Extrainstitutional learning challenge in higher education

Laura D. Browne

University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©1991 Laura D. Browne

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2172

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
Extrainstitutional learning challenge in higher education

Abstract
The number of adults entering and reentering higher education is rapidly increasing. Researchers have attempted to determine why adults return to higher education. Morstain and Smart (1977) noted five reasons: social learning, learning for the fun of learning, learning for stimulation or relaxation, career change and life transition. As these adult learners enter academe, they bring with them a wealth of knowledge and life experiences that will have little credibility in a system which only recognizes credit hours earned as the result of time spent in a classroom. This is a major obstacle for adults wishing to enter higher education.
EXTRAINSTITUTIONAL LEARNING
CHALLENGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

---------

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

---------

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

---------

by

Laura D. Browne
August 1991
This Research Paper Presented by: Laura D. Browne

Entitled: Extrainstitutional Learning: Challenge in Higher Education

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Thomas W. Hansmeier

Date Approved: June 21, 1991
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

Date Approved: June 21, 1991
Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

Date Received: June 24, 1991
Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling
The number of adults entering and reentering higher education is rapidly increasing. Researchers have attempted to determine why adults return to higher education. Morstain and Smart (1977) noted five reasons: social learning, learning for the fun of learning, learning for stimulation or relaxation, career change and life transition. As these adult learners enter academe, they bring with them a wealth of knowledge and life experiences that will have little credibility in a system which only recognizes credit hours earned as the result of time spent in a classroom. This is a major obstacle for adults wishing to enter higher education.

Official recognition of knowledge and life experiences gained outside an academic institution, known as prior or extrainstitutional learning, dates back to approximately 1945. However, it was not until the late 1970's that adults in the United States began to benefit from the opportunity to obtain college credit for what they already knew (Sansregret, 1984).

This paper will define extrainstitutional learning by discussing its four components. A discussion of two
of the major challenges extrainstitutional learning presents to higher education will be followed by descriptions of the three most frequently used methods of assessing that learning.

**EXTRAINSTITUTIONAL LEARNING**

Spille (1988) defined extrainstitutional learning as:

Learning that has occurred outside the sponsorship of legally authorized/accredited postsecondary educational institutions. This includes learning acquired from work/life experiences, individual reading/study, mass media, participation in formal courses sponsored by associations, businesses, government, industry, the military and labor organizations. (p. 31)

Ekstrom (1983) further divided extrainstitutional learning into intentional and incidental learning. Intentional learning includes traditional classroom instruction, training programs and courses in business, the military, voluntary organizations and other non-credit courses. This type of learning, with the exception of self-directed or individualized study, can
be verified by the instructor. Incidental learning, the by-product of some other activity where there may not be an awareness that learning has occurred, takes place most frequently in paid work or supervised volunteer work. This learning is verifiable because it is supervised and evaluated. Unpaid, unsupervised incidental learning such as homemaking or daily living skills is not verified easily. Since much of the knowledge that adults bring to higher education may or may not be verifiable, it is difficult to assess whether it is equivalent (similar) to the learning that occurs in a university classroom.

The assessment of the equivalency of intrainstitutional and extrainstitutional learning is the crux of the issue now challenging higher education. Ekstrom (1983) expressed this challenge as the "problem in determining the congruence between learning that took place at another time/place and the current standards/requirements of the institutions" (p. 69). Rolls (1987) contended that an adult learner must condense/translate life experiences into classroom equivalencies and provide accurate documentation in order to gain verification of extrainstitutional
learning. Warren (1974) defined two issues which appear to contribute to a general reluctance to assess and accept extrainstitutional learning: competency vs. time spent (the credit-hour system) and measurement techniques.

ISSUE #1 - COMPETENCY vs. TIME SPENT

The practice of granting credit for extrainstitutional learning is a relative newcomer on the educational scene. Because extrainstitutional learning does not consist of faculty directed classroom exercises on a college campus, some consider it a passing fad while others view it with skepticism and resentment. Many educators feel that academic credit can only be gained by attending classes and doing the assigned work for a predetermined period of time. Faculty members value and guard their "surveillance" role in directing student learning and awarding academic credits (Warren, 1974). They are also very cautious about granting credit for someone else's teaching or for an unfamiliar kind of learning experience. Some educators focus on the threat to quality that all adult special programs are believed to represent (Tate, 1983).
This perceived threat to the quality of learning might be better understood by looking at the changes that have taken place in higher education in the past 200 years. In the 19th century, faculty members did not lecture. They assigned lessons to be studied outside the class and listened to the recitation of those lessons during class time. Faculty members were more like examiners and the institutions were examining centers certifying out-of-class accomplishments. All students were required to complete a fixed, four year curriculum that varied little from institution to institution (Warren, 1974).

