# The Life and Death of Adult Higher Education

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## Abstract

Should unique adult higher education programs be preserved and even championed, or should such programs succumb to the pressures of the day and get folded into more conventional higher education? This essay argues that, in addressing such vital questions, we need to become more aware of the relationship between human development and college study, specifically, whether new research in and theories of adult development suggest that college experiences designed particularly for adults can provoke more mature thinking in older students.

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Many of our college programs for adult learners are booming. Many more, however, are struggling to survive as competition among institutions, financial pressures, and the demands of state and accrediting agencies reshape so much of what we originally set out to do. So here are our questions: Given the situation in which we find ourselves, should we continue trying to sustain unique programs for adults seeking college degrees in the spirit of the long and rich history of adult education that sought to make higher education meaningful for those who were so often denied entry? Or, would we be better off succumbing to external pressures for standardization, abandoning our unique programs for adult learners, and joining the ranks of conventional higher education?

Before we examine this issue in greater depth, we need to identify the distinctive features of these college programs for adults. Clearly the most notable feature is an institutional delivery system that allows busy adults with jobs, families, and community obligations access to credit-bearing classes that lead to accredited degrees. Programs offered at night, credits earned through "correspondence schools" (now referred to as "distance learning" programs), and, today, internet-based courses, are all explicitly designed as alternatives to the insular campus-based programs designed for full-time traditional-aged students. Secondly, in order to cater to the purported pragmatic nature of adult learners, adult-focused courses are designed to make the relevance of the subject matter to current social, economic, political, and individual concerns more explicit. Thirdly, in recognition of adult maturity and experience, many adult college programs allow learners considerable latitude in deciding what they want to learn, selecting the materials and resources they find interesting, and pursuing their preferred ways of learning.

As long as traditional colleges continue to emphasize day-time, face-to-face social contacts among students and faculty, clubs and other social organizations, sports and access to athletic equipment, to say nothing of study abroad, most adults are forced to look elsewhere for educational access. However, when some of these same traditional colleges find it necessary to increase their enrollments, adult students are suddenly transformed into a highly desirable potential new market (sometimes referred to as "low-hanging fruit"). To the extent that they are

able to expand their offerings—and in particular to make available convenient and readily accessible forms of study (e.g., online courses or classes that meet no more than once a week or at night) these colleges directly compete with and thus negatively impact the enrollments of stand-alone adult programs. The high status of the traditional college—the idea of a physical campus that represents an "ivory tower" of fervent intellectual activity—also has drawing power. If a co-existing adult program appears to offer the same resources available to full-time younger students, many adult learners would consider this as a very attractive opportunity.

Moreover, there is another side of the picture. Ironically, educational theory posits that the two distinguishing *educational* features of adult college programs are equally valuable for traditional-aged students too. Indeed, college-level subject matter that has relevance to real life and allows student agency in determining what to learn are both arguably important for creating greater motivation and deeper understanding for *all* learners. John Dewey, for example, pointed out that student agency and self-direction is critical to learning at any age (Dewey, 1916; Mayhew & Edwards, 2007/1965). And most teachers of traditional-aged students are just as concerned to show their younger students the relevance of their courses of study as are adult educators. It is also more and more the case today that many traditional-aged students have jobs, are parents, and have no time for institutionalized leisure. Thus, even the situational features that distinguish adult programs are increasingly attractive to many younger students too. Put another way, an institution that can offer a traditional program for younger students along with a program that caters to adults—assuming adequate resources for both—has a decided advantage over singular and less diverse programs.

