Investigating Adult Education Graduate Program Trends in a Post-Covid19 Environment

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Abstract: The history of Adult Education (AE) graduate programs spans almost a century, yet many programs have experienced significant challenges in recent years to remain viable. The purpose of this paper is to understand the struggles AE graduate programs encounter in building, maintaining, and growing programs in North America. We conducted two separate research investigations, in 2015 and in 2022/23, to explore these issues. Our findings reveal program challenges to remain viable, as well as strategies faculty and administrators have utilized to strengthen their programs.

Keywords: Adult education graduate programs, program titles, higher education, health professions education, human resource development

As adult education (AE) professors who have worked as colleagues in master's and doctoral graduate programs in adult, professional, and higher education for several years in an urban public university, we have experienced significant challenges in maintaining viable graduate programs. The first challenge unfolded over many years due to state and federal funding cuts to higher education, making many public universities increasingly dependent on revenue from student enrollments or grant funding. Then came the Great Recession of 2008 to 2009, and the subsequent financial hardships experienced by many meant there was less money for investing in graduate or professional education. This resulted in low student enrollments that accelerated the closure of some AE programs (i.e., National Louis University and Cornell University). More recently, higher education institutions have struggled to maintain or increase student enrollment and funding due to the abrupt changes following the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent campus closings for several months. Most campuses switched their formats to online or hybrid learning with mixed success. Although the pandemic accelerated these learning format changes, they were not universally embraced by students and may have caused more student attrition. As students left campuses and universities lost revenue for campus services, university budgets experienced negative ripple effects.

In a post-pandemic context, many universities struggle with all these issues and others that threaten their ability to continue programs and services to students. In addition, as a result of lowered enrollments, some universities initiated re-organization plans for their colleges and/or programs, collapsing similar programs into newly formed colleges or departments and closing programs with low enrollments, forcing faculty members to find new ways to attract and retain students, often with minimal assistance from university administrations. University re-organization may impact program viability and how resources are allocated to programs. AE graduate programs are not immune to these challenges. In conversations with colleagues from other AE programs, we have learned that many face similar challenges to those we have encountered: administrative indifference, scarcity of resources, and stagnant enrollment.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the struggles AE graduate programs encounter in building, maintaining, and growing programs. AE graduate programs are frequently linked with inter-related programs, such as higher education or health professions education, so we also seek to understand the challenges these inter-related programs face. We first examine the history and *state* of academic graduate AE and related programs and then conclude with a larger discussion regarding AE program challenges and strategies faculty have utilized to strengthen their programs.

Brief History of Adult Education Graduate Programs

The earliest AE academic graduate programs began in the 1920s and 1930s with the establishment of programs at Columbia University and the University of Chicago. However, it wasn't until the 1950s that new AE graduate programs were established in many universities across the United States and Canada. These programs were strengthened when the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) was formed in 1957. Among CPAE's first activities was to develop graduate AE program standards that helped establish academic credibility for AE programs (Hansman & Rose, 2018). The CPAE program standards have been revised several times. They are currently being reviewed to respond to changing contexts (online/hybrid/remote learning, lack of administrative support, adoption for accreditation, etc.). Through researching the development of CPAE and AE graduate programs from the 1950s to the 1970s, Hansman and Rose (2018) uncovered that early AE faculty struggled to "carve" out a place for themselves in the academy and acceptance as legitimate academic programs. Unfortunately, this struggle for acceptance and legitimacy continues, as more recently, some AE programs have been forced to consolidate with other programs (i.e., Higher Education, HRD, Technology) to stay afloat in their universities. Others have permanently closed. In researching AE program closures, Milton et al. (2003) determined contributing factors to closure were program integration, responsiveness to change, and leadership.

Adult Education Program Research

In the past several years, studies have examined different factors related to AE graduate programs. Sonstrom et al. (2012) studied how AE doctoral programs in North America adhered to the 2008 program Standards of the CPAE by examining AE curricula on 37 program websites in the spring of 2011. They focused on the extent to which programs attended the nine recommended core curricular areas for doctoral programs. They found that all programs met at least two of the standards, but only two of the programs met all nine of the standards. Tisdell et al. (2016) took a different approach and conducted a quantitative survey of North American AE faculty and a textual analysis of the websites of AE graduate programs. Their purpose was to explore the field of AE to understand the demographic information about North American AE faculty and programs, faculty involvement with professional associations, and the nature of faculty work, interests, motivations, and satisfaction. Among other things, they reported a decrease in the number of doctoral AE programs based on Sonstrom et al.'s 2012 findings, from 44 AE doctoral programs to 38 doctoral programs in 2016.

