

The Value of Continuing Education

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Those of us who work in higher education are often asked or even required to justify what we do in economic terms. It appears that the entire institution of public American higher education is so commonly viewed by many state legislators as an economic drain that chancellors, presidents, and multitudes of administrators spend an immense amount of time and resources demonstrating that the public American university is an economic engine worthy of the limited support that it receives.

When we were invited to submit this paper, we were asked to write about the way continuing education contributes to economic development. We are happy to do so, and from our particular Wisconsin vantage point, have a lot to say. At the same time, we cannot help but bristle at a national climate that makes this article of interest. Higher education—and continuing education as one arm of that enterprise—is not just an economic engine; it contributes directly and in a multifaceted fashion to the common good. It generates and makes accessible a great deal of the knowledge that drives our economy; it helps develop an understanding of our society and the world for millions of students; and it helps develop the personal, social, and human competencies without which, to use the words of Thomas Hobbes, life would be poor, nasty, brutish, and short. But we know we are preaching to the choir. Nearly all of the readers of this piece are our colleagues: continuing educators who have to engage in the Sisyphean task of showing the economic impact and economic value of what they do. And so we turn to this task with the aim to summarize the economic value of higher education, and to show how continuing education is the vehicle

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through which the university connects with the community to make life rich, pleasant, kind, and long.

We should note that we use the term “continuing education” rather loosely because the boundaries of what fits into continuing education units from one institution to another are extremely fuzzy, so keeping the concept defined to one institution will not fit another. Instead, we use “continuing education” to connote the meaning that former University of Wisconsin President Charles Van Hise intended when he spoke of the Wisconsin Idea in 1904, namely that the boundaries of the university should be the boundaries of the state, and that research conducted at the university should be applied to solve problems and improve health, quality of life, and the environment for all citizens. Readers of this article might adjust this normative definition to better fit their institutions, but the point will be the same: continuing education extends the knowledge and research created at a university to audiences that would otherwise not benefit from it. In this loose interpretation of continuing education, universities engage in continuing education efforts in ways that are not confined to their traditional continuing education departments.

EXTENDING KNOWLEDGE

Having to defend the economic development value of higher education is a relatively recent phenomenon. American higher education began as a benefit for the wealthy, but by the middle of the 19th century it was clear that the value of higher education had to be extended throughout the country. The Morrill Act, signed into law by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, was designed “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”¹ Universities quickly sprouted across the country soon after the act was signed, and they immediately began to focus on extending applied knowledge generated on their campuses throughout the states they served. In 1887 the Hatch Act extended the Morrill Act by giving federal land to states to establish agricultural experimental stations. This ensured that agricultural research was part of the mission of the land-grant university, and it put the university at the forefront of helping to develop what was at that time the primary economic engine of the country. By 1914 and the ratification of the Smith-Lever Act, the import of the land-grant university as a key driver of economic development through agricultural research was clear. The Smith-Lever Act established cooperative extension as a partnership between the US Department of Agriculture and land-grant universities in order to inform people about current develop-

ments in agriculture, home economics, and related subjects so that they would be able to translate that knowledge into more effective modes of production and more effective ways of living. Cooperative extension was—and remains today—continuing education focused primarily on agriculture, natural resources, youth development, and family wellness.

The most significant public and political recognition of the connection between higher education, economic development, and national wellbeing came after World War II. In 1946 Harry Truman appointed a Presidential Commission on Higher Education, and it was “charged with the task of defining the responsibilities of colleges and universities in American democracy and in international affairs—and, more specifically, with reexamining the objectives, methods and facilities of higher education in the United States in the light of the social role it has to play.”² The commission found that higher education was critical for national security, social welfare, and economic growth:

Science and invention have diversified natural resources, have multiplied new devices and techniques of production. These have altered in radical ways the interpersonal and intergroup relations of Americans in their work, in their play, and in their duties as citizens. ...The increasing complexity that technological progress has brought to our society has made a broader understanding of social processes and problems essential for effective living.³

Focusing on the critical connection between national security and higher education, the report notes that “It is essential today that education come decisively to grips with the world-wide crisis of mankind....Nothing less than a complete reorientation of our thinking will suffice if mankind is to survive and move on to higher levels.”

