

# Principles of Good Practice

*for*

*Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults*

AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION

The Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials

Prepared by a Task Force

Sponsored by The Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials,  
American Council on Education and The Alliance: An Association for  
Alternative Degree Programs for Adults\*

\*[N.B. The organizational name *The Alliance: An Association for Alternative Degree Programs for Adults* was changed to *Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA)* October, 1998.]

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## **PREAMBLE**

Among the more important characteristics of a profession are the will and collective energy to define its own standards and to establish the principles by which good practice may be judged. As a profession evolves and matures, critical self-examination and reflection become increasingly crucial obligations. The profession of Adult High Education has arrived at this point in its development. It has reached out to populations which have previously been all but excluded from higher education and, in doing so, the profession has developed an impressive repertoire of responses. Manifest in these responses, and in the energy which informs such innovations, is the profession's commitment to serving the learning needs of its constituency.

Those of us who work with alternative and external degree programs for adults are increasingly aware of the need to consolidate the gains the profession has enjoyed and to

establish those standards and principles by which evolving practice may be assessed and improved. We realize that our failure to do so will mean that our work will be judged according to how closely it resembles that of other, more traditional educational approaches, designed in other times, for other purposes, other populations.

In this spirit, the Alliance (an Association for Alternative Degree Programs for Adults) and the American Council on Education have worked cooperatively over the past several years to encourage dialogue within the profession. From this dialogue emerged a task force to develop a set of principles of good practice for the programs and institutions we guide. Those of us involved in this task have been encouraged by the discussions and feel energized by the prospect of sharing our deliberations with a broader audience. It is our hope that these principles will stimulate future examination and debate and, ultimately, will be useful to our profession and to any individual, agency, or organization with an interest in Adult Higher Education.

James J. Harrington  
President  
The Alliance

## FORWARD

The national concern over quality in education, which focused first on elementary and secondary schools and more recently on colleges and universities, is the subject of much debate and discussion. But the quality of alternative and external degree programs has been questioned since the mid-1970's, when many of these programs were first established. Because of their innovative nature, these programs have been associated mistakenly with "diploma mill" operations by some individuals. Others, including academics in traditional programs and institutions, have viewed them with a rather jaundiced eye. The *Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults*, by helping to define the parameters of excellence, should dispel misunderstandings and doubts about the purpose, legitimacy, and worth of these programs.

Within the higher education community, there is increasing consensus concerning the relationship of clear mission statements and learning outcomes assessment to program quality. The *Principles* give full treatment not only to these two areas, but also to six others.

Thoughtful examination of the *Principles* should deepen and enrich the dialogue on how to strengthen and improve the quality of all of higher education. The *Principles* also should contribute to the professional growth of practitioners serving adult learners by providing a basis for reflection, application, and research in particular areas of practice. The "know how" gained from these activities can, in turn, be applied to the evolution and refinement of the *Principles* themselves.

The *Principles* should be useful in establishing Alternative and External Degree Education as a distinct identity within the broader field of higher education, as well as in

weaving these programs into the academic fabric of institutions. They also serve a transforming function in alternative and external degree programs because they encourage the development of learning experiences that are responsive to diverse student goals, characteristics, and contexts; student services that take into account the circumstances of adult learners and the obstacles they face in pursuing degree programs; student self-assessment opportunities that help to further learning and academic, career, and personal planning; and faculty who are proficient in their disciplines, responsive to their students' needs, and committed to maintaining high standards.

Finally, the *Principles* should be useful to consumers who are seeking an alternative or external degree program and are "shopping" for the most appropriate learning experience. And, they should be useful to institutional accrediting bodies that make periodic judgments about the quality of particular alternative or external degree programs.

The *Principles*, which define and encourage quality programs, can be applied to traditional programs and institutions as well as to the alternative and external degree programs for which they were developed. Thus, they help set standards of quality for all types of programs serving all kinds of learners.

Henry Spille  
Vice President & Director  
The Center for Adult  
Learning  
and Educational Credentials  
American Council on  
Education

## **INTRODUCTION AND GUIDE TO READING THE PRINCIPLES**

During the past three decades, higher education has made considerable strides in recognizing a growing population of students: adult learners. Many of these adults deferred or interrupted their academic goals for reasons of work, family, and other commitments; others were not ready for college when they were younger; and many find that lifelong learning is required for professional development, active citizenship, and personal satisfaction.

Many institutions, as they began to recognize the educational needs of these adult students, developed academic degree programs especially designed to serve them. Traditional programs were taken off campus or offered at new times; other existing programs were adapted for this new population; and some innovative degree programs were developed to serve the needs of adults. These programs provide many features such as flexible scheduling, student-designed majors, prior learning evaluation, on-site instruction, distance learning, self-directed independent study, and other creative approaches to academic content and educational process.

The names of degree programs designed for adults vary in relation to their format, methodology and audience. They might be called external, alternative, special, off-

campus, weekend, individualized, general studies, or one of many other titles. Some programs focus on content and its organization while others concentrate on different modes of instruction and opportunities for learning. While content, structure, and procedures may vary widely from program to program, a common denominator has been the intended audience of adult students, generally those in their mid-twenties and older.

