



## **The Role of Continuing Education in An Era of Academic Accountability**

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**C**ontemporary institutions of higher education find themselves at a make-or-break point in their viability as social entities. In order to survive and certainly to thrive, each college and university must establish a viable relationship between the institution and the citizenry it serves; today, in many instances, these bonds are in jeopardy. Higher education is effective in creating a vital relationship with its constituents when citizens understand and value the institution's productivity and its tripartite mission of teaching, research, and service. If successful in creating this relationship, colleges and universities are held in high esteem by the average citizen. When the relationship between the institution and its constituents erodes, the reputation of higher education in the minds of community members diminishes. Eventually, this situation becomes critical, and today the standing of colleges and universities is at a low ebb.

What has happened over the years to undermine this trust can be explained by the evolution of institutions of higher education over the last several generations. This article provides perspective on the subtle changes occurring during the last half century, describes the "how" and "why" of the current situation, and proposes a scenario of change which draws upon the inherent strengths of colleges and universities. It addresses how institutions of higher education must define and respond to new external factors critical to their future success and the critical role that continuing education is poised to play in this evolution.

### **Historical Perspective**

Over the past fifty years, institutions of higher education in the United States have changed markedly. After the advent of manned space flight — begun in 1961 by the then-Soviet Union's first *sputnik*, a surge in scientific research emerged that was based on extensive funding of higher education by the federal government. Research in the sciences and in other disciplines exploded;

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consequently, academic publications grew in number. The states followed suit and provided further opportunities for individuals to pursue careers in academia. An additional factor driving the explosive growth of academia was the Vietnam War because many young men continued their studies at the graduate level as an option to avoid the draft. These factors threw academia into an unexpected environment flush with funding and with a pool of research talent.

College campuses in the 1940s and 1950s were generally located in small towns, and the student body was composed of young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one who were being sent to college for the purpose of fostering their maturation as well as their acquisition of an education or vocation. The public expected faculty to be fine teachers, role models, and scholars, but not necessarily to publish scholarly work in one's discipline. However, those seeking the award of tenure in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s often possessed a track record of academic publications.

Over the decades, the organizational dynamics in higher education changed; areas addressed by faculty research and teaching narrowed, while the nature of the student body became broader and more diverse. Whereas disciplines narrowed and specialization began to be the benchmark of academic departments, requirements for mastery of a body of knowledge common to all students decreased. Moreover, the relative availability in funding permitted the number of graduate programs to grow and also allowed colleges to open their doors to the nontraditional student. The academic expert in the profession of continuing education emerged to address the educational needs of these students in the credit and noncredit arena. Moreover, universities in urban settings began to flourish because of the expanding needs for knowledge in cities.

During this time the internal dynamics of higher education shifted at many colleges and universities from a once-primary mission of creating an educated society and productive workforce to one of discovering and creating knowledge. Because of the many substantive discoveries made by faculty, higher education's contributions to the health and welfare of the public have been significant. As society reaped benefits from the advances in scientific and other research and from the resulting improvements in health and well being, its needs for knowledge continued to expand. Nonetheless, in many universities, the latter function outweighed the former in commitment. Effective teaching, though incorporated in institutional guidelines for the award of tenure, was not a pivotal factor in actually receiving tenure.

This dichotomy between research and teaching is revealed in an anecdotal, but accurate description of views held by a senior administrator at a prominent research institution who believed that

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research — in particular, the creation of new knowledge — comprised the core of the institution. In his view, other aspects of the triumvirate of research, teaching, and service, notably undergraduate education, were not integral to the institution's mission but were embodied in the term "service," which he used repeatedly to describe all facets of instruction. Clearly the standing of undergraduate teaching was a lowly one, and university activities involving continuing education and public service found themselves enjoying an even lower rank. This view, held by a bright and committed academic, gives one pause. Many scholars would find his perspective to be parochial, a misrepresentation of the university's purpose. The chasm between professional perspectives within the academy illustrates the incompatible duality of purpose which universities have developed over the last several decades.

The underlying conflict between the emphases on research and on teaching became evident when decisions over the allocation of funds were made. As long as financial resources given to higher education were on the rise, the budgetary needs of research and teaching — and, to a lesser degree, of service — were met. However, in the 1980s and 1990s funding sources at many institutions began to diminish at the state and national level. Institutions of higher education faced a shrinkage in funds and, subsequently, a retraction of programmatic resources. At the same time the actual dollars invested by society remained substantial, and legislators began to grapple with defining accountability in higher education and to consider regulation of academia from without the academy.

