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An Alternative Vision for Metropolitan Universities

The typical student of metropolitan universities of the future will be over twenty-four years old and studying part time. What vision of the university is most appropriate to this reality? Citing 1990 research at University of Maryland University College, the author identifies the principal characteristics that make adult student bodies distinctive. Noting the relevance of this distinctiveness to facilitating learning, the author challenges urban universities to examine the implications for their choice of mission.

A New Reality

The majority of metropolitan universities in the near future in the United States will, even at undergraduate level, be populated predominantly by students who are over the age of twenty-four and studying only part time. More than 75 percent of these students will be employed full time or will have equivalent nonpaid responsibilities, such as household management or important voluntary leadership roles in the community. An additional 10 percent or more will pursue paid employment part time while doing their college studies. In other words, the role of student will be a second or third priority among their duties.

In Great Britain, the appearance of this new majority of adult part-time students may be delayed by five to ten years; but its arrival in due time is relatively certain. The timing varies for other industrialized countries, but they too are moving toward this picture.

Not all metropolitan universities are alike. They differ with respect to their emphasis on research and public service. They also vary, some by design and some by circumstance, as to the profile of their students' age, part-time or full-time enrollment, commuting to or residing on campus, range and degree of ethnic minority background, and focus on professional advancement or liberal education. The vision presented here is for those metropolitan universities characterized by a significant proportion of older students.

Background for a New Vision

The proposed vision is based in part upon a recent study in which the author interviewed forty-six scholars of adult learners. Some thirty of them were administrators of baccalaureate degree programs, and sixteen of them responded as researchers in the field of adult learning. Some of the latter also were program administrators, and some of the former have done research in the field. In this study, the two groups of respondents were asked different, but closely related questions about some seventy-six "features" of twenty-two existing undergraduate curricula. These features were selected in the hope that they could provide insight into best current practice. The features had to do with the following information:

- purposes of the curricula;
- approach to selection and admission of students and the resulting characteristics of the actual enrollees;
- characteristics, priority responsibilities, allocation of time, and teaching or other activities of faculty and other staff;
- the environments used for learning;
- experiences undergone and activities required or permitted; and
- resources and facilities provided.

The practitioners were asked to identify the features that were in use in their programs and to rate their importance in terms of effect upon learning outcomes. The researchers were asked to rate the features as they would apply to a hypothetical student body profiled in the questions. The questionnaires were supplemented by interviews focusing on recommendations on best practice.

Also used as background for exploring this alternative model of a metropolitan university is research done between 1987 and 1990 on the work forces of corporations and unions using the services of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to develop and orchestrate their employee growth and development programs.

Building on these prior explorations, the author in this article tries to envisage a metropolitan university ideal that embodies a composite of features derived from these studies.

A New Clientele

The clientele of this ideal metropolitan university will be primarily part-time adult students. But age alone, though important, is not the principal determinant. The considerable variation that can exist in the characteristics of older students is indicated in Tables 1 and 2, which contain examples of populations in two actual current programs. The students vary not only in age, but also in gender, ethnic makeup,

proportion working full time, curricular interests, and career aspirations. There is considerable diversity, as well, in family backgrounds, particularly in such areas as economic status, educational level achieved by parents, single or dual parents, scholastic aptitude, vocational aspirations, and intellectual complexity and maturity.

Most respondents to the 1990 study agreed that the following constituted the most important characteristics of a predominantly adult student body, as compared to one of traditional age:

- *Experience base.* The amount and significance of experiences from which the students have learned and on which they can draw in their studies.

- *Time demands.* The pressures of time under which they labor with their numerous major responsibilities.

- *Level of responsibilities carried.* The scope and significance of responsibility recently or currently exercised in their work, family, or volunteer roles.

- *Strength of purpose and commitment to their studies.* The degree of clarity as to their reasons for having returned to formal studies and the degree of determination with which they are pursuing these purposes.

