Chapter 1
The Roots of Change:
Adult Higher Education and Online For-Profit Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter suggests that the rise, establishment, and success of for-profit online educational institutions is rooted in prior technologies and concepts supporting the education of adults. The chapter shows how correspondence schools and later the University Without Walls and other adult degree programs provided the institutional models for reaching out to those adults who were unable to access traditional academic programs because of academic, economic, institutional, and social barriers. Three concepts are discussed as providing the conceptual groundings for the for-profit online university: the open university and independent study, correspondence and home study, and adult-focused degree accommodations. The convergence of these ideas and the availability of advanced technological tools which could reach learners worldwide provided the opportunity for the for-profit online educational institution to supplant other adult degree programs and to become a disruptive force in the educational marketplace.

The concern for access by adults to higher educational opportunities must be voiced in an attempt to remedy our national educational situation so that the promise of a higher education is available to all. It is not enough to take pride in the achievements

of higher education in America. It is not enough that some schools and programs for adults exist. These must be in usable form and available on an equitable basis to those adults who want and need them. (Taaffe & Rocco, 1981, p. 4)

INTRODUCTION

Thus begins a manual written by members of The Alliance (Miller, 1981) that specifically calls for increased acceptance of a new student demographic, the adult student, into higher education. According to Rocco (2010), The Alliance, founded during the 1973-74 academic year, was grounded in four basic values: access for adult learners, innovation and experimental curricular design, quality assurance through administrative practices and assessment of student learning, and collaboration among institutions. The result would be the strengthening of a democratic society—one with an educated and self-directed citizenry. Higher education institutions could—and should—contribute to this goal by willingly opening their doors to the growing numbers of adult students who wanted the knowledge and learning experiences embedded in an undergraduate degree. This was also the idea of the open university proposed by Wedemeyer (1978) who envisioned a university where adult students could pursue higher education under an open enrollment system, would be partners with faculty in designing and completing a program of study, and would work on content at home, at work, in the community, and at their own pace and time. The idea of learners having control over time, space, and pace of learning using technology can be seen in the independent study movement advocated by Wedemeyer (1973). All adults, regardless of socio-demographic characteristics or previous academic achievements, would be welcome. Educational opportunities for adults were designed to develop autonomous and self-directed learners at a time when the numbers and diversity of adult learners in higher education were increasing.

BACKGROUND

Growth in adult enrollments in higher education, defined as students 25 years of age or older, surged from 27.8% in 1970 to 38.3% in 1980, to 44.1% in 1990 and remained in the 40% range until 2020, when it was expected to decrease slightly to 38% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018 as cited in Robertson, 2020). Today, numbers and demographics for adult students have become relatively consistent; in general, today's *new majority* (a term coined in 2016 by Allan Golston of The Aspen Institute) of adult students are part-time, middle-aged women (Robertson, 2020).

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