

**I** *This overview of the adult degree movement since World War II focuses on factors of creation before 1970, the adult degree revolution of the 1970s, the post-baby boomer enrollments in the 1980s, and globalization and technology-based distance learning in the 1990s.*

## Adult Degrees and the Learning Society

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Since World War II, earning a college degree has gone from an elite privilege limited to fewer than 5 percent of the population to a broadly distributed achievement open to all. More than 25 percent of people over the age of twenty-five now have four-year degrees or higher. Our society values the credential highly as a sign of mastery and sustained performance. Dissent from this view arises occasionally, but no decline of eagerness to earn degrees is in sight. A major change during the same period has been the large number of adult learners engaged in higher education. Many are catching up after previous choices to delay their study. Others are discovering their degree interest for the first time, or they realize from their life experiences the value of going on to second or even third degrees to fulfill their aspirations. By the mid-1990s, persons over age twenty-five constituted almost 44 percent of higher education enrollments. If the criteria of adulthood were broadened beyond age alone to include younger persons whose lives include adult characteristics, the proportion of adults rose to well over 50 percent. The opportunity for many of these persons to study arises from recent innovations that make degrees more feasible for them. It is fair to call this an adult degree revolution.

### **Sources of Transformation**

Prior to the rapid changes that began in the late 1960s, a single model of undergraduate degree study prevailed throughout the United States. Kasworm (1993) was only slightly facetious when she likened the historically traditional institution and degree to a private liberal arts college of the

1840s, offering curriculum in the classics to elite young gentlemen who attended full time in the nonagricultural months of the year. By the mid-twentieth century, some of this picture had changed, but much had not. Colleges remained difficult places to manage for fully employed adults with family and civic responsibilities, and the institutions were unreceptive to previous learning achieved or individual preferences about curriculum.

Granted, some earlier exceptions existed that would provide concepts for later reform. The University of London's external degree based on examinations was one. Universities, many in the United States, began to teach courses planned for adults by extension and correspondence. A few even offered degrees this way, but time to completion normally was frustratingly slow.

Following World War II, attitudes toward adults as learners began to change. The war demonstrated adults' capacity to learn, including at advanced levels. The General Educational Development (GED) examination enabled those who lacked high school completion to meet that basic threshold for college entry. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, or GI Bill, brought a flood of veterans into higher education, where they astonished academics with their maturity, goal directedness, and academic ability ("The GI Bill's Lasting Legacy," 1994; Bennett, 1996). The American Council on Education (ACE) and military authorities took the lead to evaluate and recommend credit awards for various military training experiences. Access to higher education became easier for adults through the postwar community college movement. Meanwhile, psychologists and other social scientists began to see adulthood as a developmental period that may entail change and growth through new learning. Knowles (1975, 1980) attracted many followers with his concept of andragogy to describe the special nature of adult learners. This was accompanied by recognition of a capability or "plasticity" of adults to learn throughout life (Field, 2000).

Adults responded by steadily increasing their involvement in learning. The number taking the GED each year increased tenfold between 1949 and 1971, and more than 40 percent indicated an intention to pursue further study (Gould, 1973). Educators sensed that adult enrollments grew in the 1960s, an intuition that later reports of enrollment by age confirmed.

By the end of the 1960s, American higher education was in a state of flux, even turmoil, which made it ripe for innovation. Protests of younger students against the rigidity and "irrelevance" they perceived in their education manifested this. Many changes on their behalf also gave adults more flexibility. Some innovators looked for ways specifically to serve adult needs. The number of institutions offering extension or evening college degrees increased. New degrees planned for adult needs also appeared in special entities created to house them; among them were the University of Oklahoma's bachelor of liberal studies and similar programs, the University Without Walls consortium, and various programs for government workers. From abroad, the new Open University in the United Kingdom and Athabasca University in Alberta, Canada, roused excitement about the possibilities. An

American survey in 1972 estimated that between one-fourth and one-third of colleges offered nontraditional degree programs in some way (Ruyale and Geiselman, 1974).

## The Nontraditional Revolution

Sensing these trends and observing the 1960s program initiatives for adults, government agencies and several national organizations launched inquiries into the new phenomena. Their recommendations helped to shape change for the next generation, including a charge to reform in the 1972 Higher Education Amendments and the founding of the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) in 1973 (Gould, 1973; Smith, 2002).

