

SYMPOSIUM ON ADULT LEARNERS
WINSTON-SALEM STATE UNIVERSITY

August 19-20, 1985

I am reminded of an incident which occurred many years ago while I was living with my family in Chicago. At the time, we were being visited by my uncle who is a physician. We were contacted by a family friend and informed that she would be picking us up the following day because she had a treat in store for my visiting relative. And so, on the following day we dressed and were whisked away by our friend and taken on a private tour of a large and newly opened hospital. After several hours of navigating patient corridors, operating theaters, and laboratories, our friend returned us to our home confident that she had provided my uncle with an unexpected highlight of his vacation visit. After being appropriately polite and gracious to our departed guest, my uncle let forth with a series of colorful expletives. The point to which was that the last place on earth in which a physician wished to spend his vacation time was in a hospital.

Well, I have interrupted my vacation on your beautiful ocean shore to come to a campus. I do so, however, willingly and eagerly because I view the topic you are addressing as significant and important.

I first became intrigued with the adult learner when I was Dean of Students at Towson State College in metropolitan Baltimore. Approximately one-third of the 15,000 students enrolled in that institution were adults attending our evening division. Because I have tried, whenever possible, to continue my college teaching, I

took on the responsibility of offering a course in the evening for adult students. I was immediately impressed with the contrast between these adult students and the more traditional students with whom I had grown accustomed. One of the best illustrations of this occurred into the semester when evening courses were cancelled because of an unexpected snow storm. As I left my office, I could hear the students cheering and applauding the announcement that classes were being cancelled. Because I was concerned that my evening students may not have heard the announcement on the radio, I went to my classroom anyway to see if anyone might show up and, if they were willing, we might have some informal discussions in a smaller setting. Much to my surprise, the entire class was there, even those who had heard the closing announcement through the media. While our traditional-age students were jubilant in the class closing announcement, my adult students were relieved that our class was continuing. That same semester classes were closed an additional two times because of inclement weather, and on each occasion, my class, at my students' insistence, continued to meet.

It was readily apparent to me that the philosophical, motivational, and experiential orientation of these students was significantly different from the traditional college-age learner and that therein lay significant policy consequences for those colleges and universities that wish to serve their adult students.

This conclusion was reinforced when, several years later, as a Vice President at Tennessee State University, I was faced with the enormous managerial challenge of assisting in the orchestration of a merger between Tennessee State University and what had formerly been known as the University of Tennessee at Nashville. As you may know,

Tennessee State University, while much larger, was similar in many respects to Winston-Salem State University. The profile of the student constituents of these two institutions is practically identical, although TSU was considerably larger in size. The University of Tennessee at Nashville, however, at the time of merger was made up exclusively of adult students pursuing their collegiate education part-time and in the evening. I became convinced at that time that it is impossible to effectively respond to the learning requirements of two populations so different in their backgrounds and preparation, within the same curricula and policy context. It is possible, and indeed desirable, for institutions in urban settings such as Winston-Salem to serve in a quality manner and deliver its academic programs to both clientele within the same university.

I thought it might be useful if I outline some of the more superficial and obvious points of divergence between the accepted assumptions relating to the traditional-age students and the adult learner. For one thing, there are no proven assessment techniques for predicting academic achievement for the adult learner. SAT scores, ACT scores, high school grades, and class rank are useless and irrelevant when applied to a 48 year old homemaker who has decided to return to the academy because the kids have now left home.

While there is much debate about the use of predictive measures for recent high school graduates, there is no debate at all about the irrelevancy and inappropriateness of using standardized test scores and high school grades that are obsolete and, in some cases, downright ancient for the adult learner.

Another area of significance is the eclectic nature of traditional college curricula. The curricula at Winston-Salem University, as with most other institutions of higher learning, have as desirable consequences personal growth and development that transcends the mere transference of information. To be sure, the fundamental purpose of your curricula is intellectual growth, but it also has as legitimate objectives components designed to assist the maturation, socialization, physical health, and critical and independent thinking and decision-making skills for the students who graduate from this fine institution.