- *Complexity of intellectual development.* The level of intellectual and emotional maturity or development, as measured on assessments such as the William Perry "scheme," Loevinger's dimensions of development, or the like. These assessments are not measures of school-based learning achievement as such, nor of potential.

- *Concern with immediate utility of their studies.* The degree of concern of a "pragmatic" nature; that is, the extent to which studies can have early and significant usefulness in the work or other priority activities of the learner. (See, e.g., Carol B. Aslanian and Henry M. Brickell, How Americans in Transition Study for College Credit. [New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1988] 42 ff.)

- *Initial lack of confidence in their own academic success.* The degree of uncertainty or uneasiness about the student's own ability, given recent absence from formal studies, rustiness with regard to academic skills or relative lack of such skills. While some respondents said that this attitude was quickly overcome by most adult students, it generally was reported as a concern at entry.

- *Determination to succeed.* Readiness to persist against obstacles and even in the face of the necessity of occasional "stopping out," once the commitment is made to a goal such as certificate or degree completion. Adults often "test the water" in a course or two or in noncredit studies before making this commitment.

- *Sense of having chosen to return to study.* The degree to which the student has chosen for his or her own reasons to be in formal college studies, not because of parental or other social pressure and not for lack of other acceptable choices. This characteristic had not been on my questionnaire, but emerged from the interviewing.

Table 1: Profile of the Student Body of an Urban University
Undergraduate Only, Fall 1988

Age: Average 30   22 & Under - 11.2%   23-38 - 38.5% 39 & Over - 50.2%

Gender: Female - 52.2%   Male - 47.8%

Race/Ethnicity: Caucasian Non-Hispanic - 70.9%
                    Hispanic - 3.1%
                    Black - 18.7%
                    Asian - 6.5%
                    American Indian - 0.7%
                    All Other - 0.1%

Employment: Full Time - 81.9% Part Time - 10.6%
                    Not Employed - 6.9%   No Information - 0.6%

Self-Reported Annual Income:

Below $12,001 ....3.3%
$12,001 to $17,999 ....12.4%
$18,000 to $23,999 ....23.9%
$24,000 to $29,999 ....21.`%
$30,000 to $39,999 ....20.4%
$40,000 or more..15.1%
Not applicable 0.7%
Answer missing 2.6%

Declared Goal at Entry:

Acquire general education 10.8%
Prepare for new career 17.7%
Enhance skills or knowledge 22.6%
Acquire credentials for advancement or new employment 29.8%
Satisfy personal interests 5.8%
Enter graduate school 6.4%
Other..6.7%
Answer missing 0.3%

Undergraduate Credits Earned Elsewhere:

0 ....0.6%
1-20 ....9.3%
21-40 ....10.8%
41-60 ....18.7%
61-80 ....21.3%
81-100..10.5%
101-120 ....7.2%
121-140 ....6.2%
141 or more 3.3%
Answer missing..12.3%

Note: Students transferring in more than 90 credits to this institution were required nevertheless to complete at least 30 credits with the institution in order to receive a degree.

Table 2: Profile of the Student Body of an Urban University
Undergraduates Only, Fall 1988
College for Adults
with Comparisons to University as a Whole

Age: Average 35.6

Under 24	1.0%
24-29	21.1%
30-44	63.8%
45 and over	14.1%

Gender:

Female	68.96%
Male	31.04%

Race/Ethnicity:

Caucasian Non-Hispanic	84.2%
Hispanic	3.6%
Black	11.2%
Asian	0.8%
American Indian	0.2%

Evening Enrollments, This College	100.0%
Evening Enrollments, University as a Whole	21.3%

Part-Time Enrollment, This College	95.2%
Part-Time Enrollment, University as a Whole	37.6%

About the following set of characteristics there was less agreement.

- *Demanding of teachers.* The extent to which the students press for teachers to deliver upon student expectations for help with learning, or the extent to which they become rebellious if not satisfied with the services received. Some younger student populations are more demanding regarding nonacademic agendas.

