Continuing Education in Colleges and Universities: Challenges and Opportunities

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EDITORS’ NOTES

Dramatic changes in society, the economy, and technology are altering higher education and, with it, continuing education schools and programs in colleges and universities. “Nontraditional” adult learners now outnumber traditional, full-time, residential college students, and the noncredit arena explodes with more program models, technologies, and audiences, all of which must respond to greater demands for fiscal accountability. As a result, continuing education (CE) programs seem to be at a critical juncture. Those that choose to continue business as usual might very well face extinction; however, those that anticipate and respond to these changes can provide critical leadership not only for their own programs but also play a major role in their institutions.

Due to the historical mission of their units as well as professional experience, CE staff members have the expertise to assume campuswide leadership roles in community outreach, economic development, internal and external partnerships, and distance education, all of which are now having greater impact on other campus departments. While CE units have always been at the nexus of campus and community, expectations and opportunities are increasing on a number of fronts. In this volume we explore some of these developments and their potential impact on CE units.

Historically, CE programs have not been especially prestigious in the university hierarchy. Baden (1999) stated that from the 1970s to the 1990s, CE units often were marginalized and their staff felt like second-class citizens on campuses. CE needs and priorities received less emphasis than those for students of traditional ages. Despite the fact that many CE units were generating substantial revenues for their institutions, their leaders seldom had much influence on institutional direction and resource allocation.

While we would all hope that this has changed in the 21st century, an increase in stature for CE units has been slow and uneven, even nonexistent in some institutions. Despite this, the past 20 years have been a period of significant transition for CE, according to Cervero (2001) who points to four trends: (1) more programs are being offered online; (2) there is increased collaboration among adult learning providers including universities and employers; (3) CE units are increasingly operated like businesses; and (4) CE is becoming a requirement for more and more professions.

Yankelovich (2005) believes that a number of trends will transform higher education in general; his predictions also include implications for CE practice. First, the longer life span (average of 47 in 1900 and nearly 90 in the current century) will disrupt the prevailing pattern of education, then work, replaced by greater integration of the two as well as alternate—or concurrent—periods of each. Longer periods of retirement will increase the demand for education for second careers as well as for personal enjoyment, providing new programming opportunities for CE.
There will also be greater pressure to understand different cultures and languages since businesses will be increasingly international in scope, and the risk of cultural isolation could undermine the global leadership of the United States (Yankelovich, 2005). Further, Yankelovich (2005) believes that the growing social and economic inequality in the United States will motivate workers to engage in continuous skills upgrading to remain competitive, and this will foster additional higher education–corporate partnerships.

The context for CE is also changing to incorporate skills and competencies for global interdependence, leadership, and innovation, according to Walshok (2012), who sees both challenges and opportunities for continuing education:

1. In the 1950s to the 1970s, the role of CE was often viewed as providing a second chance for adults; today, CE units are vital hubs of reeducation and training, especially for the millennials (those born after 1980), who realize that a bachelor’s degree is not sufficient for career advancement, contributing to record growth in both credit and noncredit certificate programs.

2. To promote innovation, CE needs to assume an active role in local and regional economic development, by providing technical assistance, mentoring, and business incubators as well as career-focused courses.

3. CE units in research institutions must do more than provide access for adults to traditional curricula; they should also help individuals prepare for their next career stage by building skills and knowledge portfolios and providing advising throughout the life span to assist individuals as they transition in and out of educational experiences.

4. There will be more partnering with K–12 schools, community colleges, employers, and regional planning groups to develop the local workforce and have access to resources that the university does not possess.

Walshok (2012) believes that meeting these challenges will require CE professionals with the skills to network and integrate information across multiple fields of learning in order to develop programs that bridge the “world of ideas and the world of action” (p. 51). To accomplish this, she urges CE units to assume greater presence in the civic, cultural, and economic life of their communities.

Gratton (2011) argues that the modern university tends to function as an entity separated from the larger community with a primary focus on full-time students but that CE units can be the bridge for increased interaction with external communities. She describes ours as an age in which continuous learning is essential for career success and argues that working people need environments where they can network to develop relational and collaborative opportunities as well as the skills to interact with multiple local and global communities.

Kasworm (2012) underscores this need for community linkage and notes that higher education in general is being pressured into being more responsive to regional and statewide economic development. In addition, the need for
more Americans to earn bachelor’s degrees to remain competitive in the global marketplace will remain critical.

According to Schroeder (2013), universities will increasingly be called on to assess and interpret learning experiences that students have accumulated through online courses, careers, and personal learning networks in addition to traditional courses. He believes that to remain relevant, universities must rethink the traditional transcript to include competencies and understandings rather than course prefixes and titles. The college transcript of the future will describe learning activities that have been pursued both within and outside of the academy, in a classroom or online, some for credit and others not. This development will have special relevance for adult learners who often bring a wealth of experience to the classroom.

New York Times columnist and author Tom Friedman (2013a) believes that a global revolution is occurring in online education as a result of massive open online courses (MOOCs). MOOCs are noncredit, open enrollment, free courses currently offered by several prestigious schools, such as Harvard, MIT, and Stanford, where thousands can and do enroll in a single course. Although the large number of students results in little or no interaction with faculty, MOOCs can promote the interaction of people from different backgrounds and cultures, in addition to the content learned.

