

ADULT DEGREE PROGRAMS

Quality Issues, Problem Areas, and Action Steps

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INTRODUCTION



Over the past 20 years, in response to an ever-increasing demand from adult students and employers, there has been tremendous growth in the higher education programs and services tailored to the needs of working adults. In 1968, adults 25 years or older represented only 26 percent of the total undergraduate enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities. Today, they constitute nearly one-half of all persons enrolled at the undergraduate level. The number of institutions with programs designed specifically for adults has grown in an effort to respond to these needs. This increased need is related in large measure to changes in the U.S. and world economies and in the world of work. As we approach the twenty-first century, jobs increasingly require higher skills and individuals increasingly change jobs several times over the course of their lifetimes.

Adult degree programs, including external degree programs and degree completion programs, and programs to assess the college-level learning acquired by adults in non-collegiate settings, constitute some of the most promising innovations in higher education over the past 20 years. The last decade has seen a major acceleration in the initiation of these programs. In recent years, growth in the number of institutions with adult degree programs has been dramatic. In 1983, when ACE published a *Guide to External Degree Programs in the United States*, only 100 programs could be identified. The 1993 revised edition of this guide, entitled *Guide to Alternative and External Degree Programs in the United States*, will include 284 programs. This represents a nearly threefold increase in less than a decade. Twenty years ago, only about 40 institutions had comprehensive programs in place to assess prior learning; today more than 600

institutions report having such programs and more than 1,200 provide at least some opportunities for the assessment of prior learning (*Prior Learning Assessment: Results of a Nationwide Institutional Survey*, CAEL, 1992).

This rapid growth has resulted in increasing concern about maintaining the quality of programs for adults. Preserving quality options for adults is of critical importance because America cannot afford to offer poor quality educational options to individuals who will need further learning the most to enhance their careers, their employability, and their lives.

Since the early 1980s, several patterns in adult program policies and practices have emerged, many of which are believed to pose a threat to quality. Concerns have been provoked by the significant increase in the number of adult degree completion programs, which in recent years have been widely disseminated through "franchising" arrangements. The areas that have evoked concern include practices that violate principles of good practice in prior learning assessment programs, practices in accelerated and external degree programs which run counter to those accepted tenets that are basic to postsecondary education degrees as traditionally defined, and other potential threats to quality that may be inherent in degree completion program models propagated through contract arrangements.

While we agree that there are very significant and real problems in some programs for adults, it is not our contention that these problems occur in most programs. We believe that most practitioners of adult programs are attempting to respond to the very real needs of working adults for quality alternatives and flexibility. While it is important to identify and recognize problem areas, it is equally important, indeed vital, to preserve all appropriate options that increase access for adults.

It is with this dual concern – for assuring quality and also for fostering the development of alternatives that respond to America's need for a nation of lifelong learners – that the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the American Council on Education (ACE) joined together to investigate issues related to the quality of adult programs and to formulate a strategy for addressing them. This paper is a first step in that effort and was prepared as part of a joint CAEL/ACE planning process, funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. The paper outlines essential ingredients of quality in adult learning and prior learning assessment programs, describes problem areas that pose particular threats to the quality of these programs, describes the research methods employed, discusses difficulties encountered in this preliminary attempt to delineate improper practice, reports the findings of research aimed at documenting instances of practices that threaten quality, and recommends steps for an action plan to address these problems.

QUALITY ISSUES AND INDICATORS

Degree Programs and Definitions

Before proceeding to a discussion of the standards of practice and other dimensions that constitute quality in adult degree and prior learning assessment programs, we must first provide some general definition. Most adult degree programs, whether they be degree completion, alternative degree, external degree, or accelerated degree programs, are programs that award a baccalaureate degree.

The academic community has not been successful in developing a generally accepted statement of what constitutes a baccalaureate degree. While agreement on all aspects of degree definition has been elusive, there is widespread agreement that two philosophical concepts are basic to postsecondary education degrees. First, the primary responsibility for developing and awarding degrees rests with an institution's faculty, which acts under policies promulgated by the academic administration and governing board. Second, undergraduate degrees at the baccalaureate level should, by definition, include a general or liberal education component. These core concepts underlie this paper's assertions about what constitutes quality and the analysis and recommendations concerning adult degree programs.

In the broadest sense, an adult degree program is any collegiate degree program with a primarily or exclusively adult clientele. At its simplest, such a degree is a traditional degree made more accessible to adults. Classes may be held at night or on the weekends rather than during the day.

External degree programs are designed so that much or all of the learning required for a degree can be completed through different forms of off-campus instruction. Many such programs offer ways of recognizing, in the form of academic credit, college-level learning gained outside the college environment.

Degree completion programs, most often available at the bachelor's level, are designed to assist students who entered degree programs at an earlier time in their lives,

interrupted their education, and now want to complete their degrees. The degree content, learning strategies, overall structure, and the services offered by such a program typically are designed to aid in the achievement of this goal. Degree completion programs for adults who have completed lower- division requirements frequently are structured in an accelerated format. Prior Teaming assessment often is provided as a part of these programs.

The "contract" adult degree completion program models that have been widely disseminated through "franchising" arrangements in recent years typically consist of 1) "lock-step" coursework - completely standardized curriculum and instructional format - offered in an extremely accelerated and standardized timeframe; 2) credit for prior learning; and 3) two years of prior credit in other postsecondary institutions, or through courses of study in the military, or in corporate training courses. The common prerequisite for admission is 60 semester units of successful college work. The opportunity is usually offered to "make up deficiencies" prior to admission through the award of credit for experiential learning.

