

DRAWING ON EXPERIENCE IN ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION
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CHAPTER 1
AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTINUING HIGHER EDUCATION

Images of Continuing Education

Hothouse Blooms

I was once told by a campus electrician at my first collegiate job at NYU that higher education was everything above the basement. Well, continuing education is everything that is left over, after all the other campus deans and administrators have carved up the pie. This includes all the things that no one else wants to worry about or do—night school, noncredit courses, different types of community outreach, usually the summer session, programs with industry, labor unions, the bypassed and under- and un-employed. It is a strange amalgam of the programs that don't fit in anywhere else, the loose ends, or a quick response to short-term needs that strangely enough often become a long-term commitment, stretching way beyond the horizon.

If you are new, and looking for a way of understanding our field, be assured that continuing education at each college is a “hothouse bloom” very much suited to the conditions of that particular school with very little luck of being successfully transplanted in its original form to another campus or college. Unlike traditional academic disciplines, no one type of continuing education is normative. One school, because of where it is located, may have extensive executive training programs while another, with a more rural location, might specialize in distance learning degree programs that are addressed to a statewide clientele. Still other schools could have extensive worldwide programs, and others recruit students no farther away than a subway ride.

This lack of standardization also extends to size, running the gamut from a single director at a small college with one half-time assistant, to deans at enormous universities, public or private, with staffs of hundreds, not counting part-time faculty, which can add many more hundreds to the total. The variations between programs are too numerous to list, but I can assure you, there is not a single campus continuing education unit or division that is a mirror image of another. Surprisingly, differentiation also extends to sister colleges within a single state university.

When I first came to Stony Brook in 1986, I had little more than the foggiest notion of what a Dean of Continuing Education was supposed to do. I decided to call my counterparts at the three other State University of New York university centers. At the University at Albany my position did not exist, although there was a very large state government training operation, led by the director at Albany's Rockefeller Institute. At the University of Buffalo, the Dean of Millard Fillmore College ran the undergraduate night school. There were also four assistant deans in charge of continuing education for

their respective professional schools. At Binghamton University, continuing education was at that time a component of the School of Education, with the dean wearing two hats. My program at Stony Brook was a horse of a different color—a separate graduate degree granting unit of the university, without a faculty, that also conducted noncredit programs.

In the course of my career I learned that there is nothing surprising about the varieties of continuing education projects, programs, methodologies, and modes of organization. This is not strange if you bear in mind the essential elements common to all programs, namely the linkage of continued learning with achieving greater success and satisfaction in life. With that as its core, continuing education can veer in a multitude of directions, incorporating all sorts of self-improvement offerings, degree and non-degree curricula, different types of learning experiences from the most casual to the most formal and minutely prescribed, and presented to all types of students. This instrumental role and relationship to individual growth is so obvious in our culture, we shouldn't be surprised that more applications keep cropping up as further needs are continuously identified.

One of the glorious features of the continuing education world, from the perspective of practitioners, is the mind-boggling variety of things to do. If you think about it, everyone is a potential student. And without a doubt, everyone you meet has had some contact with the wide-ranging world of adult learning-- dance lessons, computer courses, workplace training, conferences, workshops, you name it. This universal frame of reference makes it hard, if not impossible, to say "no" whenever a new need or idea emerges. In short, if you are not versatile, flexible, and open-minded, this field is not for you.