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Adult and continuing education are vehicles by which metropolitan universities have expanded their clienteles. Through planning, professional exchange, character, and hard work, the credentialing goals of continuing education are generally well met. But attention needs to be paid as well to expanding the adult curriculum into areas of more liberal study in ways that meet the needs and match the strengths of adult students and their teachers. One means to accomplish this might be to place work—in the largest possible sense of the word—at the curriculum's center.

Putting Human Industry into a Liberal Context

An Urban Georgic

From its very inception in 1636, the history of higher education in America can be construed as either rural or urban, depending of course on what sort of place you take seventeenth-century Cambridge to have been. Some two centuries later, Thoreau thought that sleepy Concord was sufficiently urbanized to make him head out to Walden Pond, where he pondered the meanings and patterns behind the work in which he found himself engaged. It turned out that his Harvard training had prepared him to continue his education as an adult.

If the formative years of American higher education are rooted in agrarian settings and values, they must not be conflated with the pastoral. Only in brief and odd intervals has our nation's college experience featured the elements of pastoral: a world of youth who fear nothing more disturbing than time, which lurks as their troubler while they hone the interrelated skills required of lover and poet, and devote themselves to whatever subjects the mind turns to when liberated by leisure. If American higher education has its roots in one of the Virgilian modes, it is more likely to be the georgic tradition. The georgic captures the pragmatic reveries of those who work the land. In the georgic, the mind is not diverted from the routine of labor, but is trained to become alert to the potential significance of those labors. The bees and the beans are contemplated by someone who is acquainted enough with the seasons—human and natural—to perceive their patterns and make them meaningful.

Though the georgic tradition describes the cultivated life in a rural setting, it is not a bad guideline

for making some sense of the educational possibilities for those whose labors bring them to the city, letting them find a space for free inquiry in the context of necessity, and come to peace with the work they must do. Listen to the conversations in any lunchroom in America. They provide a model for a curriculum that imitates the lives of working persons: One's job rather naturally sits at the center of a series of concentric circles taking in more and more of the world that shapes and is shaped by an individual's labor. Such a model implies that a curriculum is not best seen merely as a sequence of courses, or the outcome of a process of academic governance (though it is also both of these), but the end result that integrates one's study and one's daily life. I hope to suggest as well that such a curriculum is particularly well suited to the resources of metropolitan universities, and would match up well with the particular needs and abilities of adult students.

Populations and Identities

Metropolitan education tends to be particularly conscious that education is not natural or inevitable in content or scope, but is the result of choices made in broadly political contexts. Over the years, the professional literature describing the extending of higher education to new populations permits the very word *urban* to function as a variety of euphemisms: Early in the century, *urban* generally signified *worker*, while in the past few decades, *urban* has tended to be used interchangeably with *inner city*. Metropolitan education and educational policy are not innocent. Their goals have been to redress inequities created by exclusions from other educational opportunities for populations restricted by economics and social policy. Metropolitan education has generally seen itself as strengthened, not tarnished, by the political compromise and social debate that has shaped it. It has become one vehicle for America's political zeal. In the course of this century, America has increasingly turned to the urban, rather than the western, frontier to pick up the unfinished—perhaps the unstarted—work of seeing its dreams of democracy fulfilled.

The history of education in America shows metropolitan education and adult education rising together in waves—one in the decades following the Civil War, and again in the decades after World War I, and perhaps again during the past decade. As fast as a new generation of municipal universities found identities for themselves in the twenties, they developed evening and extension programs. During those years, the population of students taking evening or extension classes grew twice as fast as the population of traditional students, and we are likely to see a similar rate of comparative growth again today. Such a statistic, of course, is far from value neutral; campuses are divided between those who mourn the baby bust and those who eagerly anticipate the opportunities for growth in adult education.