These courses do not ordinarily carry college credit, but there are ongoing discussions on ways to make these offerings creditworthy. Some providers are offering proctored exams and even certification for transfer credit through the American Council on Education (Lewin, 2013). The dramatic possible impact of this on adult degree programs expands on current means of transferring credits, earning credit for prior learning, and other modes of demonstrating competence (Peale, 2013).

Friedman (2013a) sees the possibility of students creating their own degrees with online courses selected from the best faculty in the world. Similarly, Peale (2013) describes this as the “unbundling” of degrees by which students will choose among online courses from multiple institutions, thus pursuing a degree “cobbled together on your laptop at home” (para. 1).

Mozilla’s Open Badges project also recognizes that learning occurs in many ways and locations in addition to traditional higher education (Watters, 2011), yet much of it is not “counted.” Badges are certificates that demonstrate competence and can be earned from sources other than formal higher education. These credentials could precipitate a shift from formal educational settings to other venues, such as the workplace and online sites, where teaching and learning can occur on a daily basis.

These badges represent what Friedman (2013b) describes as the transition from a focus on “time served” to “stuff learned” (para. 6), leading to a more competency-based educational system with less emphasis on where you learned something than what you learned. CE has a vital role to play in these new ways of certifying learning due to its role in linking campuses with the larger community and the economy.
Because CE programs vary so much among institutions, it was a challenge to select issues and developments to include in the current issue. Chapters in this issue highlight those issues and developments that seem to have wide application and relevance and are intended to provide useful information for both new and experienced CE professionals in higher education settings.

In Chapter 1, Lisa R. Braverman introduces this New Directions issue by describing how the roles and expectations for both continuing education programs and professionals are undergoing a period of rapid change.

Chapter 2, by Angela Gast, examines one of these changing expectations—that of increasing the number of adults with degrees; she describes some of the current trends in adult degree programs and related student services.

Partnerships, both internal and external, are increasingly being developed by CE units. In Chapter 3, Anthony M. English discusses the steps necessary for successful partnerships, as well as some of the pitfalls to avoid.

Judy Copeland Ashcroft addresses the evolution of online learning, including the recent emergence of MOOCs, as well as the changing roles of CE units in using technology to extend learning opportunities, in Chapter 4.

Prior learning assessment has been a mainstay of adult degree programs for some time, but new means of documenting learning outside the classroom are being developed. These areas are discussed by Rebecca Klein-Collins and Judith B. Wertheim in Chapter 5.

Noncredit programs are becoming more businesslike in operation, and there is a never-ending need to develop new offerings to respond to changing demographics as well as internal and external expectations. Nelson C. Baker explains these changes in Chapter 6.

Community colleges are increasingly seen as engines of economic development. Customized training for employers as well as innovative links with secondary schools and universities are being developed to provide more seamless career education and participation in local development activities. In Chapter 7, Rebecca A. Nickoli explores these trends and sample programs.

The growth of the older adult population, coupled with new advances in the study of learning, has resulted in new opportunities for CE programming. Frank R. DiSilvestro discusses the educational opportunities and challenges presented by this growing demographic in Chapter 8.

CE marketing departments are experiencing significant transformation as a result of new technologies, strategies, and customer media preferences. In Chapter 9, James Fong discusses these developments as well as their implications for CE marketing in the future.

In Chapter 10, Ronald G. White summarizes the issues and developments discussed in this volume and anticipates some of the challenges and opportunities that CE units in higher education will face in the years ahead.
References


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Continuing higher education has undergone a significant transformation in recent years, illustrated by such innovations as MOOCs, globalization, strategic collaborations with government and industry, and increased entrepreneurship. As a result, continuing education (CE) units have experienced a fundamental shift in the way they conduct business in our field.

The Dynamic Flux of Continuing Higher Education: Redefining the New Roles, Responsibilities, and Expectations

Lisa R. Braverman

Introduction

Continuing education (CE) organizations have undergone historic transformations in recent years in both the roles that they perform and the audiences they serve. CE practice in the United States has had to accommodate the explosion in adult enrollments that has been occurring since the late 1980s (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). During this time, according to adult enrollment expert Carol Aslanian, “career-oriented programs of study, convenient schedules and locations, and age-based services needed to be created or expanded to meet the academic and logistical needs of older learners” (Aslanian & Green Giles, 2011, p. 2). According to their research, in 2011, over 40% of all higher education enrollments consisted of students age 25 or older. In response to the dramatic rise in adult students on campuses across the nation, colleges shifted resources and personnel by expanding or creating substantial new departments and schools of continuing and adult education to cope with this growth. Aslanian’s theory that adult students are most often involved in a life transition meant that campuses had to understand and serve these adults in increasingly supportive and flexible ways.

The general population possessed greater disposable income in the late 1990s to spend on self-enrichment and college study. By the early 2000s, world events and the dot-com bust forced a downward cycle in enrollments and revenue for most CE units, especially in noncredit, short course offerings. According to a report funded by the Sloan Consortium (Allen & Seaman,