

PERSPECTIVES

ADULT EDUCATION GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN WESTERN CANADA: WHAT'S HAPPENING, WHAT'S WRONG AND WHO CARES?

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Abstract

Adult education graduate programs in Western Canada—both new and old—are facing a variety of threats. This article reports on the status of these programs, identifies the threats they are experiencing, explains the strategies they are using to build and maintain support, suggests factors that make programs vulnerable, and offers recommendations designed to strengthen support for graduate study.

Résumé

Dans l'ouest du Canada, les programmes de formation des adultes conférant des diplômes, tant anciens que nouveaux, font face à une diversité de menaces. Cet article décrit la situation actuelle de ces programmes, identifie les menaces auxquelles ils sont soumis, explique les stratégies qu'ils emploient pour établir et maintenir le soutien dont ils ont besoin, suggère des facteurs qui rendent ces programmes vulnérables, et fait des recommandations conçues pour renforcer le soutien aux études de maîtrise et au-delà.

Introduction

For at least 20 years, professors of adult education have been discussing the "marginality" of their graduate programs and strategies for building a stronger base of support. In 1973 a report was prepared for the Commission of Professors of Adult Education of the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. (Knox, 1973) which focused on the development of new graduate programs, catalogued the views of professors about the problems they faced in gaining legitimacy for their programs, and offered advice on how to strengthen support for programs. In 1993 the Committee of Professors of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education and the Commission of Professors of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education carried out a study designed to identify immediate and long-term threats to graduate programs and to recommend ways to strengthen support for graduate programs. One of the reports from this study (Knox, 1993) was based on interviews conducted with adult education faculty at representative universities across the U.S. The other report (Sork, 1993) was based on interviews with adult education faculty at six universities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia that offer, or are in the process of offering, graduate study in adult education. Telephone interviews were conducted with seven faculty members at the six universities in Western Canada that offer, or will soon offer, graduate programs in adult education.

The interviews were semi-structured; five questions were used to focus conversations. They were: 1) What is the current situation/status of your graduate program? 2) Has there been a recent threat to the program? If so, what was the origin of the threat, what were the indicators (warning signs) and how did you (your program) respond? 3) What have you (and your colleagues) done, or continued to do, to build and maintain support and cooperation for your graduate program? 4) What is it that makes an adult education program vulnerable to cuts, reorganizations and other changes that may not be in the best interests of the program? 5) Do you have any other comments or advice you would like to offer regarding building and maintaining support for adult education graduate programs? Both of these reports were presented and discussed at the November, 1993, meeting of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education in Dallas, Texas.

It is now early 1994 and several university graduate programs across Canada are facing major reorganizations. The programs at Dalhousie, O.I.S.E., Alberta and British Columbia are all facing administrative or academic reconfigurations proposed in response to fiscal pressures. Meanwhile, electrons have been flying across the Canadian Adult Education Network as academics debate the "marginality" and relevance of university programs, pass along rumours about program dissolutions, and fret about what can be done to strengthen the position of adult education as a field of study.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the findings from the study conducted in Western Canada in the fall of 1993 because the observations and suggestions made by those who participated seem to be both timely and potentially useful to others who may face various threats to their programs. This report begins with a brief summary of the status of programs as of early 1994 and continues with observations and suggestions made about strengthening university support for adult education graduate programs.

Current Status of Graduate Programs in Western Canada

There are no free-standing departments of adult education in Western Canada. Every graduate program is contained within a department that includes other fields of study or disciplines. Most often these other fields are—in some combination—educational administration, educational foundations, higher education, community education, and career and technical education. During the last 3 years in Western Canada, opportunities to study adult education at the undergraduate and graduate level have increased: one new masters program has been approved, another is in the process of being approved; a B.A. in adult education has been approved; and certificate- and diploma-level programs have expanded.

