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ABSTRACT

The external degree movement is raising critical questions for higher education. It is necessary for advocates of new programs to deal with the basic assumptions underlying higher education in America. Faculty governance, the determination of what constitutes worthwhile knowledge, the selection of some subject matters and the rejection of others, the process of learning through life experiences, the definition of which experts can make these decisions, and other critical issues are examined. The 11 issues raised are a guide for proponents of external degrees to construct a rationale for their advocacy. The issues may also be used as a set of criteria for those who question external degrees to raise the critical concerns. The answers developed in response to the issues raised in this paper should be a useful basis for faculty, administrators, governing boards, and citizens to decide the values and limitations of external degrees. (Author/LBH)

EXTERNAL DEGREE PROGRAMS: SOME CRITICAL ISSUES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Education does not make up for experience. Such "wisdom" suggests that education is synonymous with irrelevant schooling while life experiences are inevitably growth-producing. Neither of these assumptions are necessarily true. School curricula may include a variety of beneficial direct experiences, while the quality of some people's living may be a series of unreflected-upon, unconscious responses and cultural hang-ups. Without such analytical overkill, however, the simple statement, "Education does not make up for experience," is clearly intended to be a concise assertion that formal education may be neither a sufficient or even necessary condition for effective living. Taken at face value, the statement is used as a rallying cry by advocates of external degrees. Following are twelve issues which must be considered in planning external degrees.

1. *Shall learnings which are presently being demonstrated receive college credit, or shall credit be awarded for only those learnings which are considered to be prerequisite to present performance?*

The test-out mechanism poses a curious anomaly. College learnings are supposed to prepare one for life. These learnings are offered as means, or instrumentalities, for learning other knowledge and skills deemed necessary in subsequent life situations. But in order to assess the value of life experiences, we examine people, not on what they know and can do--which is the stated purpose of formal education, but on those learnings which are similar to college-course achievements and which are admittedly only preparatory to life. An analogous situation would be to identify children doing library research and, rather than assess and credit them for present performance, credit them for passing a reading readiness examination.

One solution to this dilemma is to translate present college courses into competencies and forms of knowledge that are recognizable to students and practitioners. But translating college curricula into competencies is an awesome challenge and requires more than the traditional forms of assessment now common in the test-out processes of external degree programs.

2. *Should an external degree by virtue of its externalization assume more social-service purposes than a traditional degree, or should all students be equally free to pursue self-development of their particular talents and predispositions?*

The individuals who advocate externalization frequently perceive of themselves as well-endowed with social consciousness and are attracted to the external degree movement, in part, out of a need for social justice. Whatever their motivation, there is a do-gooder syndrome that permeates their rhetoric. Credit for prior life experiences is frequently awarded for community services; concurrent work-study credits are frequently awarded on the basis of the social value of the jobs; candidates sometimes receive credit upon the recommendation of an employer or supervisor; in some instances, credit is awarded to people for projects related to improving the environment, conserving energy, or serving as a consumer advocate.

Must the poet, or the person involved in theoretical mathematics, Greek literature, computorized music, be transformed into a community worker because he/she desires to pursue an external degree? Should we say "selfish" academic interests are reserved for regular college students, but service to others is the province of the external degree? Recognizing that a good part of the problem stems from traditional college programs not sharing common goals

or clear objectives for general education, the rationales of external degree programs should try to deal with this issue in more explicit terms.

3. *Shall external degree programs support and enhance the concept that higher education is essentially preparation for the business professional community, or shall external degrees also emphasize general-liberal studies?*

As higher education has become more accessible to larger numbers, it has become more vocational and professional in orientation. The study of various liberating disciplines for their intrinsic values and interests has always been more characteristic of students not searching for work. The closer we come to the goal of open access, the smaller the proportion and hence the influence of those who simply pursue their interests. It is now often described as a "luxury" in the sense that the student is freed from the need to feel pressured about subsequent employment and "luxury" in the sense that the student can be free to pursue his interests rather than be driven to complete some series of required courses. The generalization that the American college system has, for most students, become a vast certification process to qualify graduates for jobs and not primarily a learning-for-learning-sake situation is certainly not new.

