

16. Developing a Commitment to Lifelong Learning

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America is aging. In the present decade alone, the over 40 population will increase by 35 percent. Those in the 50 to 59 age bracket will rise by 17 percent. And since we Americans continue to live longer and have fewer babies, this trend is likely to persist.

The traditional work pattern is also breaking up. People are less involved in earning a living from early morning to late at night five days a week. The average working week in America - 62 hours in 1900, 43 hours in 1945 - now stands at about 37½ hours.

Further, many older workers now find themselves outdistanced by the pace of change. All too often, the individual forced into "early retirement" (as an alternative to simply being fired) has fallen behind in his field, been judged redundant, and quietly put out to pasture - with years of potential productivity left. Such situations are not only economically wasteful, they are tragic in simple human terms.

The nations colleges and universities are feeling the impact of these trends. Increasingly, education is becoming something more than a full-time pre-work ritual exclusively available to the young. In 1972 about 28 percent of all college students were 25 and over. Ten years later, the number had jumped to over 35 percent. And during this same period, the increase in students of age 35 and older was an astounding 77 percent.

This impressive shift is due largely to a growing number of part-time students. In 1972, such students constituted about one-third of the entire higher education population. In 1982, part-time students comprised over 40 per cent of the total. And it is estimated that by the year 2000, almost half of all students enrolled in American higher education will be part-time.

A related trend is the dramatic expansion of the two-year college. Before 1970, these institutions attracted less than 20 percent of post-secondary students. Today, over 50 percent of all such students are in community colleges and increasingly, the emphasis is on community, not college.

The two-year institution offers a stunning variety of programs for older students at convenient times and the move is away from the traditional transfer role that prepares students to go on to a senior college or university. There is, in fact, something called the "reverse transfer" going on. For example, in 1979, approximately 15 percent of all students in Illinois who transferred that year left public four-year universities to matriculate at community colleges. That same year, more students went from the campuses of the University of California to community colleges than the other way around.

The trend persists. Many graduates from liberal arts programs of four-year institutions find themselves simply less able to compete in today's tight job market that often demands very specific work skills. They return to a two-year college to better "train" themselves in one specific area of work or another that currently seems to be in most demand.

Retirees are also more actively engaged in higher education. The later years of life are being thought of as an ideal time for reentering the world of learning. Occasionally, colleges and universities are using their residence halls to accommodate retirees, providing not only housing but the opportunity for continuing education. Other colleges are asking: If we can go into the factories, why can't we also go into the nursing homes and the retirement villages? Why should a person, after a lifetime of productive work, be allowed to

vegetate intellectually simply because of the physical limitations of age? A few colleges are actually establishing retirement centers in proximity to the campus.

It is not just traditional higher learning institutions that are catering to mature students. Corporations are starting their own colleges to serve adults and industries are offering more and more education programs for their own workers, providing varied schedules for mini-courses, seminars, video-lectures and the like. The world of learning and the world of work are beginning to overlap and intersect.

Looking ahead, labor contracts can be expected to include "agreements for continued learning," arrangements that free the worker for several hours a week to take a college course in his or her factory, store or laboratory - not only technical courses relating to a specialty, but also in liberal studies. And more and more working adults may be granted mini-sabbaticals (just as college professors now are) either to refine their special skills or for their general cultural enrichment.

Everyone stand to gain from these developments. The individual gains by acquiring or updating skills that enhance prospects for job placement and salary increments. Additionally, the individual's sense of self-worth is sharpened as is his or her contact with ideas important to the person's place in society. This is life-long education for careers and citizenship as well.

Industry gains as better educated, better trained workers, older and younger, contribute to productivity and efficiency in the work place as well as to creativity and criticism in product design and corporate strategies. In the United States, as in Great Britain, there is concern that business and industry be fully competitive internationally. Higher Education has a crucial role in Americas economic resurgence.

Colleges and universities profit too. No longer are campuses youth ghettos, viewed with suspicion by "gown ups" in the outside world. And students, in turn, are looking with less suspicion on life beyond the campus. The time may soon arrive when the campus and the town will truly mix. A college community that is truly a community may emerge.

Here then is the picture. Higher learning in America has committed itself to expanding access unqualified by considerations of race, sex, religion, or social status. Increasingly, universities are affirming with equal seriousness that access to education should have no strings attached in terms of age. An older population is demonstrating that learning can be lifelong.

However, just below the surface of this transformation there are questions of profound importance to academe. How can this continuing expansion of access to higher education be balanced by the essential commitment to excellence? And how can a sense of campus community be maintained as a variety of part-time students with differing needs move freely in and out? Reconciling tradition and change, here as elsewhere in American life, remains the most fundamental issue for those who guide the destiny of our institutions of higher learning.

