

Toward a Learning Society Revisited: The Rise and Fall of an Educational Ideal?

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Abstract: *This study begins a broad historical dialogue on the movement for lifelong learning and the “learning society” and the ways that many of the innovations were adopted, while the adult students continued to be marginalized both institutionally and conceptually within adult higher education.*

Introduction

In 1973, when *Toward a Learning Society: Alternative Channels to Life, Work, and Service* appeared, it seemed to augur a new day in the conceptualization of higher education and not incidentally a broader view of adult education within the higher education paradigm. This work built on an earlier work, by Robert M. Hutchins (1968) which argued that higher education needed to be expanded to all populations, including part-time educational opportunities for working adults. This work is more of a proclamation for action than actual study. While its principal concern is for universal access to higher education, it recognizes the importance of work in the lives of adults and presciently insists that higher education needs to become more integrated into the world of work. It cautions however that universal access is not the same as universal attendance. This report makes several all-encompassing proposals while recognizing the problems of implementation. The proposals include: (1) Greater diversity of experience for young people, with facility of movement between work and education. “This also suggests the desirability of shorter ‘modules’ of learning....” (p. 5); (2) “Extension of national service programs and of educational opportunities in industry, trade unions, and the military” (p. 5); (3) increases in part-time study and greater access for adults; (4) expansion of the community college system; (5) “The creation of ‘Learning Pavilions’ in densely populated neighborhoods where people can drop in to study and to discuss their studies (p. 5); (6) Open universities and external degree programs; (7) Guaranteed financial access to higher education with higher education support; (8) “More emphasis on a cumulative record of achievement and less on the academic degree itself” (p. 6).

This report and others like it augured a new day for both higher education and adult education. It pulled together the various reports of the late 1960’s and seemed to catapult the issues of diversity, access, and adult education onto a national stage. The appearance of this work was part of a broader movement discussing innovations within higher education that focused on a more student-centered approach, greater individualization, and an emphasis on the breaking down of the barriers among disciplines. Yet despite massive amounts of money, this new learning society never materialized. What we had instead, was a brief interest in non-traditional higher education, much of which focused on programming for adults. Indeed, it is interesting that recent histories of higher education completely bypass the phenomenon of adult students and the role of non-traditional adult programs in shaping the current state of higher education and adult education. This paper begins an examination of the development, funding, and demise of innovative college degree programs for adults that arose starting in the 1960s. Specifically, it examines the philosophical tenets behind innovations in access, delivery systems, and curricula. It also begins a discussion of the funding made available from the Carnegie

Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework draws on the work of the Grant and Riesman (1978) related to their categorization of reforms within higher education. They posit that there have been two types of reform. The first, the telic reforms were reforms that had the goal of reforming the system (or aspects of the system) of higher education. For Grant and Riesman then, these reforms were a form of resistance to the research based university model. The other type of reform, popular reforms were, on the other hand, those reforms developed to meet external demands. For Grant and Riesman (1978) these included changes in undergraduate education that would lead to increased student autonomy, new patterns of organization, and “attempts to respond to the demands of minorities and other previously disenfranchised groups”. It is particularly interesting that while Grant and Riesman predicted that the telic reforms were more important, in fact it has been the popular reforms that have continued through to the present day.

Post-World War II Period

Starting in the late 1950s and continuing until the early 1980s, higher education research was replete with concern about the state of education. On the one hand, Jencks & Riesman (1968) saw the Academic Revolution as a change in governance, shifting power relations within institutions from Boards and Presidents to the faculty, who for the first time came to own the curriculum, grading, and all matters academic. Yet this was also the period where there was a distinct revolt against this cult of the expert. This tension over expertise allowed priorities to shift away from curricular innovation and to issues of delivery.

The seeds for the transformations of the 1960s and 1970s lie in the 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, Smith & Bender (2008) see the period from 1940 through 2005 as one of transformation for every aspect of higher education. What we do not always realize today is that initial concern about the fate of the private liberal arts college drove much of the innovation. It was not until Sputnik and the consequent National Defense Education Act that concern shifted to curriculum specifics. However, a concomitant consequence of this was a large decline in the percentage of students attending private colleges, although the actual numbers increased so that the phenomenon was partially hidden. However, the early 1970s growth had lessened and the number of students enrolled in private liberal arts colleges was falling. (Russel, 1974). A key trend in the early 1970s was the lessening of religious control and a movement towards independence and co-education. In 1978 Grant and Riesman looked back at a decade of turmoil within higher education and tried to make sense of the general educational changes (as opposed to the political ones) that had taken place. They found a “thoughtful reappraisal of the undergraduate curriculum” as a process going back at least 50 years although they noted some curricular reforms went back much further. (p.2). These telic reforms “embody a significantly different conception of the goals of undergraduate education. To some degree, they represent an attack on the hegemony of the giant research-oriented multiversities and their satellite university colleges” (Grant & Riesman, 1978, p. 17). They rejected the notion of research as the basis for university life and offered an alternate vision of the possibilities for higher education.

