

# **PROGRAM CLOSURES: WHAT HAPPENS TO FACULTY LEFT BEHIND?**

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## **Abstract**

This autoethnographic study documents the stories of two adult education faculty members' experiences when their academic programs were closed. In both cases, they each became programs of one after colleagues retired or left for other reasons. Despite their isolation as the only faculty members with adult education credentials, both continue to conduct research, teach, mentor students and colleagues, and remain engaged with the field of adult education.

Keywords: program closure, autoethnography, institutional assessment

Over a decade ago, Milton et al. (2003) explored adult education programs. More specifically they examined the changes faculty and students experience in programs. Three factors were identified that contributed to program changes—program integration, responsiveness to change, and leadership, both program and outside leadership. Since 2003, several adult education programs have become defunct, yet others continue to thrive. Still others are hanging on by a thread. It has been surprising to see once viable and well-respected programs in adult education be discontinued, and distressing once it became our own programs.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study addresses adult education program closures and the fate of faculty left behind after the program closes. Once faculty have invested their efforts in obtaining tenure and promotion, graduating students affiliated with the program, they are still vulnerable to possible termination, exclusion from decision making, and feeling irrelevant. This study employed an autoethnographical approach in which we dialogued about six organizing questions regarding our backgrounds, program history, program decision making, survival in the institution, career consequences, and ability to mentor others.

## **Perspective**

Higher education administrators now largely control curriculum that was once the domain of faculty (Bérubé et al., 2013). Recent "program closures represent the confluence of . . . long-term trends: the erosion and redefinition of tenure, the massive growth in the ranks of the contingent faculty . . . and the nationwide disinvestment in public higher education" (p. 5). Program closure is an emotionally charged, undesirable outcome that often results in termination of tenured and tenure-track faculty, interrupted and prematurely terminated careers, reduced morale, and diminished contributions to research and the literature (Eckel, 2002). It can damage institutional reputations, reduce choices for students, and compromise

academic disciplines (Wilson, 2009). Nevertheless, in times of financial stress, academic institutions “must adapt, combine existing resources, and craft an organizational image resonant of societal wants (Platt et al., 2017). When a program closes, termination of tenured and tenure-track faculty may be allowable but only after attempts have been made to place them in another suitable appointment, offering retraining to prepare them for reappointment, and faculty compensation.

### **Research Design**

Autoethnography involves an insider’s perspective on cultural events. It connects the personal to the cultural using various methodological strategies (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This type of research helps glean a deeper understanding of the participant’s personal experiences by using techniques such as introspection, focusing on feelings, thoughts, and culture (Esterberg, 2002). The insider has intimate knowledge of the event or group (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). In this case, each author has successfully navigated the tenure process and gained status as full professors in an adult education program. The strategy used in this study is a biographical method where “turning-point moments of individual’s lives” can be presented, contextualized, and examined” (Denzin, 1989, p. 13). The authors combined their own personal narratives. These narratives were analyzed for similarities and differences concerning the impact of program dissolution or near dissolution. This study used content analysis to identify, code, and categorize themes and patterns in the data (Patton, 1990). This method provides a way of analyzing the structure of the data, allowing salient themes, patterns, and observations to emerge.

### **Research Findings**

We graduated in the same year from one of the most prominent adult education programs at the time. Upon graduation, we eventually joined the faculty ranks of established adult education programs, one in Mississippi (Lilian) and one in Missouri (Paulette). We are now both members of the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. Our programs closed because of institutional requirements for minimum graduate enrollments and administrators making subsequent decisions to close viable graduate programs. In both cases, decisions were made when we were occupied with administrative roles (associate provost and department chair), meaning that we were forced to participate in our own demise by dismantling the programs we hoped to return to.

### **Our Background and Program History**

In our descriptions, we take turns responding to the organizational questions.

#### *Paulette*

I, along with another recent doctoral graduate, joined the faculty at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in 1999. Prior to our arrival, my colleague, John Henschke, had been a department of one. Yet, he was able to maintain the program. I was promoted to associate professor in 2005 and professor in 2014. Once under the auspices of secondary education, our program became an M.Ed. in Adult and Higher Education. The adult education program began to grow, especially after we implemented an online component. In 2004, we received the “Malcom Knowles Award for Outstanding Adult Education Program Leadership” for excellence in using best practices for adult and continuing education by the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. We seemed unstoppable. However, a number of events would

dramatically change the trajectory of our program. One junior faculty member was not promoted. She subsequently retired. We were fortunate to hire another faculty member. However, shortly after her arrival, our most senior member retired and began teaching full-time at another institution. I became the program director. The new junior faculty member resigned. I accepted an administrative position at my institution.