The influence of German universities and the development of graduate schools in the United States led to curricular diversification and election in the undergraduate colleges, the formation of academic departments, and to the organization of academic programs around specific major fields of concentration. This diversification of courses and freedom of choice created the need for a system to determine equivalencies among those courses and programs leading to a common degree. The accounting procedure most commonly adopted was to divide the typical four year
program into units small enough to represent individual courses, assign several units to each course according to the amount of time it required and aggregate these units or "credits" into a full college program (Warren, 1974).

This resulted in the development of the credit-hour system as the method of documenting a student's progress toward the desired goal of a college degree. The credit is not based on evaluating the learning after it has occurred, but on planning the experience so that the process of engaging in it will be educationally productive. "The evidence that the educational experience has been honestly undertaken has been universally sufficient for awarding credit" (Warren, p. 123).

The credit-hour system is less than 100 years old, yet it controls every major aspect of higher education. It links educational output to monetary input utilizing a ratio of credit hours per number of dollars of educational or general expenditures (Warren, 1974).

Some colleges and universities are moving away from the traditional credit-hour degree to the competence or achievement oriented degree (Warren,
1974). This competence-based educational movement attempts to focus both instruction and assessment on demonstrable skills and understanding rather than on the accumulation of credit-hours (Willingham, 1976). The problem with competency-based assessment is the lack of a single standard of measurement (Kirkwood, 1976). How is this learning translated into academic credits? The answer appears to lie in a redefinition of what an academic credit is. Willingham (1976) suggested that the new credit units should be based on multifaceted evidence of learning: the intellectual content of the credited experience, the general nature of the activity it involved and the level of competence acquired and displayed by the student (Warren, 1974).

Some educators fear that a competence or achievement oriented degree will consist of credits based on false or erroneous claims of competence. In reality, neither the credit-hour system nor the criterion-referenced system is free from fraud or error. Competence could be measured better in terms of learning outcomes rather than time spent engaged in prescribed activities. To do this, current measurement
techniques which are based on time spent could be revised to measure competence (Ekstrom, 1983).

**ISSUE #2 - MEASUREMENT**

In principle, the measurement of learning is not affected by the process through which the learning is acquired. Therefore, the measurement of learning based on time spent is no different from that based on competency. The concern is that current techniques are not able to measure extraintitutional learning, which may result in students receiving unmerited credit. This concern has resulted in a growing interest in the use of absolute standards of performance. Criterion referenced measurement assesses a student's competence with respect to a specified performance task, not with respect to someone else's performance (Warren, 1974). The performance tasks or course objectives must be made explicit, clear and equitable enough to be assessed directly and they must be relevant to the objectives of the course, curriculum, institution or framework in which learning takes place (Kirkwood, 1976).

A review of grading and transcribing methods may also be required. The A-F scale based on percentages of total points is not sophisticated enough to reflect
accurately the nuances of competence identified by criterion-referenced measures. Narrative transcripts, used in conjunction with traditional transcripts, could present a multifaceted picture of a learner's competencies (Warren 1974). Criterion-referenced measures of competency could enhance the learning experiences of both the adult and traditional aged student.

The first part of this paper has explored some of the controversies which surround the assessment of extrainstitutional learning. This part of the paper will describe three of the assessment methods currently being used: tests, credit recommendations and individual assessments (Sansregret & Ekstrom, 1984).

**METHOD #1 - TESTS**

Tests are one of the most widely used methods of granting credit for extrainstitutional learning (Cangialosi, 1981). They are best suited to assess intentional learning and self-directed study (Sansregret, 1984). The tests are a measure of student learning outcomes (Cross & McCartan, 1984) and they can be standardized or nonstandardized.
The College Board's College Level Examination Program (CLEP) examinations are the most widely used of the standardized tests. CLEP examinations measure, in either multiple choice, general, or subject exams, knowledge regardless of how it was acquired. The institution decides whether or not it will accept CLEP scores and how much credit will be awarded. Critics of credit by exam are concerned that cut-off scores must be set for the award of credit. Common practice is to award credit if the test score is greater than or equal to the scores of 25-50% of the students who have completed the course (Warren, 1974). Critics are also concerned with determining what percentage of degree credits should be granted by this method (Cross, 1984). Generally, most institutions allow no more than 25-75 semester hours of lower level baccalaureate or associate degree credit for exams (Spille, 1988).

