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Continuing Education and the Changing Needs of Rural Communities: A Case Study of Two University Extension Programs at the University Of Saskatchewan, 1911-1964

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Abstract: A historical sociological approach is used to explore the role of University Continuing Education (UCE) in meeting the changing needs of rural communities in Saskatchewan, Canada during the twentieth century. Results yield insight in the relationship between UCE and social change.

Since its establishment in 1907, the University of Saskatchewan has offered extension programs to rural communities in the Western Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Farming education was the initial form of continuing education program; however, programs for women and youth were soon developed. These programs were developed to meet the unique needs of individuals living in rural areas of the province who would not otherwise engage in traditional on-campus study. This study examines how the University of Saskatchewan's Extension Departments served the needs of rural communities through two specific programs: the Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Program and the Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan. Each of these programs addressed a specific need in the community, and changed significantly over the decades.

The primary purpose of our paper is to illustrate the importance of developing relevant programming for rural communities. Research on University Continuing Education (UCE) has focused largely on descriptions of how these programs meet the needs of individual students (Corbett, 1952; Kidd, 1956; Selman, 1994). However, UCE programs have also been implemented to address the needs of entire communities. UCE programs at the University of Saskatchewan are evidence of this. Throughout the twentieth century, the province of Saskatchewan witnessed drastic social changes in immigration, patterns of agrarian settlement, and urbanization. The Extension Department at the University of Saskatchewan developed and implemented programs that addressed these broader social changes to meet the needs of the communities.

Through an examination of these programs, our analysis also provides a better understanding of the relationship between UCE and social change. The existence of the Extension department in Saskatchewan and the manner in which the University conceptualized and practiced their continuing education functions was largely dependent on these broader social and economic changes. Previous research has emphasized two approaches to understanding the relationship between UCE and social change. The first perspective portrays UCE as a means for individuals and societies to adapt to a changing world. Liberal scholars, policy makers and those in charge of leading UCE units tend to argue that continuing education is a key component of individual growth and societal development. The second perspective portrays UCE as having the potential to actively shape patterns of social change. According to this approach, UCE in Canada was historically the site of social activism by educators struggling for community development and justice. From this point of view, UCE was once a vibrant and democratic means through which activists and citizens worked to create a better world. Understanding the relationship between UCE and social change must be explored through the historical and comparative study

of the material experiences of those who take part in UCE programs and practices. Different forms of UCE practice encourage different forms of thought and action on the part of those who take part in such practices. Thus, UCE is both produced by and productive of changing patterns of identity that subsequently help shape those conditions. This research examines how each of these perspectives can explain programs offered at the University of Saskatchewan.

Data and Methods

This paper uses historical sociology to examine these issues. Historical sociology attempts “to understand the relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social organization on the other as something that is continuously constructed in time” (Abrams, 1982, p. 16). This perspective is used to understand two case studies of programs offered at the University of Saskatchewan’s Department of Extension: Homemakers’ Clubs of Saskatchewan and the Dominion Provincial Youth Training Program. The case study approach is particularly relevant for our research question: by focusing on two case studies rather than a broader analysis of programs, we are able to illustrate the specific ways in which these educational programs addressed the social issues pertinent to rural communities throughout the 1900’s. We will also use these case studies as the basis for exploring broader research questions regarding the relationship between educational institutions and social change.

The case studies were selected for several reasons. To begin, we focus on programs delivered to women and youth as a way of exploring how the programs targeted individuals not commonly engaged in university programming at the time. Secondly, the Dominion Provincial Youth Training Program is a clear example of how university extension acted as a solution to an identified “problem”, namely the high unemployment rate among young people during the depression. The Homemakers’ Clubs of Saskatchewan is a good example of how UCE provided communities with the resources to help them identify their own needs and act upon them. Overall, these case studies provide a strong foundation for exploring the importance of UCE in rural areas, and how they responded to broader social change.

Data for this analysis were collected from the University of Saskatchewan archives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in September 2006. Our analysis is limited to the archives available for the years 1911 to 1964 – a time period that best represents the main activities of the selected programs. Several documents were of value in understanding the specific nature of the programs. For example, annual reports of the programs, correspondence between program directors and participants, as well as educational materials are used throughout our analysis. These documents serve as an important source of information that can help us explore our research questions.