The reports adopted an antielitist stance, and they spoke from egalitarian, humanistic, and even moral bases. The Commission on Non-Traditional Study especially supported these ideas in adult degree development. The commission's first recommendation was that "full educational opportunity should be realistically available and feasible for all who may benefit from it, whatever their condition of life" (Gould, 1973, p. 7). Such views contributed to the person-centered character of many of the new nontraditional programs.

An early challenge for these groups was to find language that would distinguish the newly emerging models from the old patterns. *Nontraditional* was an early candidate, although many objected to a term that seemed negative. Ultimately, most acquiesced to the Commission on Non-Traditional Study's choice of *nontraditional* for its breadth and flexibility. Kasworm and her colleagues argued that the term *nontraditional* marginalized adults as outsiders or unequal participants in higher education rather than respecting their individual worth and dignity (Kasworm, 1993; Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel, 2000).

## External or Extended Degrees?

By late 1970, practitioners began to apply the term *external degree* to programs that diverged from traditional patterns. Many programs were external in that much or all of learners' participation took place away from the institution's main site. Others were external in that their design and procedures stood outside conventional structures. Later, ACE and an association that from 1978 it encouraged, The Alliance, used the terms *alternative* for programs that required at least 25 percent of requirements be completed on campus and *external* for programs with fewer than 25 percent of campus-based requirements. All, however, focused on the needs of the adult learner rather than the convenience of the institution.

Two Non-Traditional Study Commission scholars, Valley (1972) and Houle (1973), undertook to classify the external degree formats extant at that time. Valley described six models. The *administrative/facilitation* model

preserved the main elements of the traditional degree pattern but adapted matters such as class duration and scheduling, site of instruction, and provision of student services to mainly adult enrollees. He cited the Evening College of the University of Cincinnati and the School of General Studies at Columbia University as examples. Another was the Georgetown University part-time foreign service degree. His *modes-of-learning* model used approaches specially chosen to serve adult clientele needs, including the adult liberal studies degrees, the individually designed degrees of the University Without Walls, and programs for government workers.

Valley's other four models—*examination, validation, credits, and complex systems*—disengaged most fully from traditional practices and relied on assessment of learning outcomes as the basis for degrees. In each case, an entity authorized to make academic awards, but not necessarily a college, established criteria for degrees. It then applied methods such as examinations, validation of total life learning experiences, or eligibility for credit awards to determine if the criteria had been met. In 1971, the New York State Regents followed the University of London model with the External Degree, based on completion of examinations. Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey followed with a similar plan in 1972. Valley pointed to some programs in development that used the validation or credits awards, but these approaches did not go very far in the United States. Nothing like the English Council for National Academic Awards developed here. Instead, examining or credit-recommending bodies made services available for colleges to use. Valley's last type was the complex systems model, exemplified by the newly founded (1971) Empire State College of the State University of New York system that combined elements from all the other models.

Houle regarded Valley's first two types as successive generations. He rechristened them as *extension degrees* and *adult degrees*. The remaining four models he gathered together as a third and emerging generation called *assessment degrees*, which emphasized individualization and demonstration of competence. Through competence evaluation, the student's learning became the focus of the degree award rather than fulfillment of formal requirements. In Houle's view, the external degree separated traditional higher education functions such as admission, teaching, evaluation, and certification in ways that enabled programs to address them more creatively. Houle did not classify external degrees any further, but he named examples such as the New York Regents External Degree, Minnesota Metropolitan State College, and Community College of Vermont. The potential for still more innovation led him to consider *external degree* as a provisional term, useful while new forms emerged but replaceable.

Another group at the University of California, Berkeley, took a somewhat different approach. They identified sixteen programs as subjects for case studies, some of them decades old and campus based. Instead of *external*, they adopted the broader term *extended degree*, by which they meant "a degree program with policies and procedures which enhance its

convenience and appeal and with content of interest to students who are usually beyond what has been considered the conventional college age” (Medsker and others, 1975, p. vii).

