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Institutions of higher learning need to increase work-related training and support services.

Aronson and Eccles: Community colleges and career education for older adults

Community colleges and career education for older adults

**By Jeanne B. Aronson
and Margaret Eccles**

In an address delivered at the 1979 National Adult Education Conference, Arthur S. Flemming, former commissioner of the Administration on Aging, stated:

Colleges and universities must develop more career programs to meet the needs of growing numbers of older Americans who are not leaving the work force at the traditional retirement age. . . . Because older persons will not always think about the campus as a place that offers help, educational institutions have a responsibility to locate people who are retiring and tell them about educational opportunities. . . . Higher education institutions are confronted with a tremendous opportunity to respond to the needs of

career-related programs, but so far this is largely a missed opportunity.¹

While figures indicate that adults 55 years of age and older form about 7.7 percent of the total enrollment at postsecondary institutions,² it is difficult to assess how many career-related training opportunities are being offered to older adults nationwide at colleges and universities, or how many adults are taking advantage of them. In 1977 the American Council on Education surveyed public and private two- and four-year institutions of higher education to assess the extent of instructional programs and community services being offered adults 55 years and older.³ Although over half of the 556 institutions responding offered no programs designed specifically for older adults, 58 percent of the public two-year colleges and 52 percent of the public universities did have such programs—mainly for self-improvement, use of leisure time, and pre-retirement. Courses geared toward second career training composed 17.5 percent of the programs at public two-year colleges and 20 percent at public universities.

Community colleges, serving over one third of all postsecondary students in the country, have through both philosophy and statute adopted a role and mission that is closely conversant with and responsive to the expressed educational needs of their communities. During the past decade community colleges have recognized the emerging needs of more diverse groups of adult learners and have incorporated the concept of lifelong education into their mission statements and program offerings. Between 1974 and 1976 enrollment of students 35 and over at two-year colleges jumped 30 percent; total enrollment for this group in fall 1977 was 1.3 million. The average age of the community college student is now over 29.⁴

In a recent publication of the College Board's Future Directions for a Learning Society project, Howard Bowen attributes the success of the community colleges in attracting adult learners to this responsive stance:

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that they offered virtually any subject for which a demand existed or could be created and for anyone who wished to learn part-time or full-time. They offered courses on any schedule and at any place that seemed convenient to the learners.⁵

In addition, the community college offers relatively low tuition.

Part of the community colleges' thrust toward the adult learner has been to specifically design programs and services for older adults, although it is difficult to provide exact numbers because of the way enrollment data are kept. Most older adults, at least initially, enroll for non-credit activities, which are estimated by the U.S. Office of Education to have increased 500 percent in community colleges between 1968 and 1978.⁶ The state of Maryland is one of the few that keeps detailed records by age, and these show that in fiscal year 1978 there were 25,123 adults over 60 years of age enrolled in non-credit courses specifically designed for them, and 800 persons over 60 enrolled in special credit courses.⁷ Even here, however, the exact number of persons over 60 enrolled in courses open to all students cannot be ascertained, although it is estimated as "thousands."

Career-related programs have provided a small percentage of course offerings in comparison to liberal arts, recreational, and coping skills activities. However, in the belief that community colleges need to increase work-

related training and support services for older adults. Educational Considerations, Vol. 8, No. 10, p. 35. The interest of older adults in remaining active in paid employment? The well-documented "graying of America," in which the percentage of the population 55 years and over will rise from 20 percent today to a projected 27 percent by 2030 while younger age groups remain stable or shrink,¹¹ is having many effects on American social and economic life. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the controversy over the Social Security System and the increasing demand on a comparatively shrinking younger work force to support a burgeoning number of retired persons. While four workers supported a beneficiary a few years ago, the projected ratio for 2025 is two workers supporting one beneficiary.¹² It is currently being debated whether the system can even remain afloat as its reserves dwindle, and four out of five of today's employees have indicated less than full confidence that Social Security will be able to pay them the benefits owed.¹³ Lack of confidence in future income benefits, coupled with steep inflation and expectations of a relatively healthy and long lifespan, are leading many Americans to question the wisdom of giving up all involvement in productive employment. Many others who have already retired are also finding economic, social, and psychological reasons to consider a return to paid employment.