As the GI Bill played out, universities expanded their programs to meet rapidly growing demands. From 1938 to 1948, the number of college students doubled. Building on this growth, it then tripled from 1960 to 1980.⁴ Underlying this growth were significant social and economic changes that began in the previous century. The American workforce had been changing and expanding since the end of the 19th century, and workers needed more education. As the population grew, children needed more elementary and secondary education, and as the eight-hour workday became the norm, people had more free time to explore personal interests. Universities responded to these changes. Northwestern University, for example, began

to offer evening classes in 1905 and opened the evening division for adult education in 1927; the University of Wisconsin established the University Extension Division in 1907—a separate extension division from agriculture; New York University established the Division of General Education (now the School of Continuing and Professional Studies) in 1934; and the University of Maryland opened University College in 1947.

It was the post-World War II era and the GI Bill, however, that for the first time in US history made continuing education not only the mainstay but often the largest program at many universities. Most soldiers returning to school were adults getting married, starting families, and working. Universities accommodated these new needs by expanding evening programs and creating new kinds of degrees. In 1947, for example, enrollment in Northwestern's University College was 6,907 with students completing degrees such as the Bachelor of Philosophy, Bachelor of Science in Education, and Bachelor of Science in Speech.

In small towns and rural areas, the needs for university help were no less daunting, and higher education responded. Through cooperative extension in Wisconsin, for example, food and nutrition programs reached 10,000 families in 1949. Within a decade, 300,780 farms and homes adopted extension recommendations for better homes and farms.

The university established extension centers to create access points for returning Wisconsin GIs. Thirty centers were operating in a variety of facilities immediately after the war, and by 1950, permanent two-year extension centers were established in 11 cities. By 1953, eight of these were community colleges providing full freshman/sophomore university programs for those beginning their college careers. The fastest-growing post-war area of general extension work was a wide range of conferences, institutes, and short courses to meet the needs of professional and functional groups around the state. In 1953, 229 such institutes were held by 14 extension units with a combined enrollment of 29,859. The Milwaukee Extension Division had grown into a metropolitan college with 1,431 day enrollments and 6,348 night enrollments. Theater, music, art, and other cultural programs reached more than 982,000, and the state teachers colleges were beginning to become competitive, offering their own adult and professional education programs.

Early distance education in Wisconsin came via public television and radio from the University of Wisconsin. In 1947 and the years following, WHA developed the statewide FM Radio Network. Television was added in 1954. Extension division faculty and county extension agents used commercial media for education, presenting 13,300 radio broadcasts and over 900 television programs by 1959.⁵

By the late 1970s public attitude toward higher education began to change. “Flower Power” gave way to the “Me Generation,” and what was valued as a public good came to be seen as a private investment into individuals’ futures:

The era of higher education that began with World War II came to an end as the century closed. If the decades after the war witnessed the self-conscious development of a higher education system as a public good—best represented by the California Master Plan⁶—that vision is today clouded. Such policy ideas were replaced by market principles, shaped by a commercial ranking system begun in 1983 by a popular magazine using a questionable methodology and imitated by various other ranking services.⁷

The national attitudinal change toward higher education had profound effects on universities. “In 1945 universities didn’t compete for students; most were local. By 2000 all of them did.”⁸ This competition, fueled by the quest to rise in the rankings and shaped by the ranking criteria, coupled with shrinking state support and increased need to use research as a primary revenue source, changed the focus of universities and the way in which they view their own role. Universities are increasingly competitive with one another, positioning to be the recipients of federal and corporate grants to support their research. The latter is then used to justify more grant applications in an endless quest for resources.

Public universities have changed much more than private ones, and the change is dictated by necessity. On average, from 1980 to 2000, states reduced their support of higher education from 10 percent of their total budgets to 7 percent.⁹ This has left a number of state universities receiving a very small portion of their support from state funds. The University of Virginia and the University of Colorado, for example, receive less than 10 percent of their operating budgets from their states.

The consequence of this trend on continuing education is both ironic and unfortunate. Because continuing education units are student-driven and not research-driven, and because the students they exist to support are often not the students that count in the rankings races, continuing education is seen by many top research universities as not only unimportant, but as endangering their success by undermining their exclusivity. After all, the focus of continuing education is on inclusivity and access, while the

national rankings reward campuses that reject most of their applicants. Consequently, tenure and promotion criteria seldom do more than pay lip service to teaching in continuing education programs or providing public service, and faculty understand this very well. They shy away from teaching nontraditional students unless they either absolutely have to for financial reasons or because they are where they want to be in the academic hierarchy and choose to focus on teaching underserved audiences. In both cases, however, the number of faculty who choose to teach in continuing education programs is low.