*Lilian*

When I joined the faculty at USM we had MEd, EdS, EdD, and PhD programs in Adult Education. I joined two faculty members, John R. Rachal and W. Lee (Willie) Pierce, one of whom was dean at the time of my hire. A few years after my arrival, they both chose to take advantage of a phased retirement program and they worked half-time for 3 years until they retired. I became program coordinator when they began half-time work and then became a program of one when they retired. When I first arrived, I was startled by the small class sizes (e.g., 5 – 6) students and like most universities, this was not sustainable financially. Later, I also assumed responsibility for coordinating the Higher Education and Student Affairs programs.

### **Current Status of the Program**

*Paulette*

The program only exists on paper, as no adult education M.Ed. students have been admitted since 2014. When students apply for the M.Ed. in Adult and Higher Education, they cannot select adult education as an emphasis. In an attempt to stay current in the field, I continue to teach 1-2 adult education courses per semester. Unfortunately, because enrollments (four students) are below minimum requirements, I do not receive any credit for teaching them. As the university recently increased the minimum student credit hours faculty must generate per year from 180 to 270, I am required to teach a course outside my discipline.

*Lilian*

As the university began the process of pruning programs that were not financially remunerative, we were forced to close each of our programs in succession, beginning with the EdS, then the master's, and finally the EdD/PhD programs. We have not been able to offer adult education coursework since 2014. This was not problematic for me at first because I was appointed as department chair and served in that role for three years. During a university reorganization, my department was combined with another that focused on teacher education to form the School of Education. Now that I no longer have an administrative role, there is difficulty in finding suitable teaching assignments for me. I taught both adult education and qualitative research courses for many years, but with no adult education program and a changed emphasis on capstone courses there is little need for my teaching specialties. Now I am teaching remedial reading for freshmen and capstone courses for doctoral students in educational administration, both of which are outside of my expertise.

### **Changes in Administration can Reduce Support for Adult Education**

*Paulette*

When I left the college to assume an administrative role, it was apparent the dean was not supportive of the adult education program. My departure put a nail in the coffin. Upon my return, a newly selected dean was in charge. She informed me she wanted me to work with a faculty committee, particularly a professor in experiential and family education, to create a master's degree in community education with an "emphasis in adult education." I made it clear,

I was not in favor of the idea. Since that time, I was charged with recruiting for and starting a new Adult Education Ed.D. program which began Fall 2020.

*Lilian*

Recruitment was always a problem and now we have no program. Adult education's difficulties in explaining the field and its value may be a major contributing factor to program closure. For example, students may not see a future, while other faculty and administrators may not see the justification for the program. Given adult educators propensity for critical thinking and questioning, we wonder if there is a perception that we do not support institutional mission and goals?

### **Surviving in the Midst of Loss**

*Paulette*

I consider myself a survivor and fighter. As I have been a program of one for a number of years, I have adjusted. I continue to supervise doctoral students. Over the years, I have built a number of relationships with colleagues in the field. Knowing I can call them is comforting. I collaborate with them on research projects and publishing. I currently serve as secretary and parliamentarian for the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. It enables me to keep my pulse on the field.

*Lilian*

Despite the apparent annihilation of my program, I continue to publish in adult education. I continue to supervise doctoral dissertations in higher education and educational administration. I am able to mentor other colleagues. I am currently serving as President of Faculty Senate. I remain engaged with the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education and have returned to co-editing of *Adult Learning*. The ability to remain connected with others in my field is critically important to feeling meaningful and purposeful.

### **How We Support Junior Faculty When None Exist in our Program?**

*Paulette*

I support Black junior faculty at my institution, although none have adult education backgrounds or interests. I assist adult education colleagues seeking tenure and promotion by writing external letters. It is encouraging to write them as I am reminded there are programs and faculty fortunate enough to receive support from their institution.

*Lilian*

Although I have no departmental colleagues in adult education to support or mentor, I do help others in my department and in the field of adult education. I am frequently asked to write external letters for promotion and tenure for colleagues in adult education. I serve on the CPAE Awards Committee and have the opportunity to review the work of our colleagues in adult education. I am able to encourage authors in adult education as co-editor of *Adult Learning*. I am hopeful that others in adult education will have a better experience than mine.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

When a viable program is closed due to financial exigency, faculty face loss of employment or terminal contracts, invalidation of credentials to teach, teaching courses outside their area, or feeling irrelevant, just when they are at the peak of their ability to contribute. We wrote this in hopes that others can learn from our experiences. Strategies should be created to

maintain programs even in the midst of financial exigency and program restructuring. It is important to be politically astute about program evaluation and institutional metrics for success. Student recruitment is a critically important role so that programs will not be questioned in the light of budget restrictions. Aligning adult education courses within other programs, serving on curriculum committees to make certain our voices are heard, and collaborating with colleagues throughout the campus are just a few strategies for maintaining programs. Even if it is difficult, it is also important to describe our successes within adult education programs so that administrators will understand their value.

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