The program's first publication in 1978 stated its basic view that:

Community colleges have many resources potentially useful in bringing the mature talents of older people more fully into play in a changing work world: a community base; . . . established relations with local employers in a variety of occupational training programs; placement service, job counseling and means of verifying skills; forms for organizing, administering and publicizing new programs; experience with adults in large numbers and, in recent years, with older adults. . . . Present mechanisms for bringing workers and jobs together are inefficient for serving older job seekers and the "suddenly old" displaced middle-aged applicants; . . . seldom are the special counseling and placement problems of older workers addressed."

In the interim, the Older Americans Program has worked with many colleges offering such programs as senior employment services, specialized training courses to fill an identified need in the community (e.g. homemaker and home health aides), self-employment training and support such as assistance to a handicraft cooperative, and peer counseling programs. Adults served include both those near retirement and those already retired.

Although complete data on enrollments and numbers of programs offered are not available, two AACJC surveys provide an indication of the status of career education for older adults at community colleges.

In 1977 the Older Americans Program surveyed community colleges concerning work-related offerings for older adults.⁹ Of the 547 respondents, 140, or 25 percent, indicated they had courses or workshops related to improvement or acquisition of job skills. Special counseling services for older adults were indicated by 139 colleges; 12 senior employment services were identified, with 16 other colleges having closely related services such as job-seeking clinics. Many colleges indicated an integration of services for all students, with no specific older adult components.

An in-depth survey of career education in community colleges was undertaken by AACJC in 1978,¹⁰ based on the U.S. Office of Education's Career Education Office definition of "helping individuals acquire and utilize the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for each to make work a meaningful, productive, and satisfying part of his or her way of living."

Eight specific components were studied, with over 65 percent of the colleges having all eight in place. Those most relevant to the adult learner included career resource centers (77 percent), services for adults in career transition (86 percent), work experience opportunities (85 percent), and collaboration with the community (92 percent). Of the colleges surveyed, 43 percent indicated offering career services to senior citizens, although 65 percent of them indicated a need for assistance in this area. Senior citizens were in fact among those least well served, whereas adults in career transition and women were among the populations best served.

The 1979 Louis Harris survey of "American Attitudes toward Pensions and Retirement" found that:

Significant percentages (of employees) would prefer to work—either full-time or part-time, at the same job or at a less demanding job. . . . A total of 51 percent say they would prefer to continue with some type of employment. . . . Of those 50-64, 48 percent say they intend to continue working instead of retiring, as do an almost equal percentage of younger workers. . . . Among those already retired . . . 46 percent would prefer to be working . . . and 53 percent would have preferred to continue working instead of retiring.¹⁴

The feasibility of older workers continuing or reentering paid employment will be greatly influenced by employer attitudes toward older workers' capabilities, the existence of alternative work patterns such as part-time or shared jobs, the expansion of job development efforts to identify occupations especially suited to older adults' skills and experience, and the general employment picture. The 1978 Age Discrimination in Employment Amendments raising the mandatory retirement age to 70, and the 1975 Age Discrimination Act both have strong potential for influencing retirement patterns, although it is too early to judge their effects.

The issue of whether continued older worker participation in the labor force denies entrance or promotion to younger workers requires a careful consideration of the factors which influence job openings across the economy. Obsolescence, technology, and changing work patterns all influence employment opportunities, so that younger workers do not necessarily move directly into slots left by retirees. Use of experienced older workers as short-term consultants, as trainers for younger workers, or as part-time workers in community service are all examples of non-conflicting alternatives. Many older adults do not want to work full-time and many are interested in self-employment. Also to be considered is the right of older persons to maintain themselves in productive capacities in the face of changing demographics, where it is not uncommon for a 65-year-old to be financially responsible for an infirm parent.

It cannot be realistically assumed that reentry of older persons in the job market will suddenly become easy, when workers over 45 presently form one of the largest groups of "discouraged" workers, i.e., those who give up seeking employment after repeated failure.¹⁴ Community colleges and other educational institutions will not likely be able merely to include more older adults in training programs established for younger persons without some modifications or provision of facilitating mechanisms. Heavy reliance on cooperative arrangements with business and industry, government, non-profit organizations, and other educational institutions is often necessary to fashion training opportunities and support services that are effective in placement of older workers, as indicated by a number of ongoing programs:

Through intensive community outreach, the Los Angeles Valley College Senior Adult Program was able to place 101 men and women in part-time jobs during its first year of operation. Project HIRE at Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts placed 90 older persons in jobs in 1979.

