

WOMEN IN THE LEARNING SOCIETY

K. Patricia Cross
Educational Testing Service

It gives me a great deal of pleasure to play a part in this conference honoring my mother, for it is a conference that would have had her wholehearted endorsement. Its simple purpose is to bring together a group of adult women for the purpose of learning about some new developments. And Mother was a feminist and a lifelong learner long before those concepts had the high visibility that they have today.

If I were to follow the "what's new?" theme of your conference, my remarks would be entitled, What's New in Higher Education? Actually, there is a lot that is new in higher education, but I will follow the admirable example set by the previous speakers of the day and limit myself to talking about only part of what's new in higher education. The change I have chosen to talk about this noon, however, will make a great deal of difference to our society, and it is one in which you, as women who are no longer enrolled in college full time, will play a major role.

The hottest new movement in higher education is generally called lifelong learning in the United States and recurrent education in countries abroad. Those terms refer to an emerging worldwide interest in adult learning. For a number of reasons, the vanguard of the lifelong learning movement in the United States consists largely of women between the ages of 25 and 45.

Prepared for Katherine Cross Women's Conference, Illinois State University, Normal Illinois, October 28, 1978.

There has been an explosive growth in the number of adult learners during this decade, and it is the result of changing demographics as well as changing lifestyles. Demographically, this nation is moving from numerical domination by the youth of the society to domination by persons in their middle years. The World War II baby boom generation is growing up. Those born in 1957 at the peak of the postwar birthrate are now 21, and those born at the beginning of the birth explosion are almost 30. During the 1970s, the number of 18 to 24 year olds in the population will grow a modest 8 percent, while the number of 25 to 34 year olds will increase a whopping 44 percent. If the birthrate remains as low as it is today, by the year 2000 there will be a 30 percent decrease in the number of children under 16, counterbalanced by a 40 percent increase in the number of adults over 16.

No wonder then that growth industries in the United State are switching from products like baby foods and blue jeans to furniture and family recreation vehicles or that the makers of Johnson's baby powders and shampoos are now conducting extensive advertising campaigns to promote the use of their products by 30 year olds.

Educators too are taking note of these changing demographics. As a cushion against the predicted 20 percent drop in the number of 18 year olds in the 1980s, colleges are looking at the potential for serving adult learners. Adults now constitute the most rapidly growing segment of American higher education; almost half of today's college students are over the age of 21. In the community colleges the average age of students

is 28 and rising. Obviously, as far as colleges are concerned, the growth potential for education lies, not in the youth of the nation, but in the adults.

Research on adult learning indicates that over three-fourths of the adults who are no longer full-time students in school say they are interested in further learning, and an amazing one-third of the adult population actively participate each year in some form of organized instruction (Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs, 1974). The term "organized instruction" includes a broad range of organized learning activities such as on-the-job training, senior citizens programs, exercise classes at the YWCA, courses on financial planning offered by investment firms, and a host of other organized classes. The number of adults enrolled in classes, workshops, and discussion groups of this sort already exceeds by a large margin the total number of regular students enrolled in all two- and four-year colleges and universities.

There are many reasons for the explosive increase of interest in life-long learning. Most, of course, are related to the rapid pace of social and technological change. Margaret Mead has reminded us that the world we live in is not the world we were born in, nor is it the world in which we will die. For women, the changes in lifestyle have been especially dramatic. My grandmothers, for example, lived on farms in Kansas and raised large families of eight and ten children without freezers, dishwashers, washer-dryers, drip-dry fabrics, or convenience foods. I'm sure that my grandmother would have defined a convenience food as one where the beans were picked for her.

She would not have dreamed of having them presented to her washed, snapped, frozen in buttersauce, and topped with slivered almonds. Raising a family in those days not only occupied all of the hours in a day, but it also required most of the years of the life expectancy, which incidentally, was only 45 in 1900, compared to 75 for women today.

My mother's generation still spent from sunup to sundown on various household chores, but the decrease in family size shortened the years devoted to raising a family. My return to Illinois State University today reminds me that the only automation associated with housework when I was growing up in Normal was that my brother, my sister, and I automatically helped with dishes, ironing, and the canning of fruits and vegetables from the garden--activities that have virtually disappeared from the experience of today's children.

Thus in just three short generations, the time devoted to family and housework has declined dramatically, both with respect to the hours per day and years per lifetime. A majority of women between the ages of 25 and 55 are now employed outside the home, and increasing numbers of women are returning to school to gain the skills and credentials for jobs. Or they are participating in a variety of learning activities, designed not so much to enhance employability, as to enhance the quality of life.

When we talk about the emergence of the learning society, we are talking about more than the increased enrollments of adults in colleges and adult schools. New opportunities for learning exist all around us--as they did not

even one generation ago. One can learn about science or about history and culture from sophisticated television programs such as *The Ascent of Man*, *Civilization*, or *Roots*. Last year 450 newspapers carried a series of 15 lectures on Crime and Justice which was available for credit from some 300 colleges and universities. Furthermore there are today an unprecedented number of how-to-do-it paperbacks. We can teach ourselves how to do anything from writing a will to fixing the plumbing to growing orchids. Although much of the excitement about lifelong learning has been stimulated by colleges, research indicates that the most popular form of adult education is still self-directed learning.