Extension Work at the University of Saskatchewan

The University of Saskatchewan is located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, one of Canada’s Prairie Provinces. Since its inception, there has been a clear mandate to include extension education into the work of the university. Walter Murray, the University of Saskatchewan’s first president, stated that “this is the University of the people, established by the people, and devoted by the people to the advancement of learning and the promotion of happiness and virtue” (President’s Report, 1909, p. 12). This unique relationship between the University of Saskatchewan and the communities in the province was maintained throughout the first one hundred years.

The Department of Extension at the University of Saskatchewan was established in 1910. This department was the first of its kind in Western Canada, and was modeled on the land-grant universities in the United States. The Extension Department functioned as a department in the

College of Agriculture until 1963, at which time an Extension Division served the University of Saskatchewan. Between 1913 and 1950, a separate Department of Women's Work provided extension programming to women across the province. The Extension Department will be disestablished on July 1, 2007, and replaced with three new departments.

The Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan

The Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan was the first program offered specifically to women. According to the 1958 Handbook of the Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan, there were four primary objectives that guided the activities of this organization: (1) To develop an appreciation of the skills and arts of homemaking; (2) To discover, stimulate and train leaders; (3) To make communities better places in which to live; and (4) To encourage good citizenship. These objectives were promoted through the various publications and newsletters sent to the branches, as well as at the provincial conventions that were held each year. This program grew quickly, from 140 clubs in 1914, to 292 clubs in 1933, and 315 clubs in 1957. This organization was engaged in personal and group study, as well as numerous activities in their local communities. The Homemakers' program is a good example of how a specific program adapted over the course of the century to serve the needs of rural communities.

The specific programs in which the Homemakers' were involved addressed unique needs. The public health work of the Homemakers' is one way in which this organization served their communities. In the early parts of the twentieth century, health professionals were scarce in rural Saskatchewan. The Homemakers' Clubs were encouraged to determine the medical needs in their communities, and meet them through the development and implementation of public health initiatives. For example, the Homemakers' Clubs were involved in supporting local hospitals, through donations of clothing and money. Much of their work was done through education. More specifically, as medical advancements were made, the Homemakers' were actively involved in bringing these advancements to their communities. For example, the Homemakers' clubs organized numerous dental and immunization clinics, and were active in educating the public about tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases. As the benefits of pre-natal care became documented, the Homemakers' were a strong voice of encouragement for expectant mothers to seek pre-natal care. Overall, many of the medical needs of rural communities were supported in part by the work of the Homemakers' Clubs. As the needs of the communities changed, so did the work of the Homemakers'.

The public health work of the Homemakers' Clubs is only one aspect of their broad program; however, it illustrates the importance of this organization in meeting the changing needs of rural communities. Since the inception of the Homemakers' Clubs in 1910, the clubs had evolved from an educational program focused on enabling women to be better homemakers, to a women's organization that fostered leadership, education and self-development. Through providing leadership development and educational support to the Homemakers Clubs, the Department of Women's Work at the University of Saskatchewan provided significant service to rural communities across the province. The Homemakers' Clubs were one of the few ways that women living in rural areas could access continuing education. This education, in turn, provided women living in rural areas with the tools to determine the needs of their communities, and meet those needs through programming. These needs were constantly changing, and the Homemakers' Clubs were encouraged to constantly reevaluate their programs and meet these needs.

The Dominion Provincial Youth Training Program

Saskatchewan's branch of the Dominion Provincial Youth Training Program (DPYTP) was established in 1937 with the goal of training young people for gainful employment (Paul, 1948, p. 1). This program was initiated during the depression years; since government funds were scarce, the costs of the program were shared between the Dominion Department of Labour and the Provincial Department of Education. As a result, the program was given the name "Dominion Provincial" (Paul, 1948, p. 1). In general, the program offered instruction to people between the ages of 16 and 30 years, offering courses in agriculture for men and in homemaking for women. In addition to the specific courses, there was also the opportunity for young men to receive financial assistance to attend the two-year School of Agriculture Course at the University of Saskatchewan.

