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The Ever Widening Gyre: Factors Affecting Change in Adult Education Graduate Programs

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Abstract: *The purpose of this survey study was to understand the factors that have influenced recent changes in the size of adult education graduate programs. We found that integration has a significant effect on changes in student enrollment while leadership, innovation, and integration all significantly predict variance in faculty growth.*

The Purpose of the Study

Over the last five years, a number of adult education programs have been dismantled or have merged with other programs. This fact, combined with the loss of key theorists in the field, point to the possibility of the field diminishing. Others argue that the field has always had programs closing at the same time that other programs were growing or new ones were opening. Some departments have increased enrollment and added faculty members over the last five years. Furthermore, various fields of adult education practice such as human resource development have never been stronger. The purpose of this study was to understand the factors that have influenced the recent changes in the size of adult education graduate programs. This study provides evidence of changes that have occurred in these programs. Understanding these indicators may help those in academic programs better prepare to combat negative changes and support continued growth.

Historical Perspective

Adult education graduate programs first emerged in the 1920's to meet the needs of teachers and administrators, with a course title first appearing in 1922 at Columbia University and a curricula leading to an advanced degree established by 1932. The 1920's and the 1930's saw an expansion of different forms of adult education in university graduate programs; and, with the exception of a small decline during World War II, the number of adult education courses continued to rise well into the 1980's (Houle, 1988). The foci of programs during the 1960s were competence, social understanding of

practice, philosophy and values, zest for continued study, and conducting and interpreting research (Liveright, 1964).

On the other hand, the field has had warning signals. In 1988, Kreitlow identified nine danger signals for graduate programs: isolation from other disciplines, lack of commitment to the department with which the program is affiliated, acceptance of educators not trained in adult education, homogeneous age range of faculty members, lack of internal communication, decline in funded research, limited publication record, decline in image within the college, and concerns by graduate students about the status of the program (in Peters & Jarvis, 1991). This study sought to assess the prevalence of these warning signs today.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors that have influenced the recent changes in the size of adult education graduate programs. Survey methodology was employed to measure faculty and administrators' perceptions of the factors influencing their programs. One primary research question was addressed in this study:

To what extent do leadership, integration, and responsiveness to change predict changes in size of adult education programs over the past five years?

Instrumentation

Instrument development drew on findings from an earlier research project involving both qualitative and quantitative methodologies conducted in a Ph.D. seminar class, a review of relevant literature, and

practical considerations based on conversations with faculty members and administrators. The earlier study was conducted in several phases using a mixed-method research design. This was a collective research project initially involving 11 Ph.D. students in data collection and analysis.[1] The faculty member responsible and her graduate assistant developed the research design and guided all phases of this project. The first phase focused on the collection of qualitative data through 11 interviews conducted with a purposeful sample of faculty and administrators. Participants were chosen to encompass the diverse field of adult education in terms of full-time faculty and those with administrative responsibilities; large and small programs; and among geographic regions of the United States. The transcripts from these interviews were analyzed using open coding to develop preliminary themes (Merriam, 1998). Three themes common across all the interviews were identified and led to a definition of key variables that influenced changes in adult education programs (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). One of the themes, program integration, dealt with the identity, image, and value given to the program by both the college and the institution. The two other themes were program innovation [or responsiveness to change] and leadership.

In the second phase, survey items were developed based on these variables, using data from the interviews and informed by the literature review (Fowler, 1993). A pilot survey consisting of 52 questions was completed by 13 adult education programs, with one person responding from each program. Scales were developed which corresponded to the qualitative themes. The survey was refined based on input from an expert on survey design and pilot responses. The final survey items were predominately Likert-type questions, and used a 6-point response scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Section One of the final survey consisted of twelve items that dealt with the integration of the program into the college as well as the institution. Section Two consisted of eight items that measured perception of changes or innovations in individual programs. Section Three consisted of eight items and dealt with issues of leadership and their impact on the programs. Section Four contained eight questions designed to elicit the actual changes in size of the program in terms of numbers of faculty and students between 1994 and 1999. The final section asked for demographic information and solicited open-ended comments.