Degree programs for adults may be offered in various academic structures. The degree program may be the single goal of a free-standing institution; it may represent a major unit within a college or university; it may be an extension of other institutional services; or it may be a small department within a larger college or university. Throughout this document, the term program is used to refer to the adult degree program, whether it is located within a larger institution or is the academic program of a free-standing institution.

Regardless of structure, however, the central concern for the adult degree program movement has been balancing quality and standards with access and program design to meet adult learning needs. These issues have been, and must continue to be, framed within the academic context of the higher education institutions offering the programs. But while general institutional goals and standards must remain consistent for all academic programs, the policies, practices, and standards necessary to serve adult students require particular attention.

For many years this attention has come through activities such as program evaluations, graduate surveys, self-studies, and accreditation reviews. Professional organizations have provided forums for the discussion of these critical issues. Two groups that have been especially involved with this effort at the American Council on Education and The Alliance. Both separately and together, they have worked to formulate standards and principles by which good practice could be assessed and improved. These *Principles of Good Practice for Alternative and External Degree Programs for Adults* are the result of that work. They reflect the growth, development, and maturation of programs and institutions committed to the adult learner.

The development of this document has involved many people and much time. A task force was formed in 1987 to begin the process of delineating and writing a set of principles of good practice that could be observed and judged. The task force was composed of faculty, administrators, and academic professionals representing a broad spectrum of institutions and degree programs for adult learners.

As the developing document took shape, it was critiqued repeatedly by professionals from throughout the United States who represented varied programs, institutions, and agencies within higher education. Through this evolving process, it became clear that those involved in alternative and external degree programs lacked a consistent vocabulary, so a glossary of terms, developed by a member of the task force, was added. The glossary, covering general vocabulary of the field as well as terms used in the principles, examines how terms are used and reviews some trends in work usage.

As a result of the task force's efforts, this set of principles has been developed. The purpose and objectives of these principles are consistent with those expected for any academic program; however, they stress consideration of the special contexts, experiences, needs, and conditions of adult students. The principles are designed to provide guidelines or ideals for existing programs as well as for those agencies, organizations, or individuals who seek to examine and evaluate the quality of alternative and external degree programs for adults. It is hoped that the principles will be both provocative and useful; that they will assist others working in the field; and that they will continue to develop and improve with application.

Eugene  
Sullivan  
Task Force  
Chair

## **OVERVIEW OF THE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR ALTERNATIVE AND EXTERNAL DEGREE PROGRAM FOR ADULTS**

### **Principle 1: Mission Statement**

The program has a mission statement that reflects an educational philosophy, goals, purposes, and general intent and that clearly complements the institutional mission.

### **Principle 2: Personnel — Faculty and Academic Professionals**

Faculty and academic professionals working in alternative and external degree programs share a commitment to serve adult learners and have the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to teach, advise, counsel, and assist such students.

### **Principle 3: Learning Outcomes**

Clearly articulated programmatic learning outcomes frame the comprehensive curriculum as well as specific learning experiences; in developing these outcomes the program incorporates general student goals.

### **Principle 4: Learning Experiences**

The program is designed to provide diverse learning experiences that respond to the characteristics and contexts of adult learners while meeting established academic standards.

### **Principle 5: Assessment of Student Learning**

The assessment of a student's learning is based on the achievement of comprehensive and specific learning outcomes.

### **Principle 6: Student Services**

The policies, procedures, and practices of the program take into account the conditions and circumstances of adult learners and promote the success of those students.

### **Principle 7: Program Administration**

The administrative structures and the human, fiscal, and learning resources are sufficient, appropriate, and stable for accomplishing the program mission.

### **Principle 8: Program Evaluation**

Evaluation of the program involves faculty, academic professionals, administrators, and students on a continuing, systematic basis to assure quality and standards, and to stimulate program improvement.

## **PRINCIPLE 1: MISSION STATEMENT**

The program has a mission statement that reflects an educational philosophy, goals, purposes, and general intent and that clearly complements the institutional mission.

### **Rationale**

A well-defined program mission statement has a guiding, vitalizing, and unifying effect on all those who develop and operate the program. In addition to describing the fundamental goals and purposes of the program, the mission statement presents a commitment to the constituencies it endeavors to serve, and it provides key parameters for evaluating the program. While the mission statement reflects common goals and values, it allows for a diversity of viewpoints and directions within the program by which the goals may be reached and values expressed.

For a program that is a part of an institution, the mission statement establishes the internal relationship of the program to the institution's mission. Alternative and external degree programs for adults are, by their very nature, dynamic and evolving; therefore a clear mission statement serves to insure continuity of purpose despite programmatic and personnel changes.

### **Subprinciples**

- 1.1 The program mission statement is congruent with, extends from, or is a part of the institutional mission.
- 1.2 The program mission statement is reflected in program planning, goal setting, decision making, and in program policies.
- 1.3 The program mission statement is included in the institution's catalog and program materials.

1.4 The program mission statement is reviewed periodically and revised, as necessary, to reflect changes in the program, institution, and the larger community.

## **PRINCIPLE 2: PERSONNEL —**

### **FACULTY AND ACADEMIC PROFESSIONALS**

Faculty and academic professionals working in alternative and external degree programs share a commitment to serve adult learners and have the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to teach, advise, counsel, and assist such students.