Given this likely outcome, why not give up on trying to sustain unique adult programs? The "elephant in the room" here, the unspoken issue, is the question of "developmental stage." The model of education in which young ("emerging") adults (Arnett, 2004) are sequestered away from home but in a relatively safe environment is predicated upon the relative immaturity of these traditional-aged students. As compared to older adults, they not only lack key human experiences (e.g., parenting, careers), but recent studies have found that the "adolescent brain" is not fully developed until well beyond the college years (Jensen, 2015). Consistent with these findings, cognitive researchers report that intellectual and meaning-making perspectives of traditional-aged college students are relatively undeveloped (e.g., Perry, 1970; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). In the safe environment provided by traditional colleges, these younger students have the opportunity to grow up or mature as they are encouraged to communicate thoughts and opinions, experiment with novel experiences, acquire more sophisticated understandings, and tolerate uncertainty. Theoretically, at least, older adults returning to school have already passed through these early stages of cognitive development in response to various personal, social, and work experiences.

To the extent that traditional-aged students are significantly less mature than older adults, the sequestering model of education and a college experience that encourages student to mature remains highly attractive to many parents. The fact that most college faculty know very little about human development (unless they are psychologists) does not seem to be of particular concern. Humans obviously "develop" whether they go to college or not—growth seems to be a process that results from exposure to any new or disruptive experience that stimulates reflection and/or behavior changes. Of course, if the intellectual skills promoted in college increase the

likelihood and even the quality of reflective thought, then college-level disciplinary study may, even if indirectly, promote a deeper kind of thinking that is important for any kind of human growth. Thus, even if college attendance is not necessary for personal development, it could still add extra value to the maturation process.

In sum, highly regarded traditional colleges today are considered well worth attending, not only for their scholarly resources but as places where young people are expected to acquire more mature habits of behavior, more adult-like attitudes and values, and broader and more worldly perspectives. However, whatever the developmental advantages college offers for these emerging adults, it is generally true that the older adults who also seek a college education do *not* do so for reasons of personal growth (e.g., Stevens, 2014). The vast majority of these adults come in order to acquire new information and to earn a degree that certifies that knowledge and offers economic advantages. While they might enjoy the intellectual advantage of being associated with a well-known high-status university, they are not enthusiastic about or do not see the relevance of the developmental concerns that take up a considerable amount of non-scholarly attention by traditional university administrators and staff.

However, most people would agree that personal growth does not stop when people reach the mid-twenties. With age, people become (by definition) more experienced or proficient, sometimes wiser, more tolerant, and happier. During the past 50 years or so, beginning with Erik Erikson's theorizing in the 1970s (Erikson, 1980; 1998), understanding the ways adults change in positive ways across the lifespan has become a discipline in its own right and an area of serious scholarly research. It is now generally agreed that there are a number of definable stages in the life-course associated with marriage, parenting, community involvement, professional work and so forth, that can and do stimulate further measurable changes in the individual that are recognized as personal growth (e.g., Kegan, 1994). Theorists may differ in the number of stages, the nature of the changes, and their focus. Some emphasize personality change; some focus upon the development of ethical thought or religious belief; still others upon happiness or tolerance or perspective. Table 1 briefly describes some of the theories of adult development that appear in a recent edition of *The Journey of Adulthood* (Bjorklund, 2015). What they all have in common is that they represent changes in how adults make meaning out of life or in their ways of thinking.

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Table 1
*Various Development Theories*

**Five factor theory of personality** (p. 243): The 5 factors = Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness. Data: e.g., with age, we become more agreeable and conscientious, less neurotic and open

**Erikson's theory of psychosocial development** (p. 255): 8 stages, each one a conflict that requires resolution – 4 or 5 stages occurring in adulthood. (9th stage in Erikson, 1982/97). Data: e.g., generativity (stage 7) higher at midlife than earlier or later.

**Loevinger's theory of ego development** (p. 259): 7 stages (4 occurring in adulthood). Data (e.g., development) is correlated with education (self-awareness decreases; conscientiousness and individualism increase).

**Valliant's theory** (p. 261): based upon Erikson – looks at changes in defense mechanisms. Data, e.g., mechanisms employed become more mature with age (i.e., more consonant with reality).

