CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAINING OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM LEADERS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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A B S T R A C T

As community college leadership changes, there is a need to understand how college leaders accept and embrace programming aimed at adult education leaders. Additionally, there is a need to understand how program managers working with adult and community education interact with their community colleges. Combined with challenging fiscal situations, many community colleges have structured adult learning programs, whether for leisure education or for literacy instruction, to be linked to available funding with decisions to offer or not offer programs based on fiscal criteria. The study profiled community college adult education program managers and then identified what they perceived to be their greatest needed areas of training and how important those areas were. The majority of the managers had worked in community college administration 10-15 years, had been in adult education program administration for that same length of time, held a master's degree, and, approximately half reported administratively through a division of academic affairs. Their most needed training was in program marketing and in handling administrative issues, and the most important areas identified dealt with administration and assessment. Findings lead to stressing the need for strong leadership that will prioritize programming with the mission of the American community college.

Keywords: Community colleges, adult learning, program management, leisure education, privatization.

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges play unique roles in serving their communities, providing a broad range of programs and services including basic job training, leisure education, academic preparation work for transfer students, and pre-college programs. As new technologies make education easier to distribute, and as the aging adult population grows and demands more educational opportunities, community colleges are uniquely situated to be a primary provider of community-based adult education.

Cohen and Brawer (2008) offered an initial classification of what they termed "community education" (p. 317) to include continuing education, adult education, adult basic education, continuing occupational/workforce education, and lifelong learning. They provided examples of different states' reliance on community colleges to offer these types of programs, such as

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Florida's community colleges enrolling approximately 75,000 in recreation and leisure courses and Mississippi community colleges enrolling 209,795 in noncredit classes. However, Cohen and Brawer offered few observations, findings, or reports on the structure of community education in community colleges, with the exception of noting the reliance on funding mechanisms to dictate the offering, expansion, or restriction of any given program. They conceded that "community education has not reached parity with degree- and certificate credit programs in either funding or internal and external perspective" (p. 344), yet they did note that short courses that respond directly to community needs are one of the greatest attributes of community colleges.

Nearly two decades ago, Seagren, Wheeler, Creswell, Miller, and VanHorn-Grassmeyer (1994) argued that there was tremendous need for the development of training for academic leaders in community colleges, and this argument has been consistently reinforced as a generation of community college leaders has begun to retire with new leaders appointed (Bernadin-

Demougeot, 2008). In what has been termed the "graying of community colleges," the projected turnover is significant, and in states such as California, up to half of all community college presidents and leaders are projected to retire within the next decade (Duree, 2007). And the general discussion of community college leaders has been focused, at times, noting that there are special attributes and characteristics of those who work effectively with adult learners, and that these characteristics must be consciously fostered and developed (Brockett, 1990). Community college leaders must have the skills necessary to respond to adult education students and their unique challenges, life stages, and learning styles.

New community college leaders face competing priorities, and must create priorities based on their campus' challenges, including the consideration that can or will be given to community education programs (Duree, 2007). There is competition for new college leader attention between growing academic transfer functions of the college, local job training and workforce development, and recreational learning programs. For many leaders, decision to offer or not offer community education is predicated on the availability of program funding (Grover and Miller, 2014). An additional consideration may be predisposition of new generation of community college leaders toward this type of programming.

The current study was to design to explore the characteristics of those who lead adult education programs in community colleges, giving special attention to training they utilize to stay current in their work and challenges they face in offering their programs. Findings such as these can be critical in helping community colleges fulfill their community-level responsibilities of engaging their publics and working to enhance general quality of life of those not served by other agencies.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There are a variety of literature bases that can inform the current study, including research on the characteristics of community college leaders (Gascon-Brewton, 2011), adult education leaders, offering and organization of adult and community education, and a limited but informative foundation of literature on adult and continuing education professionals in community colleges. To best organize this literature into a meaningful understanding, previous research has been categorized into two broad areas: community college leadership attributes, and adult and community or continuing education in community colleges.