#### **Rationale**

Faculty and academic professionals who work in degree programs for adult learners have common characteristics, although their titles and responsibilities may vary. Their tasks may be wide-ranging, encompassing the characteristics of teacher, administrator, adviser, counselor, broker, and student personnel provider. While certain positions will emphasize certain tasks over others, most positions will involve a general mix of roles. In terms of the overall program, the combination of these various roles, whether within an individual or among the program staff, provides an integration of attitudes and abilities central to serving adult learners.

The academic competencies of the faculty must be complemented by their understanding of adult learners and the goals and nature of the adult degree program. Likewise, part-time or adjunct faculty, who often provide special perspectives, resources, and expertise, need similar orientation and development. Meeting the needs of these part-time faculty members and integrating them into degree programs for adults are issues for the future.

In addition to fulfilling their other leadership responsibilities, all academic professionals in alternative and external degree programs serve as advocates for adult learners within their institutions. Their responsibilities include speaking for this population and increasing the institution's understanding of adult learners.

#### **Subprinciples**

2.1 In addition to academic or professional expertise, faculty and academic professionals have an understanding of adult learning and development, and other characteristics and needs of adult students.

2.2 Professional development is systematically planned and implemented for all personnel involved in the program in order to improve understanding of adult learners and to enhance academic and professional expertise.

2.3 Faculty and academic professionals actively participate in establishing, implementing, and evaluating the curricular and academic standards of their programs.

2.4 Criteria, rationale, and procedures for the selection and evaluation of faculty and academic professionals in the program are congruent with the standards of the institution.

2.5 Specific criteria, standards, and expectations for the role of part-time or adjunct faculty are clearly articulated.

2.6 Faculty and academic professionals in the program participate in the institution's systems for evaluation, incentive, and reward, e.g., promotion and tenure.

### **PRINCIPLE 3: LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Clearly articulated programmatic learning outcomes frame the comprehensive curriculum as well as specific learning experiences; in developing these outcomes the program incorporates general student goals and in implementing them it accommodates individual goals.

#### **Rationale**

Learning outcomes provide a focus for teaching, for what is to be learned, and for assessment of that learning; they also serve as a foundation for program evaluation. A distinction is made between programmatic learning outcomes that are comprehensive or program-wide in scope and programmatic learning outcomes that are identified for a specific learning experience (course, tutorial, independent project, etc.). Faculty and academic professionals determine both types of outcomes, but seek the involvement of students in that determination. Some specific learning experiences may involve students in the identification of their own individual outcomes for those experiences.

Adult learners enroll in degree programs for various reasons, often with specific personal or career goals in mind. It is both reassuring and motivating to them if programmatic outcomes clearly relate to their individual goals. The interrelationships among comprehensive outcomes, specific outcomes of learning experiences, and students' goals reinforce the learning process. The direct participation of the students in the identification of specific outcomes for a learning experience further supports their achievement and recognition of academic progress.

As part of the comprehensive outcomes, programs have a responsibility to assist students in the acquisition of the depth and breadth of knowledge requisite for their specific degrees. They are also responsible for aiding students in the development of skills and abilities in critical thinking, communication, problem solving, learning resource

utilization, and analysis and integration of knowledge. The development of these skills and abilities encourages students to become more autonomous, self-directed lifelong learners.

### **Subprinciples**

3.1 The faculty and other academic professionals determine the program's learning outcomes to form a coherent curriculum.

3.2 Learning outcomes reflect the core values and standards of the program and institution, and the general learning goals of their students.

3.3 The achievement of learning outcomes for the specific learning experiences can be demonstrated and assessed.

3.4 Programmatic learning outcomes are described so that students can relate the specific learning outcomes of each learning experience to the comprehensive outcomes of the program.

3.5 Learning outcomes for specific experiences are framed in consultation with students.

3.6 Learning outcomes provide a context for faculty/student discussions of academic progress and help guide student program implementation and modification.

3.7 Learning outcomes are clearly described so that external audiences (graduate schools, employers, etc.) understand both comprehensive and specific programmatic outcomes.

3.8 Programmatic learning outcomes are periodically revised to reflect changes in the program, institution, student population, and larger community.

## **PRINCIPLE 4: LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

The program is designed to provide diverse learning experiences that respond to the characteristics and contexts of adult learners while meeting established academic standards.

### **Rationale**

Learning experiences in adult degree programs recognize the social environments, experiences, backgrounds, motivations, and learning styles of adult students. Program designs might employ a variety of methods: didactic presentation, small group

discussion, interactive sessions, internships, or independent study. The experiences take into account the increasing use of technology to achieve learning goals. In addition to the mastery of academic subject matter, learning experiences should be designed to facilitate and enhance the learning skills, capabilities, and strengths of the learner.

American society abounds in resources for learning. Public and private colleges and universities and proprietary institutions exercise the central but not exclusive responsibility for providing postsecondary education. Associations, businesses, government, industry, military, labor, and other groups offer formal instruction, much of it at the postsecondary level. In addition, independent study and reading, career and voluntary work, the mass media, community involvement, and social interaction contribute to each individual's learning.

Given that college-level learning occurs in many places and at many times, college and university faculty have a responsibility to assess and accommodate extrainstitutional as well as institutional learning as part of their credentialing function. Through reliable and valid assessment of extrainstitutional learning, new learning is encouraged, past learning is renewed, and theory becomes integrated with practice. Faculty involved in degree programs for adults have the special responsibility of determining with the individual how this learning contributed to the goal of becoming an effective lifelong learner.