Principles of Good Practice for Adult Degree Programs

ACE, often in cooperation with other organizations, has taken a leadership role in efforts to enhance quality in adult degree programs. In 1990, in conjunction with The Alliance: An Association for Alternative Degree Programs for Adults, it developed a statement of the *Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults*. While numerous other documents have been published by ACE and other higher education associations, including the National University Continuing Education Association (NUCEA), the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), and the Coalition of Adult Education Organizations (CAEO) addressing issues of quality from a variety of perspectives, the ACE/Alliance guide the clearest articulation of a set of institutional standards which can be used as indicators of quality. The ACE/Alliance *Principles of Good Practice* can be summarized as follows:

- The program has a mission statement that reflects an educational philosophy, goals, purposes, and general intent and clearly complements the institutional mission.
- Faculty and academic professionals working in alternative and external degree programs share a commitment to serve adult learners and have the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to teach, advise, counsel, and assist such students.

- Clearly articulated programmatic learning outcomes frame the comprehensive curriculum as well as specific learning experiences; in developing these outcomes, the program incorporates general student goals.
- The program is designed to provide diverse learning experiences that respond to the characteristics and contexts of adult learners while meeting established academic standards.
- The assessment of a student's learning is used to determine the achievement of comprehensive and specific learning outcomes.
- The policies, procedures, and practices of the program take into account the conditions and circumstances of adult learners and promote the success of those students.
- The administrative structures and the human, fiscal, and learning resources are sufficient, appropriate, and stable for accomplishing the program mission.
- Evaluation of the program involves faculty, academic professionals, administrators, and students on a continuing, systematic basis to assure quality and standards and to stimulate program improvement.

ACE's Task Force on Educational Credentials' *Recommendations on Credentialing Educational Accomplishment* provide specific guidance on the entities and mechanisms that should hold responsibility for awarding degrees, the kinds of accomplishments that associate and bachelor's degrees should attest to, the need for clear definition of the meaning of credits, credentials, and degrees awarded, and the need for interinstitutional definitions, alternative programs, and sound methods for evaluating institutional and extraintitutional educational accomplishment. CAEO's "A Bill of Rights for the Adult Learner" outlines many dimensions of quality as defined by the adults who seek degree opportunities. Key dimensions for adult students include accessibility, flexibility, and the relevance of learning outcomes to their life and career needs.

Prior Learning Assessment: Standards for Assessing Learning

Prior learning is defined as learning achieved through a number of avenues, such as work experience, volunteering, community involvement, and independent reading, before entering a college assessment program. Prior learning assessment programs are put

in place to evaluate, for the possible award of college credit, learning from life and work experience.

CAEL originally was organized to determine if it was feasible to validly and reliably assess, for college credit, learning that occurs outside the college classroom and away from the college campus. As CAEL evolved into a permanent organization, the commitment to quality as the hallmark of adult programs that include the assessment of prior learning was central to its organizational mission. In 1989, CAEL published a successor to its initial publication outlining the principles of good practice in assessing experiential learning. This publication, authored by Urban Whitaker and entitled *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures*, sets forth "Ten Standards for Quality Assurance in Assessing Learning for Credit:"

Academic Standards

- Credit should be awarded for learning, not for experience.
- College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
- Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
- The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
- Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

Administrative Standards

- Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
- Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.
- Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not on the amount of credit awarded.
- All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for continued professional development.
- Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment arts.

These standards, the assumptions on which they are based, and the principles, procedures, and practices which derive from them were developed after intensive conversation with hundreds of learners, assessors, faculty members, administrators, and

accrediting agency representatives. They do not necessarily represent consensus but are considered best practice.

The Role of Accreditation

Regional accrediting agencies generally address quality at the institutional level; they do not accredit programs. Because their focus is on the institution as a whole, they are not focused on how different programs within a college or university relate to the institutional mission. Since adult degree and prior learning assessment programs are often only a small part of the total institution, they usually receive only a small mention in an accreditation report, not a full review. The regional accreditation institutional review is a process which, by and large, occurs only once in a decade. This relatively infrequent review process focused at the institutional level, combined with the rapid proliferation of programs for adults in recent years, has posed new challenges to accrediting bodies in curtailing bad practice and in identifying significant threats to quality in programs for adults. Several of the accrediting agencies have included adult learning and prior learning assessment experts on their accreditation review teams and have, on occasion, reviewed specific institutional programs or activities through focused visits. The effectiveness of regional voluntary accreditation, however, rests on the extent to which institutions strive for excellence and a process of continuous improvement. Once an institution is accredited, it is extremely difficult to revoke its accreditation. Probation status or revocation of accreditation are rare and usually result from such fundamental disruptions as fiscal insolvency or trustee resignation; rarely do they result from programmatic issues.

For regional accrediting bodies to have a stronger role in assuring the quality of adult programs, they need to consider making focused institutional visits a more regular feature of their review process. Knowledgeable practitioners in the fields of adult learning and prior learning assessment must participate in focused visits to evaluate adult and prior learning assessment programs.

Quality is a multidimensional concept. It goes beyond adherence to standards, although adherence to academic and administrative standards can lead to and indicate quality programs. Quality in programs and services for adults includes being responsive to learner needs for access and flexibility, adhering to academic and administrative standards, conforming to the integrity of the institution's mission, meeting the needs of employers and society for a skilled and learning-oriented workforce, specifying and assessing student outcomes, and striving to continuously improve programs and services. Quality can be assessed according to the degree to which institutional and programmatic practice conforms with or departs from these ideals.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS AND ABUSES

In planning the present effort to use exploratory inter-views to gather information about the potential problems and abuses occurring relative to adult degree and prior learning assessment programs, the CAEL/ACE steering committee identified five major areas of concern:

1. The growth of "franchise programs" and possible threats to quality inherent in this model.
2. Potential quality problems in accelerated and external degree programs.
3. Practices that violate standards of good practice in prior learning assessment programs.
4. Possible patterns of abuse that have developed in adult programs that have been added to the offerings of a "traditional" college or university.
5. Problems in states where religious institutions are exempt from state regulatory oversight or where oversight of this particular group of religious institutions is weak.

