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Revisiting Continuing Education at the Metropolitan University

Metropolitan universities today are challenged to engage more actively in the amelioration of social, cultural, and economic problems that confront the nation's urban communities. University continuing education, traditionally viewed as instructional outreach, should be redefined more broadly as university outreach to assist in shaping responses to these new demands. A refocused continuing education, building upon its instructional outreach role, would be knowledge based, change driven, client focused, multidisciplinary, issue and constituency oriented, and it would employ a broader range of university activities for urban problem solving.

Continuing education, whether as a provider or facilitator of campus outreach activity, experiences tension in balancing its market orientation with traditional university demands for autonomy and the narrow reflection of the instructional patterns of the campus. As Philip Nowlen pointed out in the Spring 1989 issue of the *Educational Record*, there are "contending frames of reference through which to find meaning and direction [for continuing education]." (p. 46) The scope of continuing education at times is broadened by reading its special competence as extending the resources of the university to the broader community in an outreach mode. This view of continuing education does not limit its role to instruction, but includes other outreach services consistent with a university setting, such as the provision of technical assistance, public information, and even the creation of research parks. More frequently, however, continuing education is viewed only as "instructional outreach," manifested in free-standing credit courses or degree programs for nontraditional students and noncredit seminars, workshops, and conferences related to the academic entitlements of the university. This is the usual pattern at the metropolitan university, where the local, typically urban population accesses university resources through continuing education.

The Value of Continuing Education

Continuing education adds value to the university in creating access through credit and noncredit instruction; continuing education also adds value to the community by raising the level of public and professional discourse. Despite its instructional character, this modality of continuing education is considered to be "service" in the frequently used metaphor of the three legged stool of research, teaching, and public service. And while, even in this conceptual framework, continuing education plays many roles within the university—missionary, advocate, and guardian of the adult student, programmatic boundary spanner, and convener—it nonetheless characteristically engages in *instruction* for the nontraditional student. Its instructional interests span the disciplines, frequently serving as the venue for multidisciplinary approaches, and meeting demands for new instructional products.

However, a broader framework for continuing education is preferable. Continuing education's greatest potential is in assuming broader responsibilities to engage the university in forms of outreach that are not typically associated with continuing education's instructional responsibilities. Both the university and the community benefit when continuing education is given an expanded function. The notion that continuing education is limited to instructional outreach is no longer adequate for the 1990s and beyond. American universities today are increasingly looked upon as an important resource in bringing improvement to some of society's most intractable problems. This is particularly true in major metropolitan areas of the country, where over 70 percent of the country's population resides. It is a challenge that more metropolitan universities are accepting. As the late Marguerite Ross Barnett remarked in her inaugural address at the University of Houston in 1990, "What will characterize the superb twenty-first-century university will be its ability to manifest and focus areas of unquestioned excellence on the challenging issues of the day." Even prestigious private universities see themselves as a source of creative social problem solving. Outgoing President Derek Bok of Harvard University remarked in his final address to the faculty that Harvard's "mission should clearly include the use of education and research to address great human problems, such as poverty, hunger, crime, and environmental destruction."

Continuing Education and the Community

The metropolitan university, particularly, is being asked to join forces with government, business, and social agencies to ameliorate serious social and economic problems in the metropolitan areas, to help ensure economic vitality; to assist in restructuring education; to enhance the professional skills of teachers and government workers; to improve environmental quality; to contribute to improving the health and safety of the communities' residents; and to increase the level of civility in communities. The litany varies little from community to community.