The nonstandard examinations are those developed by academic department or individual faculty members. These examinations permit direct judgements regarding the equivalence of learning for specific courses (Spille, 1988). They are often supplemented by other
Experiences in the Armed Services is used to grant credit at approximately three-quarters of the institutions in the United States (Hexter & Andersen, 1986). The average number of credits awarded is 30, 94.3% as electives and 72.8% for major/minor course requirements (Cangialosi, 1981). In its National Guide to Educational Credit for Training Programs, the Office of Educational Credit of ACE evaluates courses offered by private employers, community organizations, labor unions, and government agencies. There has recently been an increased interest in obtaining college credit for such courses for the following reasons: 1) some of the courses are similar in format and content to those offered on campus; 2) many organizations offering these courses claim enrollments are higher if college credit is available; 3) it is getting easier to assess the quality of, and make credit recommendation for, such learning; 4) due to competitive job markets, there is greater interest in converting learning into salable credentials (Cross & McCartan, 1984).

The Division of Independent Study of the National University Extension Association (NUEA) evaluates a wide variety of correspondence and independent study
programs among member institutions in its Guide to Independent Study through Correspondence Instruction. The Task Force on Volunteer Accreditation of the Council of National Organizations for Adult Education has developed "I Can" lists to help volunteers and homemakers identify skills for which college credit might be granted (U.S. Department of Labor, 1983).

The major advantage of credit recommendations is the speed and ease with which the evaluation of learning can be done by using the appropriate guidebook. The major drawback is that there is no attempt to differentiate between above average, average and below average learners because it is the course that is being evaluated. Credit recommendations are limited in their usefulness because they lack "metrics" or units of measurement that facilitate standardization. Ekstrom (1983) suggested that without these "metrics," there is no realistic way to facilitate transfer of the quality of learning, to facilitate transfer of credit between institutions, or to provide credibility of the learning for graduate school.
The least used, but most flexible, method is individual assessment through the development of a portfolio of learning outcomes.

METHOD #3 - PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Adults entering higher education have usually had extensive experience in business, community affairs, parenting and/or family life. However, they seldom understand completely the developmental tasks they have mastered, the ways in which they learned, or the relationship between learning from life experiences and academic learning (Mark & Menson, 1982). The portfolio process helps the adult learner identify knowledge and experiences for which credit may be obtained (Dagavarian, 1989). The portfolio process is designed to assess both intentional and incidental learning (Ekstrom, 1983). Guidelines for the development and assessment of portfolios were developed by the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL) in 1975. These guidelines are widely accepted by faculty assessors and are considered exemplary (Spille, 1988).

Extracting academic credit from experience is the heart of, and perhaps the most complex part of, the portfolio development process. Helping the learner
identify and "fit" the learning outcomes of their experiences with the criteria of college-level learning is exceedingly difficult if course descriptions do not clearly define the desired learning outcomes (Mark & Menson, 1982).

The assessment process is composed of six stages: define the learning, articulate it in terms of an educational goal, document the learning, measure the nature/extent of the learning, evaluate and transcribe the credit. Since the faculty assessor and the learner share responsibility for the outcomes of the process, there is increased faculty-student interaction which facilitates student success (Kemper & Olasov, 1988). The learner must be able to prove to a qualified faculty member that s/he has already learned the subject matter covered by a particular course. Documentation could include: computer programs, poems, artwork, audio/video tapes, clothing designs, letters from employers, articles about the learner's accomplishments, etc. (Dagavarian, 1989). The institution, learner, and faculty advisor negotiate the actual credit award (Lamdin, 1983).
institution, learner, and faculty advisor negotiate the actual credit award (Lamdin, 1983).

The rate of achievement of the portfolio assessment process is approximately the same as in traditional college classrooms. Ninety percent of all credits requested through portfolio assessment are eventually awarded. Increased cognitive growth, heightened self-esteem and understanding are some of the positive after-effects of the process.