Hill and Issac-Savage (2022) focused on AE program closures and described their experiences as senior AE faculty members whose programs were closed by university administrators. Both described higher education financial issues, administrative and leadership problems, and lack of university support that led to their programs closing. They cite Bérubé et al. to explain their experiences: "Program closures represent the confluence of . . . long-term

trends: The erosion and redefinition of tenure, the massive growth in the ranks of contingent faculty, . . . the nationwide disinvestment in public higher education and proliferation of administrative positions" (Hill & Isaac-Savage, 2022, p. 5). In more recent research, Collins and Zacharakis's (2023) case study examined one AE program's growth, decline, and continuous rebirth in the competitive higher education market and academic stratification. Throughout its 55 years of existence, the program, in its case study, has supported faculty in embracing an entrepreneurial spirit and accepting leadership positions within the program. Through flexibility and diversification, the program has continuously evolved to meet the needs of the current learners. They recommend that all faculty focus on the program and their professional reputations first. They conclude that "Today academic capitalism is real in higher education; for faculty who believe in the opportunities higher education provide to students, the challenge is to maintain our values while thriving in this landscape" (Collins & Zacharakis, 2023, p. 111).

Adult Education and Related Programs: Issues and Concerns

To better understand the state of AE programming, we conducted a web-based review of programs in the United States and Canada. This was a follow-up of an earlier research project we conducted in 2015 on (at that time) current AE programs to inform our own AE program revision process. In that initial 2015 search, we examined websites for AE programs' curricula, program credit hours, and the number of faculty members. Our current AE program research began in 2022 and 2023 when we again conducted a website search, first reviewing all programs from our 2015 research list. We then expanded our research to a larger web-based search for any additional programs related to AE. We identified well-known and long-standing AE programs. However, with an expanded search, it became more difficult to identify possible additional related programs due to several factors. AE programs are often folded into larger departments. For example, at Cleveland State University, our Adult, Professional, and Higher Education (APHE) program is housed in the Counseling, Administration (K-12), Supervision, and Adult Learning Department (CASAL). We found that many AE programs are situated in departments that do not contain the words "adult education" in their title, and, in addition, their titles may highlight other specialties, making it challenging to know if AE is a related program. Examples of related programs may include Educational Administration, Higher Education, Psychology, Counseling, Leadership Studies, Human Resources Development, Professional Studies, and Lifelong Learning.

Compounding these difficulties, AE programs are often listed with or subsumed in Higher Education programming, making it problematic to identify the number of faculty in an AE program, as all department faculty may not focus on adult education. Finally, using the search term "adult education" not only results in graduate programs in AE but also includes a myriad of continuing education programs geared to adults. Finally, there may be newer programs that are currently not as well-known that we did not discover in our search.

Another issue with comparing our 2015 research and AE program list to our current search stems from many university reorganizations that have occurred, many post-COVID-19. For example, Cleveland State University has been reorganized, and our department has been moved from the College of Human Services and Education to the Levin College of Public Affairs and Education. Our new college now includes the former College of Education, Criminology, Sociology, and Communication Departments and the School of Urban Affairs. Our AE program has not gone through significant changes as a result of this reorganization. Still, it is more

difficult to find the APHE program on the university website in a college that includes a number of varied disciplines besides ours.

Higher Education Programs

Higher Education (HE) programs are often associated with AE. HE programs vary in title, but they usually focus on higher education leadership and administration, college teaching, student affairs, and/or counseling/advising. After a search of university websites within the state of Ohio and surrounding states, we identified 39 graduate programs with a focus on HE, of which only four were situated under the umbrella of adult education. We know HE graduate programs face challenges similar to those mentioned in our discussion above, yet we were able to identify strategies faculty and administrators have utilized to address such challenges and strengthen their programs. These strategies include, but are not limited to, partnering/situating struggling programs with reputable programs that already have strong enrollments. A positive outcome of COVID-19 was the realized success of online/remote teaching and learning. Flexibility within AE and related graduate programs (online, hybrid) may be a strategy to increase enrollment, hence strengthening programs.