The adult learner, however, has generally come to terms with the nonintellectual questions of this curricula in other settings and during earlier years. Therefore, the requirements of an adult-centered curricula emphasizes intellectual and subject matter focuses over more existential concerns.

Generally, the burden is on the student to adapt his or her life style to meet the delivery mode of the institution. The adult-centered curricula is faced with the exact opposite responsibility. It becomes our task to offer diverse and flexible learning opportunities so as to meet the occupational and life style requirements of the learner. Simply stated another way, you cannot expect adult students to abandon the responsibilities of adulthood, leave employment, or neglect families to meet the scheduling requirements of a college.

Perhaps the single most important distinction between the adult learner and the traditional-age student is the tremendous amount of learning that the adult student brings with him when he first comes to the campus. There are three fundamental policy commitments that

any college must make if it is serious about dealing effectively with the adult learner. First, it must provide credit-bearing opportunities for the adult student through the assessment of prior learning. It is patently ludicrous that a man or woman who has been a bank examiner for 15 years should be expected to take Accounting 101. Secondly, the curricula must be purged of those components which may be relevant and appropriate for traditional-age students but which becomes irrelevant for an adult. You will not attract many adult learners if you require them to take physical education activity courses. Third and finally, you must be willing to adopt flexible institutional modalities which allow the adult learner to attend classes and manage their families and professional responsibilities simultaneously. You cannot be effective unless you are committed to all three policy concepts. Offering courses at night and on weekends alone is insufficient.

At this time I would like to tell you a little bit about Thomas A. Edison State College of New Jersey. I do this not for the purpose of selfpromotion, but rather to suggest to you one of the most effective models in American higher education that deals exclusively with the adult learner.

In the middle 1960's, American higher education began to notice that adult students were returning to the campuses in large numbers. Beginning in 1967, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education produced a number of reports which recommended the development of college degree opportunities for underserved populations. Of particular emphasis by the Commission was the need to provide flexible and accessible, yet high quality, college opportunities for an ever increasing adult student population.

Three states responded to this challenge with major institutional commitments: the State of Minnesota, which created Minnesota Metropolitan State College; the State of New York, which created Empire State College; and the State of New Jersey, which, in 1972, founded Thomas A. Edison State College.

One of nine state colleges in New Jersey, Edison State College is the only state college with a statewide mandate. We are headquartered in Trenton, New Jersey, but we have satellite sites in East Orange in the north and at Cherry Hill in the south. We were chartered to serve the adult learner exclusively. We have currently enrolled over 5,000 students, with the age of our average student slightly less than 40 years old. At our October commencement this year, we will award a degree to our oldest graduate, a Mr. Edward Stit, who is now 87 years old. I believe our youngest graduate at the same commencement will be 24.

We offer four baccalaureate degrees: Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, and Bachelor of Science in Nursing. In addition, we offer several associate degrees and a number of certificate programs. We have no permanent teaching faculty. Our curricula is unremarkable. The requirements for a business degree or a nursing degree at Edison and Winston-Salem, or at Rutgers, are very similar, with some notable exceptions. We have no residency requirements, and we have no requirement for physical education activity courses.

Students earn credits towards their degree through a variety of processes. First, students transfer in previous college courses taken at various times during their lives. Secondly, students earn credit from corporate and military courses recommended and approved

by the American Council on Education. Third, students earn credit through prior learning assessment for college level learning they have achieved in nonclassroom settings.

We have a variety of prior learning assessment processes available to our students. The College has developed over 100 examinations in the Thomas A. Edison State College Examination Program. Students can also earn credit through appropriate scores on CLEP Examinations, ACT/PEP Examinations, DAN TES Examinations in the military, and through portfolio assessment. We annually hire approximately 400 faculty as faculty assessors in our portfolio assessment process. Edison State College currently has students enrolled in every state in America, including Alaska and Hawaii, and has students attending every college and university, public and private, in the State of New Jersey. Students are admitted daily and graduate daily. As I mentioned earlier, we hold a formal commencement once every year in October.

