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Continuing Education's Abiding Challenge and the Need to Break the Electronic Circuit

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It has been clear for at least ten years that a revolution in distance education has decidedly taken place. We are now entering a period of slower growth and refinement. Sloan Commission data for 2006 shows the beginning of this trend, recording a slight decline over the prior year. And even though the rate of growth vastly exceeds that of higher education overall, with the almost universal participation of US public higher education institutions already committed to online learning, the prospects for dramatic expansion are limited. Of course there will be incremental growth as divisions of university continuing education discover new niche areas for degrees, but in no way will these opportunities compare with those present in the start-up phase of only several years ago.

Within the traditional arena of higher education encompassed by full-time bachelors, masters and doctoral programs, it is hard to imagine online learning expanding beyond already made concessions. Moreover, full-time faculty reluctance to teach online, and the need to rely heavily on part-time faculty, will, I believe, keep electronic distance education at the margin of mainstream collegiate education, except for community colleges whose outreach mission is more closely woven into their institutional culture.

By way of contrast, courses wherein faculty supplement face-to-face contact with computer enhancements, will be the principal campus growth sector for applied technology. It will enable them to post assignments, share their power point presentations, and moderate discussion boards creating another layer of instruction that is still, at its core, more or less conventional.

Even though continuing education divisions have done nothing short of a remarkable job in pushing the boundaries of distance education, the realization that online education is an updated version of correspondence education must by now be dawning on continuing education leaders trying to creatively enlarge their limited slices of the academic degree granting pie. This leads me to suggest that constricted opportunities for growth will function as an electronic ceiling, limiting further major inroads of distance education into academia.

I think it is fair to say that just as correspondence education has persisted, so will elearning, as we now know it. In the same way that correspondence was enriched by audio-visual aids and imaginative study packets, online learning will undoubtedly incorporate new features such as podcasting and real-time streaming that will add a more

life-like dimension. But, this must be recognized for what it is- a gap filling gussying up, until the next major breakthrough in distributed education eventually emerges.

As we ponder this trajectory, it is crucial that we remind ourselves that our calling as continuing educators must transcend allegiance to current technologies and the strategies to which they are linked. The real issue is, and always will be, expanding opportunities for continued learning. As our country moves further along in becoming a service economy, the only jobs that will compare in salary and prestige to those lost in the demise of manufacturing will be those requiring higher levels of credentialed education as entry level requirements. For that reason, it is vitally important to turn our attention to the existing higher education pipeline, which is sorely in need of a major rethinking. This is the true choke point and the real and abiding continuing education challenge awaiting resolution.

Unless we are able to increase educational participation at the earliest stages of college entry, the education gap between haves and have-nots will widen. Those left behind in the competition for higher education will encounter a bleak future of diminished opportunity.

The geography of US higher education, particularly at the state level, has been carved up in much the same way as the Congress of Vienna shaped Europe following the Napoleonic era. Or perhaps a better analogy is to the cartel systems we studied in college economics where a handful of major competitors, by collective agreement, successfully kept others from entering the marketplace. Our “system” is segmented by degrees (associates, bachelors, masters, the doctorate) and institutions (community colleges, four year colleges, and those universities granting the doctorate), albeit with some overlap, not to mention what is called “mission creep” as institutions strive to move up (never down) in the degree granting hierarchy.

This is not the place to review how higher education developed in the US except to note that the uniquely American invention of the community college has flourished beyond anyone’s wildest dreams and now accounts for almost 50 % of total college and university enrollment. Although originally viewed as a “stepping stone” to the next or bachelors level, for an equal if not greater number of students it is “terminal” and a jumping off point for technical and licensed occupations.

According to data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2004) the community college completion rate is 15.9% for those earning an associate’s degree and 9.3% for those receiving a vocational certificate. This compares with a completion rate of 53.4% for those attending four year institutions. (Wirt, et al. (2004). *The Condition of Education 2004* (NCES 2004-077). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics). Clearly, the most direct strategy for increasing the yield of graduates from our colleges and universities is to improve retention at each level. Another way might be to rethink undergraduate education in ways that enlarge student, especially part-time student, options and incentives. This will engage the entrepreneurial talents of continuing higher educators beyond existing boundaries and structural

limitations, and demand significantly more creativity than that needed to generate new online degree programs.