Adult education is about the romance of making fresh starts. One consequence of the cycles of technological change and obsolescence is that more and more adults are returning to school to adjust to transitions

in their work lives. Adults also return for a fresh start in their personal lives, or just as a result of a conviction that they have unfinished business. Large metropolitan centers of higher education must therefore offer a great deal of counseling and assessment. However ill prepared the typical eighteen-year-old student may be, he or she is, for example, likely to have been writing regularly in school for the past ten years. A returning adult may not have written in more than a decade—and yet may still have received credit for a composition course taken still longer ago. The metropolitan university must be able to weave together into a coherent whole the unraveled threads of academic false starts and changed majors undertaken at several prior institutions and often spanning a decade or more. Such students are more likely to be at the door of the metropolitan universities than any other place: They need an institution large and diverse enough to take them in regardless of the rustiness of their credentials. They are easier to serve if one remembers that they are not especially different from other segments of the urban population. They have come to the city for the same sorts of reasons: to pursue opportunities, to follow a spouse to a job, to reestablish family ties, or simply to find cheaper living costs. In the broadest sense, it is geography that brought them to the city, and in part it is the amenities of institutional geography that these students are seeking, of which parking or other transportation, convenient scheduling, and a safe, clean, and comfortable environment are not least.

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Continuing education typically sees itself as a gateway to the university's human and material resources. Metropolitan universities also provide continuing education for the communities of active adult professionals working in the surrounding areas. These range from formal courses and programs leading to credentialing to far less structured means of exchange between and among practitioners. Metropolitan universities provide opportunities for designers or doctors or policemen to have a place where theory and practice become reacquainted with and refresh each other. This activity changes and challenges the traditional functions of the university. In this exchange, students do not serve as empty vessels to be filled. Indeed, their expertise may rival that of their instructors, though it takes a different form.

The needs of continuing education and the missions of the metropolitan universities support each other. But this same model of exchange—of bringing practitioners to campus in a way that challenges traditional university roles—is more likely to become a source of conflict when practitioners start to function as classroom teachers. Adult education at all levels is frequently taught by anyone other than full-time faculty and often includes a high proportion of professional practitioners. Though the use of such individuals gets a lot of play in mission statements, there is a good deal of edginess when the community sets out to educate the university, rather than vice versa. These tensions further complicate the difficult status of part-time and adjunct faculty on many campuses, where research activity is given far higher status than professional practice. The net result is that continuing educators frequently feel little

more connection to their institutions than their students do. Both instructor and student are accustomed to receiving more respect outside of the classroom than they will on most campuses. Like the students they are teaching, the faculty in adult and continuing education feel disconnected from their work; both see their *real* work taking place elsewhere. Who will defend adult education when it feels provincial, parochial, and second class to those most closely involved with it?

It is impossible to teach adult and other nontraditional learners without learning to cherish their strengths. They are self-directed, goal-oriented, determined, and patient. They bring a substantial wealth of personal experience to their studies. They get our jokes and remember the Kennedys. A surprising amount of collaborative learning goes on in the classroom; indeed, they would be models of mutual support—if they had the time. The best hours an evening student can give his or her subject may be those spent in class. While most day students could go home to rethink a problem or revise an essay, adult students may have neither time for free reflection nor uncluttered space at home, where multiple demands keep them from being able to make school their main focus. They are as efficient in organizing their work as they are adroit at negotiating the interstate. Their work comes in on time.

Adult Students: Challenges to Liberal Education

But with these strengths come weaknesses that have an impact on curricular decisions. They work hard and work late, and they generally pay for their own educations out of their own pockets. They may tend to identify themselves as consumers rather than as students. They may have a very highly developed sense of just what is necessary, which can lead to a low tolerance for anything they consider a waste of class time; this can place a premium on information and discourages freer speculation. Though naturally skeptical of all authority, they are also very skilled at finding out exactly what is required of them. The adult student has a sense of contract and obligation that is as strong in them as it is weak in a typical teenage student. If work is unlikely to come in late because of a grandmother's ill health, it is also unlikely to arrive late because the student brooded on the implications of a question or answer. David N. Portman, in *The Universities and the Public* (see Suggested Readings), cites the wonder reportedly expressed by a college professor who found himself teaching returning GIs after World War II: "These men don't want to tear everything down; they want to make the existing system work better." (p. 143) Our praise of these students sometimes verges on a praise of their passivity, and the historical connections between urban, adult education, labor disputes, and civic dissent seem very distant.