Community College Leadership: As Cohen and Brawer (2008) highlighted, there has been a significant amount of literature on leadership in higher education, and they argued that based on this literature, an institution's success or failure can often be charted. They highlighted the work of Vaughn (1994) and Richardson and Wolverton (1994) in specific on community college leadership, noting that "as colleges have grown larger and more complex, administrators, faculty members, and trustees all have had to adjust" (p. 155). By 'adjust,' Cohen and Brawer meant that community college leaders must modify how they work and set priorities to meet their institutional and constituent priorities.

College leadership makes a difference in deciding which programs get attention, which are offered prominently, which receive resources, and which programs are eliminated or reduced in size and scope. The question or change within a college's mission, as driven by a leader, was critically examined by Morest (2006) in relation to serving students. She noted "the potential for community colleges to shift their attention away from an important constituency: low-income and disadvantaged student" (p. 29). Specifically, she observed the tension between providing transfer education opportunities, as desired by the university constituency and those interested in low-cost, affordable transfer work, and occupational or vocational training programs, often desired by adult learners looking to enhance their careers or change jobs. In both instances, the temptation by community college leaders to shift the financing of these educational programs can lead to distorting the equity mission of community colleges, and she demonstrated her point that leadership beliefs and values can have a direct impact on how an institution operates, and that leadership development is critical for the continuation of the community college mission.

The attribute of leadership has been echoed for over two decades as a necessity for community colleges, as institutions, to foster. As a result of the demand for leadership development, there have been numerous academic degree programs that have emerged, along with association based leadership development programs, and even consortia of institutions that have created leadership development programs specifically for community colleges. The Chair Academy, an outgrowth of the Maricopa Community Colleges, for

example developed a program to help foster leaders in postsecondary education, offering academic credit for professional development activities. In the Academy's publication, Dewling and Rivera (2010) stressed the need for collaborative relationships, strong interpersonal skills, and commitment to continuous professional development as fundamental elements of strong community college leadership.

The primary association for community college administration and advocacy is the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), a member, Washington, DC-based organization. With a concern about presidential turnover and a growing demand for community college leaders, the Association (AACC, 2005) developed a listing of what they considered to be the key competencies for their member college leaders to hold. Through work with community college presidents, board members, and college faculty, including interviews, member surveys, and focus groups, they identified core competencies as including organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, advocacy, and professionalism.

Roberts (2007) used the AACC leadership characteristics in a study of trustees, staff, faculty, administration, and alumni at a case study community college, and identified a listing of key skills community college leaders must possess. Stressed in his findings was the critical ability of community college leaders to appreciate, understand, and be willing to advocate for multiple missions and appreciate the learning differences and outcomes desired by different college learners. Roberts explained that successfully maintaining this balance is difficult, and that training and integrating the complex mission of community colleges into professional development is paramount to successful leadership in these institutions.

The conclusion to be drawn from the literature on community college leadership is that successful leadership is often situational, meaning that it is dependent upon the challenges and opportunities facing a particular college. And, college leaders must be willing to understand a situation and respond appropriately, which means that leaders must have a sense of who their constituents are and how the college can best respond to their needs.

Adult and Community Education in the Community College: The development of leadership for adult education programs has received some limited attention during the past 100 years. Rohfeld (1989) developed the most comprehensive description of the emergence of training adult education leaders, tracing the formation of professional associations for adult educators in the 1920s to the emergence of formal university-based training programs at Teachers College at Columbia University in 1922. The interest in such programs and public lectures led to the creation of adult education coursework at Teachers College in 1930 and Ohio State University in 1931, and ultimately, to degree granting programs. Such programs focused primarily on differentiating adult learners from traditional learning environments; however, no mention in these programs was made to the emerging world of the junior, and later community, colleges and the majority of the academic attention was about the content of adult learning rather than how to best lead these programs.

Doctoral research over the past 40 years has been one of the most responsive to the discussion of adult and continuing education leadership. Guglielmino (1978), for example, focused on the skills needed for success in the future of continuing education. Survey responses from middle-level continuing education managers, professors of management, and training directors revealed strong agreement that human skills, such as leadership and communications, were the most important and exceeded the need for strong technical skills in operating continuing education programs.