In some areas, students can study with the College directly through our Center for Learning and Telecommunications, otherwise known as the Electronic College. At the present time we have available through all sources approximately 100 courses that are exclusively media delivered. By media I mean television, radio, and computer. None of these courses are classroom based, and for the first time in the history of American higher education, high quality collegiate instruction is available to the adult learner independent of location and time. A plant worker can study accounting on his minicomputer at home after getting off a shift at 4 in the morning. All that is necessary is access to either a computer or a video cassette recorder.

There are two other things of great significance in which Edison State College is involved. I mentioned earlier that students can earn credit if they have taken noncollegiate instruction which has been approved under the guidelines of the American Council on Education. Edison State College does the evaluation of corporate training for the American Council on Education in the State of New Jersey. And finally, through our Statewide Testing and Assessment Center, we do prior learning assessment for 22 other colleges and universities in the state. This provides access to high quality prior learning assessment for those traditional-age students matriculating at other colleges and universities. They can earn credits at their own institutions, without taking the appropriate courses, by demonstrating that they possess college-level credit-bearing knowledge.

The College graduates approximately 500 students a year. One-half of these students go on to graduate and professional schools, and 90% of these get admitted to the programs of their first choice, which are included among the most important and prestigious graduate and professional schools in America.

The College that I am fortunate to serve has demonstrated that it is possible to provide relevant and flexible responses to adult learners while maintaining qualitative standards second to none in American higher education. This institution is not only an innovative servant and leader for the adult learner, it is the keeper of a national movement within higher education.

OK, why should you care? Why should Winston-Salem State University, which has established a long-standing reputation of high quality undergraduate instruction to traditional-age students, concern itself with the adult learner? Let me suggest several reasons.

First and most importantly, it is your job. This institution, as a fundamental component of its mission, has dedicated itself as a servant of the public interest in Winston-Salem and North Carolina. And guess who the public is? Not only are adult learners the clear majority of the population, they are involved vigorously in learning without you. There are more adults formally involved in postsecondary education off campus, and there are more faculty teaching them off campus than traditional students and faculty currently on campus.

Traditional higher education is now a minority within postsecondary education. The last year before divestiture, AT&T spent more money educating its employees than MIT spent educating its students. Some of that education is not collegiate-level, nor is it collegiate relevant, and to that I say fine; for colleges and universities need not be all things to all people. But much of that nonclassroom instruction that is taking place outside our campuses walls, is a result of a defaulted commitment on the part of traditional higher education. It is time for this institution and others, if they are to be true to their mission, to raise their sights and broaden their views, to open their arms and embrace all of the students who could benefit from the resources sitting before me.

Let me say a word about the adult learner and the historically black college. As you may have picked up from that very fine and flattering introduction, I have spent considerable time and service at two excellent historically black universities. My intellectual, philosophical, and emotional commitment to these institutions is strong and undiminished. I am in no way suggesting that it is desirable to neglect or abandon the traditional and historic clientele of Winston-Salem State University. I do suggest, however, that you can and should do more. There are thousands of colleges and universities that are looking out for the needs of mainstream America. There are hundreds of high quality institutions that are committed to equal opportunity and access for college-age black students. There are even some institutions that are specifically focused on the needs of the adult learner. There is virtually no one that has taken up the cause of the minority adult learner, and it is to that challenge that I hope you will be called.

I have that commitment in New Jersey. When I came to Edison, approximately 7% of our enrollment was minority. It is up to 14% this year. Because of the basic profile and character of the adult student, we have doubled our minority student population without financial aid, without remediation, and without attention to developing basic collegiate skills. I could go on and on with some very practical benefits for you: these students are highly motivated, they pay on time, they register when they are supposed to, they don't live in dormitories, and you will never see one before the disciplinary committee.

But the fundamental rationale for a compelling mandate for your attention to the adult learner is eloquently written and well stated within the philosophies and words of your own mission. The population is there and is in need of your help. The resources are here as well as the ability to respond to their needs. I suggest that you spend these days and the weeks and months ahead examining the issues, debating the questions, and, hopefully, embracing the commitment.

Thank you.