The number of faculty in these programs ranges from one to seven. Some established graduate programs have lost faculty to retirements, experienced awkward reorganizations, and lost supportive deans or department heads while others have added staff, refocused their programs and consolidated support. On balance, graduate study in Western Canada can best be characterized as *stable*, although in early 1994 it is a precarious stability as fiscal pressures are prompting faculties of education to

review their priorities and operate with diminishing resources. All programs report that demand for graduate study in adult education is clearly increasing at a time when university funding is either stable or declining.

Recent Threats

Although some respondents considered "threats" too active a word, faculty found themselves in various circumstances that caused them to be concerned about the future of their programs. Following are the main "threats" faced by these programs.

Financial pressure to cut programs or faculty.

Cutbacks in university funding make it difficult to sustain higher-cost graduate programs. Cutbacks also make it difficult to replace retiring faculty members and a higher priority is often given to teacher education programs which are viewed as more central to the mission of the Faculty. Since adult education graduate programs are relatively small and are not working in areas considered directly related to a K-12 mission, they are vulnerable when a dean is asked to cut positions or programs.

Proposed reorganization.

Often related to financial pressure, reorganizations are thought to reduce administrative overhead, "broaden" the intellectual base of a department, and increase flexibility in staffing. They also effectively dilute the influence of some faculty and programs while increasing the influence of others. Reorganizations are viewed as one solution to internal squabbling and dissension because they invariably alter the dynamics of debate and centralize decision making.

Dissension among faculty.

Fundamental—and often very public—disagreements among adult education faculty and between adult education faculty and others in the department or Faculty are threats because they divert energy from teaching and research programs; sometimes embarrass administrators who view them as "problem programs"; and become the focus of attention for current and prospective students, other faculty, and those in the field who may offer support. Scholarly work being done in the program by faculty and students is overshadowed by bickering, disagreements and ideological warfare.

Confusing the field of practice with the field of study.

Adult education as a field of study is not only difficult to describe but it is largely invisible to others in the College or Faculty who focus on the preparation of teachers and administrators for schools. Those who do not make a conceptual distinction between the field of practice and the field of study will not appreciate the research traditions and contributions to scholarship that are rewarded in universities. In some quarters there are still doubts about the legitimacy of adult education as a field of study in part because it is multidisciplinary in character and in part because its scholarship deals with such diverse and amorphous phenomena.

New dean or department head.

The departure of a supportive dean or department head and the arrival of a nonsupportive or ill-informed replacement represents a threat since new administrators often feel the urge to put their own "stamp" on the unit by reorganizing it or changing its orientation. Such changes also represent opportunities to build new alliances and situate a program so that the new administrator can better support and defend it. Nevertheless, any change in key decision-makers is likely to alter the priorities of the unit and the way it is administered.

Strategies Used to Build and Maintain Support

Respondents described both what they had done and what they thought should be done to strengthen support. No single strategy was viewed as more important or useful than any other. Employing a combination of strategies seemed to produce the best results.

Develop internal strategic alliances.

Adult education programs are generally considered lower priority within their Faculty than school-oriented teacher education programs. Strategic alliances are used to build support for an adult education program in a context where its contribution to the mission of the Faculty may be questioned. Building these alliances involves developing more or less formal cooperative relationships with academic units both within and outside the Faculty. Depending on the history and emphasis of the program, outside units might include Extension or Continuing Education, Agriculture, Social Work, Business/Commerce, Health Professions, and so on. Developing *mutually-beneficial dependencies* with other units not only raises the profile of adult education, but also links its continued health with the health of the other units.

Develop external strategic alliances.

Graduate study in adult education developed from the concerns and with the support of the field of practice. Developing and maintaining alliances with key groups and individuals in the field of practice has worked to the advantage of several programs by providing a constant flow of experienced graduate students, sites for research and field placements, and a source of support when programs are threatened. Again, the concept of *mutually-beneficial dependencies* applies; the alliances must be seen to benefit both the external group and the adult education program.

Cultivate support among key decision makers.