Interestingly, the number of credit hours required to complete HE programs varied greatly among programs, ranging from 30 to 65 credit hours to graduate. Program faculty may want to gauge whether the number of credit hours required to graduate impacts the recruitment and retention of students. In addition, it wasn't clear if internships were required or optional for students; nonetheless, the majority of the 39 HE programs reviewed have some type of internship component. A multitude of concentrations (or certificates) exist within HE programs. Concentrations included career and academic advising; sports management; enrollment management; mind, brain, and learning; student development and affairs; academic support; college athletics leadership; strategic leadership; institutional effectiveness; leadership and administration; adult learner; counseling; diversity; technology; HE policy; legal issues in HE; and college teaching. Finally, it was evident that these HE programs market the uniqueness of their programs on their university websites. Some programs highlight environment or contexts, for example: urban; diversity, equity, and inclusion; experiential/contextual; community-based; and/or cohort-based learning. Others market the partnerships that exist with other disciplines/programs within their universities, while still other programs focus on internship, study abroad, graduate assistantship, and service opportunities. In many program descriptions, academics, low faculty-student ratios, small class size, faculty expertise, electives, and involvement in research were also emphasized. It would be beneficial for faculty and administrators to identify cost effective approaches to market AE and related programs, highlighting unique features that may attract potential graduate students.

Health Professions Programs

The final program area we examined was health professions education (HPE). There has been a marked increase in HPE over the past 50 years. In 2018, there were 37 US-based HPE programs and a total of 151 globally. In 2023, this number was listed as 157 globally with 52 situated in North America (Tekian et al., 2023). HPE programs (also called Medical Education or Health Sciences Education) are often partnerships with a number of disciplines (Artino et al., 2018), and they may be situated in a variety of different colleges or schools, including medicine and education. There is more clarity in the labeling of HPE programs than in other AE related programs, although some are listed as specialties within broader programming. Our findings

indicate that these collaborations are frequently among medicine, public health, nursing, business, and/or adult education. In addition to master's programs, there are a number of programs that offer graduate certificates in HPE. The increase in programming can be linked to a move to professionalize HPE (Artino et al., 2018).

Discussion and Conclusion

Recently, popular news sources have illustrated several issues that are affecting higher education institutions. Enrollment is down in graduate programs (Knox, 2023), college education has less importance attached to it, and costs have skyrocketed (Tough, 2023). AE and related programs are not immune to these challenges, and, mostly anecdotally, adult educators are aware of the issues AE programs face as well as of past and recent program closures. However, as adult educators with significant familiarity and experience in the field, we found it somewhat difficult to identify AE programs and trace their trajectories via web searches. This difficulty, in part, was due to the complexity of determining the exact number of program closures because of diverse program and department names for AE programs and, further, the consolidation of AE programs with similar programs (i.e., HRD, HE). In addition, university restructuring has buried AE programs in schools or colleges that do not necessarily highlight the presence of AE programming. The frequent confusion of AE graduate programs with continuing adult education programs/departments further illustrates the issues with AE program visibility.

As Hansman and Rose (2018) contend, the challenges to AE programs are historical and longstanding and, as recently discussed by Hill and Issac-Savage (2022) and Collins and Zacharakis (2023), are not new to the fields of AE or HE. Collins and Zacharakis highlighted the myriad of roles faculty may assume to maintain a program's viability (recruiter, marketer, innovator, entrepreneur). In lieu of administrative support, it is incumbent on program faculty to navigate these broader issues while recognizing and taking on the additional roles faculty are required to assume. But the question is: How can already busy and overloaded AE faculty members meet these competing demands for their time and energy?

In conclusion, AE education programs share common goals, but programs are tailored to the needs of their potential students as well as their local communities/contexts. Programs require different strategies to address their own challenges; however, it might be beneficial to identify strategies from related programs (i.e., HPE, HE, HRD) that can be applied across related programs.

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