The issue for developers of external degrees is whether they will recognize the advanced state of the vocational ethic in our society. Will they pander to it in order to gain support for their programs, or will they also seek to offer general and liberal studies? The problems of offering general education are not simply that the public does not value it, but that liberal and general studies are much more difficult areas in which to award credit for prior learning, for current work experiences, or for the kind of knowledge that will enable applicants to test out.

4. *Shall developers of external degree programs seek to gain acceptance for their programs by dealing with the rationale for such programs in popular terms (i.e., vocational mobility, the scarcity values of degrees), or is it the responsibility of developers to seek to broaden the views of proponents and adversaries regarding the educational values of all college degrees?*

Many faculty and even more in the public believe in the scarcity approach to assessing educational value; that is, a major portion of the college degree's worth derives from the fact that all others, or even most others, do not have a college degree. Education is consistently reinforced in the public mind as a commodity with real economic benefits. Such a scarcity ethic encourages people to see personal gain from not helping to equalize educational opportunities for all and personal threat from helping to grant degrees to increasing numbers of people. The faculty frequently shares this scarcity view; as advanced degrees are externalized, they perceive their own positions as being threatened.

The foregoing generalizations may be sweeping; they nevertheless portray the direction of the trend to emphasize the college degree, in fact, any diploma, certificate or degree, as valuable in a competitive sense-- because others do not have it-- and not necessarily because of what has been learned. Part of this condition is explained not only because of the undervaluing of general education in higher education but because of higher education's inability to define the meaning of general education in ways which are widely accepted and understood. The issue for developers of external degree programs is which constituencies will they risk antagonizing or

appeasing in the political process of having various institutions of higher education approve offering an external degree.

5. *Should external degree programs permit faculty assignment by the usual methods of self-selection and collegial selection, or should procedures for faculty assignment include new means of determining who shall serve as faculty and their roles?*

It requires no detailed review here to contend that projections for declining enrollments in the 1980's are already being felt in many institutions. Large public institutions as well as small private colleges are in the throes of retrenchment decisions. While there is still insufficient data upon which to generalize carefully, it is not uncommon to find numerous institutions in financial difficulty which have initiated external degree programs with great alacrity. In these cases, faculty are often faced with forced choices between their long-held perceptions of academic excellence and their needs for continued employment.

In usual forms of faculty assignment, it is assumed that while an individual may prefer to teach an advanced course, he/she is entirely competent to teach an introductory course, and that the quality of instruction and student learning will not suffer because of an instructor's preference. In an external degree program, however, the differences in faculty assignment are not between one course and another but between knowledge in different forms; between radically different methods of instruction and between students whose expectations are significantly different.

The dilemma, while complex, can be stated simply. Faculty may be incompetent or unwilling to teach or credit external student activities.

Should a separate faculty which is some form of subset of the total faculty be created?

6. *Should the realms of creditable knowledge be determined by students, by faculty, or by some cooperative means involving both groups?*

Studying at home, at work, when one chooses, under conditions one chooses, are markedly different from the conditions under which students normally pursue degrees. Student convenience, by itself, is not evidence that standards are high or low. We frequently fall into the trap of confusing clerical or organizational demands with academic requirements or, conversely, of accommodating to student convenience under the guise of making knowledge "more relevant."

The issue is joined at the point of specifying the nature of knowledge. Traditional college programs emphasize a level of theoretic abstraction which tends to generalize across a wide spectrum of real life or professional situations. External degree programs emphasize work and life experiences which are particular, personal and situation-bound. The former (traditional) tries to move the student from the general to the specific; the latter (external) tries to move the student from the specific case to the conceptual.