Since the group's concerns centered in large part upon the development and rapid growth of "franchise" or contracted adult degree programs, most of the information gathered through the interview process explored this area. In reviewing the information obtained from these exploratory interviews, the CAEL/ACE steering committee determined that the problem areas identified could be better delineated as follows:

1. Issues related to the articulation of and relationship between adult degree programs and the institutional mission.

2. Practices which violate the standards of good practice in prior learning assessment programs, administrative deficiencies in these programs, and insufficient attention to the role of faculty in the assessment process.
3. Administrative deficiencies and inadequate involvement of faculty.
4. Questionable financial management practices and overzealous marketing to consumers.
5. Inappropriate curricular instructional format, and identification and assessment of learning outcomes.
6. Inadequate support services for adult learners.
7. Improper practices at unaccredited institutions that are perceived by the general public as being "typical" of adult degree programs generally.

RESEARCH METHODS

In the national exploratory research, a wide variety of individuals holding a broad array of perspectives on adult degree program quality were interviewed by David Stewart of ACE on behalf of the CAEL/ACE steering committee. In total, 43 individuals were interviewed by telephone in early 1992. In selecting interviewees, particular attention was given to including a cross-section of individuals who represented different regions of the country, types of institutions, perspectives within organizations and institutions, and degrees of expertise in adult learning and the assessment of prior learning. Interviews were conducted with staff members at different levels in six of the regional accrediting commissions and a diverse group of administrators from a number of public, private, two-year, and four-year ACE and CAEL member institutions. Each of these institutions is known for its high-quality options for adults. The "franchise" or contract degree movement was well represented and covered in depth; officials at different levels within six institutions or organizations that offer degree development and implementation services to colleges and universities were interviewed. Also interviewed were individuals from a number of institutions that had contracted with each of these six contracting organizations. Finally, regulatory officials in states that exempt certain types of unaccredited religious institutions from state oversight also were interviewed to determine their perceptions of abuses (if any).

This preliminary effort represents the first broad attempt to directly address a number of sensitive issues and potential abuses within the broad area of adult programs. This exploratory and anonymous interview process provoked strong reactions from a number of interviewees. Most interviewees answered pointed and sensitive questions with remarkable candor. Some, however, were guarded and anxious in their responses.

A more narrowly focused in-depth telephone survey of all postsecondary institutions in the state of Indiana, which employed a different methodology, was also conducted in early 1992 to look at specific practices within and across adult programs. The survey was conducted as part of a larger effort by CAEL in Indiana to survey the

capacity of Indiana's postsecondary community to serve the adult workforce. The survey found that 60 percent of Indiana's 67 postsecondary institutions provide programs and services for adult learners. Some of the specific information from this survey, conducted by Joan Knapp on behalf of CAEL, has been included at points in this paper to complement, clarify, and/or reinforce the broader-based national exploratory research.

In addition, as part of the activities of the planning process and preparation of this paper, CAEL and ACE gathered information, formally and informally, from a variety of additional sources, including additional representatives of accrediting bodies, members of accrediting review teams, adult learning practitioners, and a variety of written sources, some of which are included in the attached bibliography.

Since the discussion of problem areas that follows is based primarily on exploratory inter-views that were focused to a large extent on contract adult degree completion programs, it would be inappropriate to claim that these results are broadly applicable to all adult degree programs. Many of the problems identified here may be only potential areas of concern in other adult degree programs. More structured research across a broad national sample of adult programs is required to draw conclusions that can be extrapolated to all adult degree programs. Through the research conducted as a part of this process, we found that it was more difficult to obtain information about the kinds of threats to quality we were examining because the abuses or improper practices themselves are subtle, not flagrant like those perpetrated by "degree mills" which literally "sell" degrees or award degrees that do not meet minimum standards of acceptability. While abuse may often be inferred through a process that asks directly about practice, only by looking in depth at actual practices, comparing what institutions say they do with what they actually do, can both the nature, and extent of bad practice and abuse be clearly delineated. This is largely the result of the fact that improper practice often is not so much a matter of what is done or not done but of how something is done. A close examination of practice, similar to the kind of in depth analysis sometimes undertaken by accrediting teams, would be required to really get at these issues. What has been learned through this research, however, does provide information on which problems to look for and on which practices need to be explored in depth.

DOCUMENTATION OF PROBLEM AREAS

A clear majority of concerns and problems identified in this study, while potential areas of concern for all adult degree programs, seem to be more prevalent within and more frequently identified with contract degree completion programs implemented at colleges and universities via a "franchising" arrangement with a contracting entity. The spread of adult degree completion programs via this mechanism has been a recent national development in higher education. Few institutions would choose to use a word as commercial as "franchising" to describe their activity; however, franchising - the right to develop, market, and deliver a product or service to a particular locality - is the concept being applied. The programs themselves take several forms.

The map included as an Appendix to this paper (see CAEL website www.cael.org) provides the reader with some idea of the dispersion of these programs, most of which occurred within the five-year period from 1985 to 1990. At least 75 colleges and universities have acquired adult degree completion programs by contract in the last ten years, and the number is growing rapidly. This rapid proliferation is a result, in part, of the generative nature of the process. Some of the institutions that are currently selling programs to other institutions originally purchased the program which they are selling via a contract with another institution. Now they themselves have become contractors. In some cases, up to three generations of such arrangements can be identified.

At least six institutions and consulting firms are currently engaged in providing contract services. Ten of the institutions which implemented adult degree completion programs in concert with a single contractor recently formed a consortium. Collectively, the adult degree programs at these ten institutions enroll 17,000 adult learners annually in 16 states and in Puerto Rico. Nine of the ten programs are less than ten years old, and six have been in place for less than five years.

The growth in the number of adult degree completion programs is especially intense among small private colleges having a religious orientation. Several contractors target these institutions in their marketing efforts. More than one-third of the members of one coalition of religious institutions currently are operating degree completion program, and many more are seriously exploring the option. All of the programs at institutions in this coalition were instituted in the last ten years, and more than half have been instituted within the last five years. All of these institutions initiated programs with some external assistance, most under a contract agreement with one of the four oldest contracting entities.