- *Less skilled academically.* Being rustier in regard to reading, writing, mathematical, and study skills, or having never developed these kinds of college-level skills. In the 1990 sample of programs studied, only 27 percent reported this characteristic, with the remainder either viewing their adult students as about the same as others or as significantly superior regarding these skills.

- *Differing in learning styles.* As defined in such an assessment as David Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory, tending less toward abstract conceptualization as a preferred style and more toward a mix of accommodation, active experimentation, or concrete experiencing as a learning style preference. (See also, e.g., K. Patricia Cross, *Adults as Learners.* [New York: Jossey-Bass, 1981] pp. 162-163.)

- *More active in classrooms.* Tending to speak out more readily or to take other classroom initiatives, or being less passive there than less experienced (usually younger) students.

- *Emphasizing accuracy.* Being more preoccupied with being "right" or accurate than with speed, thus sometimes handicapped on timed examinations and preferring "power tests."

- *Less open to experiences or views incongruent with their own.* Tending to be skeptical of ideas or reported experiences at variance with their own

settled convictions. Respondents disagreed about this alleged character-
istic more than about any other listed here.

The metropolitan universities with predominantly older students
might be expected to share the initial set of characteristics of their stu-
dent clienteles, but to vary with respect to the second group of charac-
teristics.

To me, the extent of this list was surprising. Its complexity may be
reduced somewhat if one notes that the first three characteristics are
derived from the learner's situation in life (experience base, time de-
mands, level of responsibilities carried) and produce for the student
what Patricia Cross calls "situational obstacles to learning." Three of
the items in the list have to do with the kinds of minds the students
bring to their studies (complexity of intellectual development, level of
academic skills, and learning style preferences). The remaining charac-
teristics are primarily attitudinal. Viewed in this way, the list suggests
measures that curriculum planners and teachers can take to facilitate
learning.

Not one of the scholars interviewed claimed that there is a single
principle of learning or of education that for older or more experienced
persons differs categorically from those governing learning and instruc-
tion with younger students. But, as the list attests, the common view
was that the application of accepted principles of learning and instruc-
tion to populations so different from one another can be profoundly
different.

Education for What?

Though it may have other purposes also, a curriculum is designed
to facilitate learning. But what learning?

The researchers in my 1990 study listed the intended learning out-
comes they recommended in this declining order of importance:

1. learning to learn
2. learning how to assess oneself and one's own learning
3. developing key generic competences (intellectual, interpersonal, etc.)
4. mastering basic academic skills
5. achieving advanced knowledge in an area of emphasis

Practitioners were in essential agreement. However, the agreement
appeared to be greater in the abstract than in practice. That is, the
implementing provisions reported by practitioners for achieving out-
comes 4 and 5 were more explicit and more substantial in most cur-
ricula than were the provisions for achieving outcomes 1, 2, and 3. This
discrepancy between professed objectives and actual practice was the
most disturbing encountered in the 1990 study. In an ideal metropoli-
tan university emphasizing teaching, all five learning goals would be
strongly implemented and the effectiveness of implementation would
be regularly evaluated and upgraded. Removing the discrepancy is not

easy, but it can be done. My study disclosed that a number of strong baccalaureate degree programs are seriously and effectively pressing for outcomes 1, 2, and 3 and are measuring their results to evaluate success, to redesign their efforts periodically, and thus to strive to do still better.

It may be helpful to note that a fundamental difference distinguishes outcomes 1, 2, and 3 from outcomes 4 and 5. The latter can be acquired by less complex intellectual activities than the former. While practice and use at increasingly complex levels are needed to master academic skills and advanced knowledge, the interplay between memory and verbal work on one hand, and application in complex contexts on the other, normally would seem to be much more difficult with outcomes 1, 2, and 3.

A Faculty for the University

For the faculty of the metropolitan university that gives the highest priority to facilitating adults' learning, what are the implications of that choice?