The metropolitan university today is adopting a more assertive posture in the life and politics of its community. The evidence is in the popular and professional press—and apparent on our campuses. The metropolitan university is building on its traditional research and teaching roles, but creatively adapting to the peculiar needs of the metropolitan area of which it is a part. This adaptive behavior covers a wide range. At one end is the subtle influence the university has by articulating moral order in the conflict of ideas and providing a sanctuary for reflection on theory and practice. At the other end is active engagement with the private sector in creating products and services such as research parks. Manfred Stanley sees the university as a "civic institution," an institution "central to the production or maintenance of goods defined by a large majority of citizens as vital to the material and moral prosperity of the commonwealth."(p. 5)

Ernest Boyer eloquently argues the case for a stronger bond between the university and its community in *Scholarship Reconsidered.* He acknowledges an historical link between campus and contemporary problems, but argues that link must be strengthened. By what instrumentality will this link be forged, assuming the university is committed to making a difference in the life and times of the community? How will multiple connecting points be established to link community and university? While no single entity within the university should be viewed as the sole contributor to this effort, continuing education on most campuses possesses the historical mission of extending the resources of the university into the community. Hence is the logical starting point for analyzing or initiating linkages to the community. On some campuses this historical continuing-education mission has much meaning for the entire university, acting as a metaphor for the role the university has historically played in enriching the entire community. The Wisconsin Idea comes to mind: "the boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state." In this tradition, continuing education plays an important facilitating role in the engagement of the university in the affairs of the state.

Continuing Education as Part of the University

In its usual form, as essentially an instructional outreach, continuing education is limited in its ability to perform the bridging role necessary to position the university as a major contributor to societal problem solving in our metropolitan areas. To bring about this linkage, continuing education must be viewed in a much broader framework, as spanning and connecting to the entire university. Continuing education, both as a function and an organization, must be seen as an integral part of the fabric of the university. It must become a major participant in the business of the university. It must be reconceptualized to perform a larger role on behalf of the university in order to engage the entire university to affect the community in which it resides in a variety of ways and in a positive manner. This will require, in many instances, the reinvention, and in others a reinvigoration, of continuing education. On some campuses noninstructional outreach or extension activity is already imbedded in continuing education. How it is

organized is the subject of another contribution to this issue. Suffice to say that in concept the campus at large should assume responsibility for the bridging function, either as contributors to the process or as facilitators of the process. Continuing education, by assuming a larger outreach role, is positioned to provide leadership in this effort. This leadership potential is based on a disposition of continuing education to relate naturally to the external world and on a talent for translating worldly problems into educational approaches.

In an essential sense, continuing education helps to convert knowledge into readily useable forms for immediate application.

A reconceptualized continuing education expands upon its usual role as a provider of "instructional outreach" to include the roles of facilitator, convener, or broker of other university resources. Continuing education becomes an integral and active component of the university's central concern with the "knowledge process" by being a principal provider of access to the university's **knowledge base** by the larger community. It is, however, not a passive conduit for knowledge transmission, but rather an active participant in the process of knowledge dissemination and application. Hence, it is part of the fundamental mission of the university. In an essential sense, continuing education helps to convert knowledge into readily useable forms for immediate application. It is a given that a tension exists between the internal priorities and customs of the university and the pressures applied by external groups or external issues. Possessed bodies of knowledge must be fitted to new applications in unaccustomed ways and reorganized to meet external needs. Communication must be established with the users of that knowledge. Against this background of tension, continuing education plays the role of facilitating the continuous interplay between the knowledge enterprise of the university and those external to the university actively engaged in societal problems.

External demands on the university are many. Universities are being asked to help ensure economic vitality by providing society with new products, services, and new methods of manufacturing. They are expected to engage in technology and knowledge transfer, provide better management skills, and improve the skills and knowledge of workers in an international marketplace. Universities are asked to enhance practitioner skills in traditional fields through updating and to provide training in new areas of specialization where no traditional faculty exists, such as hazardous waste management. Universities are also being asked to create a level of civility in our civic community by training emerging leaders, by enlightening the public on issues of common concern, and by celebrating cultural diversity.

This conceptualization of the role of continuing education in the knowledge process is in contrast to the three-legged stool metaphor of research, teaching, and service, which assigns continuing education the role of service. Continuing education is more central to the knowledge activities of the university than that appellation would imply. The concept of the knowledge process provides a more useful way of describing the fit of continuing education to the fundamental roles of the university.

It allows us more definitional precision in describing the appropriate activities of continuing education within various institutional cultures. In its instructional mode, continuing education contributes to transmitting knowledge. When continuing education is engaged in activities such as policy analysis or program evaluation, it is appropriately participating in another dimension of the knowledge process, knowledge generation. When it facilitates technology transfer or provides technical assistance, it is engaged in knowledge application.