As a way of stimulating this overdue dialogue I sketch out two ideas that address college attrition that could be undertaken by those of us in continuing higher education.

Strategy One. Academic Alchemy, Making Credit out of Non-Credit

In our continuing education bureaus we often talk about the presumed relationship between the credit and non-credit portions of our offerings. Occasionally we find overlap, particularly when a student enrolls in a credit granting course after sampling non-credit, and vice versa. For the most part, however, these two realms remain separate, often each standing on its own fiscal bottom. But, what if our own non-credit programs could also carry credit?

For over thirty years the American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service (ACE/CREDIT) has provided course equivalency information for educational programs, including training, offered by associations, unions, corporations, and professional organizations. This information is readily available to colleges and universities who can then determine if they wish to grant a student credit for a non-collegiate educational experience based upon CREDIT's independent assessment. But typically the non-credit experience being converted to credit will emanate from outside of the university, not from its own continuing education division.

I propose that this mechanism can be successfully exploited by continuing education departments who decide to have their non-credit activities CREDIT approved. Since college credit is fungible, a student would not necessarily be limited as to where the credit could be applied. This neatly sidesteps the potential barrier of a host institution denying credit for its own university's non-credit program. Students, under this scenario, would be free to explore the application of their credits at other, more accommodating, institutions.

Strategy Two. A Full House Beats Three of a Kind, the Need for a New Academic Credential

The success of the Associate's Degree is based on two factors: its acceptability as an entry level credential in certain occupational areas, and, secondarily, as a building block within higher education's great pyramid of achievement. In the same way as credits are fungible currency, the associate can plug into a bachelors, which can be tucked into a masters and so on, leading to the doctorate. In fact, I am willing to bet that we can all name people of our own acquaintance who have persisted in exactly this manner. Undoubtedly there are many more who earned a bachelors or masters in the same manner.

I propose that these existing points on the academic yardstick be augmented by an additional credential or degree at the sub- associate's level. For argument sake, a 30 credit P.A.A. (Partial Associate in the Arts). Not only would this motivate students to complete an entire year of college study instead of dropping out after only a semester, it would also facilitate re-entry to higher education at some later point in the individual's career.

To my way of thinking this new credential need not (and perhaps should not) be a community college degree. Instead, its curriculum would stress fundamental competencies that are comparable to what we aspire to provide for 4 year college undergraduates such as courses in literacy, numerocity, computer technology, globalism, the opportunity for foreign language study, as well as a sampling from the liberal arts and sciences. The target population would consist of those more inclined to study within a university environment than that of a community college. And to achieve convergence with the larger continuing higher education mission, it would be a part-time program geared to the adult populations we already serve.

To prevent charges that this alternative undergraduate program would dilute or detract from the regular college "brand" it would be necessary to stress once again, transfer options. Students would be responsible for developing transfer stratagems with the guidance of continuing education program advisors. For some students the attractiveness of a university credential, even a P.A.A., will be of significant value, both immediately, should they choose not to go further, or in the long term when it, coupled with career expertise, serves as the foundation for more advanced credentialed higher education. Grubb's influential *Working in the Middle: Strengthening Education and Training for the Mid-Skilled Labor Force* (Jossey-Bass, 1996) demonstrates this powerful linkage of higher education with long term career success.

Whether or not these ideas will gain support in their current form, or lead to iterations more likely to succeed, I offer them in the hope that they will prompt us to think beyond our present pre-occupations with existing program content and the technologies used to deliver them. We have enjoyed in recent years a wonderful exhilaration borne of the marriage of computer technology to distance education. It is imperative that we now take the time to rediscover our roots and the fundamental purposes continuing education may serve both individuals and our society

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