobs, lower educational levels, and younger age. Thus, I assume that these men are in a situation where money is a real--as opposed to a perceived--problem. For women, the barrier of cost seems not to be very closely related to how much money they can be assumed to have. For example, among women, college graduates are almost as troubled by the cost of further education as high school graduates. Equally strange is the finding that financial barriers plague female college graduates much more frequently than male college graduates. Half of the women graduates compared to only one-fourth of the men indicated that cost of further education was an important barrier. Despite all of the talk about women's liberation, it looks as though women do not feel as free to spend money on their education as men do. After I had classified cost as possibly situational for men, and dispositional for women, I pondered the recent battle within the University of California over introducing a new system of charging only part-time tuition for part-time study, and I decided that cost is still an institutional barrier too, operating quite frequently to discourage part-time students.

The rest of my classification was easier. We can dispense with the dispositional barriers rather quickly because they do not loom large in the eyes of very many people. We can assert with some confidence that most people are kindly disposed to continued learning. I did find it interesting as well as appalling that the leading dispositional barrier was "too old to learn," checked by 17 percent of all respondents but by over 40 percent of those over 55. I can't help predicting that if we run the same survey in 1980, we will find a dramatic increase in the interest of older and retired people in education. For one thing, our technology will permit greater ease of delivery into the home, and for another, we are becoming much more sophisticated in our perception of what lifelong education is. While such education may consist of traditional coursework in the academic disciplines, it is more likely to engage the interest of the learner because of its timeliness and relevance to real-life problems and interests. Older people express little interest in degrees, but there is no evidence that they feel too old to spend their increased leisure time participating in a variety of learning activities that are useful and interesting to them. The North Campus of Miami-Dade Community College added 3000 students, a 30 percent increase in one year, by designing a program for Miami's senior citizens and then enclosing a recruitment flyer in Southern Bell Telephone bills. Since the over-65's are constituting an increasing proportion of our population, we should be alarmed that "too old to learn" is the most frequently checked dispositional barrier to lifelong learning. An educational system that does not serve the needs of the elderly does not serve the needs of the learning society.

The other dispositional barrier that adults said deterred them from further learning were ranked in this order: not confident of my ability,

not enough energy, don't enjoy studying, tired of school, don't know what to learn, hesitate to seem too ambitious, and friends or family don't like the idea. But these more personal barriers were experienced by from only 3 to 12 percent of the potential learners. To interest people in formal learning is not our major problem it seems. If the price and the program are right, the attitude is quite positive.

This brings me to the data on institutional barriers. If cost is considered an institutional barrier, it heads the list. And the cost barrier, as you know better than I, is not easily lowered because cost is also listed by institutions as the major deterrent to initiating nontraditional programs (Ruyle & Geiselman, 1974). Not surprisingly, the institutional solution has been to pass the cost on to the student. Most institutions expect their adult programs to be self-supporting; only one-fourth the programs designated nontraditional look to the institution for subsidy (Ruyle & Geiselman, 1974). It seems to me that as we move into the implementation of the learning society, the lack of institutional support for adult learning will be considered discrimination on grounds of age. Adults as well as young people will have to be eligible for financial aid on the basis of need. At present, over one-third of the institutions in this country have no financial aid of any type available for part-time students, and even fewer colleges--only one-fourth--have financial aid offices open evenings or weekends.

Exacerbating the problems at the institutional level is what a recent ACE Study Commission terms "massive discrimination against part-time students" on the part of almost everyone--federal and state aid programs, social security survivor's benefits, income tax requirements, etc. (Committee on the Financing of Higher Education for Adult Students, February 1974). It is painfully apparent that the ACE's Committee on the Financing

of Higher Education for Adult Students is right on target when they insist that we need a totally new conceptual framework in higher education that eliminates the distinctions between "regular" and "adult" students. If we mean what we say about lifelong learning and about the desirability of a learning society, then we can no longer perpetuate a system that assumes learning is a necessity for some and a luxury for others.

I don't have any answer to the financial problem. Obviously, it is perceived as a problem by colleges, students, government agencies, and national study commissions. The best we can hope for is that clear recognition of the existence of the inequity of present practices will lead to reform.

In the meantime, other barriers that I have categorized as primarily institutional are a little easier to do something about. An astounding 35 percent of the respondents to the ETS questionnaire said that an important deterrent to taking a course of study or learning a skill was that they didn't want to go to school full-time. While we in education may talk knowingly about the changing college scene with its dramatic increases in the number of part-time learners, a substantial portion of our intended audience seem to picture an old-fashioned college campus with 18 to 22 year-olds spending full-time on the campus quad. In reality, 1972 marks the year in which the number of part-time students in college equalled the number of full-time students, and we are moving rapidly toward the predominance of the part-time college student. Full-time enrollments are leveling off while part-timers continue to increase. In the 1970's the rate of growth of part-time students has been roughly three and one-half times that for full-timers.