Expectations vary between institutions regarding what is appropriate for continuing education among the several dimensions of the knowledge process. But whatever the mix, and whether viewed as provider or facilitator, continuing education in this conception participates in all the fundamental knowledge-based activities of the university as do the other academic units of the university.

The Expanded Function of Continuing Education

Continuing education can carry out its expanded function because it has five important characteristics: It is change driven, client oriented, issue oriented, multidisciplinary, and constituency oriented.

Continuing education is **change driven** by virtue of its commitment to the ongoing improvement of professional practice, the encouragement of public discourse on foreign and domestic issues, its engagement in cultural enrichment, and its dedication to the expansion of opportunities for all people. All of its activities are in response to or in anticipation of needs and conditions brought about by change.

Continuing education is **client oriented**. Its activities, services, and programs are shaped by the demands of users of its products. The processes employed for program development are generally predicated on market demand, with relatively short timelines and a tight fit between client need and the character of the program. In most instances the budget of continuing education contains a substantial requirement for fee-generated income. This requirement creates the condition for the development of a product that is much closer to the needs of the client than one developed without the market environment.

Continuing education views the world in terms of **problems or issues**, which is the way in which the public bundles its concerns. This means, as well, that continuing education must take a **multidisciplinary approach**. The external community does not structure its concerns in a manner that readily replicates the structure of the university or the organization of its knowledge base. The tendency toward specialization, characteristic of all disciplines, works against the creation of an appropriate fit between issue and university. Disciplines are vertical, problems are horizontal, and society operates in a matrix of these. The closest the university comes to a fit is through centers and institutes. Hence, the interface between societal problems and universities is frequently inadequate and results in unrealistic expectations and frustration. By having a multidisciplinary, issue-centered orientation, continuing education can create a better fit between institution and community. It can

mobilize all pertinent resources and approaches within the university. It can draw upon several disciplines and subdisciplines, as well as various departments, centers, schools, and colleges. Hence it can structure responses, regardless of modality of outreach, that have a better chance of ameliorating a condition existing in the community.

The successful engagement of the university in all forms of outreach will depend upon its ability to organize its product principally on the basis of an issue-centered, multidisciplinary approach. It is the only feasible response, but requires, *inter alia*, the coordination of curriculum development, mediation of differing practice approaches, and coordination of faculty resources among the various disciplines and organizations involved. Continuing education provides a neutral venue for this coordination, as well as a positive and experienced environment for creating an interface with clients of the program or activity.

Finally, continuing education must adopt a **constituency orientation**. Continuing education has traditionally been learner-centered, focused on the structure, modality, and outcome of participation in an individual learning experience. While this orientation remains appropriate when structuring such experiences, it is not fully consistent with the broader conceptualization of continuing education as an interface with the knowledge process and with the issue orientation described above. Just as the concerns of the community are bundled into issues, the beneficiaries of university responses to those issues are likely to be grouped into constituencies that are identifiable to the continuing educator. It is the constituency group qua group that will benefit, with potentially subsequent benefit flowing to the individual member. There are collective points of view, issues, and concerns that inhere in the group that may not be shared universally and uniformly by the individual members. Addressing the needs of the group will ameliorate a common problem and improve the situation for the group as a whole.

This constituency orientation, as well, builds a base of university support that is clear and easily accessed and mobilized. By addressing the broad interests of constituency groups in a common pursuit of the interests of the commonweal, the university creates the potential for reciprocal support of its interests through this partnership. A constituency orientation also provides the university with easily identifiable and recruitable partners for problem-solving initiatives. By linking issues and constituencies with an appropriate university response, strategic alliances become feasible and increase the impact of any such activity.

By adopting these characteristics, continuing education positions itself to play a larger role within the institution. Building upon its traditional instructional outreach role, it assumes a broader responsibility for building linkages with the external community. In so doing, it accepts an additional responsibility to engage the resources of the university in forms that are not typically associated with continuing education's instructional responsibilities. For some institutions this expansion will be consistent with the present functions of continuing education or outreach; for others it will require a new approach.