### The Crux of the Matter

The crux of the matter is that colleges and universities today are not meeting societal expectations. How and why it happened must be explored before a solution can be developed and implemented.

It happened because public universities and private colleges did not have the stewardship skills to manage both academic freedom and accountability to the taxpaying public. As a result, higher education has not fulfilled the strong expectation that the lives of the average citizen would improve from society's investment in the academy.

Today's goal for colleges and universities must be to reestablish public trust in the value and inherent worth of higher education to society. This reinvigoration should come from within academia as it builds upon its traditional forte in research (the discovery of new knowledge), teaching (the conveyance of knowledge), and service (the commitment of the institution to the good of the public); simultaneously, and without fail, academia must redirect these endeavors to satisfy the concerns of the citizenry which provides its very life blood.

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## How Can Higher Education Meet the Goal?

Colleges and universities must forge ahead in a new mode — one of preserving their inherent strengths while initiating responsiveness to the external requirements of the citizens who directly and indirectly influence their destinies. Academia should and must develop a bridge of common understanding between itself and the contextual community. This bridge can be built by accepting the role of outreach and service to society, i.e., institutions of higher learning must understand that to serve the citizenry they have to reach out and analyze their requirements and tailor educational programs and services to fulfill those needs.

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Many vehicles can be used to build this common understanding: applied research to meet the standards of business and industry in achieving defined outcomes; faculty responsibility and accountability for the academic success of students, measured by academic progress and, enhanced, when necessary, by dignified intervention; and communication

with legislators regarding the fiscal measurements of accountability in addition to the intangible and constructive transformation of lives which results from a college education and from research. The collegiate community should be proactive in communicating with a wide range of individuals of influence in business, industry, government, and nonprofit agencies as well as civic leaders and other prominent individuals.

Moreover, the scores of individuals who use education to achieve the American dream help shape the standing of colleges and universities in society. This latter group, on its own initiative, seeks connections with colleges and universities as students of undergraduate, graduate, and notably continuing-education programs. Both sectors of society — individuals of known influence and individuals of anonymity — make up the present and future voters and taxpayers who over time can reestablish and reaffirm the public's confidence in colleges and universities. The academy's proactive communication effort should not be merely a public-relations campaign but an organic change in the way higher education understands its mission and the activities which fulfill its role and scope.

The welfare of colleges and universities, and of our society in general, will depend upon building viable relationships with a wide range of audiences, and some of the greatest expertise in institutions of higher education lies in continuing-education professionals who have accrued over the years the talent of

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understanding criteria necessary for success in developing, implementing, and evaluating educational programs designed from the perspective of the outside constituent. The profession of continuing education is distinguished from other sectors of campus by the exclusivity of its outreach commitment: it seeks to effectively convey knowledge to the constituency of the institution, the public.

### Critical Factors of Success

To bring about fundamental change in higher education, institutions must address six factors critical to successful public accountability. First, there must be a need for knowledge or a problem which can be solved by the acquisition of knowledge. Second, there must be an audience and it must be reachable. Third, there must be a qualified individual to teach and an individual who respects his/her audience. Fourth, the pedagogical schedule must be appropriate to the lifestyle requirements and level of expertise of the audience. Fifth, educational programs must be evaluated by the student and the institution. Sixth, rigorous financial tracking is mandatory and must be used to maintain budgetary control.

- *The Role of Continuing Education*

Historically, continuing education has connected the community and academia. It has helped traditional higher-education institutions to evolve from isolated campus environments to integrated centers of learning that emphasize service to society as a whole.

The traditional emphasis of academia was to develop programs to expand the intellectual understanding of the world and to reflect a large degree of abstraction. This understanding of the world is a "purely academic" model developed to serve the long-term, strategic growth of the individual, i.e., it is the means to evolve the student's intellectual engine. On the other hand, continuing education addresses specific needs, intellectual and otherwise, of students and matches them with the resources of academia to meet short-term, tactical requirements. The two approaches, purely academic and continuing education, stand in sharp contrast to each other in pedagogical assumptions and practices.

- *Learner-Centered Education*

Traditionally, the award of undergraduate and graduate degrees reflects acquisition of an predominantly abstract body of knowledge by a student whose responsibility it is to learn and demonstrate mastery of the discipline according to the standards set by faculty who have incorporated national parameters in these standards. In other words, the benchmark for academic proficiency is attainment by the student of a corpus of knowledge without consideration of the level of expertise of the student at his or her point of departure.