Perhaps most ironic is that some of the top private universities have come to terms with continuing education much more so than top public ones. NYU and Northwestern, for example, created independent, populist brands by establishing schools of continuing education that are separate from the rest of their campuses. Those schools have separate admission criteria, separate degrees, and some have their own faculties. These schools of continuing education contribute handsomely to the universities bottom lines, and because they have independent identities, they are tolerated and accepted. Among the public schools in the Big Ten, for example, only the University of Minnesota has an independent College of Continuing Education, but it appears to have never received the benign acceptance of the administration and faculty that its private counterparts enjoy.

THE VALUE OF SEPARATENESS

In this section, we focus on the value of an independent identity for continuing education as a significant asset in an organization's ability to contribute to economic and social development, and we describe what we know best: the University of Wisconsin Extension (UWEX). UW-Extension is not located on or part of any of the University of Wisconsin campuses. It shares a chancellor with the UW Colleges: 13 two-year, liberal arts colleges located throughout Wisconsin serving as both associates-degree granting institutions and as transfer institutions into the 13 comprehensive and doctoral institutions in the UW System. Although the colleges and UWEX have one chancellor, each organization continues to maintain its own provost and set of deans and directors, each maintains a very independent and unique identity, and each continues to have a statewide focus.

UWEX consists of four divisions: Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning; Cooperative Extension; Broadcast and Media Innovations;

and Entrepreneurship and Economic Development. All of the divisions are state-wide and all engage in their own versions of continuing education. Cooperative Extension focuses on agriculture, natural resources, community development, and family wellness; Broadcast and Media Innovations targets public radio and television, and public programming; and Entrepreneurship and Economic Development operates 12 small business development centers and 4 specialty centers across the state and offers business programs and support services to companies of all sizes. Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning provides statewide leadership across all 26 campuses of the University of Wisconsin System to increase access for adult and non-traditional students, increase the number of degree holders in the state, and provide the services and programs needed for lifelong learning.

Despite enjoying what is perhaps the most unique continuing education system in the country, as well as an outstanding system of higher education, the state of Wisconsin has significant challenges. It is 35th in the nation in the age of baccalaureate degree holders; it has minority populations and geographic locations that are greatly underserved by higher education; and it has an economic base that continues to struggle to move from a traditional manufacturing focus to a knowledge economy.

To address these challenges, in 2006, University of Wisconsin System President Kevin Reilly introduced the Wisconsin Growth Agenda. The vision behind the growth agenda is that "the University of Wisconsin System should be the state's premier developer of advanced human potential, of the jobs that employ that potential, and of the communities that sustain it."¹⁰ Simply put, the growth agenda is the UW System-wide plan for how the UW System will be both an economic catalyst and an economic engine for helping to build Wisconsin's knowledge economy.

An important part of the Wisconsin Growth Agenda is the Adult Student Initiative (ASI). The justification for the ASI came in 2004, from a statewide committee representing the UW System and the Wisconsin Technical Colleges. The committee was called the Committee on Baccalaureate Expansion (COBE), and the committee's charge was to "examine the number and nature of baccalaureate degree holders in Wisconsin as compared with other states, determine why Wisconsin is lagging behind, and recommend cost effective and collaborative strategies to provide access and opportunities to expand the number of baccalaureate degree completers in the state."¹¹ The authors of the report found that although Wisconsin is well served by a

broad array of higher education institutions, including public, private, and proprietary institutions, “opportunities for working adults to complete a baccalaureate degree within these institutions are somewhat limited. Similarly, persons of color and students from low to moderate income families are underrepresented in many of the institutions.”¹²

Having read the COBE report in light of the Wisconsin Growth Agenda, the Division of Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning in UW-Extension collaborated with the UW Colleges and made a case to UW System to include funding for programs for adult and nontraditional students in its biannual budget request process. The request was for \$2.5M, and if approved, two thirds would go to UW-Extension and one third to the UW Colleges.¹³

There was a great sense of urgency for UW-Extension and the UW Colleges to advance the knowledge economy even before a decision was made by the Wisconsin Legislature about the growth agenda budget request. So in 2007, Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning reallocated nearly \$2M to spur the development of new, online, bachelor degree programs throughout Wisconsin, and the UW Colleges invested funds to pilot the conversion of semester-length classes into intensive formats to enable adults the opportunity to enter higher education more often, or to take a short break from their studies if life responsibilities interfered. Supporting these efforts, UWEX ran a statewide marketing campaign to raise awareness among adult and nontraditional students, and to invite former University of Wisconsin students who never completed their degrees to come back to their campuses—or to other UW campuses—and to complete their degrees.