Individuals were e-mailed a cover letter requesting their participation in the study which also gave the address and password of the web site to complete the survey. A copy of the survey was attached to the e-mail message. Respondents had the option of responding by completing the survey on the web, returning an e-mail, or faxing the completed survey.

Sample
Program selection began with the CPAE directory Part II dated November 1998 which lists Adult Education Programs in the U.S and Canada. Programs not in the U.S. were automatically eliminated. Individuals were then identified from the CPAE directory of Professional Colleagues, dated October, 1999. Individuals who were listed as adjunct or who did not list an e-mail were eliminated. Two faculty members with national knowledge of the field were then asked to review the list, adding new hires, adding adult education programs and faculty from the AHRD list, eliminating individuals who were retired, not in adult education programs and/or in non-faculty roles.

Another 12 individuals either replied and declined to answer the survey or had permanent fatal-flaws with their e-mail address. Finally, one individual was asked by a member of her university to complete the survey and was then added to the sample and another individual in the sample responded from his new institution, adding another program to the sample. This left a final sample of 131 individuals and 71 adult education programs.

Several strategies were used to improve response rates (Dillman, 1983). These included individual cover letters sent out via e-mail that assured individual confidentiality and stressed the importance of the participants' responses. The letter was sent on the senior researcher's e-mail account and contained her signature. Follow-up consisted of a second e-mail message as a reminder. The final sample consisted of 78 individuals representing 50 programs or an adjusted sample of 60% of individuals and 70% of adult education programs.

Data from the survey were analyzed from the web-based survey using SPSS 5th Edition.[2] Data analysis consisted of again examining the reliability of the scales using Cronbach's alpha. All scales were reliable with reliabilities of .8560 [leadership], .9099 [integration], .7678 [responsiveness to change]. We then sought to answer the research questions using multiple regression analyses. All analyses were conducted at the program level. Wherever there were multiple responses from the same program, responses were collapsed into one case representing the mean of responses from that program.

Findings

To what extent do leadership, integration, and responsiveness to change predict changes in size of adult education programs over the past five years?

We found that the dependent variable, changes in size, could not be collapsed into one construct. Therefore, we treated change in student enrollment [consisting of two items, one regarding Master's student enrollment and one regarding doctoral enrollment] as one dependent variable and change in the number of FTE faculty as a separate variable. Figure 1 depicts the final simple regression analysis related to changes in graduate student enrollments. Although integration was significantly related to increasing student enrollments, it only accounts for 16% of the variance in student growth. When leadership or responsiveness to change were added to the multiple regression model, the model was not significant.

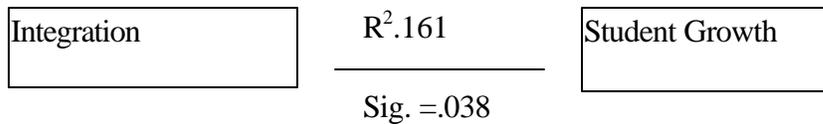| Integration	R^2.161	Student Growth
	Sig. =.038	

Figure 1. Determining variance in student growth

Figure 2 indicates that almost 32% of the variance in faculty growth was explained by the three independent variables and this relationship was highly significant. Strong programs appear to have strong internal identity and appropriate integration within the university. Leadership and innovation were also important in predicting variance in size.
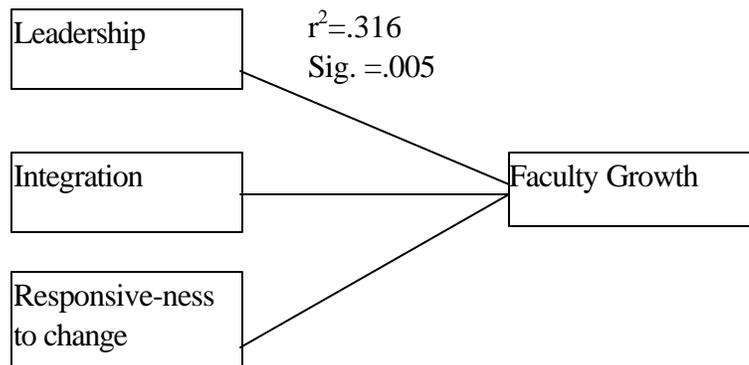
Leadership	r^2=.316
	Sig. =.005
Integration	Faculty Growth
Responsive-ness to change	

Figure 2. Determining variance in faculty growth

Additional findings of interest were analyzed using frequency analysis. We asked programs to indicate whether or not they had experienced changes

of leadership, organizational location or identity. Table 1 presents these results.