17. Measure for Measure of University Performance

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An observer of colleges and universities in the United States might conclude that higher education there is more than adequately assessed.

The federal and state governments have detailed procedures to monitor programs they fund. Six regional accrediting bodies, blanketing the nation, measure the overall health of higher learning institutions. One-hundred-fifty-four professional accrediting bodies look at specialized programs on campuses - ranging from agriculture to nursing education. And many states have what are called coordinating bodies that try to keep collegiate programs well balanced.

Consider California: the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, the regional accrediting organization, is responsible for institution-wide evaluation. In addition, there is the state coordinating board - the California Post-Secondary Education Commission that reviews new programs and evaluates selected degree programs already in place.

Beyond these oversight arrangements, administrators at the three public higher education systems in California (the University of California, California State University, and the community colleges) have at their disposal a variety of student, teacher, and administrator evaluation procedures of a very complicated and exhaustive sort.

One example: in 1983, the trustees of the California State University system voted to evaluate the job performances of the system's 19 campuses, and to do so every five years. The board also decided to evaluate the performance of the chancellor, albeit on a different schedule.

All of these evaluations are generated beyond the individual campus. But of course, each campus also has its own special provision for assessment. Faculty evaluate their colleagues at tenure time and students, too, have formal and informal ways of evaluating classes.

The situation in California is, with variations, repeated in most states across the country.

Still, after all of this, we remain dissatisfied. The pieces do not add up to a coherent whole. Reports of low test scores among teacher education students, nursing graduates who fail to pass state licensing exams, the necessity for remedial programs, these and other "failures" have encouraged a move for externally imposed student performance tests.

At least two states (Florida and Georgia) now require students to pass exams of basic skills and general education to advance to the junior level. And, in 1983, the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges considered requiring member institutions to measure student outcomes as part of the accreditation process. That decision, after objections by some members, was deferred pending further study.

To measure or not to measure? And, if so - what - and how? These questions beset educators and policy-makers alike. The debate is heating up and the answers differ widely, differ to the point of contradiction.

On one side there are academics and especially politicians who insist that education is now big business and better ways must be found to evaluate the effectiveness of the investment. Grady Bogue, chancellor of Louisiana State University, put the issue squarely: "To know as much about our students on exit as we know about them on entry hardly seems an extraordinary expectation . . . how can we possibly give any

meaningful leadership to program and service improvement without data on what our graduates know and think?"

Implicit in such comments is the suspicion that higher education is unable or unwilling to monitor its behavior. Chester Finn, director of the Center for Education and Human Development Policy at Vanderbilt University, has written: "Accountability is unpleasant - comparisons are unwelcome - objective indicators reveal embarrassing truths. And so the academy, even more than the public schools, has actively resisted the development of measures of student learning, of institutional productivity, of faculty performance, and of scholarly quality . . . We have essentially no means of gauging how well American higher education as a whole is doing with respect to student learning."

On the other side of the debate are educators, most often faculty members, who see grave dangers in trying to quantify a process as significant and subtle as the education of students. They point out that it is the least important parts of the experience that are measured - time, space, numbers of students and faculty, and the number of books placed on the shelf.

Beyond the nuts and bolts there are, these people argue, qualitative effects that are infinitely more important but infinitely more difficult to assess. Kenneth Ashworth asks: "How effectively can we measure . . . the ability to think critically, self-esteem, independence, self-reliance, enhanced awareness, an increased tolerance, empathy, intensified sensitivity, more sophisticated tastes, the rejection of stereotypes, or the capacity to grow in each of these qualities?"

The challenge of accountability is both sobering and disturbing. And yet there remains a restlessness among politicians, the public and students about the process and the outcomes of higher education. Educators, while worrying about the dangers of slicing colleges into little pieces to be counted, must continue to search for ways to evaluate their work.

Otherwise, major decisions will be taken out of the hands of those people within the university who probably know most about what goes on there and have the capacity to see the larger picture. As administrative and academic evaluation is conducted increasingly by those beyond the campus, governance structures will erode and the integrity of the campus will be threatened.

This problem already has emerged. In addition to the persistent oversight of government agencies and the granting of specialized accreditation, college guidebooks have in recent years become a booming business. Parents and students, dissatisfied with accreditation and unwilling to accept unchallenged the colleges' slick promotional brochures, are turning to commercial reports that describe campuses in colorful and irreverent terms.

What higher education needs today is not additional yardsticks to evaluate its work. More than enough procedures are in place. Needed now is more attention to the meaning of the enterprise, for only as we gain greater clarity about the missions of the university - about the functions that the form are to serve - will we have the standards against which to measure our procedures. Only as we clarify goals of higher education will we have the confidence to proceed with our evaluations.