

Lowering the Barriers for Adult Learners

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If I could have my choice of when to live and work in the world of higher education, I would choose the 1970's as the most interesting and exciting era that has occurred in the past 50 years or is likely to occur in the next 50. For I believe that we now stand at a significant crossroads in the history of higher education. Sometime around 1970--give or take five years--we could look back on a system that took as its major claim to fame a truly remarkable physical growth. Few questioned either the desirability or the direction of the growth.

Many refer to the post-World War II years as the golden age, but I wonder if history won't find those years more akin to the turbulence of adolescence than to the golden years of maturity and wisdom. In many ways, higher education has had a difficult adolescence. We have experienced rapid physical growth. We have faced the encouraging, but still adolescent, problems of integrating parts that were growing at different rates. Like most adolescents, we have bumped against the problems of authority in the form of taxpayers and legislators and alumni who felt we may have grown too big for our britches. We have even struggled briefly with the acne of

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campus eruptions. They were good years in many ways, full of the exuberance and energy and natural optimism of youth, but they were not the golden years, and I am not sorry to see them pass.

The decade of the 70's will not, I think, be the golden years either. They are more likely to be the seeking years in which we face the problems of our own identity. Who are we and what does the future hold for us? Like post-adolescents who have attained physical maturity, we are likely to waver between brashness and timidity as we seek to find our place in the world. These will be the years of self-study and evaluation. While it is hard to see what lies ahead for individual institutions, we have great faith in the collectivity that is higher education. Some institutions, like some young people, will make it big; others will teeter on the brink of insecurity and self-doubt. Some of the decisions made in these years will be wrong--some fatally so--but most institutions will possess the vitality to profit from errors, to grow in maturity and self-confidence, and to develop uniquely and distinctively--free to establish their own identity.

Such freedom has not been characteristic of higher education in the past. We are constantly reminded of the increasing homogeneity of higher education (Martin, 1969; Hodgkinson, 1971). Again, like insecure adolescents, we seem to feel more comfortable trying to look and act like everyone else. Who hasn't seen the upwardly striving college purporting to be the Harvard of Podunk County? I have been on community college campuses where ambitious administrators engaged in adolescent daydreams about a transfer curriculum that would be recognized as the Harvard of community colleges. But those are the dreams of a bygone era. Recent research in California shows that people are beginning to perceive real differences in the emphases and priorities of different kinds of colleges

(Peterson, 1973). Furthermore, there is a growing interest nation-wide in educational innovation, and colleges are seeking distinctiveness. Many colleges are more interested in what Empire State College or Ottawa University or Staten Island Community College are doing than they are in what the older prestige models of Harvard or Stanford are doing. The present plateau in physical growth is giving higher education the opportunity to get ourselves together and to think seriously about goals and purposes. For most colleges, these years of the 1970's are raising profound questions about identity.

Higher education, individually and collectively, derives its identity from three sources: some comes from our heritage, some is a product of the times in which we live, but most of our identity is a function of decisions that we make. If I do say so myself, our inherited identity is good; we come from good stock. There are not many rascals among our ancestors, no incurable heritable strains of disease, and only an occasional weird aunt or eccentric uncle. As to the identity that has been thrust upon us, we can acknowledge that we are the offspring of parents that have been considered pillars of society; people look to us for leadership in solving all manner of problems of the community. They expect us to be knowledgeable--sometimes beyond our capabilities--and they expect us to be generous--sometimes beyond our resources. In some ways people expect us to be like the parent generation of colleges, preserving their standards in the face of social change which has been rapid enough to make some standards unwise or impossible and others ridiculous.

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And so, higher education is a product of past heritage and present times, but most importantly, we are the product of our own decisions. I cannot in the time available today even begin to enumerate the areas in which decisions

will have to be made, but like any adolescent making a decision about a future role in the world, each college needs to give simultaneous attention to its particular strengths and capabilities as well as to the needs and demands of the market place. Just as a young person thinking about teaching as a career today might be encouraged to take note of the fact that the supply of teachers is greater than the demand, so a college thinking about carrying on the tradition of a residential liberal arts college might well give thought to the supply and demand for liberal arts education. Good teachers and good liberal arts colleges will surely be needed in the years ahead. Neither the teacher nor the liberal arts college should be urged to abandon their desire, but each had better be sure that they will enter the market from a position of strength--with the ability and the motivation to beat out rather substantial competition. The weak liberal arts college, like the weak teacher, is likely to be forced to seek other roles in the years ahead. But the strong liberal arts college with a sense of mission, like the strong teacher with commitment and dedication, probably has a bright future ahead. And so one decision your college might make is to preserve and improve your identity as a liberal arts college.