Among the concerns most strongly expressed by many interviewees, including accreditors, adult educators, and administrators, was the speed of the growth and proliferation of these programs. This rapid growth is seen as outpacing existing mechanisms, such as institutional accreditation, for encouraging and evaluating quality control. A representative of one regional accrediting body stated that the accrediting body is actively discouraging its member institutions from entering into contract arrangements to develop adult degree programs. Reactions elsewhere in the accrediting community ranged from fairly strong opposition to cautious acceptance. With their emphasis on institutional rather than programmatic review, regional accrediting agencies are not well equipped to evaluate contracted degree programs in depth.

Some contractors cited their own previous shortcuts in implementing degree programs. Prominent among these was the failure to insist upon the involvement of institutional faculties. Many individuals reported concern about programs that were implemented at institutions that were not prepared to implement adult degree programs at an acceptable level of quality. Some institutions at which programs were implemented did not have the resources - financial, faculty, or administrative - to implement the programs for which they had contracted. Ultimately, these problems become those of the contracting institution, the students who obtain degrees there, the employers who pay for these degrees or hire graduates from these programs, and the adult learning movement generally (when its integrity is called into question).

Another concern is the potential for abuse inherent in the franchise model. If a contractor's fee is based upon student enrollment, as it frequently is, there is an incentive for programs to place an inordinate programmatic emphasis on marketing and recruiting students. At some institutions, students are enrolled without going through the institution's regular admissions process. At one institution, the contractor provided recruiting services, and the contractor's agents, who worked on commission, were reported to have "packed the classroom" with unqualified students. These students had not been required to meet institutional admissions standards and were not necessarily prepared to succeed in the program.

It would be inaccurate and unfair, however, to state that because abuses have been documented and because there is a great deal of potential for abuse inherent in the

contract program model, all contract adult degree completion programs are poorly run. There is great variability in practice across institutions in the way these programs are implemented, as there is variability in the degree of responsibility for quality which the seller organization takes and the degree of integrity with which the institution purchasing the program implements it. Of concern here is the lack of clarity about the locus for quality control. An institution cannot abrogate this responsibility when it acquires a program developed by another institution, but neither can the contracting entity be absolved from maintaining a corollary concern for quality controls. To date, these issues have not been adequately addressed in some contract arrangements.

This research documents the extent of the growth of this practice, the kinds of abuses that have occurred, and the extent of the potential for abuse. The research thereby confirms the need for continued attention to this practice. The thorough documentation of the true extent of improper practice will require extensive and intensive institutionally based research. Since so many of the problems and concerns noted in the exploratory research arose within these contract degree completion programs, it will be important for future research to determine whether questions concerning quality are inherent in the major program models that are being sold to and implemented at colleges across the country.

Issues Related to Program and Institutional Mission

The first principle of good practice for alternative and external degree program for adults, as formulated in ACE/Alliance's *Principles of Good Practice*, states that a program have an official mission statement that describes the educational philosophy, goals, purposes, and general intent of the program and that *clearly complements the institutional mission*. Program mission statements provide a valuable framework for defining program quality evaluation procedures and for articulating the relationship between program and institutional goals and commitment.

In the interviews conducted in the preparation of this paper, a number of interviewees expressed concern about the lack of an explicit and complementary relationship between the mission of the adult degree program and the overall mission of the institution. This issue was quite frequently mentioned in relation to contract programs. Such adult degree programs often were seen by interviewees to be grafted onto an institution rather than to be developed from within an institution.

One example of this concern cited by an interviewee was that of a small private college whose institutional mission focused on providing a strong liberal arts education to a resident undergraduate student body. This institution recently instituted an adult degree program in business administration that was acquired through a contract arrangement

with another institution. The components of this program, its objectives, educational philosophy, and goals differ significantly from those articulated in the institution's mission statement. New adult programs are often seen to be neither congruent with nor to extend from the institutional mission.

Program mission statements should complement the institutional mission and articulate the relationship between program and institutional goals. The role of adult programs within the institution may be more readily understood, and support from other divisions, departments, and offices may be more readily obtained, if there exists an adult program mission that clearly articulates the relationship between program and institutional goals and commitment of the program. Programs with official missions function more effectively within their institutions and, as a result, are better able to meet the needs of their students.

Problems in Prior Learning Assessment Program Practice and Administration

With the recent growth in the number of adults enrolling in college has come the corollary implementation of prior learning assessment programs to respond to their need to have their prior learning recognized. In the last 20 years, over 1,200 institutions have implemented some form of prior learning assessment. Most of these institutions have done so in the last ten years. Many interviewees reported their perceptions and knowledge of numerous problems in the assessment of prior learning at a number of institutions. These problems fell into three major areas: 1) practices that violate the standards of good practice, 2) administrative deficiencies, and 3) problems stemming from insufficient attention to the role of faculty within the assessment process. Interviewees reported the following problems:

- Awarding, in name or in fact, credit for "life experience."
It is not experience but prior learning that is identified and documented in a high-quality program. To be appropriate for the award of credit, this learning must be at the college level and must be relevant to the degree program in which an individual is enrolled. Pre-collegiate remedial courses are not applicable toward a traditional undergraduate degree at well-run institutions, and neither should comparable learning be applied toward a degree in an alternative program for adults. Often, institutions that do, in fact, assess and award credit for prior learning continue to state in their promotional materials that they award credit for "life experience."

- Awarding credit that is not appropriately matched to an institution's curricula and course offerings.

Credit that is not relevant within the curriculum of an adult degree program of study should not be awarded and applied to the major requirement – even if it is impressive in another context. Distinctions need to be made between credit that is applied toward a particular degree and credit that meets elective requirements and can therefore be applied toward graduation.