### **Subprinciples**

- 4.1 Specific learning experiences are determined by faculty and academic professionals in consultation with students in order to facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes, to use and extend the strengths of the individual's learning style, and to develop the student's social and work environment as a learning resource.
- 4.2 Learning experiences equip learners to develop progressively those habits, skills, and values necessary for lifelong learning.
- 4.3 Learning experiences make use of current research and theory about how adults learn.
- 4.4 Learning experiences are offered in a variety of ways, settings, and time frames to accommodate individual learning styles and life situations.
- 4.5 Learning experiences are designed to provide feedback to learners regarding their progress in achieving the specific learning outcomes.
- 4.6 Program design and specific learning experiences recognize an individual's prior and current extrainstitutional postsecondary learning.
- 4.7 Learners are assisted in examining the relationship of prior and current institutional and extrainstitutional learning to their learning abilities,

learning outcomes, and overall degree goals.

## **PRINCIPLE 5: ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING**

The assessment of a student's learning is based on the achievement of comprehensive and specific learning outcomes.

### **Rationale**

The progress of students and their achievement of outcomes require assessment that has direct, personal links to the teaching-learning process. Because the assessment of learning is complex, programs use multiple methods of assessment including written and oral examinations, case study methods, interviews, portfolio and project review, and other means to determine that learning goals are achieved.

Forms of assessment selected are appropriate for the particular learning experience and assist students in their learning.

Just as the learner's involvement in identifying learning experiences and learning outcomes is essential, so too is the learner's involvement in the assessment process. Assessment grows from a partnership of faculty or academic professional and student that is committed to a process of helpful dialogue and feedback. Student participation in assessment contributes significantly to the goal of developing more self-managing, autonomous learners. Without the capacity for assessing one's own learning, the accomplishments of this goal is unlikely to be realized.

In addition to serving the individual student, assessment of students' progress provides essential information regarding the teaching and learning processes of the program. Individual student assessment is an integral part of the general program assessment and evaluation plan and contributes to the accountability of the program and the institution.

### **Subprinciples**

5.1 Assessment is designed to be an integral and active part of each learning experience.

5.2 Student learning is evidenced by what the student knows and can do through demonstrations of knowledge and skill.

5.3 The assessment criteria, methods, techniques, or strategies are developed by faculty and academic professionals on the basis of how effectively they might determine the extent to which the specific learning outcomes are achieved.

5.4 The assessment process for student learning provides ongoing feedback between teacher and learner regarding the acquisition of both knowledge and skills.

5.5 The development of student self-assessment skills is an integral part of the learning process and is critical to the growth of self-managing, autonomous learning.

5.6 The program has policies and procedures for assessing and recognizing extracurricular learning, as well as learning that takes place at accredited postsecondary institutions.

5.7 Program policy for recognizing prior or current extracurricular learning specifies standards or criteria, administrative and faculty responsibility, means of assessment, recording of results on transcripts, and the maximum number of credits or other forms of recognition allowable.

## **PRINCIPLES 6: STUDENT SERVICES**

The policies, procedures, and practices of the program take into account the conditions and circumstances of adult learners and promote the success of those students.

### **Rationale**

Student success in alternative and external degree programs for adults is enhanced not only by the academic quality of the program, but also by well-designed and appropriately delivered services that recognize the particular needs and circumstances of adult learners. Student services policies and practices support student academic and personal success in the form of student achievement and student development. Student achievement is identified as learning at the highest possible level consistent with program standards, one's interests and abilities, and the personal constraints experienced in making progress toward one's goals. Student achievement is demonstrated by such evidence as course completion, satisfaction with goal attainment, improved learning or self management skills, and degree completion. Student development fosters personal characteristics such as self-esteem, self-directedness, autonomy, and the ability to formulate clear goals.

Adult and external degree programs are essentially student centered. Their student services enable learners to succeed from admission to graduation by recognizing, responding to, and honoring student diversity in preparedness, ethnicity, work and family commitments, goals, age, race, gender, and other characteristics.

Initial services focus on successful entry to the college, including useful program materials that inform students about educational options and procedures, and an admission process that is responsive to adult learners. Subsequently, transition into the

education realm is eased and focused by providing meaningful orientation services and assessment of academic and learning skills. Support services to promote student success while pursuing degree work include financial aid, counseling, advising, life/career planning, placement, child care, and academic tutoring. These services, which need to be accessible to adults, are directed at focusing student goals and options and overcoming obstacles to goal achievement.

### **Subprinciples**

6.1 Promotional materials present a clear, comprehensive, and accurate description of the educational program and the services offered, including information concerning admission requirements, degree(s) awarded, curriculum, costs, learning formats, assessment methods, graduation requirements, policies regarding the recognition of extracurricular learning, and accreditation.

6.2 Admission and retention policies take into account qualitative as well as quantitative data that reflect the student's current motivation and ability.

6.3 Financial arrangements and student financial assistance policies and procedures for adult students are equitable with those for other students at the institution.

6.4 Program entry services help students assess and understand their academic and learning skills as a basis for undertaking the program; students are assisted to strengthen these skills.