Practitioners and researchers differed somewhat in the 1990 study as to whether expertise in discipline or area of emphasis should predominate over "student centeredness" as the most important characteristic of faculty for adult baccalaureate programs. They agreed that the combination of high marks in both was the ideal. Further they agreed that students strongly favor a substantial proportion of faculty who are primarily not teachers, but practitioners currently applying their expertise to the work world. Note the paradox of this demand: students desire faculty who in their university roles are primarily concerned with teaching, but who also are expert in their disciplines or professional callings and who work principally in applying this expertise, rather than in teaching. The paradox arises, not because there is any contradiction among these specifications of the model faculty member, but because academicians are accustomed to thinking that the best teacher must be dedicated primarily to pedagogy rather than to application of knowledge.

This ideal of the faculty has two important implications. Faculty will need training and education in their tasks as teachers. They also will need expert help with the design and development of courses, including course materials, specifications of learning outcomes expected, and identification of primary learning strategies; with the assessment of learning; with the conduct of learning groups; and with academic advising. Since they are not primarily teachers by either expertise, calling, or training, they will, with rare exceptions, need preparation for these tasks and probably also staff to supplement their work in developing and evaluating courses and curricula.

This picture of the ideal faculty arrangements for a metropolitan university giving first priority to teaching adult students actually is largely realized today in some institutions. The ideal is not in just who the faculty are, what the supporting staff is, or what the faculty development provisions are, but also in the richness of the provisions, their

responsiveness to learners, and their integration through good administration.

University of Maryland University College (UMUC) is an example of an institution striving to maintain this kind of system. It enrolled over twenty-five thousand individuals in Maryland and an additional seventy thousand worldwide in the academic year 1988-1989. It had in Maryland some eleven full-time instructional faculty, fifteen full-time assistant deans and program managers with traditional academic credentials, and more than four hundred adjunct faculty. These adjunct faculty were engaged solely for part-time duties as instructors. Many of them are primarily practitioners in their professions. UMUC has one of the country's most extensive and sophisticated programs of faculty development. An associate vice president for instructional development and evaluation and his staff annually create teams of experts to design anew or to redesign fundamentally at least thirty-five courses or curricula. This pattern of staffing and of staff support has evolved from decades of practice and improvement efforts and of having the single primary role, that of serving part-time adult students.

What Learning Efforts and Experiences?

After preliminary discussions about the learning activities most needed for adult students in baccalaureate programs, a questionnaire was developed for the 1990 study. In the questionnaire, some sixteen commonly used features were employed, and respondents were asked to rank them according to importance in their actual or hypothetical programs. Nine of these features appeared in the ten judged most important by both practitioners and researchers. The nine were:

- a high degree of interaction between students and faculty;
- a general strategy of individualization of studies;
- a considerable use of independent study;
- a considerable use of integrating studies, especially of interdisciplinary studies in various forms;
- early disclosure to students of the intended learning outcomes;
- an opportunity for students to change learning objectives as studies progress;
- a rich mix of diverse experiences in classrooms;
- a significant degree of collective involvement of students in the design of courses and programs; and
- a high degree of interaction among students in their learning activities, in addition to the interaction between students and faculty.

In addition, practitioners included in the top ten provisions the effort to make learning efficient for the students. Researchers included group study opportunities. The ideal for metropolitan universities giving priority to instruction includes all eleven of these features of their instructional programs.

The Environments for Learning

Both researchers and practitioners in the 1990 UMUC study, commenting on environments for learning, gave the opportunity for learning at work the top priority among alternatives presented. The proportion of learning by adults that will occur willy-nilly in their work sites is so high that it would be a major pedagogic error if university instructors and curriculum designers fail to provide for the integration of work site learning with university-based learning.