Research has stressed the need for institutional control mechanisms to monitor program size, cost, and efficiency (Malamet, 1980), and critical discussions have highlighted the need for a reflective approach to monitoring the system of the adult education enterprise that includes "assumptions and propositions" (p. 121) about adult learners (Peters & Associates, 1980). The need to understand the unique attributes of adults was also the foundation of Soney's (2003) examination of the administration of adult learning programs. Soney wrote that "the adult learning administrator must out of necessity understand the nature and make up of the students who depend on the institution" (p. 17), highlighting the attributes, behaviors, and objectives of adult students as key considerations in how programs are developed and evaluated.

Wang (2004) provided a synthesis of how community education programs are offered through community colleges, stressing that community education is one of their three primary functions (along with transfer

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education and occupational training). Wang noted complexity of successfully offering community education, concluding that due to primarily budget concerns, many community colleges have reduced their community education offerings. Wang further categorized community education to include adult education, continuing education, and lifelong learning, and ultimately offered recommendation that a critical and constructive conversation among community college leaders should be held to identify more systematically and efficiently use community education and meet needs of constituent users, such as adults.

More recently, Milheim (2008) studied reflective practices of adult basic education (ABE) program managers, motivated in part by her own personal challenges as a program director. She highlighted mis-match between individual needs from professional development and types of programs that are typically offered and how they can practically help those in professional adult education management. Through semi-structured interviews, she identified that these adult education managers relied on different kinds of practice to be effective in their jobs, including reflection about themselves, their practice, decision-making, and even their core personal and professional values.

Also in 2008, Largent and Horinck explored how community colleges provide programs to adult learners, specifically in area of service learning programs. Through their research at an urban, single campus community college, they concluded that adult students in their study "seemed to demand changes because they need to have more understanding of what is expected, more attention to need for their learning to be meaningful, and more connection to life experiences and control over their own learning" (p. 47). They subsequently concluded that program administrators in colleges such as their case study institution need to make efforts to incorporate adult learning theory into programmatic decisions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data were collected using an online, research-team developed survey instrument administered to a random sample of 400 community college adult education program managers. Sample was selected using an online listing of American community colleges, and once college was identified, the internet was used to identify a single person who has administrative responsibility for adult learning programs. The sample size was determined by over-sampling the projected sample size of 244, determined using the Nunnery and Kimbrough (1971) formula with a 95% confidence interval.

The instrument was developed based on Panteia's Research voor Beleid (a European policy and research think-tank) report *Key Competences for Adult Learning Professionals* (Buiskool, Broek, van Lakerveld, Zarifis, & Osborne, 2010). Report was developed by studying documents from around the world, focusing on "duties, tasks, responsibilities, roles, competences, and work environments of adult learning professionals" (p. 3), and was conducted in part by research teams at three universities, including University of Glasgow, University of Thessaloniki, and the University of Leiden. The goal of the research was to establish a global baseline of skills for adult education program directors. The competences identified in the report were translated to a researcher-developed survey instrument, where respondents were asked to rate the importance and needed training of each competence. Both of these questions were asked of respondents using a five-point Likert-type scale (1=strong disagreement, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 5=strong agreement).

A pilot test for the survey instrument was conducted with 15 community college continuing education professionals who were not selected for participation in the study. Pilot test resulted in some narrative clarification revisions, and a Cronbach alpha was computed on the survey responses, with a resulting alpha level of .7934 for the instrument reflecting an acceptable level of reliability. Survey instrument was deployed to identify sample in spring 2014 academic semester, and four follow up email messages were used to prompt responses by potential study participants.

FINDINGS

The number of respondents to the survey ultimately reach 233, 11 less than the 244 required for a 95% confidence interval. Despite this slightly lower than projected return, the number of responses was determined to be acceptable based on the exploratory nature of the study. An analysis of responses with no follow up reminder and the fourth email reminder demonstrated no significant difference in respondent patterns. Of these respondents, the majority had worked in community college administration 10-15 years (61%), had been in adult education program administration for that same length of time (63%), held a master's degree (82%), and, as shown in Table 1, approximately half

reported administratively through a division of academic affairs (48%).