Popular reforms on the other hand arose in response to student demands. Grant & Riesman (1978) saw these changes as less substantial. They did not fundamentally change the

structure of the university, but answered calls for reform from constituent groups. These included calls for greater student autonomy, different organizational structures, and more of an emphasis on inclusion of otherwise excluded or disenfranchised groups. Much of the student unrest of the 1960s focused on these kinds of issues. Of course, writing in 1978, they did not consider the generational conundrum that also drove these reforms and which left higher education stagnant with the baby bust or the generation born after 1965. These popular reforms included: student-designed majors, free choice curricula, and the abolition of fixed requirements. These popular reforms “modified the means of education within the constraints of the existing goals of the research-oriented university” (Grant & Riesman, p. 16).

Grant & Riesman maintained that these reforms failed. They demanded too much of faculty. They condemn the incorporation of the public school mentality that looked to develop in their words, “teacher-proof” (p. 6) curricula. They deeply condemn this anti-teacher bias. Many traditional colleges adopted some of the innovations advanced. Nationally, in the early 1970s there was a drop in general education requirements, although of course thirty years later they are back in force. There was also a movement away from required courses. Some of these changes were enacted almost with a sense of adventure; of moving into uncharted territory. However, often this encouraged more specialization rather than a broadening of experience. But most problematic was that faculty members who participated in specialized program within more traditional institutions were often labeled pariahs.

Paradoxes of Reform – Funding and FIPSE

The reforms led to some central paradoxes within higher education. The first one can be called the Paradox of faculty autonomy. Much of the driving force for reform came from faculty and is portrayed as part of the Academic Revolution, where power and governance shifted to faculty. Yet there is a deep irony here. Many of the innovative programs exist with adjuncts who have essentially no autonomy. The broader issues have been lost. Governance is not an issue in for profits. But one of the central paradoxes may be that in the end much of the driving force for change came from the federal government through the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. In effect, what we see is a series of reforms that began as a faculty and student driven imperative that ultimately became an administrative protocol aimed at recruiting students. The extension of participation that underlay many of these innovations was often aimed at adult students. Yet the ways that access was extended has had implications for both the field of adult education and for the place of adult higher education within the field. The work of the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) lies at the heart of much of this work and yet has been ignored by both those in higher education and certainly those concerned with the policy of adult education. Yet, it is this work at the intersection of adult education and higher education that is extremely important in understanding the state of adult higher education today. The 1970s portrayed as a “golden age” of creative thinking about higher education. And FIPSE was at the center of it” (Finney, 2002, p. iv).

FIPSE was founded in 1972. It was the compromise solution that was originally conceptualized by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education Report, Quality and Equality in 1968 and called for the formation of a higher education foundation. Clark Kerr was the chair of this commission. The impetus for this proposed foundation had several sources such as concern about the changing student population and increasing student unrest of the 1960s and early 1970s. (Gould, 1973). An initial call for a foundation by Senator Daniel P. Moynihan met

great resistance. A second version developed by a group in HEW also died. The only part to survive was a fund unattached to a particular foundation. This allocation was entitled, "Support for Improvement of Postsecondary Education". Virginia Smith, the first director of FIPSE wrote that this was, "a small consolation prize for those who had urged the establishment of a foundation. Yet it soon became clear that a phoenix had risen from the ashes" (Smith, 2002, p.2).

This consolation prize was an allocation of \$10 million to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) budget to "improve postsecondary educational opportunities by ... encouraging the reform, innovation, and improvement of postsecondary education..." (Quoted in Bunting et. al., 2002, p. 30). Because of the small sum, great discretion was given to the secretary of HEW to spend the funds. He chose to retain aspects of the failed foundation and create an organization with a separate identity. In choosing a name, scrutiny appears to have focused on the acronym. FIPSE "had a friendly sound, a measure of lightness to it" (Smith, 2002, p. 2). FIPSE was seen as paradox functioning as an innovator within a vast bureaucracy that frequently discouraged innovation of any kind. Yet, despite this inauspicious structure, FIPSE became known for both its flexibility and its field orientation. (Bunting et al., 2002, p. 30).