6.5 Orientation services are provided to help students understand themselves as learners and their new learning environment.

6.6 Academic progress of students is monitored and intervention strategies geared to adult learners are developed to improve student success.

6.7 A program plan is developed for student achievement and retention; follow-up research is conducted to ascertain reasons for problems and success of students and graduates.

6.8 Students in the program are included in the various institutional policies and practices with regard to awards, recognition, and honors.

6.9 Student support services of the institution are available, accessible, and appropriate for the adult learner; such services are designed to assist the student from admission through graduation.

## **PRINCIPLE 7: PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION**

The administrative structures and the human, fiscal, and learning resources are sufficient, appropriate, and stable for accomplishing the program mission.

### **Rationale**

Central to the success of degree programs serving adults is the institutional commitment to the program. This commitment is reflected in the fundamental administrative structure, the financial and budgetary arrangements, the academic systems, and other resource arrangements that support the program. The administrative structure of the program has equitable status with other academic units within its institution. At the same time, just as the program as a whole needs to be dynamic, open, innovative, and responsive, its administration also must possess these characteristics.

The administrative structure of adult degree programs varies; it may involve a program within a college or university; a separate college, school, or division within a larger institution; or a free-standing institution. Regardless of structure, administrators provide leadership in designing and implementing policies and procedures to serve adult learners in the program, while remaining consistent with the general policies, procedures, and standards of the institution.

Financial and other resources need to be sufficient to achieve the goals of the program. Particular attention is given to ensuring that proper library, media, laboratory, and computer support is available to students and faculty. The program's academic systems must also provide recognized, acceptable, and equitable strategies for a broad range of issues, including hiring, training, and evaluating faculty; developing and evaluating curricular; admitting students and assessing their learning; and evaluating overall program success.

### **Subprinciples**

7.1 Administrators provide leadership to assure that program operation grows out of an integration of administrative, academic, and student support commitments to the adult learner.

7.2 Criteria, standards, and expectations are clearly articulated for the roles of faculty and academic professionals in the program; specific requirements are delineated for part-time faculty.

7.3 Faculty and academic professionals participate in the development, review, and revision of program policies, procedures, and practices.

7.4 Funding and fiscal policies of a program are consistent with its own mission and with the general fiscal directions, purposes, and goals of the institution as a whole.

7.5 Adequate learning resources, including but not limited to computer support, laboratories, and library materials and services are available to students, faculty, and academic professionals.

7.6 Academic systems provide clearly stated standards and methods for managing and maintaining the quality of faculty, students, curricular, and program design.

7.7 Administrative arrangements are reviewed periodically to determine the extent to which they support program and institutional goals, purposes, and values.

7.8 The administrative structure and governance system provide ongoing planning and analysis of program directions and practices.

7.9 Criteria used to determine tuition and fees reflect the purposes, practices, services, and outcomes of the program.

## **PRINCIPLE 8: PROGRAM EVALUATION**

Evaluation of the program involves faculty, academic professional, administrators, and students on a continuing, systematic basis to assure standards and quality and to stimulate program improvement.

### **Rationale**

Continuous evaluation of a program and its components is vital to the maintenance of quality, the assurance of accountability, and the development and improvement of the program. The program administrator provides leadership for evaluation with the involvement of faculty, academic professionals, students, and others who contribute to the process.

The participation of faculty and academic professionals from other academic units provides valuable perspectives for the review of degree programs for adults. Likewise, the viewpoints of professionals from the nonacademic community and from other educational programs for adults are beneficial to the evaluative process.

Program evaluation results, shared widely, inform all those involved in the program and guide them in determining future program direction. The results also become a part of an external review process by being linked directly or indirectly to the institutional accreditation procedure.

### **Subprinciples**

8.1 In the context of the program and institutional missions, program evaluation focuses on both the attainment of goals and objectives and the processes designed to attain them.

8.2 Program evaluation provides for the inclusion of information from various constituencies, including faculty, academic professionals, administrators, students, graduates, and other appropriate groups.

8.3 Program evaluation processes encourage the participation of professionals from outside the program or the institution.

8.4 Results of program evaluation are reported to the institution's chief administrator, and to administrators, faculty, students, and others involved in the program; the results are used to modify and improve the program as well as to provide the basis for planning.

8.5 Both the process and the results of program evaluation are incorporated in institutional accreditation review.

## **GLOSSARY**

By Kent Warren

The following glossary offers some practical definitions relevant to alternative and external degree programs for adult students. For the most part, the glossary is descriptive, not prescriptive. It was developed by reviewing program materials from institutions throughout the country, identifying and collating common terms, defining those terms, and finally having the resulting definitions examined and refined by the task force and by other professionals practicing in the field.

The goal of the glossary is to develop a set of definitions that will help clarify and unify this arena of higher education. The definitions are not intended to be fixed; rather, they reflect current usage and should be modified and clarified as further analysis warrants. Reactions from users of this material will be appreciated.

**ADULT:** The most encompassing definition of adult derives from a functional point of view. In this sense, an adult is someone who has assumed the major responsibilities and commitments of adulthood (work, family, relationships, community), who is operating independently in society, and whose principal identity is other than that of a full-time student. At this time, some programs use the term to refer specifically to people over a certain age, e.g., 26, 27, or "older than average." The majority of programs, however, appear to advocate a definition of adult in terms of roles and functions rather than age per se.