To date the program has been very successful: eight new online degree programs were developed; an array of intensive classes was launched; and thousands of former and prospective adult students were reached through targeted efforts. The UW Colleges online program grew 28 percent in the 2007-8 academic year, and 30 intensive format courses that were launched all filled.

Since 2007, 882 adults applied to degree programs as a result of the Adult Student Initiative, and 276 enrolled. Although delayed by one year, permanent funding for the Adult Student Initiative is expected to begin in FY09, and plans are already underway for more online degrees, extended student services, awareness campaigns, and other statewide efforts.

The independence of Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning in Extension—and of Extension itself—made the singular focus on adult and nontraditional students possible. Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning is similar to a college on a traditional research campus in that it enjoys significant self-direction and independence from the other divisions within the institution. In addition, however, because the *raison d'être* of UWEX itself is to extend the resources of the University of Wisconsin System, there is no tension in its mission. Everyone in the organization speaks the same language of outreach, engagement, and service, and the external work of extension employees is valued for what it is. This commonality makes it possible for the institution to speak with one voice and for it to be able to convey its value succinctly to legislators and community leaders.

MAINTAINING INDEPENDENCE

Over the years, efforts have been made to decentralize UWEX, and to divide its resources among the campuses of the UW System. Especially in hard budget times, other chancellors argue that their campuses can do what extension does just as well and save money in the process.

Fortunately, University of Wisconsin System leadership, state legislators, and local communities have repeatedly affirmed the critical importance of extending the resources of the entire University of Wisconsin System throughout the state, and they recognize that if UWEX were eliminated and its funds distributed to the campuses, the campuses would undoubtedly use the funds on other priorities without any assurance that statewide needs would be addressed. The independence of UWEX and its mission to be the embodiment of the Wisconsin Idea is its strength. By being independent, it is able to focus on addressing economic development, educating underserved audiences, and contributing to social wellbeing across the state.

This principle applies to campus-based continuing education operations as well. On campuses where continuing education is highly decentralized and individual schools or colleges are asked to take care of their own outreach and engagement, the strongest pull is almost always internal. That internal focus on traditional students and research diverts faculty and financial resources from external efforts, and the net result is a marginalized continuing education program and limited external work.

In hard budget times, on campuses where continuing education is centralized, it is not uncommon for the deans to argue to the provost and president to take the resources from continuing education and distribute

them to the deans. After all, the argument goes, it is the faculty who do the teaching, and the faculty are in the schools and colleges, so the latter should have the resources and not continuing education. “Trust us,” the deans say, “we will continue to serve external audiences.” However, the empirical evidence does not support this. At institutions that have decentralized or have even eliminated continuing education units, programs and services to nontraditional audiences nearly always suffer.

University retrenchment through reduction of externally-facing programs is a dangerous strategy. The process of serving public needs is not only important for economic development and the common good; it is also an important political strategy for the university. As we note above, universities are already in a position to have to justify their value. The more insular they become, the more elitist they seem; and when a campus is viewed as elitist by the community in which it resides, it does not enjoy strong community support. At public institutions this often translates to diminished state support, which then creates a spiral effect of increasing tuition rates, further reductions in external outreach and economic development, and so on. At private institutions reductions in external programs support town-gown rifts that can manifest themselves as diminished support services for the university, such as more restrictive zoning regulations, less support of public transportation to the campus, and less responsiveness to infrastructure improvements near the campus. Put differently, strong continuing education, outreach, and public engagement efforts have very real and important payoffs for a university. Some of those benefits are directly monetary, while others are more subtle but just as important.