In its expanded mode, continuing education provides a mechanism

to integrate the faculty and staff of the university with the larger community in a problem-solving enterprise, whether this be the expansion of the knowledge base, the pursuit of traditional degree and nondegree instruction by nontraditional audiences, or the extension of new forms of knowledge to new constituencies. While the form of the university's contribution to problem solving may vary, the constant is the human resource that the university contributes in faculty and staff expertise to efforts with the community. It is the interaction between university faculty and staff and community participants that gives shape to the joint university-community activity. Thus a principal role of continuing education is the engagement of faculty and staff and the facilitation of an interaction with the community to structure a response.

Continuing Education and University Outreach Activities

How does the university shape its response to external pressures for engagement in social and economic issues confronting the metropolitan area? There exists a variety of forms of university activity that can be used to support the outreach mission and to fashion an institutional response to external needs:

- applied research;
- program evaluation and policy analysis;
- technical assistance;
- clinical services;
- development and demonstration of intervention models;
- student internships and volunteer activities;
- academic support services;
- credit instruction;
- noncredit, informal, or self-directed instruction, including conferences and workshops; and
- public information.

There is no single mode or model of outreach. A university response to external issues may utilize any one or any mix of the list, which indeed may not be complete. However, each response must rest upon the special competencies and academic strengths of the university, as well as on the appropriateness of the response to the culture of the institution. The match between the institution's strengths, the issue to be addressed, the character of community alliances created, and the modality of the response will drive decision making about (a) the locus of the response within the community, (b) the character or form of the response, and (c) the source or sources of the response from within the university.

While some forms of university outreach activities are immediately recognizable as appropriate to application in community problem solving, others are not so readily apparent. For example, we do not usually think of academic support services in the framework of outreach but the counseling and assessment skills found in academic advising fit well with

inner-city initiatives targeting employment and further schooling. Even those activities, such as credit instruction, that are most usually associated with outreach, invite reexamination for innovative ways to link them with community issues. For example, much can be gained by an evaluation of the catalog of summer session courses to determine their fit with issues of current importance to the community. The intention should be to offer courses that would prepare professionals or the public to deal more effectively with current community concerns. Such courses might be grouped with a summative conference, to which both students and the public are invited, to discuss community initiatives or new approaches to issues the courses have addressed.

The array of forms of potential response exists on most metropolitan university campuses today. But usually they are not coordinated or not oriented toward outreach. They are distributed broadly within the institution and are structurally unrelated. To mobilize the proper mix of forms for any targeted initiative is a challenge to which continuing education, viewed in its broad framework, is particularly well suited. This approach organizes knowledge and human resources around problems. To the extent that multiple forms are used, it creates a matrix organization approach to problem-solving interventions. Various segments of the university are simultaneously organized in a coordinated manner to create a targeted initiative, with leadership coordination being provided by continuing education or one of the other participants.

While this approach creates a framework in which to imagine a response by the university to a pressing community issue, it does not provide a filter through which to evaluate which issues the university should address among the pressing concerns expressed to it. In the address mentioned earlier, Bok suggests a simple set of criteria to decide which issues the university should address:

1. "potential to achieve special quality, not readily available in another institutional setting, because of its ready access to the intellectual resources of the university; and
2. should have capacity to benefit the university by contributing in some important way to education or research." (p. 47)

I would add two additional criteria. Issues tackled by the university should:

3. possess the potential for a measurable positive impact on the *community*, responding to the *community's* issue agenda; and
4. fit the special competencies of the university.

Conclusion

These are challenging times for government, businesses, nonprofit organizations and citizens, as well as universities. It is not, however, an unreasonable expectation that our constituencies would regard their metropolitan university to be among the principal resources for assistance in the arduous task of resolving what often seem to be intractable problems,

irrespective of where those problems are located in the community. The peculiar mission of the metropolitan university is to relate in significant ways to the urban community and to create relationships that are reciprocally beneficial. Continuing education, in an expanded mode, should more rationally relate the university to its broader community and support more meaningfully the initiatives undertaken with that community.

Suggested Readings

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