Unbalanced credit awards – credit awarded only in the major or *only* in general education – are inappropriate, as are the awards of large blocks of unidentified credit, e.g., a 20-credit award in "business."

- Stretching credit awards to assure admission in degree completion programs that require enrolling students to have already "earned" a minimum number of credits. This practice is sometimes referred to as "drop-in" credit.

Automatic credit that can be part of the minimum credit required for admission to a degree completion program is often not subject to faculty review.

- Awarding credit for military or employment training and education programs that appear in the American Council on Education's *Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services* (ACE/Military) or in the American Council on Education's *National Guide to Educational Creditor Training Programs* (ACE/PONSI) without adhering to the recommendations on the number of credits and credit level (lower or upper division) provided in these guides.

- The awarding of credit for experiential learning on a formula basis rather than based upon an assessment of the learning, e.g., awarding one credit for every two credits earned at an unaccredited institution.

Whatever the mechanism - whether the formula is based upon classroom hours or "seat time," a percentage of credit formerly awarded by another institution, e.g., a foreign institution, credit awarded on the basis of an individual's status as an "adult" over 25, or any other "Automatic" conversion mechanism – the use of formulas to award specific credit is inappropriate.

- Awarding credit based upon assessment by unqualified staff or inappropriate faculty. Assessment by staff, especially those involved in recruiting and marketing for a degree completion program, is a serious problem. Assessment conducted by faculty without expertise in the subject area being evaluated also is inappropriate.

The lack of training and ongoing professional development of faculty and administrators in the assessment of prior learning – its assumptions, principles,

procedures, and standards – was cited as another concern by several interviewees. CAEL's 1991 survey of prior learning assessment policies and practices found that, for the most part, institutions and practitioners are aware of the need for training and development. Nearly 400 institutions responding to the survey indicated that they need assistance in prior learning assessment program development and the training and development of individuals who assess prior learning and make recommendations about credit awards. However, many of these institutions are either unwilling or unable to locate resources to support needed training in these areas.

Administrative Deficiencies and Inadequate Involvement

Issues relating to adult degree program administration and faculty constituted another major area of concern for many of those interviewed. In adult degree programs, as in their traditional counterparts, faculty are central to academic quality. Comments and instances raising concern about this subject fall into four basic areas: 1) the administrative oversight, structure, and staffing of adult programs, 2) the involvement of faculty in program development, 3) the selection, recruitment, development, and training of adult program faculty, and 4) the use/overuse of adjunct faculty. The real problem is not in the use or overuse of adjunct faculty itself but in the lack of institutional and programmatic criteria and mechanisms for selecting, evaluating, orientation, training, developing, and overseeing adjunct faculty at some institutions and in some programs.

Administration. An adult degree program, as an academic program, should be administered through academic administrative structures. However, in some instances, adult programs are administered from non-academic offices. In very few cases, colleges have allowed contracting agencies not only to assist in program start-up, but also to administer the program on an ongoing basis. In such cases, the institutions are not exercising their responsibility for maintaining administrative and academic quality. Rather, they are lending their name in return for a portion of the generated student fees.

Other problems arise when adult programs are not well integrated into all parts of the institution - academic and administrative. Few, if any, administrative entities at a traditional institution can forego the need to adjust to the presence of adult students, often in ever increasing numbers. Interviewees reported instances of confusion, dissension, and resentment within institutions when entities as diverse as admissions offices, registrar's offices, development offices, and alumni relations offices were not part of planning and ongoing coordination activities related to an adult degree program. These internal problems inevitably affect consumers.

Another issue raised by a number of interviewees that falls within the area of administrative concerns is that of over-extension. Over-extension – offering adult degree programs at too many sites – can make appropriate oversight impossible. Instances of this problem were mentioned by regional accrediting agency representatives as being of particular concern to them. Over-extension can occur when programs are offered overseas, in remote military bases, or at multiple sites within a single locality. Extension sites themselves (or the concept that directs their development) are not in themselves the problem. However, the difficulties that an under-resourced institution may encounter in deploying resources to provide adequate academic and administrative oversight to multiple, and often remote, locations can pose significant threats to the quality of the instruction and services provided at these locations.

Faculty. Faculty are the standard bearers of academic excellence; thus, procedures that require faculty involvement in program development are essential for gauging and responding to the needs of adult learners. An adult degree program, while it will necessarily differ significantly from other degree programs at an institution, should be subject to standards established and maintained by the faculty. Most of the concerns expressed about faculty involvement cited instances in which faculty were only minimally involved in the development and/or acquisition and implementation of an adult degree program. All of the interviewees who raised this concern referred to situations in which an institution's president or board contracted with an outside organization to adopt a "ready-made" adult degree program without significant consultation with the institution's faculty. Involving faculty and achieving faculty acceptance can be a long and arduous process. From the perspective of adult degree program administrators, who reported that initial faculty suspicion and/or opposition to an adult degree program was inevitable, taking the initial time to involve faculty and overcome this opposition can often be in conflict with the stated administrative goal to get the program up and running.

At least one contractor of adult degree programs seems to explicitly discourage faculty involvement in initial discussion and decision making. A representative of this organization stated during the interview that "if the faculty vote on it, it's going to be negative" in defense of this practice. He went on to remark that "We support the president and the administrators."

Two institutions that contracted with an outside entity to bring in an adult degree program reported handling faculty opposition very differently with differing results. At one institution, after the administration and trustee had signed the contract, the faculty reacted very negatively. After belated, intensive, and extensive consultation with the faculty, the faculty senate ultimately endorsed the program, and it was launched with faculty support and involvement. At another institution, a contracted adult degree program was instituted despite faculty opposition. No attempt was made to convince or involve faculty. While the new program now enrolls twice as many students as the traditional program and its income may well have enabled the institution to survive,

faculty uneasiness with the program continues, and regular (as opposed to adjunct) faculty involvement in the program remains limited.