Item	Percent Yes
Change in Leadership	63%
Change in Program Name	28%
Program Mergers	33%
Change in Location within the College	31%
Change in College Location	9%

Table 1. Percent of Programs reporting Changes

Finally, we examined the intercorrelation among the dependent variables of faculty and student growth and the relationship was not significant [Sig.=.052].

Discussion

From our pilot study, we expected to see a strong relationship between leadership and changes in size. It was interesting to see that integration was the only strong correlate of changes in student enrollment and that it did not necessarily follow that more students led to more faculty. In fact, less than half of the programs reported an increase in faculty [$\Sigma = 2.89$] while more than half reported increases in Masters and doctoral students [$\Sigma = 6.65$]. It was interesting to learn that almost two-thirds of our respondents reported changes in leadership in their programs over the last 5 years. A number of respondents mentioned that there was no longer an adult education program per se, just adult education faculty [who were 5 years closer to retirement!] and that the program was now HRD, higher education, technology, or leadership.

Comments from respondents suggest that all is not well in graduate programs in adult education. The following comments from the survey range from those about issues of responsiveness to change, to leadership, to integration.

- Little change has occurred since the faculty has little interest in change.
- We have split into two strong, even contested, orientations – HRD and social change/social action.
- The entire enterprise of academe has changed drastically in the past five years. We have gone from the academy to the business. . . Students are routinely viewed as customers. Research has been emphasized above all else. Operations are more and more chaotic and goals are more blurred.
- Our dean seems to have a pretty narrow world-view – and it is teacher education.
- We have a new dean who is focused primarily on K-12, but willing to learn about AE.
- This survey was difficult to complete since there is only one coordinator/faculty AND the program is being eliminated.
- The university has been very supportive, especially my division and dean. Many of the other graduate school of education faculty do not understand adult education, but are increasingly gaining respect for the program as they see the high quality of the work, research and teaching.
- I think that the most important change in adult education programs could be the integration of adult education into the main focus of education. Deans do not support what they don't understand. By engaging in more articulation with education in general, programs probably would come out better financially and in the selection of new resources and faculty. However, the most disappointing aspect of being a faculty member . . . has been the inability for people and programs to change. A lack of leadership is abundant!!!!
- We are constantly aware of the need to be visible and our long term survival depends on our ability to find ways to be integrated with teacher ed. It also helps us that there are now other non-teacher education master's programs (i.e., educational technology).

- The current surviving adult ed. program is now charged with justifying its existence within a college that focuses almost exclusively on K-12. . . . Keeping an adult ed. program going at this university, in spite of support from the top of the university, is an exhausting and time consuming endeavor. It steals time from scholarship and fragments focus. . . . In addition, being in a program that everyone seems to like, but is not central to anyone's main purpose (in leadership positions, that is) means that we are in line for very few resources and little support. . . .It's frustrating and discouraging to be a scholar in this field…I am an adult educator, but in order to be so at this institution, I find I must spend at least half of my time if not more networking, advocating, marketing, etc.

Implications for Adult Education Graduate Programs

This study has significant implications for scholars who would design, develop and administer graduate programs in adult education. With W. B. Yeats (1921), we see the field "Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer; things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world; the blood dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity." What is clear from these data is that graduate programs in adult education have some reason to be concerned. Integration, while strongly correlated with positive change, also appeared to have the potential to diffuse or dilute the program's strengths. In addition, the goal of lifelong learning has been so successfully promoted that programs throughout the college of education now embrace this mission, making programs in adult education less viable as champions of that mission. It would appear that strong programs are those with strong leadership who are well integrated into the university, who are also responsive to change. Clearly, recruiting more students was not sufficient to ensure a positive future for adult education graduate programs. "Surely some revelation is at hand; surely the Second Coming is at hand."

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