Their selection for case studies included many of the same examples as did Valley and Houle and added some, such as the Johns Hopkins University Evening College, Roosevelt University’s bachelor of general studies, and Central Michigan University’s Institute for Personal and Career Development. They sorted their examples into four groups: extended campus approaches, liberal studies and adult degree approaches, individualized study approaches, and the degrees-by-examination approach. Its conclusion noted the potential of extended degree practices and the plans in various states to develop new services. It also acknowledged the need for more experience to establish full acceptance for the degrees.

Two other innovations came too late for inclusion in the Non-Traditional Study Commission and Berkeley group reports, but they were important for nontraditional degree development. The first was the formation of CAEL (Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning, later Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) in 1974. Its work has established rigorous processes for assessing and recording learning, especially from informal sources. This has enabled adults to apply broader forms of learning to their degree requirements (Gamson, 1989; Whitaker, 1989). The second was the decision to recast entire undergraduate degree programs on a competency basis. Alverno College in Milwaukee, with generous support from FIPSE, undertook to redesign its program this way. DePaul University’s School for New Learning also benefited from FIPSE support while it adopted a competency model suited to its clientele. (For other examples, see Maehl, 2000.) While competence programs were not always designed solely for adults, the explicit statements of desired competencies benefited them. Learners could see clearly what they had to do and whether they already had related background.

In the long run, many new programs became eclectic in their design, using elements that suited them in emulation of Valley’s complex systems model. Often governing systems, institutional culture, and academic politics limited what they could do. They had to find answers to new issues, such as types of administrative organization, changes in faculty roles, curriculum design in individualized programs, marketing and funding of unfamiliar programs, and technology. Their solutions took a variety of forms.

Broad acceptance of the new modes emerged by the late 1970s. Cross and Zusman (1979) examined descriptions of program responses, including those cited above, and needs assessment reports by states. Rather than treat program categories, they focused on needs profiles of various learner groups and suggested elements from different programs that would best serve them. They recommended further study of means to match service to learner needs. Sharp and Sosdian (1979) tested the acceptability of external degrees to the next level of institutions and employers. When supplied with

clear information about the degrees, the majority of both honored them for further education or employment. ACE and The Alliance (later Adult Higher Education Alliance) also published principles of good practice that helped validate the new degrees.

### **The 1980s: Adults Replace the Postwar Baby Boomers**

Higher education leaders approached the 1980s with a sense of gloom. They noted the drop in birthrates after 1964, and they anticipated shrinkage in the youth cohort that had swelled enrollments since the mid-1960s. Some discounted this pessimistic view and suggested alternative sources of enrollment (Frances, 1980). Bowen (1980) argued that the unused capacity arising from youth enrollment decline should be redirected to hasten the goal of a nation of educated people. Experience proved Bowen right. A larger proportion of all age groups began to seek degrees. Adults, many of them baby boomers who had not earned baccalaureates earlier, now took up that goal. Others who had first degrees enrolled in graduate and professional programs. Overall, higher education enrollment in the 1980s rose by 10 percent. Preponderantly, the growth came from the age groups twenty-five to thirty-four and over thirty-five (Hughes, Frances, and Lombardo, 1991). Many institutions responded with innovations to meet the new demand.

### **Adult Degree Completion Programs**

As adult enrollments grew, institutions found that the new entrants brought considerable amounts of previously earned academic credit or even associate degrees. Some institutions recognized this circumstance and adjusted their programs to help learners complete baccalaureate degrees more expeditiously.

One model, the adult degree completion program (ADCP) pattern, gained particular prominence. Institutions offering the ADCP reviewed an applicant's previous records for associate degrees or sixty hours of credit. Applicants lacking that credit were advised how to meet the threshold with additional course work or assessment. The institution then made a bachelor's degree available in two years or less of continuous enrollment. To do so, it provided alternative class schedules and study terms, enrollment in cohort groups that maintained steady progress, and additional learning assessment up to approximately 25 percent of the whole (Taylor, 2000).

The ADCP differed from earlier adult programs that had stressed customization and response to individual learner goals. In contrast, ADCP was highly structured and based on strict rules that were inimical to Malcolm Knowles's principles of andragogy, for example. For many participants, however, the security of predictable curricula, scheduling, procedures, and often guaranteed tuition rates for uninterrupted completion of the program outweighed its highly prescribed character. One important benefit of most

ADCP models was the formation of groups that moved through the program as teams. The cohorts created a momentum that sustained motivation and retention. Good examples of ADCPs can be seen at Columbia Union College (Maryland), Thomas More College (Kentucky), and Northwestern College (Minnesota) (Maehl, 2000).