Serious problems are perhaps most common in situations where an institution purchases a "prepackaged" program. However, this is the mechanism through which increasing numbers of institutions are implementing adult degree programs. This rapid growth makes this an important area of concern.

A key principle for adult degree programs is that the faculty and academic professionals working in these programs share a commitment to serve adult learners and have the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to teach, advise, counsel, and assist such students. Concerns regarding diversity of faculty, preparation of faculty, and training and development of faculty, include:

- In some programs, a small number of faculty teach all courses, greatly limiting program flexibility.
- In others, campus-based faculty who lack knowledge about adult needs, adult development, and adult learning styles provide the majority of instruction within the adult degree program.
- Concern was expressed by some interviewees about the nature of the faculty training provided by some providers of contract degree programs. They were concerned about the quality and content of the training provided, which had a market-oriented rather than academic-quality focus, and the qualifications of those who provided much of the training. It was reported that instructional evaluation, conducted by these same representatives of the contractor, was also inadequate and inappropriate to the academic degree program.
- The exclusive use of narrowly focused market-driven criteria (student evaluations of instructors) for the evaluation of instructors led, at one institution, to the significant lowering of requirements for research and writing by students in the adult degree program. Instructors who were not rated highly by students because of their student research and writing requirements were asked to reduce their student workload requirements or discontinue teaching in the program.

A frequently cited concern in the national research interviews was the use of adjunct faculty for the provision of instruction in adult degree programs. The real problem is not in the use of adjunct faculty, but in the lack of institutional and programmatic criteria and mechanisms for selecting, orienting, training, developing, overseeing, and evaluating adjunct faculty. Problems in selection include the fact that practical experience of adjunct faculty is sometimes viewed as a substitute for, rather than a supplement to, appropriate

academic credentials and theoretical knowledge. There are issues related to the resources, compensation, training, and services provided to adjunct faculty. These are rarely equal to those provided to permanent faculty.

One adult degree program contractor representative cited his organization's effort to see that only adjunct faculty are used in the adult degree program. This raises not only instructional quality issues, but also questions about whether such a program is truly integrated into the institution's academic and administrative structures, its mission, and its governance structure.

There is widespread agreement that both permanent and adjunct faculty, all of them well trained in work with adult students, are required for providing a quality program. There is also common agreement on the needs for integrating adjunct instructional staff with permanent instructional staff and for common measures for the assessment of quality. Several accrediting bodies reported that they closely examining programs that appear to overemphasize the use of adjunct instructional staff. Again, use/overuse itself is not the problem. It is the degree to which adjunct faculty are integrated in the institution that makes the difference. Several prominent adult programs use adjunct faculty exclusively by design. Faculty are selected who bring a mix of theoretical knowledge and practical experience to their teaching, as well as on the basis of their experience in working with adults. Appropriate support, training, oversight, and evaluation are provided.

An example of a situation that led to concern in this area was an institution with an off-campus adult degree program staffed entirely by contract personnel. The program goals and structure were focused primarily upon generating income for the institution. A single instructor was teaching eight courses. With little or no involvement of the institution's permanent faculty, the program was seen to be operating in an academic vacuum. Some accrediting bodies reported that they have taken, are taking, or are considering action to ensure substantive full-time faculty involvement in the development and operation of adult degree programs.

Questionable Financial Practices and Overzealous Marketing

A large number of interviewees discussed issues and concerns about the revenue that can be generated by adult degree programs and the real and potential problems and abuses that can result. A soundly based adult degree program is driven first by the needs of the students served, not by an institution's need for funds. This does not mean that either assertive marketing or substantial fee generation are in and of themselves a problem.

According to one knowledgeable interviewee, if effectively marketed, adult degree programs can be highly profitable, generating up to as much as 40 percent of an

institution's gross revenues. One adult degree program director reported that his institution's contracted program was in the black within the first year, and in the current year, with enrollment at 150 students, it will generate about \$1 million in fees. Related program expenses are about \$450,000. For a small college that had been experiencing severe financial problems, a "profit" of \$550,000 is a substantial source of support for the traditional program. Another institution that had watched enrollment in its traditional program drop from 500 to less than 200 found that adding an adult degree program produced an infusion of new adult enrollments nearly equaling the traditional program enrollment. The college was thereby given a "new lease on life." Another institution that had an almost totally on-campus enrollment less than a decade ago now enrolls nearly 3,000 adults at a number of remote locations; less than 1,500 students are enrolled in campus-based programs.

Many concerns centered around potential threats to program quality arising out of institutional reliance on adult degree programs to generate revenue to cover significant revenue shortfalls in their traditional programs. A number of instances of this were cited by interviewee who believed that it was at least difficult, if not impossible, to develop and maintain an adult degree program at an acceptable level of quality within an environment that relied on the program to function as an institutional "cash cow." Institutional reliance on revenue from adult programs also can lead (and has led) to pressure upon adult program staff to spend a disproportionate amount of their time and effort on program marketing to recruit students, thereby leaving them with less time to actually administer the program.

Concern was expressed about the fee-sharing arrangements between contractors and institutions purchasing contract degree programs. Two accrediting bodies reported that they had examined this issue and had found that such arrangements were not openly shared within the contracting institutions. One accrediting official stated that he had found fee-division arrangements and fee-management practices that greatly favored the contractor - to a degree that was not always adequately understood by the contacting institution.

Quality concerns are elevated and abuses tend to be more common in situations where financial arrangements between the contractor and the institution provide an incentive for overzealous marketing of the program. These situations develop most often when the contractor is paid a percentage of the enrollment fee without a ceiling on the total amount to be paid. Also, in contracted situations, interviewees reported concerns about instances in which representatives of the contractor organization were actively involved in student recruiting.