Questions inevitably arise for external degree programs regarding the appropriateness of the knowledge that can be gleaned from experiences. Is all knowledge of equal value? Is it merely a question of raising the concrete to some higher levels of reasoning? If not, what criteria can be used to accept or reject the knowledge particular students may seek credit for?

In traditional programs, the faculty determine the nature of knowledge that is creditable toward degrees. The question of what knowledge is of most worth is clearly answered in terms of the competence of the existing faculty. A few external degree proponents have advocated a comparable form of extremism based on student preferences. They claim that whatever students have done, or are doing, should in some way be legitimized into a recognized and creditable form of knowledge. Between those extreme points are numerous other views regarding what knowledge is worthy of credit. The issue of which knowledge will be credited is in large measure a question of who makes the decision.

7. *Should regular courses and life/work experiences be rationalized only in terms of students' demonstrated learnings, or should procedures be developed for crediting actual experiences gained on or off the campus?*

The unreflected-upon assumptions are simple -- although not always accurate: that faculty know things students do not; that, as a result of taking a particular course, students learn things which they did not know before; that it is possible for the faculty to state, in advance, precisely what the students will learn as a result of taking a particular course; that students progress toward the stated goals of a course in weekly-monthly stages; and that the varying degrees of competence which different students must achieve to earn various grades can be clearly specified. These assumptions reflect a linear concept of teaching and learning rather than a view which assumes students' learnings to be idiosyncratic, random or unpredictable.

Those who support a highly controlled, predictable regimen of college courses frequently argue against the informal learning approaches common in external degree programs. Yet, when the mechanism of test-out is suggested, many regular faculty argue that their courses have an intrinsic validity for students which no tests can assess. Many faculty sincerely believe that attending their classes is a unique "experience" which transcends measurement.

Advocates of external degrees frequently begin by advocating non-linear approaches to learning. They emphasize the importance and inevitable differences among total immersion, life/work experiences. Frequently, however, they move to very clear, objective, narrow assessment instruments for substantiating such experiential learning.

It seems, therefore, that we have a reversal of arguments. Regular college faculty develop neat syllabi and examinations, but then contend that their courses must be experienced in person. On the other hand, external degree proponents advocate total, real experiences, but then agree to formal testing as a basis for awarding credit.

8. *Should knowledge be broken down into the traditional specializations before it can be credited, or is it possible to develop synthesized and applied means for determining creditable performance?*

Academic excellence is defined in terms of particular disciplines and specialized fields of study. The university is a loose confederation of departments which legitimize and enhance these specializations. Each discipline has its own methodology and way of ordering reality. The strength of this approach is that each group of specialists in a particular discipline can develop and deepen its own way of understanding the world.

In external degree programs, people do not usually begin with specialized ways of viewing reality. In life and work, people tend to perceive of total problem situations which require the skills of simultaneously applying many forms of knowledge.

The assumption of regular college programs is that graduates will subsequently integrate and apply what they have learned. Conversely, the assumption of the external degree proponents is that those who can already deal with total problem situations will benefit from analyzing what they are doing in terms of the various component disciplines.

9. *Should external degree programs be adjusted to fit the traditional measures of faculty workload and student requirements (i.e., the credit course), or should new units of measurement which represent work/life experience be developed?*

In several external degree programs, it has been reported that many students "miss" being on a campus and in proximity with other students. They frequently take some regular course-work to gain a feeling of group identity and support. There is little question that on-campus students learn much from their fellows, the libraries and laboratories and, of course, the faculty.

Typically, the faculty workload is computed in terms of credit courses taught. Thus, one institution describes itself as having a fifteen-hour credit load which emphasizes the faculty's basic responsibility to teaching. In another institution, the average faculty load is set at six credit hours and the expectation is that faculty will do research, write and perform community professional services.

External degree programs emphasize the number of individual students moving through individualized programs. Faculty load is more readily computed in terms of the number of individual students a faculty member works with; it cannot be reckoned in terms of credit hours.

