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Catherine A. Hansman

Amy D. Rose

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Where Do We Go from Here? The Ebbs and Flows of Professional Adult Education

Catherine A. Hansman
Cleveland State University

Amy D. Rose
Northern Illinois University

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Abstract: This paper examines the movement of adult education into the university as an area of study. It also looks at the development of the professoriate and the continual formation and dissolution of programs.

Introduction

It is almost a truism that adult education is a field under development. Going back to the 1950s, Burton Clark (1956) postulated that the reasons for the continuing marginalization of adult education (at least adult basic education) lay in the fundamental structure of basic education programs, especially their funding streams and their reliance on part-time teachers. Most importantly for Clark, he felt that adult educators were also searching for sources of support rather than developing a coherent mission. While Clark was fairly damning, he moved on to other things. Yet the issues he brought forward in the 1950's may continue today, and professors of adult education may question how much of what Clark said is still true. On the surface, it would seem that his indictment is fairly prescient. This research study begins an examination of professional field of adult education in order to address this question.

Purpose, Research Questions and Method

The purpose of this paper is to begin an analysis of the development and growth of an adult education professoriate and adult education graduate programs in higher education, of the way that adult education moved into academe as a professional field rather than simply as a field of practice. The specific research questions to be addressed include: How did adult education become a course of study within higher education? How did the program content evolve and change over time? What have been the trends related to this evolution, and what external factors have affected the professoriate and graduate programs in adult education? This historical study used archival materials as well as contemporary printed documents. This is the first phase of a larger study, and as such, the printed materials include: previous Handbooks of Adult Education; articles from the various journals; and archival materials from the American Association of Adult Education (AAAE), the Adult Education Association (AEA), and the American Association of Adult Continuing Education (AAACE).

Findings

Beginnings: 1928-1944

The 1920s are usually considered to be the beginning of the organized field of Adult Education. During this period the American Association for Adult Education (A³E) was founded. In addition, the National Education Association (NEA) founded the Department of Immigrant Education in 1921 (renamed the Department of Adult Education in 1924 (Knowles, 1977)). A central question, related to the definition and parameters of adult education, dealt with whether

there were unique educational approaches to this amorphous area of adult education. One of the earliest approaches was the discussion method. In 1929, the Carnegie Corporation funded a general adult education course. In 1933 the AAEA made a grant to Teachers College for the funding of twelve fellowships in adult education, and in 1934, a professorship was funded. Lyman Bryson was selected and is usually credited with molding this first doctoral program.

Solidifying the field? 1945 - 1964

The period from 1945 through 1964 can be thought of as a time of quiet, unexplosive growth of the field. There was concern about the need for a more professional and scientific approach to research; an expansion of programs and an attempt to clarify the meaning of graduate study which was reified in the so-called “black book” (1964). This period also included several critical developments, namely: the Kellogg Centers for Continuing Education; funding for the founding of State Boards of Adult Education; the center for the Study of Liberal Adult Education; and Human Relations training. All of these were funded by external and private foundation.

Expansion 1965-1980

The period of 1965 through 1980 saw an expansion of the field in every way. This was due primarily to the passage of the Adult Education Act of 1966. This led to the founding of many master’s programs and the expansion of doctoral study as well as the expansion of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE). This expansion also led to an increasing concern about diversity within the field and attempts to recruit graduate students from broad and divergent backgrounds. Standards for graduate programs in adult education were developed by CPAE for professors to guide graduate program curriculum design.

Ebbs and Flows 1980 – Present

The last period (1980 to present) reflects both growth and retrenchment as a constant ebb and flow. This ebb and flow can be seen in the consistent pattern of Adult Education graduate program closures since the 1980s as well as the alignment of “pure” adult education programs with related fields, such as human resource development and higher education. CPAE Graduate program standards were revised several times. Through an analysis of program closures, we attempt to tie this development into the broad concerns of both higher education and adult education.

Conclusions and Implications for Research

It is important that adult educators understand their own interests. In this case, adult education as a field of study as certainly not developed in a linear fashion. Funding agencies, from the Carnegie Corporation, to the Ford and Kellogg Foundations, to the federal government have all had roles in the growing (and probably the shrinking of graduate programs. Since the earliest days, outside agencies have decided (dictated?) what adult education is and how it fits in with a university’s mission. This is problematic for many reasons. The implications of this research are enormous both in terms of how we, as adult educators, view and understand our role within higher education, but also how we think about our practice in general. This research also has the potential to further discourse in the professoriate concerning the changing climate of higher education and its impact on graduate education master’s and doctoral programs in Adult Education.