

EXTERNAL DEGREE PROGRAMS: RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

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I can't resist the temptation to compare our activity here today with that of a medical clinic in which the doctors, after studying all the clinical tests and charts, gather around to evaluate the health of the patient.

Initially, I conceived of this session as one in which trained specialists were flown in from all over the country to examine the charts of a patient with some extremely interesting and even exotic diseases. People weren't quite sure what, if anything, was wrong with the external degree. Who wouldn't welcome the opportunity to probe further to discuss symptoms and possible remedies with other specialists--possibly even to save a life with our expertise?

Imagine then my vague sense of disappointment when I poured over the extensive charts, only to discover that the patient was essentially normal in all respects. The external degree didn't have any exotic disease or even, as it turned out, any very ominous symptoms. It was neither undernourished nor overnourished, had been accepted as basically healthy by accrediting examiners, enjoyed reasonable acceptance by others, and was living a basically sound and apparently stress-free life. Aside from a hint that the patient was perhaps beyond its peak of growth*, there was

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* "It seems that the growth rate of these programs [external degrees] has already peaked..." (Sosdian, 1978, p. 37).

no evidence of any pathology. Basically our patient could be compared to a kind of middle-class guy making a modest place for himself in the world.

The basic conclusions of the research were these:

1 - People with adult responsibilities of jobs and families find the external degree a legitimate way to consolidate and supplement earlier study experiences.

2 - The degree satisfies the expectations of its graduates very well.

3 - The external degree is adequately negotiable, seemingly credible in the eyes of the graduates themselves, their friends, employers, and educational institutions.

Thus, the answer to the fairly limited question addressed in this study is, Yes the external degree seems to be sound as an educational credential for those who attain it. Once we have answered that question (with appropriate caveats about the generalizability of the data) I would hope we could end our national obsession for asking if non-traditional forms of education are as "as good as" more conventional models. Since I am not convinced that we should be all that satisfied with traditional education, I find research documenting the equality of external and conventional degrees incomplete at best, and in any event, a dead end activity because it fails to lead to the improvement of either alternative.

Let me hasten to make it quite clear that I do not intend that remark to be a criticism of either the question addressed or the investigation

carried out in the study under discussion today. Rather, my point is that the findings reported in this study, imperfect though they may be, are more important for the questions they permit us to raise than for the questions they purport to answer.

I'd like to ask the more impertinant research questions now like, How do we go about developing more mature, resourceful, lifelong learners? In view of the research of Allen Tough (1971) and others showing the unsuspected prevalence of self-directed learners in the society, maybe what we should be worrying about is not the acceptability of external study for adults but the dangers of making rather traditional classrooms increasingly accessible to adults. Will channeling adults into a system of predigested decisions about what, where, and when to learn rob adults of motivation and responsibility and narrow the dimensions of "legitimate" learning?

On the other hand, perhaps the dropouts from external degrees would have benefitted from the structure of conventional degrees. Most advocates of the Learning Society would probably support current trends to increase the options for adult learners, but shouldn't we know something about which forms work best for which learners? One way to research that question would be to look at the dropouts from various alternatives. It would be interesting to know, for example, who dropped out and why from the external degree programs that form the basis for today's discussion.

At present most research on adult learners has a strong marketing flavor about it. We know quite a bit about the needs and interests of

learners and would-be learners. We know very little about those who say they are not interested in further learning--and as fate would have it, non-participants tend to be those that society thinks most need education. What turns them off to learning opportunities?

Researchers Sosdian and Sharp suggest in their summary that an appropriate next step in research would be a study of the advantages and disadvantages of conventional adult education, i.e., evening and extension study. And of course, I agree. They go on to hypothesize that one of the advantages of on-campus study might be the opportunities for socialization and interaction. I rather suspect, however, that the social interaction aspect of on-campus study has been vastly overrated for most adults. Today's adults are usually making a quick trip once or twice a week to a large impersonal commuter campus where they listen and take notes in conventionally-managed classrooms. If social interaction is important to learning, perhaps we should begin to worry about how to make it more effective both on and off campus.

Obviously, there are plenty of interesting questions to investigate. To me, the important message from the study of the external degree as credential is that the credential per se seems to be in good health-- and that means we can get on with the business of improving adult learning.

REFERENCES

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