ADCPs spread rapidly during the 1980s, especially to small, independent colleges experiencing enrollment shortfalls. In some cases, colleges or independent associations with successful programs packaged their models and offered to transfer them to other institutions in return for a fee or ongoing sharing of income. By the 1990s, critics began to question the quality controls present in some individually launched as well as contracted ADCPs (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and American Council on Education, 1993). Two studies in the late 1990s established more precisely the state of practice among ADCPs and proposed specific guidelines to assist planners and the evaluators and accreditors of programs (Murry and Hall, 1998; Taylor, 2000).

### **External Doctoral Degrees**

Not all adult degrees were at the undergraduate or even master's degree levels. The external doctoral degree began earlier but matured fully in the 1980s. Most developed in institutions specially created for them. A few appeared in the 1960s (Nova, later Nova Southeastern University, 1964; Union Institute, 1964; California Institute of Integral Studies, 1968). Several began in the rush of innovation in the 1970s (Saybrook Institute, 1970; Walden University, 1970; the Fielding Institute, later Fielding Graduate Institute, 1974). Others followed later. The novice institutions responded to needs for professionals in undersupplied areas, such as clinical psychology, education, health and human services, management, and administration. They attracted significant numbers of students even though they initially lacked regional accreditation. In their early days, they often met a guarded, if not resistant, reception from traditional graduate schools and accreditation bodies.

The programs had unique features that distinguished them but also many similarities that linked them. External doctoral programs maintain central headquarters sites for necessary core functions. Most faculty and students live throughout the country. Either a designated core faculty or the faculty as a whole oversees curriculum and instruction. Faculty members often are a mixture of holders of academic appointments elsewhere and doctorally qualified practitioners. Some institutions convene special faculty committees to work with individual student interests.

Students are mainly midlife, midcareer persons, ranging in age from the mid-thirties through the forties, and they often have considerable prior experience in their study areas. Curricula are responsive to learner initiatives, although licensed or regulated fields such as psychology may require

more direction. Content tends to be organized in broad fields rather than traditional courses. Students progress through combinations of self-paced but mentored independent study and periodic group meetings that establish strong bonds among participants. A few programs organize students in cohorts to move through program steps as mutually supporting groups. They also provide for special development as needed, such as research capability, skills related to specific professional fields, and in-service experience. The programs depend on easy communications among all members, for which the growth of the Internet has provided major facilitation.

By the mid- to late 1980s, the programs had shown program quality that overcame their tentative initial receptions. Successive accreditation and graduate success in licensure and academic and professional appointments helped establish them as valuable contributors to graduate education. Council of Graduate Schools guidelines on off-campus graduate education (1989) contributed to the acceptance of the external model.

### **The 1990s: Globalization and Technology**

Three trends in the 1990s increased adult participation in degree study and affected its delivery. First was an emphasis on occupational preparation or human capital development. Second was the growth of for-profit providers with an acute sense of emerging market potential and the need to maintain high standards of service. Last was the use of advanced technology in distance learning to an extent that outstripped earlier technology-based programs.

**Human Capital Development.** As the postindustrial, post-Fordist economy replaced the industrial era after 1970, many policy advisers urged investment of capital in the capability of people rather than physical resources. The quickening of global economic competition in the 1990s made human capital development a major concern in both the United States and Europe (Field, 2000). U.S. tax concessions and financial aid provisions encouraged adult participation in higher education. The first recommendation of a commission on lifelong learning was to “acknowledge and promote the link between universal lifelong learning and America’s position in the global economy” (Commission for a Nation of Lifelong Learners, 1997, p.18). Leading observers foretold the rise of a knowledge workforce that expected to receive continuing professional learning. Both employers and employees saw their welfare in terms of further education.

**For-Profit Degree-Granting Institutions.** For-profit degree granters make up a small proportion of all higher education providers, but recently they have shown great numerical growth in both institutions and enrollment. In the 1990s, two-year for-profits grew by 78 percent and four-year by 266 percent. For-profit enrollment increased 59 percent over the same period, while public enrollment grew only 6 percent and independent non-profit enrollment by 10 percent. These changes have attracted considerable attention (Goldstein, 2000; Kelly, 2001; Ruch, 2001).