We must not allow the curriculum to lose its perspective—or rather, we must ensure that the curriculum provides perspective. After all, even the most pragmatic degree program is likely to devote one half of its hours to a general education core or free electives. Some metropolitan university programs are inherently cosmopolitan. New York University,

for example, is able to offer a rich multidisciplinary approach to international studies—from global economics to language skills—to its audience of investment bankers. And there are successful programs, both credit and noncredit, which turn the city into a spectacle and teach adults to be better audiences for the arts or architecture of their surroundings. The Smithsonian Associates Program in Washington, D.C., has an inspired and well-financed tradition of building programming out of the newspaper's calendar of coming events. But in general, though the urban environment is massively interdisciplinary, metropolitan universities have not succeeded in making urban experiences central to the actual content of their curricula, particularly for adults.

Many metropolitan universities find that in their urban concerns, they are pursuing an exclusively social science agenda, in part because other liberal arts have left the field. While a few programs—criminal justice comes to mind—are entirely shaped by their urban setting, much more frequently, the actual urban content of programs offered at metropolitan universities is focused on how the identity of any one population (whether it is an ethnic or a criminal subculture) is established and retained in the larger urban population stew. While there are some fine urban studies programs at metropolitan universities—my own university, for example, offers an outstanding but still fledgling certificate in urban preservation—they do not yet attract large numbers of adult learners, who frequently are permitted to see themselves in need of whatever degree they can obtain most quickly.

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Coming to Terms with Work

Portman tells us that in the first decades of this century, the Wisconsin experiments in adult extension education saw as their goal to feed people's "desire to gain knowledge of the industry in which they are engaged." (p. 88) I find this an evocative phrase, for it implies that knowledge and understanding can complement whatever skills students must acquire for their jobs, whether white collar or blue. This seems to me to go beyond mere vocational training and to suggest that a successful education provides some theory and frameworks to help people understand whatever they are doing. This would be one way to bring all the universities' disciplines into play, and help widen the focus of adult education from the narrowly professional. In recent years, the University of Connecticut mounted a model program providing multidisciplinary contexts for understanding changes in work and technology.

A curriculum that paid attention to the contexts of work could also provide a framework for both students and adjunct faculty to understand the university's own institutional culture better. It would accomplish more than a student lounge for adults could. As we all know, free space is reabsorbed into office space in every new five-year plan, but a curriculum change—its blessing and its curse—lasts forever, or near

enough. Adult students are particularly hungry for the concepts that will help them see the meaning behind their tasks and the patterns that give shape to their efforts. The economist, the philosopher, the geographer, the historian, the scientist, the social psychologist, the creative writer all would have a role. If the definition of an adult student is that he or she is a working student, then the curriculum for adult education should be work, in the largest possible sense of the word. Virgil's farmers would have understood.

Commuter students—indeed, whole populations—are mobile, but universities are not. They tend to stay where they are put, while jobs and people go out to the beltway and beyond. Two hundred years ago, "rural industry" was a way of describing an attitude that helped to mark out a good citizen; today it is a fact of life along the interstate. Adult and continuing education needs to be more aggressive in bringing education to wherever it is needed and offering it whenever it can be taken. Unconventional times will fill empty classrooms on campus, and the choice of unconventional spaces will bring students to downtown arenas or even shopping malls.

But wherever the education is carried out, it is still appropriate to cultivate the quality of mind I earlier called georgic. Thoreau—an ideal if not a typical continuing student—wrote about Walden to place his world and his work in context. He called his first two chapters "Economy" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For." Are these bad curricular guides for adults?

Suggested Readings

Feldman, Reynold, and Barbara Hursh. "Establishing an Urban Commuter University: The Need for Community." In W. Franklin Spikes, *The University and the Inner City: A Redefinition of Relationships*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1980.

Portman, David N. *The Universities and the Public: A History of Higher Education in the United States*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978.

Stubblefield, Harold W. *Towards a History of Adult Education in America: The Search for a Unifying Principle*. London: Croon Helm, 1988.