Finally, several references were made to inappropriate advertising, including the advertisement of prior learning assessment. These practices seem to be most common in accelerated degree programs. Programs were cited that improperly promised credit as "likely" to be offered to all adult students. Advertisements that feature unqualified

phrases such as "experiential credit available," "one year of academic study," "shortened courses," or "degree in one year - one night a week" are inappropriate. Even in the absence of actual deficiencies in practice in such programs, advertising of this kind is misleading, improper, and raises questions about program quality and integrity.

Learning Outcomes, Curriculum Content, and Instructional Format

The content of an adult degree program may differ in some respects from comparable degrees offered in the traditional program, but it should meet the basic generally understood criteria for postsecondary degrees in the United States. The instructional format may differ significantly since it should take into account adult life situations and learning styles.

The problems reported in the areas of curriculum and instruction cluster in three areas: 1) identification of learning outcomes, 2) curriculum content, and 3) format of instruction.

Learning Outcomes. A key principle of good practice for all degree programs for adults is that clearly articulated programmatic learning outcomes should frame the comprehensive curriculum, as well as specific learning experiences. Formally adopted learning outcomes provide adult students with greater opportunities for taking responsibility for their own learning.

The success of an accelerated program in particular hinges upon the concept of learning outcomes, and problems were noted most frequently in relation to such programs. Several assumptions underlie the rationale for an accelerated format for adults engaged in upper-division work. The most basic of these is that adult students bring a reservoir of knowledge, skills, and experiences to the learning situation that can be tapped for new learning. Adult students are generally purposeful and motivated and, being employed, can use the workplace as a "laboratory" for many degree-related assignments. It is important to ask whether these are valid assumptions to make about all employed adults. Do they apply only to some adult students, for example, to managers at a certain level with a certain amount of job experience? If so, program advertising and admissions materials and procedures should make these criteria explicit.

If an institution's faculty can agree upon what learning outcomes ought to result from a degree program, then the time-frame required to complete the requirements is less important. This does not mean that time on task is never relevant in relation to learning outcomes. Problems arise in accelerated adult degree programs when programs are not outcome based or when outcomes are not assessed using appropriate academic procedures and protocols for evaluating learning.

The survey of adult programs in Indiana, for example, found that 56 percent of adult degree programs used learning outcomes, objectives, or competency-based goals on a systematic basis. Learning outcomes ranged from course objectives listed in syllabi to detailed competency-based goals. Learning outcomes are important not only for enhancing the development of students as Autonomous learners and for modification of degree program format for adults, but they also are critical to the conduct of adequate program evaluation procedures.

Curriculum Content. The curriculum for any well-designed adult degree program should have coherence and focus and, 'in concert with a generally accepted tenet of associate and baccalaureate degrees in the United States, should include an appropriate general education component. In high-quality adult programs, faculty ensure that this component is comparable to that in a traditional program.

The most frequently noted concerns in the area of curriculum content focused on the general education component. While several adult program directors noted that general education requirements were generally less extensive than comparable requirements for other degree program at their institutions, only some instances clearly present cause for concern. In one case, general education requirements were seen to be less important because occupational and professional curriculum areas were of interest to adult students. In another, requirements were fewer because it was "assumed" that adults have prior knowledge. Assumption of prior knowledge as a basis for waiving or reducing requirements is inappropriate unless such assumptions are validated through an assessment process.

Another area of concern surrounded contract degree programs, usually awarding degrees in majors such as human resources management or business administration, which were instituted at small liberal arts colleges that did not previously award a degree in that major field. Interviewees also cited curriculum problems in contract degree programs that arose when the curriculum had been developed at an institution with a strong sectarian focus that infused the entire curriculum. Problems arose when faculty, who did not share this focus, were expected to teach it at the institutions implementing this curriculum.

Instructional Format. An important aspect of quality for any adult learning program is flexibility. Possible problems were noted in adult programs that had completely standardized the curriculum, the format for instruction, and the time for program completion.

One common design for an adult degree program calls for students to begin their studies in a group or cohort of 12-25 persons. The group stays together for the entire degree program. ALL members of the group are expected to complete the same curriculum at the same time in a kind of "lock-step" formation. From one point of view, this approach has an advantage - that of simplicity. The degree requirements are standardized, along with the format for instruction and the time for completion. Students

are motivated in knowing that if they apply themselves, they will acquire the degree at the end of a fixed, stated period. The program can be relatively inexpensive and administratively manageable.

However, optimal learning requires options, flexibility, and the participation of the student in defining learning goals. A "lock-step" approach by definition fails to meet these criteria for quality. Without care and attention to allow for individual differences and learning needs, the cohort approach can lack the flexibility needed by most adults. These issues formed the basis of the concerns voiced by interviewees.

Inadequate Support Services for Adults

The provision of adequate, appropriate, and available services that promote the success of adult students is key to a high-quality adult program. In citing their perceptions of problem areas or specific instances they identified as lacking quality, interviewees cited deficiencies in a variety of services and resources for adults at some institutions. These included:

- Failure to provide adult students with appropriate orientation services.
- Insufficient access to library and academic resources. This was noted as a problem most frequently when students were enrolled **in** programs at remote sites. This is a key area in which regional accrediting agencies have taken an assertive stance in the past decade.
- Lack of available and appropriate advising services. Key to quality is the provision for adults of advising by professionals who have the attitudes, knowledge, and skills to meet their needs.
- Inadequate availability of financial aid. The survey of Indiana institutions, for example, found that while adults could apply for the same forms of federal and state aid and institutional support as younger students, they were not eligible for these forms of assistance because of their part-time status.
- Inadequate attention to student retention and systematic maintenance and monitoring of student participation and achievement records.

Improper Practice at Unaccredited Institutions

In the United States, the first lines of defense in protecting academic integrity are state laws governing the Authorization of colleges and universities. Such laws are not a substitute for accreditation, but should assure that at least minimal standards are applied before an organization is allowed to award degrees at the Postsecondary level. A serious threat to adult degree programs is represented by unaccredited institutions that function inadequately under weak state laws governing the Authorization of colleges and universities. A corollary problem is presented in states where unaccredited institutions with a "religious mission" are permitted to operate under laws that exempt religious Institutions from state oversight.