The DPTYTP was established as a solution to a specific issue, namely, "the youth problem" that was considered to exist in Canada (Department of Labour, Youth Training Division, 1939, p. 5). The "youth problem" was characterized by high rates of unemployment among young people. Many believe that the "youth problem" began with the collapse of 1929; in reality, this issue existed prior to 1929 (Department of Labour, Youth Training Division, 1939, p. 6). Prior to the onset of the depression, Canada's economic conditions meant that this issue was overlooked. However, the depression magnified the issue, resulting in a perceived urgency in the need for a solution. This problem was not exclusive to Canada, as all Western countries were trying to deal with the "youth problem." However, there were certain factors that existed in Canada that made the problem different here than anywhere else. More specifically, there were 50,000 to 55,000 between the ages of 16 and 30 years in Saskatchewan who were unable to leave home to pursue training in any area of study (Federal-Provincial Youth Training for Saskatchewan Farm Boys Memo, p. 1). Many of these young men had left school at 15 or 16 years, having only completed a grade nine education. The perceived consequences of such a large number of unemployed youth were clear: "Because of little or no directional influence they are inclined to drift mentally, to allow their minds to stagnate, and due to economic conditions, to feel sorry for themselves" (Federal-Provincial Training for Saskatchewan Farm Boys Memo, p. 1). Farming skills training was considered important both economically and for general social well-being.

The DPYTP was originally implemented to restore morale, increase independence and to provide direction for the youth of Saskatchewan. It was suggested that the Agricultural Extension Department hold short courses for young males and offer financial assistance to those who may need it (Youth Employment Program, 1937, p. 1). However, as the needs of the communities changed, so did the DPYTP. As the depression years came to an end and war broke out in Europe, the needs of the communities changed. Many communities experienced a decline in population: men were called away to the war or for special labour. These smaller communities made it difficult to run courses in all communities. Despite the efforts of community members to advocate for courses, many towns could not meet the 20 person minimum registration requirement. In addition, the increasing manufacturing work in the urban areas meant that the needs of urban areas became quite different from rural areas. As a result, the University of Saskatchewan began to offer two sets of courses: urban courses and rural courses, each with programs offered for men and women. Thus, the University continued to adapt its programming based on the needs of the communities.

In short, the DPYTP provided a program that served the needs of rural communities in Saskatchewan as they changed. Since Saskatchewan was a farming province, most of the courses

offered to young men and women revolved around farming. This program helped communities provide skills and education to a young workforce. However, as men went to war and the urban / rural divide widened, the programs were altered to meet the changing needs of the communities. The DPYTP is a very clear example of how UCE can meet the changing needs of rural communities.

Discussion and Conclusion

These case studies provide insight into the manner in which UCE has served the needs of rural communities. Throughout the twentieth century, the province of Saskatchewan underwent significant social and economic change, resulting in diverse and ever-changing needs. The Dominion Provincial Youth Training Program was a way for communities to solve the “youth problem” by providing employment and farming skills training to young adults in rural communities. Similarly, the Homemakers’ Clubs of Saskatchewan provided leadership training to rural women so that they may identify and develop programming that addressed their needs, such as medical services and public health education. These programs evolved with the needs of the communities they served. The DPYTP came to an end, and the HCS developed and implemented different types of programs. In short, these programs are evidence of the manner in which UCE can support rural communities through times of significant social and economic change.

The events at the University of Saskatchewan suggest that continuing education has the potential to promote individual growth and societal development. Individuals were provided with training and education that enabled them to better serve themselves, and in turn, their communities. The DPTYTP provided specific farming and homemaking skills to the youth in rural communities in an effort to ensure they could remain self-sufficient and productive members of the community. The Homemakers’ Clubs provided leadership training to rural women in order to help them become better educated about issues pertaining to rural women, and to help them serve their communities. These case studies show how UCE programs are produced by changing social patterns.

However, it is problematic to assume that the relationship between UCE and social change is unidirectional. Indeed, the University was there to assist people in the preparation for change (Paul, 1979, p. 148). The DPYTP and the Homemakers’ Clubs are evidence that citizens of rural Saskatchewan were actively involved in addressing their own needs. For example, citizens of rural communities advocated for DPTYTP courses to be delivered in their communities, indicating that they recognized the value of these programs in developing their communities. In addition, members of the Homemakers’ Clubs were instrumental in the success of their own programs. It was the individual branches, and not the University itself, that identified the needs of the community and implemented appropriate programs. These case studies show that UCE is productive of social change, and exemplify the reciprocal relationship between UCE and social change.

Today, rural communities are facing new challenges. As the economy continues to change, moving from a manufacturing to a service-based economy, many rural communities are experiencing declining populations, increased poverty levels, and decreased access to medical and social services (MacLellan, 2001; Duncan, 1996). While the DPYTP and the Homemakers’ Clubs no longer exist, they can serve as examples of the ways in which UCE can respond to and foster social changes in rural communities. Thus, rather than conceptualizing UCE as simply a

pursuit of individuals, it is necessary to understand the ways in which UCE can help arm citizens of rural communities with the leadership and skills to address their own needs.

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