The Second Careers Institute at Catonsville Community College in Maryland works with senior employment agencies and businesses in Baltimore to provide short-term training and supportive counseling for identified full and part-time positions. In one instance the Institute developed a 10-hour "pre-teller" training course in response to local banks' needs for additional peak period tellers. Upon completion of the pre-training, qualified older adults are referred to the banks for intensive teller training and then hired on a full or part-time basis.

Thornton Community College near Chicago cooperates with the South Suburban Council on Aging to enhance older adults' employability in unsubsidized positions. The college's Career Guidance Center provides technical assistance, short-term training, and staff development to the Council and its clients, who include retired blue collar workers, highly skilled professionals, and minimally skilled homemakers.

Older women seeking to enter the job market are actively recruited by senior aides and media outreach in the San Diego Community College District's Emeriti Women's Council peer counseling program. In addition to job counseling and skill preparation, applicants receive individualized guidance from a mentor selected from a network of business and professional women who volunteer their services.

Through these programs and many others, community colleges have shown that they are well equipped to accept the challenge posed by Dr. Flemming—the challenge to include career education for older adults in the broad mission of the institution, an inclusive stance well expressed by the chancellor of the California Community Colleges, writing in *Change* magazine:

Our success can no longer be measured by our transfer record. . . . Other criteria are more indicative of our goals and missions: namely, what we can do to

racial, and ethnic opportunity; our contribution to the labor force; what community colleges are doing to reduce unemployment, to provide needed skills, and to respond to the manpower needs of a rapidly changing industrial technology; our assistance and service to community human service and how we meet the requirements of the adult learner; how successful we are in promoting the concept of lifelong learning.¹⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. Quoted in Beverly T. Watkins, "Improve Programs for Older Adults, Colleges Are Urged," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 26, 1979), p. 7.
2. National Center for Education Statistics, quoted in *American Association of Community and Junior Colleges Fact Sheet*, "The Adult Lifelong Learner in Two-Year Colleges" (Washington, D.C., May 1979).
3. Frank J. Atelsek and Irene L. Gomberg, *College and University Services for Older Adults* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1977), p. 2.
4. National Center for Education Statistics, quoted in *American Association of Community and Junior Colleges Fact Sheet*, "Enrollment in Two-Year Colleges" and "Learners in Two-Year Colleges" (Washington, D.C., May 1979).
5. Howard R. Bowen, *Adult Learning, Higher Education, and the Economics of Unused Capacity* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1980), p. 16.
6. U.S. Office of Education, Bureau of Postsecondary Education, quoted in *American Association of Community and Junior Colleges Fact Sheet* "Enrollment in Two-Year Colleges" (Washington, D.C., May 1979).
7. Brent M. Johnson, "The Vitality of Age," *Maryland State Board for Community Colleges Bulletin* (December 1978), p. 2.
8. Roger DeCrow, *Older Americans: New Uses of Mature Ability* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1978), p. 7.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-8, 15.
10. American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, *Career Education in Community Colleges: Sourcebook II* (Washington, D.C., 1979), pp. 3-8.
11. *Newsweek*, "The Graying of America" (February 28, 1977), p. 52.
12. Frederick H. Lawson, "Private Enterprise and the Older Worker: What Are the Issues?" *Aging and Work* (Winter 1979), p. 8.
13. Louis Harris & Associates, *1979 Study of American Attitudes Toward Pensions and Retirement: A Nationwide Survey of Employees, Retirees, and Business Leaders* (February 1979), p. viii.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. v-vi.
15. U.S. Department of Labor, based on a study by Harold L. Shepard, *Employment-Related Problems of Older Workers: A Research Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: R&D Monograph 73, 1979), p. 17.
16. Arthur M. Cohen and John Lombardi, "Can the Community Colleges Survive Success?" *Change* (November-December 1979), p. 27.