CONCLUSION

The public perception of the economic value of higher education has changed significantly since the late 1970s. Prior to that time—and fueled heavily by the post-World War II GI Bill, higher education was seen as both a common good and as a critical component of national security. In reaction to the proliferation of atomic weapons and then Sputnik, the research performed in higher education and the knowledge created were widely supported and commonly seen as vital to broad national interests. As the Cold War ended, however, the national consciousness became highly individualistic and focused inwardly. Arguably, the perception of higher education shifted from public good to private investment.

Broadly construed, continuing education helps remind the public

about the social and economic value of higher education by spanning the campus walls and extending the resources of the university to wide arrays of audiences. In the knowledge economy, higher education is essential for economic growth, and as Richard Florida notes, in our society colleges and universities have become “a basic infrastructure component.”¹⁴ It is important to recognize, however, that the value of higher education and the role that higher education plays in our society goes well beyond economic development. As Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke notes:

More-highly-educated individuals are happier on average, make better personal financial decisions, suffer fewer spells of unemployment, and enjoy better health. Benefiting society as a whole, educated individuals are more likely to participate in civic affairs, volunteer their time to charities, and subscribe to personal values—such as tolerance and an appreciation of cultural differences—that are increasingly crucial for the healthy functioning of our diverse society.¹⁵

By contributing to the general welfare of our societies, “universities help to establish the broader quality of place of the communities in which they are located.”

Given that the primary role of continuing education and outreach units within universities is to extend the resources of the universities into the communities that those institutions serve, and given that more educated people are better off—economically, socially, physically, and emotionally—strong and well-functioning continuing education units are critical for helping to improve the quality of life of the people in the communities that they serve.

Hence, we should end the internal debates within our institutions about whether continuing education is important to the institutions’ mission. The simple answer is that it is vitally important. We must now focus on both demonstrating and communicating the vital role that higher education plays in society at large, and in continuing the economically and socially essential work that higher education performs. We must reintroduce into the national consciousness the fact that higher education is a shared, public good. 

ENDNOTES

1. A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: US Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 - 1875, Bills and Resolutions, House of Representatives, 37th Congress, 2nd Session (December 12, 1861): sec. 4.
2. *Higher Education for Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education, Vol. 1, Establishing the Goals* (New York: Harper Collins. 1947.) 1-3.
3. Ibid.
4. Smith, W. and T. Bender, eds. *American Higher Education Transformed, 1940-2005*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 2008), 2.
5. Highlight History of Extension in Wisconsin 1862 to 1999, UW-Extension Chancellor's Office. <http://www.uwex.edu/about/history/>
6. The 1960 California Master Plan was a statewide plan to coordinate higher education in California to ensure broad, statewide access to higher education.
7. *American Higher Education Transformed, 1940-2005*, 9.
8. Ibid.
9. National Education Association, "Financing Higher Education: A Crisis in State Funding." <http://www2.nea.org/he/fiscalcrisis/index.html>
10. Kevin Reilly, "The Growth Agenda: A Vision for the Future." February 9, 2006. <http://www.wisconsin.edu/news/2006/r060209.htm>
11. "Joint UWS/WTCS Committee on Baccalaureate Expansion Report." December 2004. http://www.uwsa.edu/acss/cobe/report_summary.pdf
12. Ibid.
13. There was—and still is—no question that in Wisconsin, as in many states in the country, greater emphasis must be placed on reaching out to nontraditional audiences and elevating the general level of knowledge of the populace. According to the Census Bureau, in 1970 the United States was the most educated country in the world; today it is tenth. In 1970 Wisconsin was 30th in the age of bachelors degree holders; today it is 35th. While some states have improved their educational levels, for Wisconsin and the country as a whole, the trend is not positive. In addition, in Wisconsin and in other regions of the country, high school graduation rates are declining. Hence, the need to reach out to adult audiences and to bring them back into higher education is doubly important.
14. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. (New York: Basic Books, 2002.), 291.
15. Ben S. Bernanke. "Education and Economic Competitiveness." Presented at the 2007 ICW Education and Workforce Summit (Washington, D.C., September 24, 2007.) Bernanke based his remark on "Why Does Democracy Need Education?" Edward L. Glaeser, Giacomo Ponzetto, and Andrei Shleifer. National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2006; and Thomas S. Dee, "Are There Civic Returns to Education?" *Journal of Public Economics*, vol. 88, pp 1697-1720.
16. Florida, 292.