Gross deficiencies have been observed and reported in adult degree programs offered by many such institutions located in states having inadequate or unevenly enforced laws governing institutional authorization. However, neither the general public nor the individual adult learner can necessarily make the requisite distinctions between accredited and unaccredited programs. Such identification is made all the more difficult since many diploma mills are themselves accredited by "accreditation mills" that are not recognized by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) or the U.S. Department of Education. ALL too often in this environment, the offenses of unaccredited diploma mills are generalized to academic institutions that offer legitimate high-quality alternative degree options for adults.

Actions required to counter these practices can be taken by states in their regulatory activities but should also include the development of consumer awareness about what quality means and how to know it when they see it.

NEXT STEPS

Based on the research and information-gathering activities undertaken in the preparation of this paper, the CAEL/ACE steering committee concluded that several areas in particular require priority attention. These are the development and growth of contract adult degree completion programs and the arrangements and practices that have been associated with this model of adult degree program initiation, the role of faculty in adult degree program development and implementation, and in the assessment of prior learning, prior learning assessment program practices, the articulation and assessment of learning outcomes, and the development of more focused program evaluation procedures. Specifically, further in-depth research focusing on contract adult degree completion models and practices clearly is needed. Also needed are clear recommendations for regional accrediting associations, institutions with degree completion programs, and institutions that are considering developing and/or acquiring adult degree completion programs.

One of the major outcomes of the research, information gathering, and sharing and planning activities involved in the preparation of this paper is the conclusion of the CAEL/ACE steering committee that the identification and targeting of abuse is not likely to be the most effective strategy for addressing problems of quality in adult programs. Rather, a strategy that builds consumer awareness of quality issues, promotes models of excellence, and fosters a climate of continuous improvement is more likely to succeed in producing a climate within which abuses are less likely to flourish.

This conclusion stems from our experience both in actually interviewing individuals at education institutions and in our discussions with institutions about this initiative. We often found that institutions feared that if they admitted their failure to adhere strictly to quality standards, they would be "targeted" in our subsequent quality assurance efforts. In addition, the subtlety of the abuses that are occurring makes a strategy reliant in large

part upon identifying abuse impractical. If the intent of an institution is to take shortcuts, it is quite easy to conform to the letter of the standards of quality while violating the spirit of such standards. We therefore believe that strategies aimed at building a climate leading to continuous improvement in the quality of adult degree and prior learning assessment programs, one which preserves flexible and innovative options for adults, is most appropriate.


Several interrelated activities would be required to achieve the objectives of a broad initiative to achieve this goal:

1. *To improve and expand existing publications and instruments that help institutions and accreditors in their quest for quality for adult degree programs.* Experience has shown that CAEL's *Assessing Learning: Policies, Principles and Procedures* publication, ACE/Alliance's *Principles of Good Practices for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults*, ACE's *Focus on Adults: A Self-Study Guide for Postsecondary Education Institutions*, and related documents have gained acceptance within the higher education community and provide broad guidelines for quality in adult degree programming. These publications and instruments need further refinement, based on relevant research, in light of rapidly changing and expanding practice. Once published, they need to be in the hands of accrediting bodies, accrediting teams, and institutions of higher learning.
2. *To develop and disseminate relevant research findings to institutions, accrediting bodies, higher education associations, employers, labor organizations, and government.* Remedying the dearth of research on quality issues in adult learning and prior learning assessment available to institutions, practitioners, administrators, and consumers is both an immediate and long-term need. Practice-oriented research is needed to further identify the components of quality and areas in need of greater attention and improvement. Research is also needed on consumer definitions of quality and the outcomes achieved by adults in programs designed specifically for them. Assessments of the capacity and responsiveness of entire educational systems, not just individual programs and institutions, is needed if we are to adequately address the development of a high-quality system able to develop a high-quality workforce.
3. *To develop awareness within higher education of the importance of training program administrators in how to develop and maintain high-quality adult degree and prior learning assessment programs.* Program administrators are essential to the implementation and continuance of high-quality adult programs because they have direct responsibility for advancing these programs. New materials and strategies to aid in the selection, training, and ongoing professional development

of administrators of adult degree and prior learning assessment programs need to be developed.

4. *To educate consumers (including adult learners, employers, labor unions, and government agencies) about what quality means and how to know it when they see it.* CAEL and ACE both receive many inquiries from would-be enrollees in adult degree programs, as well as from state regulatory agencies and accrediting bodies that have received consumer complaints or questions. In addition, both organizations work closely with private and public policy makers. Our experience with these "consumers" of adult education programs and services has convinced us that a systematic effort at educational outreach is imperative, both to increase access to and usage of these educational services, and to build a cross- sector foundation for understanding the importance and necessity of quality.

CONCLUSION

ur nation's ability to maintain a competitive advantage in a global economy, while continuing to preserve and enhance the American standard of living, will increasingly depend upon our capacity to promote opportunities for lifelong learning. The American workforce of the twenty-first century will need to have access to a diverse range of learning opportunities throughout their careers in order to develop and maintain the high skill levels that jobs of the near future will require. In the coming years, employers and adult learners, more than ever before, will look to institutions of higher education for more options and more flexible opportunities for learning and Credentialing. Accordingly, this will put greater pressure upon higher education to respond with new and innovative solutions. Such an increase in the development and availability of options for adults presents an exciting prospect; at the same time, however, this phenomenon will only increase the importance of initiating an effort to assure that these new programs and services are of the highest quality. To allow the numbers of programs and services geared to adult students to continue to proliferate without simultaneously developing the means to ensure that these are quality options will squander the precious resources – in time and money – of individuals, employers, states, and the nation, and will fail to achieve the learning objectives that are so important to our collective future.

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