There are several institutions currently using the portfolio assessment process. Among them are: New York Empire State College (1983); Thomas A. Edison College (1981); Vermont State College-Office of External Degree Programs (1979); University of the State of New York-Regents External Degree Program (1971); Ohio State University; Kansas State University and San Francisco State University (Sansregret, 1984).

The portfolio process has gained in popularity, but remains the least used method of evaluating extrainstitutional learning. This is due, in part, to its emphasis on the individual learner. Other deterrents include financing and staffing for this type of program.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Higher education does not have a monopoly on learning. It is part of a larger system of human learning that includes church, public schools, media, social institutions and the workplace (Lamdin, 1983). Higher education needs improved methods of assessing learner achievement that takes into account the individual character of the students and the various learning environments (Willingham, 1976). The effective use of all educational resources will depend, to a large extent, on providing valid recognition for extrainstitutional learning (U.S. Department of Labor, 1983) based on standardized criteria (Ekstrom, 1983). This would provide a common metric that would facilitate the accurate assessment of all learning outcomes.

There are also financial advantages to the assessment of extrainstitutional learning. It does not waste money or resources for either the learner or the institution. The former is not required to pay for learning that has already taken place. The latter saves money and reduces tax obligations by not teaching what has already been learned (Swift, 1985). Witkowski
described this assessment as a "worthwhile investment in human capital" (p. 99). But the value of these academic programs will be limited unless there are nontraditional delivery systems for support services, e.g. flexible financial aid, counseling and library hours (Mark & Menson, 1982).

Prior to implementing policies to assess extrainstitutional learning, several important issues must be considered (Willingham, 1976). They provide a detailed checklist that institutions might consult when developing or evaluating their own programs.

1) The institution must develop a philosophical rationale for crediting extrainstitutional learning. This is important because philosophy both determines and justifies the policies which follow.

2) The institution should develop policies which state the general types of extrainstitutional learning which are creditable, to what limits, and in what program. These will be specific to each institution.
3) Students should be required to differentiate between the learning content and the experience. Experience does not always equal learning.

4) Learning outcomes must be identified with enough specificity that they can be readily assessed and evaluated.

5) The student petitioning for degree credit should be required to specify how her/his extrainstitutional learning contributes to the degree program.

6) Institutions should develop routine procedures for periodically determining if there is adequate agreement within the faculty as to what kinds of extrainstitutional learning are creditable.

7) Institutions should develop general guidelines for determining what constitutes adequate documentation of learning. This is a key issue for quality control.

8) If direct evidence of learning is accepted, periodic checks of its authenticity should be made.

9) Assessment of extrainstitutional learning should be based on techniques that fit the
10) In evaluating an individual's learning, assessors should use techniques that are appropriate to the background of the learner.
11) The assessment process should be an integral part of the learning process.
12) Extrainstitutional learning should be assessed with reference to individual learning outcomes.
13) Criterion standards for particular learning outcomes should be stated at several levels of competence. This fosters diverse standards that fit diverse educational objectives.
14) Levels of competency required for awarding credit should be clearly defined.
15) The basis for translating outcomes into credit hours should be specified.
16) A written statement of institutional practices concerning the assessment of extrainstitutional learning should be readily available. This informs and fosters consistency, while ensuring that rationality and regulation exist.
17) The results of individual assessments should be objectively stated. This fosters accurate assessments, minimizes misinterpretations, and
facilitates quality control by making comparisons possible.

18) The results of assessment should be sufficiently consistent to ensure reasonable equity to all students.

19) Institutions should establish routine procedures for monitoring the consistency of assessment outcomes.

20) Institutions might seek better ways to integrate instruction and assessment, rather than continuing to support their separation.

21) Feedback to students concerning the outcome of assessments should foster learning and personal development. An important outcome of assessment is increased student awareness.

22) The permanent record should communicate effectively to third parties. Narrative transcripts and well-defined criterion standards of performance are a must (Willingham, 1976).

Higher education might consider developing a new methodology for assessing all learning rather than creating separate procedures and standards for extrainstitutional learning (Warren, 1974). Until
then, Willingham's checklist offers the most realistic guide for the development and implementation of programs designed to assess extrainstitutional learning. It is conceivable that the award of college degrees by examination and evaluation of competencies could become as widely accepted by the end of the 20th century as the award of course credit had become by its beginning.
REFERENCES