Adult is not usually used to refer to the adults on campus who are undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 23, nor does it usually refer to any person, regardless of age, who is in a traditional graduate or professional school. Adult, however, may be used to refer to the population served by some graduate programs designed for individuals with extensive work, family, and community commitments.

**ADULT DEGREE PROGRAM:** This expression refers to a college or university program that offers an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctor's degree whose primary or exclusive clientele are adults.

**ALTERNATIVE:** This term typically refers to an educational program that is designed to be different from the typical structures and requirements of higher education programs. The difference might focus on how learning is accomplished, what is learned, how learning is evaluated, who teaches, who evaluates, who is responsible, or who is to learn. The term also may imply a choice that is outside of established norms and methods.

**ASSESSMENT:** Assessment is the measurement or evaluation of a student's learning whether gained in the classroom, from prior experiences, or through independent study. It involves generating evidence and making judgments of an individual's competence, by comparing his or her performance against established criteria. Assessment may also refer to the examination of other attributes of the learner and the learning experience, e.g., how people learn, what helps them retain and use their learning, or how we evaluate affective as well as cognitive learning. The term assessment increasingly is being used to refer to the measurement of student learning and related processes. The term evaluation, on the other hand, while still used to refer to student learning, is being used increasingly to refer to the processes involved in examining and judging educational programs and institutions.

**AUTONOMOUS LEARNER:** Primarily British, this expression is used to indicate the mature self-directed learner who is able to identify personal learning goals, adopt and adapt appropriate learning strategies, and instigate and complete the learning task through internal motivation and commitment. The characteristics of such an individual are seen as ultimate ideals in the student's educational process. The term is essentially synonymous with self-directed learners, but seems to indicate a more accomplished or integrated stage of self-directed learning.

**COMPETENCE-BASED EDUCATION (or competency-based):**

This form of education is an alternative to the coursework and credit-based traditional model. Competence-based education is built upon the idea that students may gain knowledge and skill in a variety of ways, and that they can demonstrate that knowledge and have it assessed through a range of institutional procedures. What a student knows and is able to do within a knowledge or skill domain and at a certain level is referred to as a competence. For a competence to be acceptable as part of a degree program, it typically must combine theory and practice and meet the established standards of the academic community. Competence-based education may be used to structure a program within a

traditional community or four-year college or may form the entire educational philosophy of an institution.

**CONTINUING EDUCATION:** Among the most accepted of terms, it is nevertheless defined inconsistently, even within the same institution. The expression often refers to the general credit and noncredit educational offerings that occur outside of the regular daytime curricula. It may expand to cover a degree program for adults or it may be used limitedly to refer only to learning that does not include college credit. It is also used to refer to ongoing learning opportunities presented by professional organizations that do not offer formal college credit. (Also see Extension.)

**CRITERION-REFERENCED (criterion-based):** This concept, used by some "universities without walls" and a few other programs, is based on the idea that any college-level degree program can be described in general terms regardless of subject matter. The criteria serve as standards and guidelines for developing an individual's degree program. The criteria will usually include an area of concentrated study and broad knowledge of the liberal arts; they may also be oriented toward process as well as content, e.g., self-directed learning, scientific inquiry, communication skills, and quantitative skills.

**DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAM:** Such a program, most often available at the bachelor's level, is designed specifically to assist students who began a degree program, interrupted their education for some reason, and now want to complete their degrees. The degree content, the learning strategies, the overall structure, and the services offered by such a program typically are designed to help in the achievement of that goal.

**DISTANCE EDUCATION:** While this term can apply to all learning that happens at a distance from the parent institution, it has come to refer more directly and consistently to learning experiences brought to the distant student through the mail or through technological means. Those technologies include radio, television, satellite, film, video, or computer. The national and international professionalization of this term in its current use bodes well for its being established as a standard concept.

**EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:** The central notion is that the learner is in direct contact with the realities being studied, whether involving prior or new activities, and that such direct involvement with activities will lead to the acquisition of knowledge and skill. "Prior" experiential learning generally is focused on knowledge and skill gained from work or volunteer activities, community involvement, or family responsibilities. This type of learning often is not the result of structured educational effort.

"New" experiential learning, sometimes referred to as sponsored learning, on the other hand, often is a planned and structured educational effort. Internships, travel, and work-related projects are common forms of new experiential learning. With this form of learning, goals, learning objectives, methods, outcomes, and assessment strategies typically are identified before the activity occurs, thereby providing structure for the learning. The expression is also used to indicate a pedagogical approach used in some

traditional classroom settings; this approach would include activities such as role playing, structured interviews, simulations, and other forms of active learning.

**EVALUATION:** See Assessment.

**EXTENDED DEGREE PROGRAMS:** This expression implies that the institution is extending itself beyond the borders of its campus. It maybe used to identify course offerings and degree programs that are taken off-campus. It may also indicate a program that will use a variety of non-classroom instruction to meet students' educational goals. Forms of instruction include independent/correspondence study, guided instruction, research, internships, programmed learning, etc.

**EXTENSION:** Generally the term is used to refer to education that extends from the institution's regular offerings. Traditionally it has referred to taking education to people who are geographically removed from an institution. Historically, it has also been strongly connected with agricultural and rural services of universities. In many institutions the term is used to refer to courses that are offered outside traditional times or methods, e.g., night courses and independent study courses.

