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Intersecting the Academy: Legitimizing Applied & Professional Studies at the Post-Graduate Level

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Abstract: Given an increasing demand for continuing professional education at the graduate level, what is the appropriate role of the university? Applied graduate degree programs, in the interests of CPE for working adult students, may be perceived as a threat to the hegemony of the traditional academy, or as a new opportunity for the university to “serve.”

Introduction

As working professionals are pressured by employers and professional associations to obtain accredited higher education, post-secondary institutions are faced with an influx of demands that require some different ways of thinking about graduate education. Traditionally, graduate seminars are held—like other classes—at regularly scheduled times on campus. Alternative delivery formats use asynchronous online technology, blended learning, and off-campus courses to help working graduate students coordinate their studies with their family and professional lives. Programs traditionally segmented by course and semester are also subject to change, as cohort models, accelerated programs, and non-semestered or open-end date courses are offered to work with adult students’ harried and time-packed schedules.

These changes and others must be negotiated if professional schools within post-secondary settings are to create thriving environments for continuing professional education. Drawing from literature and our experiences developing an alternative delivery graduate degree program for practicing teachers and administrators (University of Alberta, Canada), this paper explores the ways in which the growing demand for applied post-graduate studies is challenging traditional conceptions of the role of the university (Barrows & Keeney, 2003; Jarvis, 2003).

M.Ed. (Educational Studies, Leadership & School Improvement): Graduate Studies for Continuing Professional Education

The Master of Education, Educational Studies (Leadership & School Improvement) (MES) is a cohort-based graduate degree program developed by the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Education in 2003. The program’s first cohort of 52 K-12 teachers and administrators began study the following summer, 2004. 2005 brought a second cohort of sixty students, and a new post-secondary (college) educator stream with an inaugural cohort of 12 students. The program combines campus summer residencies with online coursework in such a way as to allow students to complete their studies while maintaining full time employment.

Although our program is particularly aimed at educators, it shares characteristics with other post-graduate programs—MBAs, graduate social work, and graduate nursing programs for example—that may be said to fall under the rubric of formal continuing professional education, or applied graduate studies. Such programs are distinct from other forms of post-graduate studies in that students attend not as “scholars” in the traditional sense, but as working professionals

with an expressed aim of using what they learn, as immediately as possible, in their workplace settings.

Thus far, our experiences with the creation and implementation of our own particular alternative delivery, applied graduate degree program have resonated with research that demonstrates the challenges posed to universities by a number of change variables. These include, but are not limited to, the demographic shift to an older adult student population, increasing demands and opportunities presented by distance learning technologies, credentialism, and fiscal & political pressure to operate universities more like businesses. These forces of change create both tensions and possibilities, as both the supply of and demand for graduate level continuing professional education challenges the infrastructure, hegemony, and perhaps even very purpose of the university. Some of these tensions and possibilities are, briefly, shared here.

Profiling the Mature Graduate Student

Generally, the lifelong learning agenda has brought unprecedented numbers of adult learners to college and university campuses, and these learners are challenging the traditional purpose and functioning of higher education (Barrows & Keeney, 2003; Jarvis, 2003). Universities are, across the board, continuing to experiment with appropriate responses to an influx of “non-traditional” students. These adult learners, many with active and solid careers, bring a complex set of needs to bear on program design, as does the rapidly evolving educational technology that is so critical to alternative modes of program delivery.

In our research at the planning stages of the program, we tried to identify characteristics of non-traditional, mature students. Many study part-time, working in courses around full time employment. It is not surprising, then, that adult students are drawn to the convenience of asynchronous Internet-based course delivery (Hamilton-Pennell, 2002; Roberts, 2002; Sweet, 2000). Also, the possibilities brought by technology have introduced the possibility that rural and other distance students can access opportunities erstwhile available only to those proximate to a university campus.

As competing demands of work, family and community commitments already crowd their daily lives, adult students tend to gravitate to programs that are succinctly laid out for them. Kasworm (2003), examining accelerated formats, observes that adults desire (1) instruction that is accessible and relevant to their work and (2) a clearly delineated program of study that pushes them through to completion of the degree. Adult students have less time to ponder choices between multiple program routes and course offerings; they want structure and design in a completed format. In her study of a cohort graduate degree program for teachers, Kasworm (2003) found that strong program supports led students to believe that their time was valued, and their needs valued and recognized as distinct from those of traditional fulltime students.

