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Viewpoint: Education in older America

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Viewpoint

Education in older America

The "graying of America" is a phrase increasingly used by researchers, educators, social service and health professionals, politicians, and policy makers at all levels of government. It is also becoming familiar in the popular literature and appearing, if not explicitly, at least by inference, in the mass media. The graying of America refers to the demographic fact that older Americans are becoming a larger and proportionately more significant segment of American society.

Whereas in 1900 persons 65 years of age and older numbered three million and comprised only 4.1 percent of the population, today slightly more than one of every ten Americans, or nearly 22½ million persons fall into that age category. By the year 2000 the number of older Americans will have grown to 30.6 million, or one of every eight persons. When the year 2036 arrives, it is estimated that nearly 17 percent of the American population will be 65 years and older. Within that age bracket, the fastest growing group are those persons aged 75 years and older. By the year 1990 the "old-old," or persons 75 years and older, will comprise nearly 4.7 percent of the total population. That figure is roughly the same as that for the total aged population in 1900. Functional old-age has crept well into the seventh decade while our attitudes and policies have clung to a chronological anachronism. Thus, as American society ages, it is becoming increasingly necessary to alter our views of the aged and the meaning of growing older.

These demographic shifts are dramatic since they will potentially impact every major American institution. We are on the threshold of change which the United States will and must move from being a "youth-oriented" society to one which balances the needs, preferences, and well-being of its dependent young and old while reckoning the costs such changes incur for those in their middle years. Institutional changes which take into account the needs of the older population and the issues of aging are now emerging. They are most observable in the health and social services sectors which, under the mandates of the Older Americans Act and related legislation, are addressing many of the problems of older Americans. Educational institutions are only now recognizing the fact that they too will be affected by the graying of America.

Perhaps no American institution has been so oriented to the young by design and purpose as educational institutions. Because of the need for preparing the young to enter the world of work and to participate as responsible, informed, and productive citizens, institutions of higher education particularly have focused attention upon the young. That need will continue, but the necessity for responding to the educational needs of an older population will become more prevalent. For colleges and universities, education in an older America presents a twofold problem. First, the demand for training relevant to working with aged persons in a variety of contexts and settings will increase. Universities and colleges will be looked to to provide such training. Second, it will be necessary to find an appropriate fit between the educational demands of an older population and existing educational programs.

The demands upon colleges and universities will not simply mean a shift in the age structure of the classroom. Rather, they will involve more fundamental changes in the mode and delivery of education and training. It will become increasingly necessary to develop non-traditional modes of education and training which give greater emphasis to the priorities, schedules, and geographical limitations of an older population. It may be necessary to move more frequently outside the ivy halls if the educational needs of an older population and the on-going training needs of those serving the elderly are to be met effectively. A wider and more diverse range of motivations for seeking education and training will have to be accommodated. Hard decisions about whether to create special educational programs for the aged or to develop programs which integrate all ages into the learning process will have to be made. In some cases the physical facilities which house educational activities will require modification. In short, the tacit assumption that education and training mainly entails a four-to-five year stay on a campus where the student enrolls in, moves through, and graduates from a fairly structured program of study in preparation for entering the adult world will no longer simply apply.

It is unlikely that a graying of the campus will occur in the near future, if at all. However, if universities and colleges are to be responsible to their missions, they must recognize the value and reality of the silver strands among the gold, red, and brown, whether they be found on the campus or in the community.

George R. Peters
Guest editor