

An Overture

Learning as a Lifelong Pursuit, Part I

Learning should be a lifelong pursuit. It has benefits for both students and teachers. As teachers, we have a general interest in this topic on behalf of our students and a personal interest as we look at ourselves as students. We also should have an interest in the effects lifelong learning might have on our jobs as teachers. In fact, given the current economic situation, our immediate interest in how lifelong learning might affect our careers may far exceed our interest in its longer term benefits. Therefore, this editorial will consider the benefits of lifelong learning for the careers of teachers. Next month's editorial will address its benefits from the perspective of the learners.

Many schools and colleges are faced with dropping enrollments. Budgets are being cut. Inflation is causing the remaining dollars to purchase even less goods and fewer services. A few teachers will find new jobs in the states that are anticipating increasing high school enrollments over the next decade. According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, these states will be Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, Texas, Alaska, Oregon, and Louisiana. Others will be forced to contend with increasing competition, unless schools and colleges change their views of who their students are.

The proportion of the population in various age categories is changing. According to the Census Bureau, in 1970, 47% of the population of the United States was under 25; by 1990, only 36% will be under 25. Thus, a significant decrease in the proportion of the population in the traditional school age group can be expected. Furthermore, this change in proportion will represent an actual decrease in numbers from about 1.2 billion in 1970 to about 1 billion in 1990. That decrease is equivalent to 10,000 classes of 20 students. Corresponding increases will be seen in the older segments of the population. Between 1970 and 1990, the 25 to 64 age group will have increased from 43% to 52% of the total population—about 300,000 in actual numbers. The 65 and over age group will also increase from 9.7% to 12.4% of the population—over 100,000 in actual numbers.

Though there will be 200,000 fewer young people, there will be 400,000 more adults and elderly people. Many of these people will find it necessary or desirable to change careers one or more times during their adult lives. Others will desire to study various subjects for their own personal satisfaction.

The community colleges are among the few types of educational institutions that have been experiencing increases in enrollments in recent years. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that from 1977 to 1979 university enrollments increased by 1.6%, four-year colleges by 1.7% and two-year institutions by 4.2%. The reasons for the increases in the two-year colleges become apparent when one looks at other variables such as sex of students, full-time versus part-time status, and public versus private control of the institutions. For example, for the period from 1977 to 1979, the enrollment of women in part-time status in public institutions increased by 12.7% and in private institutions by 10.7%. In two-year colleges the increases were 16.5% in public institutions and 32% in private institutions. The disparity of these percentages can be explained in part by observing that in 1977, part-time female students already comprised 32% of the public two-year college enrollment but only 11% of the private two-year college enrollment. In addition, in 1977, 28% of the two-year college enrollment consisted of part-time male students.

The public two-year colleges have taken the lead in providing offerings that appeal to women and part-time students. Any school—public or private, pre-college or college—could open its doors to learners of any age. The opportunity to pursue learning on a part-time basis is beginning to be more widely available in the four-year colleges and universities. The time has come for high schools to implement the idea, too.

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Pursuit of Learning

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High school teachers tell me that many of their problems stem from having to teach students who see no need to be in school and from having to devote time to discipline and assorted non-teaching duties. Adult learners in high school classrooms could add stability to the student population. They could share some of their experiences with the younger students, thereby increasing motivation and decreasing discipline problems. The modest tuition they might pay could ease the strains on school budgets. Alternatively, they might provide the services of a teacher's aide in exchange for the privilege of attending selected classes. Both the quality and the quantity of teaching positions would increase. I think opening high schools to adult learners is an idea whose time has come.

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