The Primacy of Praxis

Arguably, many degree programs – including our own MES program – have taken strides toward addressing shifting student demographics; however, the presence of practicing professionals creates significant challenges to the philosophies and infrastructures that have long guided post-secondary institutions. The academy, with its allegiance to *episteme* – theoretical and scientific knowledge in the positivistic vein – resists the “how to” of *techne* associated with professional/workplace learning, and the wisdom of *phronesis* (Gustavsson, 2002) that emerges in seasoned and conscientious practitioners. It has only been in recent years that these more inductive and contextualized ways of knowing have developed as a legitimate theoretical field in

their own right (Jarvis, 2003), and traditional post-secondary institutions still regard this sort of pragmatism with suspicion (Labaree, 2003).

We have witnessed such tensions in our own program, wherein the highly contextualized and real-world concerns of our students—all practicing teachers and administrators—do not always mesh well with the more esoteric and theoretical knowledge pursued in more traditional graduate programs. Like many other applied graduate level programs, we seek to cultivate *leadership*: at best an ill-defined affair of intuition, “people skills,” analytical abilities, vision, and organizational savvy. And, where traditional graduate degree programs emphasize specialization in given areas of content and theory, our own experiences suggest that, instead, practitioners’ specializations are less significant to their growth than is the cultivation of what are typically described as “soft” or general skills, including the ability to generate, interpret and apply both formal and informal knowledge to immediate and context-specific problems in the workplace.

Thus while we recognize the unique opportunity provided through graduate studies to take more critical and reflective perspectives on what, given the “daily grind” can become taken-for-granted, in our own program, we also seek to honour our students’ working lives by valuing their experiences and providing curriculum with some utility. Beyond addressing the more concrete considerations of designing programs that can flexibly accommodate part-time and distance learners, we have strived for an appropriate balance between theory and application. Such an emphasis on praxis may be tolerated and in some cases encouraged within our own Faculty of Education, but is still not widely understood or valued in post-secondary settings. Yet the imperative of lifelong learning means that the lines between traditional academic education and more applied vocational forms of education are no longer clear (Livingstone, 1993).

Reconsidering the Meaning of Success in Graduate Studies

Post-graduate studies are designed to prepare students for a world in which research, publication, and status among one’s academic peers are the currencies of success. Research and critical thinking skills are cultivated, but equally important is the socializing of the student into the very particular norms and values of academic culture. Successful graduate students are strong writers and researchers, able to work well with theory and abstractions. While collegiality is valued, it is exceedingly important that the aspiring academic be self-directed and willing to work alone, because currently there is less encouragement to build a community of scholars than it is on becoming an academic star within the limited constellation of one’s peers. That the circle of academic discourse grows smaller as one progresses and specializes does not appear to be perceived as a particular set of biases so much as proof positive that what it takes to achieve in academia’s inner circle is not shared widely. Such is success defined in today’s academic world, and while not everyone who completes graduate work continues on to seek work in a university, all are subject to the hegemony that grooms students toward this end.

The goals and objectives of applied professional degrees are strikingly different from those of the more traditional and more academic route. Our own teachers and administrators – like their peers in graduate nursing, communications, and MBA programs – seek higher education to advance careers and enhance practice in their own fields, the concerns of which are often far-removed from the work of “pure” scholars. Students in applied degree programs, either still working in or returning shortly to their respective fields, have little stake in the sorts of activities undertaken by aspiring career academics. Research and publication are not currencies valued within their work cultures. Theory, while often enthusiastically engaged for its own sake,

quickly wears thin if it cannot be applied in meaningful ways to practice. The honing of praxis – as has been suggested – is paramount.

What this suggests to us in our first theorizing is that the qualities of a successful academic graduate student are not the same as those of a successful practitioner. Labarree (2003) points to some of these distinctions when he notes that clearly mature students are qualitatively different from their traditional young adult counterparts; it only follows that the ways in which we define and assess their formal education bear some scrutiny. Indeed, it has been a source of consternation to discover that students with weaker grades have in some instances proved to be the strongest leaders, the most committed educators, and the greatest source of inspiration and support for their peers in collaborative learning settings.

Thus, with due respect for an appropriate standard of academic integrity and quality, we still seek ways in which we can cultivate, recognize and reward all-important practitioner skills and qualities within an academic environment that does not give particular credence to that which does not generate publications, research grants, or prestige for the institution.

Alternative Programs: Entrepreneurial Thinking?