Key decision makers include department heads, deans, and vice presidents, all of whom are involved in allocating resources to programs—and threats to programs typically involve decisions to re-allocate resources. Keeping these people informed of the role, direction and accomplishments of the adult education program is viewed as important because these programs generally have a low profile within their Faculty and are doing work which is often not considered directly relevant to the teacher education function (or other primary function) of the unit. Adult education programs

can easily become isolated/marginalized unless energy is put into building a stable base of support. The programs in Western Canada which consider this an important strategy rely on the personal relationships cultivated by one or more faculty with deans, vice-presidents and other key decision makers.

Involve non-adult education faculty on supervisory committees.

Related to developing internal alliances, this strategy is used to broaden awareness among other faculty of the kind of work being done in adult education and to demonstrate the abilities and perspectives of adult education graduate students. The success of this strategy depends, of course, on having well-prepared students who are knowledgeable about educational developments both within and outside adult education and adult education faculty who are similarly aware and who are willing to take the risk of having "outsiders" evaluate the work of their students and the perspectives on research and scholarship that characterize the field.

Publicize accomplishments.

This strategy is another response to the relatively low visibility of adult education programs. Since faculty and students outside of adult education rarely attend adult education research conferences, read adult education journals and books, or know much about adult education scholarship or professional practice, student and faculty accomplishments can easily go unrecognized. Making others aware of these accomplishments is an important strategy for raising the profile of adult education by demonstrating that faculty and students are active scholars and talented practitioners who are recognized as such by their peers. This process includes publicizing awards received, research grants/contracts acquired, publications produced, conference presentations made, exemplary programs developed, and so on.

Indicators of Vulnerability

So far this report has considered the kinds of threats faced by graduate programs and strategies these programs have used to respond. In this section indicators of program vulnerability, drawn from the experience and reflections of respondents, are described with the hope that they will stimulate self-analysis and discussion within programs.

Loss of key faculty.

Retirement, resignation or reassignment of faculty who have provided leadership and/or balance to programs increases vulnerability because they create opportunities to reallocate resources and to eliminate positions. Programs with few faculty are especially vulnerable because the departure from a small program of one or two faculty makes it easy to justify elimination of the program. If faculty are re-assigned/dispersed to other academic units, then programs are vulnerable because there is no "core group" to defend them and because the dynamics of decision making change in favour of larger programs which are viewed as more central to the mission of the Faculty. Retiring faculty also take with them whatever influence, respect and credibility that is connected to their personalities and scholarship. If these are not "replaced" in the program, then the program becomes more vulnerable.

Low enrollment/low graduation rate.

Small programs that attract few students or graduate a small proportion of those who do enrol are vulnerable to elimination, especially in those institutions that use a "portfolio analysis" approach to resource allocation. In this approach programs that serve small or highly specialized "markets" are vulnerable unless serving these markets is considered central to the mission. Low graduation rates suggest either low program quality or that the market is not being well-served. In either case, programs become more vulnerable because they do not represent areas of potential growth, high demand or high quality—any of which would justify continued support.

Low admission standards/high acceptance rate.

Most graduate programs are subject to minimum admission criteria established by a senate, a faculty of graduate studies or other such body. Programs that are more "selective"—meaning that they admit only a portion of those who satisfy the minimum criteria—are often held in higher esteem and are viewed as higher quality than those who admit all or most of those who apply. Adult education programs become vulnerable if those who make resource allocation decisions come to view them as less demanding or challenging than other programs in the Faculty. Although adult education programs are often heavily populated with mature students who have proven themselves more academically capable than their undergraduate records would suggest, there are those in the university who view a "selective" admissions approach much more positively than an "open" approach. The degree to which admission practices influence vulnerability is most likely dependent on whether key decision makers view graduate education from an egalitarian or an elitist perspective, so it is important to understand which perspective is held by department heads, deans, vice-presidents and others in key decision-making positions.

Low faculty commitment to field of study.