Table 1. Characteristics of Community College Adult Learning Administrators.

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Length of experience in cc administration		
Under 10 years	60	25.75
10-15 years	143	61.3
Over 15 years	25	10.7
Missing/not reported	5	2.1
Length of time in adult education program position		
Under 10 years	57	24.46
10-15 years	148	63.5
Over 15 years	20	8.6
Missing/not reported	8	3.4
Highest education level earned		
Bachelor	6	2.5
Masters	193	82.8
Doctoral	27	11.5
Missing/not reported	7	3.0
Report to		
President/Chancellor	61	26.18
Academic Affairs	114	48.9
Student Affairs	6	2.5
Community/Government Relations	37	15.8
Business Affairs	11	4.7
Other	4	1.7
Number of direct staff reports		
Under 5	109	46.78
5-10	91	39.0
More than 10	31	13.3
Missing/not reported	2	.8
Approximate annual budget		
$500,000 or less	93	39.9
$500,000 to $1 million	75	32.1
Greater than $1million	51	21.88
Missing/not reported	14	6.0

In second section of survey, respondents were asked to identify both how important select training needs were and how important they were to current practice of managing adult learning programs in community colleges. Respondents used a 5-point Likert-type scale to respond with their perspectives, where 1=Strong Disagreement with training need and 5=Strong Agreement that training on that topic was needed.

As shown in Table 2, the most important training needs were how to handle administrative issues (mean 4.63), how to market programs (mean 4.49), and financial management (mean 4.48), while the least important were advising managers on their career (mean 3.62), advising them on their lives (mean 3.67), and understanding the social benefits of adult learning (mean 3.90). For needed training, the top areas two areas were the same as the importance ratings, including administration (mean 4.50) and marketing (mean 4.52). The third most needed training area was managing human resources (mean 4.35), and the least needed training areas were facilitating the adult learning process (mean 3.37), understanding the economic benefits of adult learning (mean 3.87), and program assessment (mean 3.87). A two-way ANOVA identified significant differences between the importance and needed training on two topics, between the importance of assessment and the need for training, and effective facilitation of the adult learning process and the need for training on how to do this.

Table 2. Perceived Importance and Training Needs of Community College Adult Learning Administrators.

Training Need	How Important	Needed Training
Assessment	4.34	3.87*
Design adult learning process	4.20	4.11
Facilitating adult learning process	3.86	3.37*
Evaluate adult learning	4.49	4.01
Advising on career	3.62	3.88
Advising on life	3.67	3.90
Construction of study programs	4.00	3.91
Administrative issues	4.63	4.50
Marketing	4.49	4.52
Public relations	4.25	4.15
Managing adult learning quality	4.17	4.22
Managing human resources	4.28	4.35
Financial management	4.48	4.00
Understanding economic benefits of adult learning	3.99	3.87
Understanding social benefits of adult learning	3.90	3.88

*identified as significantly different using a two-way ANOVA and a $p > .05$.

Finally, respondents were asked to identify the most critical issues they believed were facing adult education programs in their colleges. As shown in Table 3, the most frequently identified issue was the change in GED offering (n=87), most likely reflecting many states questioning and looking for alternatives to high school equivalency education programs for adults. This was closely followed by financing and funding issues (n=86), and as a possible extension of funding, marketing programs (n=61) was also identified. Conversely, few administrators identified issues such as library maintenance (n=1), technology support (n=1), online registration (n=1), or evaluating classes (n=1) as critical issues they face.

Table 3. Critical issues facing community college adult learning administrators.