This distinction is more than bookkeeping. It shifts the emphasis from the concerns and convenience of the faculty to the individualized programs of students. While there is still insufficient data, it is likely that faculty in external degree programs will work longer hours in direct contact with students or in support activities related to student welfare, than is now the case in teaching classes, preparing for classes and grading papers. In external degree programs, the needs of the student and his/her program development take the place of the credit hour as the building block of both the students' and faculty's workload.

There are several issues involved in this reemphasis. By what means shall faculty be selected? What criteria should be used to determine faculty competence? How shall workload be computed? With the growing rise of collective bargaining contracts, these issues will become even more sensitive.

From the students' perspective, quotas and related problems of admission must be rethought since the numbers which can be taught by faculty vary from traditional programs. Admission criteria must also be developed.

This brief review just touches on some of the issues that are generated by moving from group-centered programs based on in-college course time to individually-centered programs based on students' time and effort.

10. Should tuition or fees be charged for credit which is awarded by some form of assessment, or should fees be limited to only credit offered directly by an institution?

External degree programs are sometimes criticized as being mills which can efficiently process large numbers of students for profit. While this charge is not unheard of related to regular college programs, it is especially sensitive for programs which can suddenly expand the number of students they serve with only a small increase in costs. This issue of tuition costs for prior work which is credited, rather than actually offered, is a sensitive one. There are obviously extensive costs involved in providing professional services such as evaluating students' prior life/work experience, current experiences, the setting up of internships, transcript evaluation, providing competency examinations, counseling, and other processes involved in a student's total evaluation and program development. Should some sort of fee be charged for a total work-up? Is it ethical to charge tuition when awarding credit for prior work done elsewhere or for testing out? In many cases, committees of faculty are involved for extensive periods. At present, most recognized external degree programs charge for credit work that is actually offered and do not charge for work that is merely evaluated. This puts great strain on the institution to absorb the many costs required for analyzing students' widely ranging achievements.

11. Should minimum residence requirements be applicable to external degree programs, or might the external degree concept be based entirely on students' prior achievements?

What is the minimum portion of a student's program which must be earned in a particular program? In some external programs, units of time (i.e., weeks, months, quarters, years) are used. In other programs, special units are created to represent the accomplishments of students in particular

programs. This issue cuts across a range of problems, from what to put on transcripts, to faculty/student evaluation, to developing an institutional budget. Without a one-year "residence" rule, for example, it would be possible for students to present themselves, their portfolios, and their transcripts and simply request a degree. Institutions that do this are usually considered to be mills whatever they charge.

12. *Should program development in external degree programs be the exclusive purvue of regular faculty, or should all those involved in working with students have a decision-making role in establishing requirements, learning experiences and awarding of credit?*

External degree advocates frequently argue that by not having regular faculty they are open to the widest range of expertise that can be garnered. Opponents contend that use of non-regular faculty leads to helter skelter consultants who do not bear the responsibility for their graduates. This controversy is most relevant in external degree programs which are on the master's and doctoral levels.

In more usual cases, the issue of defining faculty status is faced when cooperating personnel are used. People who work with students in life/work situations are frequently not regular faculty. They may be recruited for special or non-traditional skills; they may be part-time because there are not enough students in a special interest area to work with them; they may simply be people who work with external students in some job who have received special training as supervisors or evaluators.

This issue relates to several previous ones -- especially the issue of who decides which knowledge is of most worth. In this context, the emphasis is on the need for defining the faculty. There is no way an external degree program can be offered without a widespread dependence on ad hoc, adjunct, part-time, or copperating personnel. Recognizing the basic assumption that the quality of any degree will only be as good as the faculty who offer it, this issue is paramount.

Other issues and their derivations will inevitably arise in the course of developing and offering external degrees. While all these issues cannot be resolved in advance, the twelve raised in this paper are critical: if they are not planned for in advance, they may injure the institution's reputation, the soundness of regular curricula, or preclude any opportunity for developing an external degree program.