Approximately 90 percent of the adult population can be classified as self-directed learners, most of whom never enroll in a course. In research which contradicts the oft repeated assertion that the average American adult has the intellectual interests of a 13 year old, researchers have found that the average adult today spends about 500 hours per year in learning projects of one kind or another.

Thus whether one looks at the greying of the campus caused by the heavy influx of adults into college classes or whether one talks about the much larger learning force using an ever-widening variety of learning resources, the conclusion is the same: Lifelong learning is a social phenomenon of great significance, and it will be increasingly important as America moves into the Third Century.

So far I have talked about changing demographics and changing lifestyles. I'd like to turn now to some of the social forces that are contributing to the growth of the learning society.

First there is the ever-present drive to expand educational opportunity. Although some may associate educational opportunity with recent social movements such as civil rights, women's liberation, and attention to the needs of the elderly, expanded educational opportunity has been a national goal ever since this country was founded. The unceasing pressures for expanded learning opportunities can be vividly and simply illustrated through the symbolism of what has been happening to the physical boundaries of the college campus.

The first campuses in this country were small collegial communities in which students and faculty lived on or around the campus, their physical isolation a symbol of their removal from the worldly concerns of the masses. In the 19th Century, the landgrant institutions came into being, expanding the classical curriculum to include applied subjects, serving a much larger audience of learners, and creating huge, albeit still largely residential, campuses. A century later, the community colleges began to change the concept of campus. In deliberate contrast to their predecessors, community colleges were usually located in the very centers of population, designed for commuting faculty and students whose lives were rooted as much in the community as on the campus. The community college movement introduced the concept of using the entire community as campus.

Finally the 21st Century, with its sophisticated technology and mass media, is destined to move beyond community as campus toward colleges-without-walls which regard the world as their campus. Indeed there are already in existence over 200 fully accredited colleges-without-walls which enroll some

54,000 adults in associate and bachelor's degree programs, frequently without ever requiring the physical presence of the learner on a campus (Sosdian, 1978). Clearly, education for adults 18 and over has burst explosively from its physical boundaries, and we are increasingly surrounded with an incredible variety of learning choices.

A second characteristic of lifelong learning is that it is becoming increasingly free of the credentials of the provider. Once learning is perceived as a characteristic of the learner rather than an offering of the provider, it shifts attention from teaching to learning. "Experiential learning" is the term that has come into being to reflect widespread agreement that when or where or from whom one learns is not nearly as important as what one learns. A majority of colleges in the country today grant academic credit if students can demonstrate on examinations that they have learned as much, through a method of their own choosing, as those attending class on campus. On many campuses it is not even necessary to take a written examination; students are permitted to submit evidence of past learning in a variety of forms--from portfolios of accomplishments to letters from supervisors of volunteer or work experience.

A number of colleges catering to the maturity and experience of adults no longer start with a list of courses to be taken by the student, but rather with helping the student work out an individualized "learning contract" which spells out the goals of the learner, the learning activities designed to

accomplish the goals, and methods to be used in evaluating learning. Faculty in such institutions are more likely to play the role of learning facilitator than provider of information. And adults are assuming more active roles in designing their own learning programs.

A third factor contributing to the emergence of the learning society is the recognition by citizens that lifelong learning is an essential and pleasurable aspect of life. New knowledge is a coping skill necessary to survival. Every 40 minutes enough new information is generated to fill a 24-volume encyclopedia. We can empathize with the medical student's distinction between a generalist and a specialist. "A general practitioner learns less and less about more and more until he eventually knows nothing about everything, while the specialist learns more and more about less and less until he eventually knows everything about nothing." Where all this pursuit of knowledge will end, I can't possibly foresee, but the fact is that knowledge is more essential than ever before, and fortunately, more easily obtainable.

Increasingly adults are taking advantage of new learning opportunities--especially adults who are already well educated. One thing we know for sure from the recent research on adult learners is that the more formal education an adult has, the more likely he or she is to seek further opportunities for learning (Cross, 1978). A college graduate, for example, is about eight times as likely as a high school dropout to participate in adult education, and each year of additional education seems to add to the

desire for further learning. And, of course, the level of educational attainment for the populace is rising with each passing decade. The average adult in the United States now has more than 12 years of formal schooling.

The learning market is also being stimulated right now by a subtle but perceptible shift from what has been called a linear lifeplan to a blended lifeplan. By and large, advanced societies promote a linear lifeplan in which youth is spent in education, middle age in work, and old age in enforced leisure. The increasingly pronounced separations between education, work, and leisure are due in part to the job shortage which is neither a recent nor a temporary phenomenon. For the past 50 years society has been unable to provide jobs during peacetime for everyone willing and able to work. A policy paper recently issued in Washington maintains that those in midlife who are at their peak of political power and influence have reacted to the chronic job shortage over the years by "pushing young persons back into school and older persons into ever-earlier retirement" (Best and Stern, 1976, p. 6).