Colleges, of course, both initiate and respond to the trend toward the blurring of the distinctions between study and work or between college and

the real world. Over two-thirds of the colleges in the country permit students to earn a degree entirely by part-time study; only 6 percent limit degree-credit to full-time students (Ruyle & Geiselman, 1974). Nevertheless, if one-third of the potential adult learners envision full-time study as a desirable or necessary condition for learning, then we have a public information campaign to conduct. The community colleges have been very successful in casting new images of the openness of their campuses and their eagerness to serve older students. Private colleges with their heritage of dormitories, sororities and fraternities, football weekends, etc., have a more difficult time projecting a new image even if they have given thought to creating the flexibilities and programs that appeal to adult learners. But the data indicate that private colleges, instead of working harder to encourage adult students, make less effort than community colleges. Whereas one-fourth of the independent colleges admit they provide no active encouragement for older students, only 5 percent of the public community colleges are as indifferent. Furthermore, whereas three-fourths of the community colleges have literature available for use in recruiting older students, only about one-half of the private four-year colleges are similarly equipped (Ruyle & Geiselman, 1974). And potential students complain about the lack of information about courses and places of study; 16 percent claim that lack of information constitutes an important barrier to their continued learning.

Other institutional barriers that 10 percent or more of the adults cite as deterring them from further study are that courses aren't scheduled when they can attend, that strict attendance requirements are a problem, and that there is too much red tape in getting enrolled. The complaint about red tape can, of course, be passed off as a motivational problem of the students, but if you are an adult who already feels a bit conspicuous



and unsure of yourself, trying to find your way through strange procedures in unknown surroundings can be quite unsettling. Orientation, counseling, and courteous and helpful clerks can be even more important for adults than for young people. Older people who have grown used to competence on their own turf may feel more unsettled in strange situations than young people for whom new and unfamiliar experiences are a more common and more acceptable occurrence.

Obviously there are a variety of steps that can be taken to reduce situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers to a college education. They range all the way from fairly simple public relations efforts to somewhat more complicated procedural modifications to extremely difficult curricular changes. Most colleges have a lot of work to do in all three areas, and all colleges should give some attention to the balance of effort given to dissemination, scheduling and services, and curricular design. I have seen college faculties work terribly hard to design a good educational program for nontraditional students only to have it founder because they gave little attention to telling people about it. Others have done nothing with the curriculum but have launched a good public relations campaign to recruit all those people that all the research statistics say are out there eager to register for classes--only to find that registrations were far below expectations. The third sin, that of having a good program and good publicity but failing to schedule it when people can come, is not common--partly because considerable attention has been given to the issue in the literature but also because if potential learners are informed that you have what they want, they won't be shy about telling you about their problems in services and scheduling.

A well-designed and well-balanced program for nontraditional learners inevitably involves what I call the who, where, how and what questions--

who is to be served, where will learning take place, how will instruction be delivered or offered and what content will be taught? A program can be classified as nontraditional with respect to four characteristics-- students, location, instructional methods, and content. There are all sorts of combinations and permutations possible. At the one extreme, we can offer the traditional subject matter in traditional ways to nontraditional students. At the other end of the continuum lies the possibility of delivering non-content by nontraditional traditional methods to nontraditional learners in off-campus locations. Research indicates that 70 percent of the nontraditional programs are at the conservative end of the change continuum; they are nontraditional with respect to the type of students served. Only 20 percent of the programs in existence in 1973 were nontraditional with respect to students, locations, methods and content. Nevertheless, the majority of programs were non-traditional in at least two respects. It is not very common in other words to attempt to serve nontraditional students without making other significant changes in the educational program (Ruyle & Geiselman, 1974).

Actually, the recruitment of students not previously served by higher education is so common now that we might well question whether the term "nontraditional students" hasn't outlived its usefulness. There are not many colleges in the country that do not make some effort to attract one or more of the following groups that have been considered nontraditional: part-time adult learners, economically disadvantaged people, special occupational groups such as policemen or accountants, handicapped students or those otherwise confined or beyond commuting distance, and a host of other groups. In the coming learning society the <sup>term</sup> "college material" has no relevance. Anyone who wants to learn is college material.

In the terminology of the day, however, the most common model of nontraditional education is the evening division that makes the rather simple assumption that the

primary difference between needs of traditional and nontraditional learners relates to educational scheduling. The program for evening colleges has consisted of offering courses and services at times convenient for working adults. Closely related to the evening division but one notch up on the innovative scale of accommodating the special needs of new learners is the extension division with two nontraditional elements--new students and new locations. In the typical extension course, the professor packs up his lecture notes and drives 50 miles down the road to teach as much of the same content in as much the same manner as he can get by with to a moderately new clientele. It is not surprising to find that it usually turns out that the new clientele registering for this model is not terribly different from the on-campus students that the professor originally made his notes to teach. Extension students are often youngish, fairly well-educated, middle-class teachers and business people seeking a few credits useful in promotion and salary considerations.