Much of what FIPSE did is often attributed to its structure, which in turn is attributed to his initial planning group. This group was very high level and made specific recommendations about how FIPSE should function. For example, they recommended that it stand outside of the organizational structure of HEW, thereby gaining greater autonomy. The membership of this planning group included: Roger Heyns, President of the American Council on Education; Morris Keeton, president of the American Association of Higher Education; Theodore Mitau, Chancellor, Minnesota State College System; Richard Hagemeyer, President, Central Piedmont Community College; K. Patricia Cross, senior research psychologist, Education Testing Service; Virginia B. Smith, Associate Director, Carnegie Commission on Higher Education; Samuel Baskin, President Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities; Frank Newman, Chairman of the Newman Report and director of university relations, and Stanford Elias Blake, president, Institute for Services to Education.

In addition to placement, this planning group made other recommendations. They advocated for a field oriented personnel and a governance-style that would include a small advisory board. The planning group adopted an underlying philosophy of Breadth and Inclusiveness. For instance they allowed unaccredited colleges to apply for funding. Additionally, applications could come from anyone within an institution, not only tenured personnel. They consciously wanted to overcome the inertia that they felt emanated from the tenured faculty. "Often it is the less established members of an institution who are seeking change and improvement." (P. 34). They consciously tried to diversify the reviewers using individuals who lived west of the Mississippi, were untenured, and were often women and minorities. From its inception, FIPSE retained a broad range of purposes.

The funding priorities have been categorized into four phases (Paulson, 2002). Paulson distinguishes these in terms of the changing priorities in extending access and in a commitment to distance education. The first time frame was from 1972 through 1980 and was typified by Face to Face Programs. Although FIPSE was just started in 1972, it started up quickly, making its first grants in 1973. The original funding priorities through 1975 included: "new approaches to teaching and learning; implementing equal educational opportunity; revitalizing institutional missions, and encouraging the development of an open system of higher education." (Bunting et al, 2002, pp.37-38).

From 1973 to 1979, it supported 500 projects and was seen as a model for other federal agencies. During this period FIPSE funded grassroots programs such as the Association of Community-Based Education and the Rural Clearinghouse for Lifelong Education and Development. Many of the programs funded during this time period focused on extending the idea of the campus. So faculty members were sent off campus to a variety of locations to teach essentially the same things. There was curriculum experimentation, but this mostly focused on the repackaging of programs or modules so that they could be taught by others with ease. Some projects worked on the development of external degrees. The aim was to provide programming that had no distinction between on and off campus attendance. The underlying priority was the extension of service, but the principal recipients of these services were adults.

The second phase of FIPSE funding experimented with the use of technology. This took place during the 1980s. The first efforts focused on the use of television, videos, and telecommunications for coursework. Again, the principal issue was the expansion of access, yet the primary recipients were again adults.

The third phase of funding ran from the late 1980s through the early 1990s. Paulson (2002) calls this, "Breaking the Mold". During this period, FIPSE's goal was to promote a shift to a more fundamental restructuring that would allow for greater access but also change the way that education was conducted. Programs "began to have a different look and feel from previous programs. They transcended traditional services areas. They sought to serve new student populations. They fostered collaboration among postsecondary sectors. They shifted their focus from developing curricula to serving learners' needs and providing student support services. They were entrepreneurial and often based on a business model." (Paulson, 2002, p. 38) By the time of this third phase, FIPSE was evolving into a strong advocate for online education. This led almost imperceptible to the fourth phase.

This fourth phase was "Anywhere, anytime learning". This began in the late 1990s with discussions of "just in time" learning. This was a phrase borrowed from industry, connoting the idea that waste could be eliminated. Certainly a key aim was expanded access, but also the fundamental structures and policies that affected learning and kept it inconveniently placebound. These technological changes were also seen as ways of improving instruction. There was a belief that as the technology changed; the role of the faculty would change as well. Interestingly this shift also led to other concerns, most notably with pedagogical issues and with quality. FIPSE's priorities thus began to shift in the late 1990s to a greater concern with the assessment of quality. In a way, the priorities of FIPSE have been reflected in much of what has happened within higher education over the past forty years.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

All too often, adult educators tend to view adult education in a vacuum. Analyzing the policy initiatives for adult higher education allows us a prism to better understand how these initiatives almost always become perverted and fail. Understanding how we moved from a policy that would restructure all of higher education to one focused on distance learning is an important part of this understanding.

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