There seems to be growing dissatisfaction, however, on the part of almost everyone, with this solution to the problem. Sociologists are observing the rise of what has been called "rights consciousness" or the "psychology of entitlement." Almost everyone today feels entitled to a job. At the same time, almost everyone feels entitled to education and to full enjoyment of their leisure hours. Older people have insisted upon their right to work if they want to, and Congress has endorsed that right through a roll-back of mandatory retirement. Young people are showing

increasing dissatisfaction with long years of uninterrupted schooling, especially when there is no guarantee of the well-paid and meaningful job to which they feel entitled, at the other end of the educational pipeline. The majority of college students today work part-time, and substantial numbers of workers go to school part-time. This brings about the phenomenon of the part-time student, part-time worker, part-time vacationer. There is nothing very exceptional anymore about the individual who attends college, holds a job, and takes off for what would once have been considered extravagant leisure weekends of skiing or surfing.

It is not only young people who feel entitled to the good-life as a blend of work, education, and leisure. Women, dissatisfied with unidimensional lives, are flooding into the labor market--and into education--in unprecedented numbers. Blue collar workers feel entitled, as never before, to a life beyond the factory. Labor unions are negotiating education and vacations into contracts. There is a rising desire on the part of the rank-and-file for benefits beyond mere wages--benefits that enhance the quality of life.

The point is that after a long human history of moving steadily toward a linear life plan which divides all life into three full-time phases with education for the young, work for the middleaged, and enforced leisure for the elderly, people from all walks of life seem to be opting for a blended life plan which permits learning, work, and leisure to go on concurrently.

At the same time that there is a blending of life activities for individuals, there is a blending of function among the organizations of

society. Employers are increasingly into the education business, conducting on-the-job training, workshops for professionals, and think-tanks for executives. Travel agencies are adding educational components to packaged tours at the same time that alumni offices and university extension services are adding packaged tours to credit-bearing courses.

While it is true that there is some competition for students among educational providers right now, the learning society should be viewed as a cooperative rather than a competitive venture. Research is virtually unanimous in reporting that the more people learn, the more they want to learn. Furthermore, learning from one source is quite likely to have a ripple effect in its demands on a wide variety of other learning resources. The movie, "Turning Point," for example, stimulated the desire in many people to learn more about ballet. The television program "Roots" resulted in a rash of requests to libraries and record bureaus for help with self-directed learning projects, but it also led to increased enrollments in classes in history and anthropology. The King Tut museum exhibits that are attracting record-breaking crowds this year are doing more to stimulate an interest in lifelong learning than to satiate it. Learning is addictive; the more people know about almost any subject the more they want to know.

An even more important characteristic of the learning society, however, than the number of providers of educational services is the variety that is present in today's learning opportunities. Formal learning in schools and colleges utilizes primarily two of the five senses--seeing and hearing--and recent research suggests that it calls on only half of the brain. We

are just beginning to discover that the right and left hemispheres of the brain perform different kinds of learning functions. Apparently, the left hemisphere handles learning that is linear, verbal, and rational whereas right brain function concentrates on learning that is simultaneous, visual, and affective. Schools and libraries exercise the left hemisphere of the brain with their emphasis on verbal symbolism and rational, sequential, logical thought. Television and museums, on the other hand, call on right hemisphere function with more simultaneous affective involvement in the learning experience.

Another dimension of learning made possible by the new multiplicity of educational providers is a dimension which might be labeled "linear sequence" versus "random access." Television presents its message in linear sequence, as do most classrooms. If I want to use television to learn about the weather, for example, I must first sit through the sports-cast. Newspapers, in contrast, offer random access; I can skip sports and turn directly to weather at my convenience. One of the advantages of libraries and museums over television and classrooms is that the learner has much more control over sequence and pacing.

The exciting potential of the learning society lies in its capacity to surround us with learning options--credit or non-credit, cognitive or affective, linear sequence or random access, on campus or off, taught by the kindly Mr. Chips, schoolmaster of yesteryear, or Artoo Detoo, technological tutor of tomorrow.

It is highly probable that the colleges and universities of this nation will continue to play their traditional role as the organizers and credentialers of learning programs. For people who want to get it all together, whether for their own satisfaction or for the credentials demanded by potential employers, educational institutions will continue to play the dominant role. Illinois State will probably concentrate on orienting traditional undergraduates to their futures as lifelong learners, but it will also, no doubt, offer learning programs for its alumni. I hope that today's program is a harbinger of things to come in the learning society in Central Illinois.

WOMEN IN THE LEARNING SOCIETY

References

- Best, Fred & Barry Stern. Lifetime distribution of education, work, and leisure. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership Post-secondary Convening Authority, 1976.
- Carp, A., R. E. Peterson & P. Roelfs. Adult learning interests and experiences. In K. P. Cross and J. R. Valley and Associates, Planning for non-traditional programs: An analysis of the issues for post-secondary education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974.
- Cross, K. Patricia. The missing link: Connecting adult learners to learning resources. New York: The College Board, 1978.
- Sosdian, Carol P. External degrees: Program and student characteristics. Washington, DC: Bureau of Social Science Research, Inc., 1978.