As a multidisciplinary field, adult education programs are often staffed by faculty with a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and interests. There are many advantages of this, but one disadvantage is that faculty allegiances are often to their primary disciplines rather than to adult education as a field of study. This seems to happen most often with faculty who have their academic training in another field or discipline and find themselves affiliated with an adult education program later in their careers. Low faculty commitment to and involvement in the field of study can result in teaching and research only marginally relevant to extant concerns and issues. While there are many examples where those trained in another field or discipline joined and became fully committed to adult education, there are also examples where there was a low level of commitment because the original field or discipline was considered the primary academic "home" which could be reoccupied if things did not work out in adult education.

Low or invisible scholarly productivity.

Respect and relative stability are the rewards for programs with high levels of scholarly productivity. Programs with low or invisible scholarly productivity are

vulnerable because they are viewed as not contributing fully to the mission of a research-oriented university. Unless such programs provide an essential service function for other academic units—which is rare in the case of adult education graduate programs—they are vulnerable to cuts or to reorganizations designed to “reinvigorate” the scholarly interests and activities of faculty and students.

Internal squabbling/ideological warfare.

Academic life in North America seems to encourage individualism and the development of well-reasoned and vigorously-defended ideological stances. In one respect these enliven the academic environment and lead to new insights and understandings wrought from debate and disagreement. Yet when it comes to building support for graduate programs, the very characteristics that make the university a stimulating place to work can make it nearly impossible to reach agreement on required collective action. Programs become vulnerable when faculty are unable to reach consensus on directions, policies and strategies necessary to build and maintain a program. Personal and professional animosities, when played out publicly, become thorns in the sides of key decision makers, put students in the uncomfortable position of having to “choose sides” to make any progress in their programs, and demonstrate to the academic community that the group cannot govern itself. In such circumstances, programs become vulnerable to reorganizations designed to distance the warring factions, to outright dissolution, or to placement in a unit under the supervision of someone thought able to either referee the contest or to make decisions for the group since they cannot make decisions for themselves.

Poor relations with the field of practice.

Scholarship that results in refereed publications and attracts research grants remains the most valued form of work in universities, so those responding to the reward structure would devote most of their energies to grant getting and writing for publication. And yet the experience in Western Canada suggests that building and maintaining good relations with the field of practice reduces vulnerability while poor relations increases vulnerability. Poor relations with the field of practice make it difficult to get outside support if the program is threatened and may also affect the quality and number of applicants. Several instances were described where support from the field of practice was rallied to convince various decision makers that a position should be filled, that a program should *not* be discontinued or reorganized, or that additional resources were justified because the program was making significant contributions to improved practice. Since practitioners are the primary clients of adult education graduate programs, a program viewed as irrelevant, unresponsive or aloof from the concerns of practice may also have problems recruiting talented students.

Poor or uneven student/faculty relations.

Students are an important source of political support for graduate programs. Satisfied students who are helped to achieve their academic goals in a safe, supportive and challenging environment can be potent lobbyists within the university. But students who are ill-served by their advisors, who are subject to second-rate

teaching, who are exposed to outdated or irrelevant ideas, or who feel harassed or threatened by faculty can be equally potent in expressing their discontent with the program. Programs become vulnerable when they do not maintain positive student/faculty relations because they are viewed as "problems." Poor student/faculty relations, when combined with other indicators of vulnerability, can be used to justify eliminating or reconfiguring programs to solve "the problem."

Insularity from other academic units.

Some adult education programs pride themselves on their "uniqueness" and the fundamental differences they claim distinguish their programs, students and scholarship from those units which focus on other forms and levels of education. The case for uniqueness has its roots in the need to justify separate programs and units devoted to adult education in a setting where many scholars are interested in educational issues. But one consequence of winning this argument—and repeating it when circumstances warrant—is that adult education programs have insulated themselves from the "evil" influences of other academic units to the point where there is little interchange of ideas and a jealous guarding of students from competing paradigms and value positions. Such insularity makes programs vulnerable not only because they are seen as isolated—and therefore easy to eliminate or reconfigure without consequence for other programs—but also because they may be viewed by those outside as ideologically monolithic with little to offer the wider educational community.