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By contrast, continuing-education programs — both credit and noncredit — are designed in a learner-centered context. Professional continuing educators develop programs after assessing the level of mastery of the material needed by the student, and they ensure that educational programs incorporate learning theories in teaching strategies. The student's knowledge at his or her point of departure is the basis for the development of the curriculum, and the level of mastery to be achieved in the course is determined from the onset according to the learner's level of expertise. The educational program is also designed to attain the breadth and depth of knowledge required by the learner. Should accountability for student success become a governing parameter for higher education, the ability to define the student level of expertise and to teach in a learner-centered environment could become a matter of importance to colleges and universities in the near future.

- *Matching Teacher and Student*

In the traditional academic arena, faculty bring a wealth of talent to the classroom in programs they develop in accordance with their individual views of intellectual achievement. In outreach educational programs, the specific needs of the learner are considered in selecting the instructor. Professionals in continuing education draw from among the resources of faculty and independent experts to pre-cast the best match possible between teaching and learning styles. Colleges and universities should create a more personalized educational experience than in the past.

- *Marketing Research*

In general, academia is disconnected from markets and marketing research; however, marketing research is a staple in continuing education. Integral parts of its systemic market analysis include assessment of educational need, environment, definition of audience, determination of accessibility and "reachability" of a particular audience, student demographics, statistics on recruitment and retention, and measurement of programmatic outcome. Market research is used to gauge the success of continuing education from the point of view of the audience and also in the context of university parameters. Should colleges and universities be required to operate in a service-industry environment, the marketing know-how of continuing education would create a bridge between the perspectives of the external client and the university.

- *Community Partnerships*

Building community partnerships of a long-term nature has been important to continuing education over the years because these relationships provide insights into changing needs for knowledge by various sectors of society, networks for advice and

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counsel, resources for program sponsorship, and vehicles for the community to directly influence the activities of the institution. These partnerships bring outside constituents into the university community and develop longevity as projects evolve over time. In working with outside groups, it is mandatory that these relationships stay within the purview of university expertise.

The extent and complexity of societal problems are such that to achieve long-term and successful partnerships, the university must be a repository of knowledge and the vehicle to provide pertinent knowledge to address constituents' problems. Continuing educators over the years have honed the skills of defining and understanding the problem from the perspective of the outside group, assessing the appropriateness of the university in solving the problem and developing the educational experience which brings together the positions of both entities. As colleges and universities interact more readily with the communities they serve, the resourcefulness of continuing educators can guide institutions into long-term and successful relationships.

### Audiences

The outward relationship falls into several recurrent categories of audiences served. The first category is composed of individuals who combine work and family with college. These individuals are often available to pursue their education — credit or noncredit — only in nonworkday times. Universities which commit to providing access to higher education for these citizens offer evening, weekend, or early-morning classes as well as offerings at off-campus sites.

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Moreover, they make college classes available through telecommunications technology and other nontraditional formats for instruction. These courses meet traditional requirements for degrees yet are designed to foster the success of the students with multiple commitments to profession, family, and learning. Similarly, noncredit programs taught in comparable times, places

and formats are offered to meet the educational needs of these individuals and are designed in a learner-centered environment to foster their success in acquiring the requisite knowledge.

The second category entails the university's response to the educational needs of a body of individuals within a particular business or profession. The nature of the university's outreach in this case is to define the common educational needs of a group of individuals and create the credit or noncredit program accordingly. Examples include executive MBAs or off-campus graduate programs in education. Noncredit examples include continuing-education

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requirements of particular professions such as social work, engineering or accounting. Again, the pivotal factor of the success of these programs is the quality of the educational experience in conjunction with an understanding of the highly focused professional schedules of the students.

A third category is the university's response to the educational needs of a facet of the community. Societal parameters may shape the needs for knowledge of various sectors of its citizenry, and the university's response is developed according to these factors. Examples include business training and development programs for minority entrepreneurs. The community for which the program is designed must be involved in each step of its development. Once again, the university acts from its strong suit — knowledge and the transference of knowledge — and builds relationships with external constituents.

### **Conclusion**

The current problem of lack of public trust in institutions of higher education, brought about by a dichotomy between academic freedom and the need for accountability to the society that provides academic funding, can and must be solved by a commitment on the part of the university to communicate and respond to the community's needs and the use of its resources to satisfy those needs. This can be accomplished only by institutions that have as a primary objective the coordination and management of academic resources and public needs. Continuing education has fulfilled this interface by giving average citizens access to credit and noncredit programs that traditionally were not within their reach. The role of continuing education should be augmented so that universities and colleges can fulfill the expectations of the community and reestablish the trust of society in higher education.

### **About the author**

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