**EXTERNAL DEGREE PROGRAMS:** This term indicates that a high percentage of the learning required for a degree can be completed outside of the central campus. By implication such programs also offer forms of off-campus instruction that will permit successful completion of a degree program. Further, many programs identified as external offer ways to recognizing learning gained outside the college environment.

There is considerable variation among programs that call themselves external. Some require no time on campus, while others demand regular visits to campus. Many institutions offer the traditional curriculum and courses off campus and may or may not offer other, more nontraditional forms of instruction and evaluation. Other programs offer no direct forms of instruction, but facilitate the use of a wide variety of learning resources and activities.

**EXTRAINSTITUTIONAL LEARNING:** Whether completed before or after entering a degree program, this term refers to learning that occurred in a setting outside of an accredited postsecondary institution. Types of learning within this category often include formal educational experiences that have been sponsored by another institution such as a business, professional organization, government agency, or the military. The term may also be used synonymously with experiential learning to indicate learning that results from work experience, independent research and study, volunteer experience, or other unsponsored activity.

**FACULTY AND ACADEMIC PROFESSIONALS:** The faculty, administrators, and other academic professionals who work in degree programs serving adult learners have many titles and responsibilities. In some cases, the roles of these individuals fall into traditional patterns; however, most professionals in the field have multiple roles and responsibilities in areas such as program development, planning, management, and

marketing, as well as teaching, advising, and counseling. Titles of positions include the traditional faculty rankings, as well as mentor, academic adviser, preceptor, tutor, academic counselor, program director, and others.

Part-time faculty tend to have similar responsibilities, but are called by a variety of titles such as adjunct faculty, community faculty, and field faculty. Many of these part-time faculty are practicing professionals who are believed to bring to the classroom a special connection between theory and practice. The standards applied to hiring these faculty members may parallel those used in the wider institution or they may place greater emphasis on professional experience and expertise rather than on specific academic credentials.

**INDEPENDENT STUDY:** The term is used by many institutions and programs to refer to any learning that a student achieves outside of the classroom. The learning activities often subsumed under the title of independent study include: a regular course taken on an individual basis; a correspondence course, a project initiated and developed by a student and guided by a faculty member; a directed reading or study structured by a faculty member for an individual student; a tutorial combined with an intensive seminar; an extensive research activity; and in some cases even teaching. Contract learning is another term used to describe some forms of independent learning for certain institutions. A few alternative degree programs use the term as their primary descriptor.

The term leads to confusion because it is used increasingly as the primary and only descriptor for courses completed through correspondence study. Such courses are designed by faculty to be completed by many students on an individual basis. This type of learning may be based solely on written material or it may be augmented with radio, television, or video instruction.

**INDIVIDUALIZED:** The word is used to identify degree content or learning processes that are adjusted to meet personal goals and/or preferred learning strategies. The term, which implies the meeting of personal needs and goals, may be used to refer to an entire degree program, to a course or project, or to the selection of learning activities and strategies.

In some institutions the terms "special major" or "personalized" are used to refer to individualized degree programs that are proposed by students around a theme or specific concentration and subsequently approved by academic advisers/faculty.

**LEARNING CONTRACT:** This education tool is a formal agreement between a student and a faculty member that specifies the subject to be studied, the learning objectives to be achieved, the methods to be used, the intended learning outcomes, the form of evaluation, and the resulting recognition of the learning, e.g., credits to be awarded or competency to be achieved. The term project-based learning is used similarly in some programs.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:** The expression refers generally to the knowledge or skills individuals are expected to acquire as a result of specific learning experiences (courses, independent learning activities, etc.) or of a program as a whole. Typically learning outcomes are both demonstrable and measurable so that they can be assessed and used as part of a degree program. The knowledge and skills may be applicable to a specific field or discipline, or they may be general in nature and apply broadly to education and learning. Learning outcomes also may often be serendipitous, providing the learner with unexpected knowledge, skill, and insight.

The term is also applied to change and growth in other areas: personal values and attitudes, social responsibility, and future personal and professional achievement. When used within this context, learning outcomes will usually relate to broader programmatic objectives, rather than to a specific learning experience.

**LIFELONG LEARNING:** The expression can be used to mean simply that people can and do learn throughout their lives. However, it is often used to delineate programmatic goals or philosophy and to imply that people should learn throughout their lives. The use of lifelong learning is similar to that of autonomous learning as it indicates the purposeful development of self-directed learning skills: identifying goals, determining methods, and developing learning resources. This pattern of skill development and its related planning, implementation, and completion of learning activities is viewed as a required activity for a full life.

**MATURE LEARNERS:** As with experienced learners, the term is used to imply that such students bring experiences to their education, and that they have learned and developed from those experiences. Usually a synonym for adult, this term is often used to differentiate between younger adults (students of traditional age) and older adults (though not necessarily senior citizens). The expression may also imply that the learner has characteristics and abilities different from those of the traditional student.

**NARRATIVE TRANSCRIPTS:** This alternative to coursework transcripts with grades and credits provides written evaluations of learning activities (both formal courses and independent learning projects). The written, or narrative, evaluations are recorded on a narrative transcript that either replaces or complements the traditional transcript. The narrative transcript is used exclusively by some institutions.