**Super's theory of career development** (p. 207)**:** 5 stages of life-span career, 4 in adulthood (exploration, establishment, maintenance, disengagement)

**Gutmann's gender cross-over effects** (p. 263):  More fluidity in gender with age. Data, e.g., increased openness to expression of previously unexpressed parts of the self with age.

**Positive psychology** (e.g., Maslow, Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi):  One example: Ryan & Deci's self-determination theory (p. 265). 4 stages of personal growth:  happiness, competence, autonomy, relatedness). Data, e.g., graduates with personal (intrinsic) growth goals happier than those with only extrinsic goals.

**Perry's theory of cognitive/emotional development (1981):**  3 main stages (12 levels in all) positing change from thinking in dualities to acquiring tolerance of uncertainty during 4 years of college education. Further developed by Belenky et al. (1986) with women and finding 6 progressive stages of "ways of knowing" quite different from Perry's (with men).

**Kohlberg's theory of the development of moral reasoning** (p. 283):  3 major stages with levels somewhat akin to Perry's theory. Further developed by Gilligan (p. 286) for women.

**Fowler's theory of faith development** (p. 287):  6 stages, 4 in adulthood (synthetic, individuative, conjunctive, universalizing).

**Kegan's synthesizing theory** (p. 291):  Development as a spiral between connectedness and independence; then a later theory of perspectival change (1994), with 5 stages, 3 in adulthood with 3 progressive levels of consciousness.

From Bjorklund, (2015)

In essence, it is noteworthy that human development seems to represent gradual changes in perspective, quality of thought, critical reasoning, understanding tolerance of uncertainty, conflict, diversity, and meaning-making. What is interesting to us, however, is that for a significant number of teachers, particularly progressive educators (e.g., Jelly & Mandell, 2017), the main purpose of education to is promote exactly those same cognitive changes except that for us, they are directed toward the outer world rather than—as in developmental theories—toward one's inner self. It's hard not to conclude that college study should promote human development. To the extent that college seems to help young adults in that regard, it seems almost inevitable that appropriate college experiences should promote the development of older adults as well.

If we are to test this claim, the question of whether special programs for adult learners should be preserved needs to be considered in another light entirely. Clearly, we need many more scholarly investigations about the relationship between a college education and human development than we currently have available. The most directly relevant research question pertaining to the future of adult college programs is whether the intermingling of adult learners with younger students helps or hinders the development process. If young students benefit from studying together as a single group, might it not be the case that adults at common points in their lives might similarly benefit from studying together? In terms of intermingling, young people do tend typically to learn from adults, but the reverse—speaking developmentally—may not be true for adults.

Another set of questions that needs to be investigated relates to the question of intentionality. Should faculty remain relatively ignorant of the many different theories of human development and allow the process of development to occur as a byproduct of subject matter study? Even if they are unaware of the potentially maturing effect of higher learning skill development, should

these teachers be encouraged to focus more upon critical thinking and other intellectual skills rather than upon the delivery of specific information? Would such a change in focus make a difference in promoting more advanced ways of "meaning-making" and reflection?

Until we have a better understanding of the impact of college on adult development, it seems to us that we should do whatever we can to preserve special college programs for adults, if for no other reason than it would allow us to better pursue some of the questions raised above. Indeed, one reason we sought to present these ideas to the AHEA audience was to stimulate current adult educators to think more intentionally about the interaction between college study and human development. Perhaps they might even stimulate their own (adult) graduate students to take up such questions. And with undergraduates, perhaps teachers could find ways of measuring both developmental levels and ways of learning in college to better understand their relationship.

In today's difficult political climate, we need to provide college experiences for adults that encourage them to pay closer attention to how they think, not just about a particular subject matter, but about the many contentious political, social, and personal issues we are all grappling with today. Until we have more information about whether college experiences designed for adults can provoke more complex, critical, and mature thinking in older adults, and whether that development is more likely in adult-only or stage-appropriate groups, we should continue to support and fight for our unique adult college programs.

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