Critical Issue	Frequency of identification
GED changes	87
Financing/funding programs	86
Program marketing	61
Evaluating programs	60
Building public/private partnerships/courses	51
Finding appropriate instructors	44
Transfer work competition	25
Facility maintenance	13
Institutional support	11
Administrative staff recruitment	10
Leisure education market analysis	8
Social media use/integration	5
Employment forecasting	4
Private provider competition	2
Leadership succession	2
Resource library maintenance	1
Technology support	1
Online registration	1
Class evaluations	1

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Survey findings provide both a snapshot of current practice of adult education in the world of community colleges, and provide an indication of some of challenges leaders in these programs are facing. For example, over 70% of those in adult education leadership positions in two-year colleges have a decade or more of experience, and nearly 95% of those individuals hold at least a master's degree. These individuals lead programs that about half of the time are coordinated under the auspices of academic affairs, have five or fewer employees, and who operate programs with less than $1 million in operating funds. The important issues, and those that leaders need training on, are related to how to make user-based and funded programs work. Broadly, the conversation focuses on the very important notion of "administrative issues" that could be defined as operational protocol or how to make decisions on which programs to offer, and is closely aligned with the strongly agreed to importance and need for training in how to successfully market programs. Similarly, when given the opportunity to identify critical issues facing their work, three of the top five issues were related to program viability (marketing, evaluation, finding partners to offer programs).

The single most important critical issue program leaders identified related to the changes of the GED test, and presumably, how their states respond to the changes. The modifications of GED to align with Common Core, among other changes such as the electronic delivery of the test and qualifications of test proxies, have been controversial in many states, with some state leaders opting to use other examinations to determine high school equivalency education. These kinds of questions and changes can be difficult for adult education programs that have limited financial resources and must rely on state program funding to offer educational programs.

All of these findings suggest that the state of adult education programming in community colleges has some stability and tradition, but that the current environment is also somewhat fragile and dependent upon the financial ability of programs to generate revenue to be offered. These trends mirror much of the commercialization of higher education, and demonstrate that these issues are not relegated to the world of four-year colleges and universities. If adult basic education, for example, is entirely dependent upon user or third-party subsidies, then this is a clear indication that much of social-good element of higher education has diminished to critical levels. Adult basic education, simply, becomes a profit center rather than a social function of the community college. Further, if programming for the workforce or high-school equivalency is dependent upon its profitability, community college leaders may have significant issues and problems illustrating the social benefits to all of an educated population.

The issue of providing a social good is not new to higher education, as questions about rising tuition and rapidly increasing fees are common within the domain of four-year higher education institutions. Additionally, high costs are common in the for-profit higher education sector, where a strong reliance is placed on federal financial aid packages as an enabling factor for college matriculation. Costs have only been a peripheral concern in community colleges; tuition rates have soared as a percentage, but they largely have remained affordable with minimal fees associated with them. If the core function of the college, however, becomes one of making financial gains a priority, then programs that serve the larger-good of the population are certainly in jeopardy.

IMPLICATIONS

Community college leaders must be aware that accountability takes many forms and can use a variety of metrics to measure, but ultimately it is the core value and belief system of the institutional leaders that create priorities for the college. As such, college leaders must understand their public-service mission that fundamentally includes providing services to adult learners. As financial competition for scarce resources increases, leaders must find ways to provide public-good based programs with the thinnest of profits. Leaders must also look at the structure of their programming to find strategies that respond to adult learners, and senior college administrators must find ways to support some of the unconventional strategies that are effective at enhancing adult learning.

A secondary implication is that adult education program managers in community colleges need to continue their professional development in the area of marketing and program responsiveness. Survey responses, as well as the identified critical issues, point to the need for programs that are attractive to an appropriate number of users with an appropriate level of resources, and that it may well be a combination of balancing profitable programs with socially-relevant, public good programs that lose money to realize the democratic vision of the community college.

Overall, adult education programming in community colleges plays an important role in how colleges, and their leaders, define themselves. With an increased challenge to fund all types of programs, it will be the vision, beliefs, and values of college leaders that make a tremendous difference in determining the future road

for community colleges. Only through training, critical discussions, and opportunities for stakeholders to speak their minds can college leaders truly identify and predict the needs of a community, including those programs, events, and classes that lead to the greater good.

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