Where extension colleges have had to be self-supporting, however, they have had to be responsive to the market. In these colleges, one sees truly remarkable innovation with respect to both content and method. The dean of the UCLA extension program told me that 10 years ago they just could not keep up with the demand for courses in personal development. Today, they are having a hard time finding faculty to teach courses related to ecology and the conservation of natural resources. Traditional institutions have been isolated to some extent from the demands of the marketplace because they have had a monopoly on the degree business and they have had a captive audience.

Sometimes I think that the extent of involvement and commitment to change has not yet dawned on some of the colleges that are out eagerly recruiting nontraditional students. Many educators are still locked in the

concept of what I call the access model. They naively assume that their job is to increase the accessibility of education for the new learners. That is only part of the task before us. I rather suspect that any attempt to be truly responsive to the needs of the learning society will cause all of us considerable discomfort as we are forced to reexamine our old assumptions about the adequacy of our curriculum and instruction. There is a perverseness of human beings that makes a college education valuable when it is restricted to relatively few people. When it becomes available to everyone, then it can no longer derive its value from its prestige. It must be worthwhile in its own right.

The handwriting is already on the wall. It can no longer be taken for granted that the traditional academic content is acceptable to the majority of students or potential students. New students and old students are expressing dissatisfaction with a curriculum devoted largely to the preservation of the traditional academic disciplines. Research conducted among such traditional students as those at the University of California showed more dissatisfaction over the curriculum than almost any other aspect of their education. These students claimed that the emphasis on the accumulation of knowledge in the academic disciplines is presently given third priority in the goals of University whereas it should be demoted to 14th place in the list of 20 goals. Community college students in California express similar disenchantment with traditional content. They would demote emphasis on academic knowledge from its present first place to 12th priority (Peterson, 1973). Other research on the desires of adult learners shows that traditional courses such as those in the social, biological and physical sciences rank very low in the interests of adult learners (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974). My own research (Cross, 1971) indicates that the New Students entering the college mainstream through the open doors

of community colleges are not attracted to the traditional content either.

All kinds of learners and potential learners, on campus and off, are asking for "relevance" in education. It doesn't help to point out to our critics that the term "relevance" is inarticulate and awkward. The dissatisfaction of people with the usefulness of their education is one topic on which radicals and conservatives can agree. Radical reformers are likely to talk about social relevance whereas the general public may be thinking about an education that will provide practical upward social and economic mobility, but the notion of applying education to the solution of real problems is a common desire now among traditional as well as non-traditional students (Cross, 1973). The knowledge explosion, the fact that information can be retrieved more efficiently than it can be remembered, the societal shift from technological problems to human and social problems--all of these contribute to widespread discontent with our present model of concentrating on the dissemination of factual information in the academic disciplines. Competency-based education is one attempt to meet the demands for an education that is useful. The "education and work" theme of the federal government and the rapid growth of cooperative education programs are other signs of the times. But a market place that continues to show disenchantment with the standard course offerings will, I believe, be the greatest force for reexamination and change in the area of the content of education.

Time does not permit an examination of the revolution taking place in instructional methods. Generally speaking, most educators are better informed about nontraditional methods than they are about nontraditional content. Furthermore, colleges are obviously more willing to examine new instructional approaches than they are to explore the possibility of new

subject matter--despite the fact that students are not as dissatisfied with the method of presentation as they are with the content of the presentation. We have some new evidence at ETS that adults, in particular, prefer lectures to other instructional methods (Roelfs, 1975). One suspects, however, that most adults in the population have had little opportunity to experience alternative teaching/learning approaches. It may simply be that most people like what they know rather than know what they like. There is every reason to think that the newer media delivery systems and self-paced learning modules are especially relevant to the instruction of adults.

It must be obvious that I think the topic of programs to serve non-traditional learners is broad and complicated. There are no prefab models; that is the challenge of the new learners. Traditional education has assumed that the institutional program is the given and that students are successful or unsuccessful to the extent to which they master predetermined lessons. Nontraditional education starts with the assumption that the student is the given and that education is successful or unsuccessful to the extent that it helps students toward intellectual and personal development. There is all the difference in the world between the two approaches. The traditional curriculum can be designed in the absence of students and transported to just about any college in the country; the programs that are the concern of this conference cannot begin without extensive knowledge of the particular clientele to be served.

I believe that we are witnessing the start of a movement that will revolutionize education for traditional as well as nontraditional learners. It is exciting and challenging to be a part of that movement.

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