For adult learners, Husson & Kennedy (2003) stress the importance of “both high-quality instruction and superior customer service” (p.54). The idea of the student as a customer or client is one that does not sit well with those who fear the colonization of higher education by a neo-liberal agenda. Frequently, especially within the academy, this translates to a suspicion of alternative or accelerated programs based on a belief that these programs are automatically aligned with corporate interests, and bring an unhealthy air of entrepreneurialism to higher education.

We can offer three responses to this fear: first, the fear rests on the myth that the activities of a university politically and economically disinterested, sequestered from the concerns of daily life (Noble, 2001). Second, the suspicion rests on spurious assumption that all applied studies lack intellectual rigour and depth (Labaree, 2003; Wenzlaff, & Wieseman, 2004). Third, as Husson & Kennedy (2003) observe, critics may very well “have little or no experience with adult learners and accelerated programs” (p. 55). Closer observation might yield less reactionary responses, and more reflective dialogue on the roles of formal, informal and workplace learning in the learning society.

Bash (2003) believes that the university has much to learn from its adult students and adult-oriented programs, and should be less fearful of their typically entrepreneurial nature. Cervero (2001) adds: “There is no reason to expect that education can, or even should, be immune from the political and economic agendas of the institutions that sponsor it or those of the wider society. If we do not recognize these realities as we build systems of continuing education, it will be like crossing a crowded intersection with our eyes closed” (p. 27).

We can only conclude that it is too simple to strike an alignment between professional programs, neo-liberalism, *techne* and their corrosive effects on the academy. Indeed, continuing professional education programs may prove as potent and necessary a challenge to the hegemony of the traditional university as critical perspectives offered from the other side of the political spectrum. At either extreme, dominant epistemologies are disrupted, and exclusionary practices are replaced by wider and more diverse discourses of learning.

Conclusion

There are a number of reasons to give closer attention to graduate level continuing professional education. A compelling argument may be made that the university has an obligation to any professional community to educate that community in its best interests. If we do not, we run the risk of continuing education being usurped by technical/rational modes common to corporate models of professional development, wherein programs are taught by consultants rather than academics. While these seasoned practitioners often bring a wealth of field-based wisdom to graduate learning, they may, in some cases, also tend to limit learning to the immediate and practical interests of the company or organization's mandate. Further, Welton (2001) and Hargreaves (2003) suggest that critical reflexivity is required to survive rapid change in survival skill in the post-industrial world of work, and we would argue that the university, more removed from the concerns of daily practice, has a significant role to play in cultivating critical and reflective professional growth.

In our own corner of the world, this takes the form of reaching beyond the boundaries of traditional graduate degree programs to meet real and expressed need in the field of education to nurture "deep" professional development – the kind that moves beyond technical skills and short term thinking to nourish leadership and critical/reflective practice in teachers and administrators. It is our hope that this perspective will foster better, stronger educators who in turn help their own students to grow.

We hope that, through our program, we are responding to our graduate students' needs, and to the influx of increasingly sophisticated instructional technologies, by un-sequestering the university. Where students once traveled to be educated, the university "classroom" is now more than ever traveling to our students. For large universities with long histories, such a change can be difficult. But, change is coming. Adult educator Steven Brookfield (2003), for example, challenges traditional rationales for contact time as necessary to the development of critical practice. Here, despite its acknowledged and simultaneous drawbacks of the isolation experienced by some students in alternative delivery programs, weaker immersion in academic culture can translate to greater emancipation for the student.

Education in the professions poses significant questions and challenges to the *raison d'être* of our universities. The general thrust of graduate level studies in the interests of perpetuating the culture of the academy must be questioned if universities are to assume a significant role in the burgeoning demand for continuing professional education. We might well consider this change impetus not as a threat to what is, but as an opportunity to serve in new ways. Critical, thoughtful professionals provide better, more caring, and more effective service to their clients. In the service professions, these "clients" may be among society's most vulnerable. Thus the equation of applied studies with corporate interests is too simple, and is an inaccurate representation of the possibilities presented by graduate studies that serve working professionals.

With such a magnitude of change pressing at the gates of traditional graduate studies, fear is not an unreasonable nor unexpected response. But, we must reflect upon what it is we are we afraid of. The question of our fear is not trivial. And as academics, we may fear a loss of status and a real loss of "standards." But, we must also ask: how can we re-think standards? And, should we? A different track/course of graduate level education may not imply weaker – just different.

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