**NEW COLLEGE:** Taken from a centuries-old college at Oxford, the expression is now used primarily to identify a program outside the traditional collegiate structures. It may refer to an evening and/or weekend program designed for working adults, but offering the traditional curricula of the institution. In other cases it refers to a special unit within an institution, which is open to many students, but which attempts to maintain a variety of innovative approaches to teaching, learning, and curriculum.

**NONTRADITIONAL:** With or without a hyphen (i.e., non-traditional), this word signifies that the program, institution, or type of education involved is different from the typical or traditional forms found on campus. The degree and type of difference found in

the so-called nontraditional forms will vary widely. The term is also applied to students, learning processes, and programmatic approach to content.

Nontraditional students often are thought of as adults, but the term may also refer to members of minority groups, part-time learners, and those who are educationally underprepared. A nontraditional program may be offering courses off campus, on weekends, through correspondence, at a distance, or through some other delivery system. Processes may involve active learning in the classroom, experiential learning in the workplace, or instruction through a computer. Content may be approached in many different fashions: students may have a major hand in the focus and direction of an activity or a degree program; interdisciplinary and thematic courses may be taught; and learning how to learn may be viewed as more important than specific content.

It should be noted that many in the field are discarding this term in favor of language that focuses on positive elements that describe the nature and characteristics of their programs, e.g., adult, external, independent, individualized, integrative, and liberal studies.

**OFF CAMPUS:** Programs or services that identify themselves as being off campus mean first that they are not on a declared campus of the parent institution. The off-campus program or service may be in another location within the same city or may be located in another town or state. A few institutions operate without a campus and have many sites similar to off-campus programs; these institutions may consider themselves to be campus-free or a generic university without walls.

**OPEN:** This descriptor is most commonly connected to the word university, as in British Open University; it is also connected to terms such as division and studies. In each case the term implies flexibility in time and place of learning, off-campus instruction, and individualization of degree requirements. It also indicates an orientation toward the working adult.

**PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT:** The most common form of prior learning evaluation, with the possible exception of formal testing programs, involves the compilation of a portfolio to demonstrate and document achievement of college-level knowledge and skill. Through the evaluation of the portfolio, credits, competencies, or other forms of recognition are awarded to the student. Credits may be awarded in general categories or content areas, just as specific numbers of credits are awarded for classes or their equivalents.

**PRIOR LEARNING:** This type of learning, achieved before entering a college assessment program, may have been acquired through many avenues such as work experience, volunteering, community involvement, and independent reading. As with extracurricular learning, the expression typically refers to learning gained outside the formal sponsorship of a postsecondary institution; it also refers to learning gained under the sponsorship of a business, government, or social agency whose educational offerings have been assessed by an educational body such as ACE.

In some cases the expression has been used to include formal college course work. At this point, however, the term is being used more consistently to indicate that postsecondary sponsored learning is excluded.

**SELF-ASSESSMENT:** This activity of the learning process has been seen by many practitioners as a critical event in the acquisition and internalization of knowledge and skill. The expression is used to refer to the process that an individual undertakes to examine the extent, amount, quality, depth, and impact of the learning involved in a specific experience. The term also implies that this self-examination or personal reflection will consider both cognitive and affective results of the learning experience.

**SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS:** The term implies that students who have this attribute know what they want to learn and how to acquire that knowledge and skill, are able to control their use of time and resources to achieve that learning, and have learned how to balance their commitments to work, family, community, and education. Further, self-directed learners are assumed to have accepted the essential responsibility for meeting their educational goals. Being a self-directed learner is often viewed as critical to success in adult-oriented degree programs.

**UNIVERSITY COLLEGE:** The expression has been used for many years to refer to different kinds of educational units within colleges or universities. The term has been used extensively to refer to units whose mission is to provide the lower division portion of a four-year program. In many cases it indicates a cross-college or cross-disciplinary focus. It may refer to continuing education/continuing studies units within larger institutions. In some cases the term may also refer to collegiate units that offer one or more nontraditional degree programs.

**UNIVERSITY WITHOUT WALLS:** Founded in the late 1960's and early 1970's in conjunction with the Union of Experimenting Colleges and Universities, this form of nontraditional education was designed to break down barriers to learning imposed by traditional institutions and programs. Critical to these programs were the beliefs that people learned at many different times and places in their lives, that they should have greater responsibility for their learning, and that factors such as age, work, family, and distance should not impede access to higher education.

In addition to official University Without Walls programs at traditional educational institutions in the country, programs and institutions that operated on similar principles were often called universities, schools, or colleges without walls. Many of the institutions did not have traditional campuses, full-time faculty, or other elements of more traditional alternatives.

**WEEKEND COLLEGE:** These degree programs are generally characterized by traditional curricula offered in large blocks on the weekends and by a variety of corresponding student services designed for the adult student population. Other time-related programs, e.g., twilight college and evening college, are similar in curricula and services, but built around another time period.

Growing out of the weekend college concept are various other educational structures, e.g., a college for working adults, designed to integrate various learning strategies into a planned whole. Here, students often learn through a combination of night classes, independent study, and television courses. The curriculum, however, often is presented as broad, conceptually integrated courses built around selected subjects.

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