

Adult Education: From a Terminal Degree to Lifelong Learning

NICHOLAS C. DONOHUE

In the conversation about underserved populations in New England higher education often revolves around “school-aged” students of color and students from low-income families. This is understandable; after all, these are the fastest growing populations in the region.

Adults, on the other hand, are too often left out of that conversation, though they too are underserved and overlooked. Adult Basic Education (ABE) students in New England are often relegated to peripheral discussions of technical training or achievement of a General Equivalency Degree or GED. The truth is, our region’s adult learners are an increasingly important demographic, not only to our higher education institutions, but to our workforce and our communities.

It has been more than 40 years since Congress passed the Adult Education Act, creating programs to help Americans over age 18 learn to read and write, and nearly 20 years since that act was repealed in favor of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act, combining adult education with federal training and employment programs. Despite the noble intentions of the former and the presumed practicality of the latter, we have undervalued the notion of adult education. Too many people, particularly in higher education, have either focused on the “Basic” in Adult Basic Education, as if a high school equivalency certificate is a “terminal degree”—or they’ve seen ABE as something directly related to specific workforce training.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation’s seven-year-old New England ABE-to-College Transition Project prepares adults throughout New England who have earned a GED or External Diploma Program (EDP) certificate to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and, by doing so, improve their lives and their families’ lives. Currently, the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project is being implemented in 25 adult education programs that are partnering with more than 40 postsecondary institutions in the region.

The ABE-to-College Transition Project helps adults bridge the gap between high school equivalency and college. The program helps students prepare academically, but also helps them navigate the culture of higher education, from securing student aid to choosing courses. The program has been so positive that the Maine Legislature, for one, has adopted the model for its own ABE-College transition programs.

Nurturing a successful program to scale like this proves it’s possible to shift the paradigm that currently defines when adults are done with education—and we must shift that paradigm further.

The New England Council’s initiative on the region’s aging workforce reports somewhat grimly that Maine possesses the oldest workforce in the country; one in three Mainers will be 55 or older by 2015. New Hampshire’s over-65 population is projected to grow by 38 percent by 2015. Meanwhile, University of New Hampshire research shows that New England’s population of younger workers, ages 25 to 34, has declined by 25 percent since 1990, as it has become increasingly expensive to live in the region.

These circumstances, combined with growing economic competition from around the globe, point to the need for more educated workers, and the need to rethink when education ends for our citizens.

If we are to be more diligent in educating adults, one thing we must address is the prohibitive barrier of higher education costs. Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick’s call for *free* community colleges is promising on this front, because the two-year public colleges have been the traditional options for adults in higher education. But the cost dilemma is more complex for many adult learners, since time spent in school is time spent away from work. Some employers, like United Technologies Corp., have provided employees with time off to earn degrees. More of these types of innovative programs should be developed if we are going to reap the full potential benefits of adult education.

Cost and time are not the only barriers facing adult students. We must also remove the stigma attached to adult education and the notion that adults who didn’t persist in education the “normal way” somehow “failed” and must now play “catch up.” These learners didn’t fail in our system; our system failed them, and the usual social constructs surrounding age and education continue to work against them.

We need to seriously re-think what we want to accomplish in terms of educating our adult learners. We need a way to formalize this process for our adult students in a way that measures success according to various outcomes. Success in one instance may be earning a bachelor’s degree; in another, it may be becoming computer literate. One adult learner may be focused on attaining analytical skills; for another, gaining communication skills may be more important.

We must review our basic assumptions about how we deliver education opportunities to adults and what

standards drive these opportunities. Re-creating a rigid, one-size-fits-all classroom model that did not work the first time around for many of these adults is not the solution. We must become better at learning how adults engage and persist with learning opportunities. This may suggest a need to increase the types of opportunities to which access is being promoted. For example, learners expand their knowledge within the context of what they already know. This is especially true for adult learners. Thus, applied learning opportunities should take into account the variety of life experiences and expertise that adults bring to the new learning experience.

We may also learn important lessons from for-profit institutions. These proprietary colleges have seen enrollment among adult learners explode because they use innovative learning technologies and offer workplace-relevant courses at convenient times and places for working people. We should at least explore some market-based approaches that for-profits have adopted, such as giving learner-consumers a role in determining when and how courses are delivered.

In the short term, we should focus on duplicating what we have seen to work not only in providing individual adults with needed skills but also in fostering institutional and societal acceptance of the very idea of lifelong learning. New England states can tap the National College Transition Network for promising practices in ABE-to-college transition programs to increase the number of adults who attain higher education degrees. The region's higher education institutions—two- and four-year, private and especially public—will need to increase their flexibility on credits, costs and when and where students are engaged in order to remove barriers from students who are working toward degrees while balancing work and raising families.

We can dramatically increase the number of college educated citizens who live in our region. But in order to do so, we must fully embrace adult learners in ways that may challenge our current assumptions and that reflect their integral role in the future of New England.

Nicholas C. Donohue is president and CEO of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. Email: ndonohue@nmefd.org.

FOLLOW UP:

Yes, a Catholic College Can Exist

JAMES F. KEENAN, S.J.

In his essay, "Can a Catholic College Exist Today?" the new Assumption College President Francesco C. Cesareo offers a manifesto of his way of governing a Catholic institution "in the midst of pluralism" (*THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION*, Fall 2007). Cesareo extols adherence to a single Catholic intellectual tradition and insists that Catholic colleges neither condone nor endorse behavior that is contrary to the church's moral teachings.

As a professor of Theological Ethics at a large Catholic and Jesuit University, I would like to offer a different perspective. In January 2006, I and another Jesuit priest, Gregory Kalscheur, S.J., assistant professor at the Boston College Law School, were asked to chair a committee of the "Church in the Twenty-First Century Project." The Church 21 project had been launched by BC's president, Father William Leahy, S.J., in the wake of the abuse scandal that rocked the church in the United States and the local church of Boston in particular.

The committee—made up of diverse faculty and administrators at BC, including the vice president for mission and identity, the dean of the Law School and

the chair of the Theology Department—was to reflect on how BC's Catholic identity pertained to the university as a whole.

BC is evidently Catholic in many ways. Yet when this Catholic identity was cited university-wide, it was often occasioned by administrators arguing that a particular event should not occur, "because, after all, we are a Catholic University." Interestingly, on one occasion, many faculty members used this same argument against the administration for awarding an honorary degree to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

I began to think that our Catholic identity was like a stealth bomber. From whatever perspective of the Catholic tradition, people used it to censure a discussion. Furthermore, when they did, they were very passionate about it. Then, after this identity was invoked to oppose an event, it disappeared from the radar screen.

On the Church 21 committee, we saw the need to approach Catholic identity more positively and to engage the faculty more directly. In fall 2006, we hosted a university-wide luncheon, which attracted more than 150 faculty members, roughly 25 percent of the full-time members. We asked them to share their concerns and hopes about the Catholic intellectual tradition, or