Kelly described three major types of for-profit institutions: small “enterprise” colleges serving local needs, publicly traded “supersystems” operating nationally or even internationally, and Internet-based institutions using electronic delivery both within and beyond the United States. Some in the last categories are of major size, and from time to time they acquire whole colleges to broaden their specialties.

The groups differ in scale and process, but they share characteristics. Most offer degrees below the four-year level (83 percent) and a smaller proportion at the baccalaureate level (11 percent). Only a small number offer graduate degrees, but the number is growing. The programs are career oriented, practical, hands-on, and customer focused. Institutional leaders cited these factors plus convenience as sources of their success. They use methods familiar in ADCP models such as accelerated modular schedules, cohort groups, and extensive academic, personal, and financial aid assistance. For-profit institutions are highly responsive to changing learning needs in their regions and manage shorter new program development cycles than traditional institutions do. Some, such as the University of Phoenix, go to great lengths to maintain consistent learning goals and outcomes in their courses, even if offered at different sites (Farrell, 2003). They assist those who have completed degrees with job placement, a historic emphasis of proprietary institutions. Accreditation and state regulatory agencies scrutinize them closely, and they devote major efforts to comply with those bodies. The Educational Commission of the States recently proclaimed them “no longer to be outside the mainstream of higher education” (Education Commission, 2002, pp. A22–23). Kelly and others see a tendency for nonprofits and for-profits to grow toward each other, driven by the goal of serving adult learners (Goldstein, 2000; Bash, 2003).

**Learning at a Distance and Advanced Technology.** The third change of the 1990s was the burgeoning use of educational technology to reach adults who are physically separated from their teachers. Recent studies have charted four generations in the use of technology for distance education, beginning in the 1850s with print and culminating in the decade 1995–2005 with multiple computer-based technologies. The fourth generation seems finally to have conquered the time and distance obstacles adults face (Sheron and Boettcher, 1997; Lewis, Snow, Farris, and Levin, 1999; Watts and Lewis, 2003). An echo of the *external/extended degree* debate has arisen over whether *distance* or *distributed education* is the better term for this development, with *distributed* pertaining to use of technology (American Council on Education, 2003).

More postsecondary institutions than before offer distance learning courses and degrees and apply advanced technology to them. Data across reports are not directly comparable, but information on two-year and four-year institutions from 2000–2001 is illustrative. These institutions offered an estimated 118,100 different distance learning credit courses during the reporting period, mostly at the undergraduate level. Fifty-six percent of

institutions that offered distance education courses had degree or certificate programs completely available through distance education. The majority offered degree, rather than certificate, programs. Four-year institutions provided more distance degree programs than two-year institutions, but in a change from 1997–1998 data, private four-year institutions had overtaken public four-year colleges in the total number of programs offered (Watts and Lewis, 2003).

Technology pervaded the distance education delivery systems. Ninety percent reported using asynchronous computer-based instruction over the Internet as the primary mode of instruction. Eighty-eight percent of institutions planned to increase or initiate use of technology in future delivery.

Successful programs have been sensitive to their audiences. They all agreed that technologies are instruments rather than ends in themselves and should be selected for their effectiveness in learning. Several recent publications discuss design needs in greater depth (Sherron and Boettcher, 1997; Lewis, Snow, Farris, and Levin, 1999; Hanna and others, 2000; Rumble, 2001; Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read, 2002; Carnevale and Olsen, 2003).

## Conclusion

One leading commentator on international adult learning trends believes the United States has become a learning society (Field, 2000). Certainly when nearly half of adults attend a learning activity with an instructor each year, pay for entertainment that is full of new content, and independently teach themselves how to do new things, Field's judgment does not seem far-fetched (Kim and Creighton, 1999). A growing proportion pursue those interests through higher education and study for credentials.

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, the field of adult higher education remains volatile. In such a dynamic domain, many questions remain unanswered. What impact will digital technology have on the structure of higher education and society at large? Will higher education change from its modernist mass basis to a more interactive focus on the individual combined with a global reach? What issues of ethics and equity arise as technology-based education spreads and the gap between technology haves and have-nots widens? Those who work in the field have much to consider.

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