But strong or weak, you need not continue a liberal arts tradition. Just as a young woman has enough opportunities today so that she no longer has to consider teaching one of the few options open to her, so colleges have more options than ever before. Your college may wish to venture into some new areas, some tested and others a gamble. You may wish to seek new markets and to serve people not previously served by colleges.

The decisions you make about your mission will help determine your identity. If you seek to emphasize liberal arts education, then you make a decision

that determines in large measure the type of students you will serve. Using the data from Dr. Carp's survey, for example, we can draw a profile of the type of people who say they are especially interested in taking courses in the humanities and languages. The typical adult learner easiest to attract to college level liberal arts courses might look something like this: She is a white woman from the middle or upper classes. She is fairly well educated already, having had some college or even a college degree. Her motivation for further learning springs largely from a desire to feel better informed, and she is oriented toward the four-year college and the traditional classroom lecture as an appropriate scene for her continued learning. There is a comparable profile for male liberal arts candidates. But they are somewhat fewer in number, and they express more interest than the women in the sciences as courses of study. In other words, the nontraditional clientele for your liberal arts college would probably look a lot like your present college students, grown up. Many of them are to be found among your alumni and the parents of your students. If you have a secret hankering to serve ghetto residents or to populate your campus with a cross-section of American society, then you will need to think seriously about changing more than the access routes to your college.

But let us assume that you have answered the question of identity for your college and that your problem is how to make your kind of education available to all those who want it. You might wish to know what prevents people who say they are interested in further study from registering for classes.

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 include 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 the situational barrier precluding college study for young mothers with children at home 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 "too old to learn" by 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.

Al Carp and his ETS colleagues asked adults who were not engaged in learning activities, but 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 were checked by less than 12 percent of the sample.

It should be remembered, however, that if a college could tap even 10 percent of the potential adult learning market in their area they would be in a pretty ecstatic state these days. I talked recently with the president of a small liberal arts 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.

The barrier checked by more respondents than any other in the list of 24 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 situa-

tion where money is a real--as opposed to 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 continuous learning. I did find it interesting as well as appalling that the leading dispositional barrier was "too old" checked by 17 percent of all respondents, but by over 40 percent of those over 55. With all due respect to the fine research of Al and his colleagues, I do fault the questionnaire for wording the item "afraid I am too old to begin" rather than . . . too old to continue learning. The use of the word "begin" may have implied a degree program in which older people express notably less interest than younger people. Other dispositional barriers that

deterred adults from continued 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 nontraditonal 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 and 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. The motivations behind the changes in higher education which seem to be sweeping the country also vary. Some colleges are frankly concerned with institutional survival, and their desire to serve new markets is motivated largely by economic considerations. Others are dedicated to the social ideal of a learning society in which all citizens may enrich their lives and opportunities through continuous learning. Whatever the motivations of individual colleges, the coincidence of pragmatic economic pressures and idealistic social concerns is bringing about the implementation of the learning society with incredible speed.

Howard Bowen, an economist of some note, has observed that the demand for higher education is not independent of the supply. As a matter of fact, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that increasing the educational supply seems to increase the demand. The rise of community colleges, for example, increased the demand for access among groups not previously considering higher education; the appearance of new programs for adults is increasing the

interest of adults in continuing their education. Despite the gloomy prognostications of some about the inevitability of the steady state in college enrollments, I think that eventuality is not as certain as birthrate statistics might make it appear. According to Bowen's calculations,

If women attended [college] at the same rate as men, if low-income people could attend at the same rate as high income people, if attendance rates were as high throughout the country as they are in the leading states, enrollment would probably be increased by at least six or seven million. And if persons beyond the usual college age begin attending in rapidly growing numbers as they show signs of doing, enrollments would grow even more (p 6).

Thus if we were truly to implement a learning society, higher education could easily double. No one promises such a rosy future, and the self-satisfaction of higher education in the 1950's and 60's gave rise to some quite effective competition in the supply of education--from proprietary institutions, from business and industry, from a rash of personal development entrepreneurs ranging from encounter groups to dynamic reading clinics, and from community agencies aggressively serving the needs of a public eager for learning experiences. But one thing is surely obvious; learning enjoys a tremendous prestige in this country. There is a potential clientele out there, eager to participate in learning activities if we can lower the barriers and provide the programs to meet their needs.

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