With their urban environments rich in subcultures, institutions, diverse peoples, and multitudinous human interactions, and given the speed of travel and communications, the future metropolitan university will surely build into its learning agendas a pattern of active interaction with an astute selection of both domestic and overseas settings. Present-day telecommunications and computer-mediated experiences can facilitate much of this experiencing of other cultures.

If, as other research suggests, the university itself has crafted a distinctive culture of its own, the students' active, continuous, and self-conscious participation in the life of that culture can form a further major influence in their development. Enculturation into that environment should not be left to individual courses and chance interactions, but should be an active concern of curricular design and implementation.

Overarching Concerns

Six overarching concerns round out the vision of the metropolitan university oriented toward the adult learner.

1. It will know its students well. Today's colleges and universities know well a few things about their students: their SAT or ACT scores, their high school grade point averages, their extracurricular activity records, and possibly their initial career goals upon entry. Colleges rarely have a profile that would embrace the students' career aspirations, their nonstudent responsibilities, and any of the other fifteen characteristics itemized earlier in this essay. Nor do colleges keep a running record of how their students change in regard to these matters. Yet, the most effective effort to facilitate learning will require both a concerted drive to enhance the students on a number of these traits and a continuous effort to stay aware of where the students are in their development. Substantial processes for assessing, sharing it with students, inviting them to use it in replanning their studies, and retaking their profiles will be needed if the metropolitan university is to be a model of its kind.

2. It will know what it produces. Whether or not the current public outcry for accountability will continue, the model university of the future will conduct a continuous, substantial inquiry into its own effectiveness and productivity. And it will share the findings of this inquiry with its constituencies. Only in this manner will it be able to

evaluate its own performance sensibly and design and institute changes that will make it genuinely more effective in its mission.

3. It will make assessment an integral part of instruction and program development. Questionnaire and interview data in the 1990 study identified that faculty needed to pay more attention to how they allocate their efforts in instruction. One of the most recognized needs was for proportionately less lecturing and greater use of time to assess learning progress repeatedly, offer feedback and interpret the findings to students, and replan the next learning activities to reflect insights gained by the assessments.

4. It will invest heavily in its faculty's development. As indicated earlier, the demanding students of future metropolitan universities and a demanding society will have their wants met only if the university devotes a heavier proportion of its budget and administrative leadership to the development of the faculty. Here, the term "faculty" should be taken to include academic advisers (who may in some portion be specialists as well), curriculum and course developers, and administrators acting in the role of service managers.

5. It will finance the learning of its adult students adequately. This point would hardly need to be made if it were not so common today for universities to treat programs for adult learners as "cash cows," costing the adults more than the costs borne by younger students and milking off surpluses for the other purposes of the university. Where a metropolitan university is primarily state supported, its leaders will have to educate public officials to understand that even if adults are funded to the full extent common for younger students, they will be a "best buy." Adult students will require less grant and loan money per course credit earned, repay loans earlier, and more readily apply their learning in ways that benefit the public. These adults deserve, as far as financial need is concerned, to be assisted according to need, just as younger students are assisted. The very productivity and competitiveness of the economy will largely turn on what adult students learn in the interplay between their work site learning and their university education. Only with adequate financing will this learning be fully achieved.

6. The university will know its niche. The diversity of student bodies among adult learner groups has been mentioned earlier. The curricula required by future society will continue to grow more diverse. The variety of societal needs for education of adults will proliferate further from the needs of enterprises to improve the quality of the work force, to the needs of the public and private sectors for instructional services through customized training and education programs. No university will be able to provide all of these things well. To be a model institution, then, each will need to have thought through, and carved out for itself, a distinctive niche that it will fill outstandingly well.

If anyone thought that the end of history—if the phrase can be made meaningful at all—had been reached for human society, the future of metropolitan universities was surely overlooked. From their

purposes and their students' profiles to their faculties, instructional programs, and cultures, the metropolitan universities will continue to evolve. It will repay these institutions to study their options further and choose among the missions that they can serve with distinction.

Acknowledgment

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