Little regard for building/maintaining internal base of support.

Complacency regarding building support for adult education graduate programs is cause for concern even if enrollments are healthy, students are satisfied, and faculty are busy getting published and acquiring grants. Building and maintaining support is a continuous and deliberate process that requires planning and energy. Programs become vulnerable when it is assumed that, because everything seems to be going well, there is no need to worry about cultivating relationships with decision makers and maintaining a base of support. A related problem is having only one person involved in this work. It is a problem because if something happens to that person, the base of support may have to be reconstructed from scratch. Personal relationships do seem to be the most common foundation on which support is built, but these take time and constant attention to maintain. Engaging successfully in university politics depends on developing trust, gaining and maintaining academic credibility, providing timely and useful information, demonstrating a future-oriented perspective, and recognizing that adult education is only one program among many with legitimate claims on limited resources.

Recommendations

Following are some general recommendations concerning how adult education graduate programs might reasonably respond to the ideas presented in this report. They are based on the proposition that no program—regardless of its history, size, prestige or location—is completely secure in this time of shrinking university budgets, shifting priorities, and competition among educational providers. This proposition has

been reinforced numerous times in Canada and the US in the last few years during which major programs have been eliminated or substantially reconfigured. Quality of academic work, size, grant getting ability, noteworthy specializations and prestige, even when taken together, have not been sufficient to ward off major unwanted changes.

1. Understand the ways in which a program is vulnerable.

It may be possible to construct a rough and highly-subjective "*vulnerability index*" that reflects the degree of risk to a program based on where it stands on each indicator described above, and others considered important for each institution. Every program exists in a unique context. Characteristics that make a program vulnerable in one context may be irrelevant or inconsequential in another. The important point is to reflect on the unique circumstances of each program and come to some conclusions about where a program might be most vulnerable.

2. Develop strategies to reduce vulnerability.

Once areas of vulnerability are understood it becomes possible to develop strategies intended to strengthen support. The strategies noted above that were used in specific circumstances in Western Canada may be a starting point for developing a strategy. Again, each program's context is unique, so what worked in one setting may not work in another. It is important to develop feasible plans that everyone associated with the program is either supportive of or, at minimum, not resistant to.

3. Decide on the best way to implement and sustain the strategies.

Implementing the strategies and sustaining them will take energy that could be spent doing other things more rewarding or enjoyable, but it is energy invested in the future of the program. In programs with more than one faculty member, placing the entire burden on one person seems unwise since the impact can be greater if all those associated with the program take some responsibility. This will also reduce the likelihood of finger-pointing and blame-laying if the strategies do not produce the desired results. In one-person programs there is not much choice; either that person does the work or it does not get done.

4. Plan to periodically reassess program vulnerability and take necessary action.

As circumstances change it will be useful to reassess program vulnerability and alter strategies. Making this a part of an annual internal program review, keyed to other recurring events like course scheduling, will increase the likelihood that it will get done.

We have learned from experience in Canada and the U.S. that once a decision about a program's elimination or reconfiguration is made, it is very difficult to reverse. There has been some success in *delaying* implementation of a decision, but it is a rare instance when letters of support, phone calls, and offers to discuss

alternative solutions have resulted in decisions being reconsidered or reversed. The implication of this is clear—understanding vulnerabilities and taking action to strengthen support are best thought of as proactive activities because they surely do little good as responses to undesirable decisions.

Practitioners, program graduates and other academics are invited to express their views on the issue of support for adult education graduate programs and how the strength of support is related to the things we do and don't do as academics. It is through open debate and discussion of vulnerabilities and how they can be addressed that we will learn how to halt the apparent erosion of support for graduate programs and begin a process of reclamation.

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