



## Addressing the Needs of the Nontraditional Learner

Old and Young, They're Coming—to Your Campus!

By Otilie Stafford

One afternoon last July, during Atlantic Union College's Adult Degree Program (ADP) seminar, I sat in the college library thinking about what was going on. The library was full of adults, ranging in age from 25-65, who worked individually with study supervisors preparing proposals for a semester of off-campus study. They were using card catalogs, carrying books from the stacks to their study carrels, sitting with their supervisors at long tables going over what they had accomplished, and waiting for access to their folders in the temporary ADP office.

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Among the varied participants in ADP was Bonnie, who already had an M.A. and was working on a degree in personal ministries so she could do community work more effectively. Then there was Roy, a retired industrial engineer, finally finishing college for his own satisfaction. Gil, a building constructor, is headed for the ministry, and Helen, a nurse, wants to advance in her career by finishing her B.S. in nursing. Bo Huang from China is majoring in music. The library was full of professional people moving up, married women returning to the job market, and persons studying in areas to which their lives had unexpectedly led them.

Only a week earlier a group of senior citizens had been on cam-

pus. These Elderhostel students were combining a visit to this part of New England with study. Their work was not degree-directed (many of them were already degreed), but their enthusiasm and the rich experience they brought to class discussions made working with them a joy.

Now the current full-time college students in ADP needed a different kind of teaching from that traditionally expected of a college faculty member.

### Radical Changes on The College Campus

As I thought about what had happened on just this one small campus, it seemed to me that higher education has changed radically in the years since I was a col-

lege student. The population of the campus has altered, and the qualifications needed to teach here have also changed.

This change is, of course, more sweeping than what is seen at just one institution. It is caused by two nationwide trends: (1) The number of students between the ages of 18-22 has been falling, reaching what will probably be the bottom of the curve this year; (2) the rapidly changing job market has made access to retraining and advanced training essential for many adults who cannot reorganize their lives to return to conventional on-campus programs.

For example, single mothers who never expected to be their family's wage earner frequently help swell the rolls of the unemployed. Their hope lies in education. Those forced out of work in jobs eliminated by the technological revolution need to be retrained for work where jobs are available. But because of their family responsibilities, traditional college education is difficult or impossible for them to achieve.

In addition, Christianity with its world view inspires many of its adherents to prepare themselves for lives of loving service. These persons desire to prepare themselves to become teachers, ministers, community workers, and public health specialists, but they need to be able to support themselves and their families while they are retrained. Having the opportunity to receive credit for life experiences would also help expedite speedy entry into these persons' chosen careers.

### **Rechanneling Time and Energy Into Nontraditional Programs**

Colleges and universities are finding that increasing amounts of energy and time are being spent in nontraditional kinds of programs.

Refresher seminars and continued learning workshops for business and professional people, college work that combines practical experience and theoretical study, and various structures that facilitate adult higher education now represent an increasing part of higher education. It should be noted, however, that such activities and programs also bring in significant funds to help compensate for the drop in traditional enrollments.

### **Needed—A New Kind of Teacher**

When the college or university administration begins to think of the entire population above the age of 18 as potential enrollees, many things happen. The most obvious is the necessity to plan curriculum, degree programs, and other methods of meeting the needs of the lifelong learner, but perhaps even more important is the need to find faculty who can think creatively and use a variety of teaching styles and methods. The days when the good faculty member was someone who had worked up an effective set of lectures in an area in which he or she was an expert, and who was then simply expected to lecture, counsel, test, and evaluate fairly, may be gone forever.

The relationship between the faculty member and the adult learner is different from that of the professor and the college-age student. The adult learner may very well be a professional person himself, perhaps earning more than the teacher, possibly older, and in every way (except his or her knowledge of a particular subject area) the equal of the professor. Thus, the relationship becomes one of equals, one of whom has expertise from which the other wishes to benefit. The need to view teaching as an interchange between equals may make some faculty members unhappy because they feel stripped

of the robe of authority and superiority that has been their traditional right.

In personal terms as well, relationships are different. The adult student is surrounded by the complications of marriage (or perhaps divorce), illnesses, deaths, bankruptcies, and other problems of adult life that young people do not usually have to deal with. Therefore, the more mature student needs a different kind of support system.

In AUC's Adult Degree Program, student representatives set up a round-the-clock system for assisting one another or finding the help needed to solve pressing personal problems. These students do not usually need career counseling. Indeed, it is their careers that have led them back to the campus. Instead, they need help in juggling jobs, families, church work, and adult pressures so that they have time to study. In such situations, the guidance of more experienced students may be the most valuable helping tool. The student counseling office can assist the adult learner by arranging times and places for this help to take place.

### **Reorienting the Administration's View**

The college administrative structure also needs to change as the campus population shifts from traditional to nontraditional programs. A dean of students, for example, who sees himself or herself as primarily dealing with dormitories housing 18- to 22-year-olds, may actually be addressing the concerns of a smaller and smaller part of the college's clientele. As changes in student population escalate, the dean of students' office may need to redefine its role and spend more time worrying about ways that

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## The Nontraditional Learner

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adult housing needs and personal lifestyles can be cared for on a campus once organized to meet the needs of much younger persons.

Sections of residence halls may need to be set aside to house adult students who are attending short-term seminars and workshops. These areas may not need tight supervision, but they do need to be kept quieter since most adults have difficulty adjusting to the noise levels of regular residence halls. Adults are also more easily disturbed by changes in their diets, so cafeterias may need to alter their menus when such students are on campus.

The business manager will need to recognize that nontraditional programs are no longer just supplementary income to keep the on-campus program running, but are central and fundamental elements of the college's overall *raison d'être*. This may lead to rearranging budgets to reflect such a shift.

The academic dean's office will need to give more attention to the

type of teacher who is hired, ascertaining that faculty members are flexible enough to move between traditional and nontraditional teaching assignments. When nontraditional programs become a significant part of the faculty's responsibilities, those teachers who cannot adjust to different ways of transmitting knowledge may themselves need retraining.

Finally, the college's advertising and public relations directors will need to direct their energies to a variety of potential students, not just to academy senior classes. Innovative strategies can be devised to reach nontraditional students and entice them to study at the institution.

### Meeting the Needs

In 1977, in the book *The Future of Adult Education*, Fred H. Harrington made the following recommendations:

1. "American colleges and universities must recognize that educating adults is one of their fundamental responsibilities."—Page 211.

2. "Colleges and universities should welcome adult men and women as degree students, on and off campus, part- and full-time, in traditional and nontraditional programs; and while protecting standards the institutions should make the adjustments necessary to accommodate this clientele."—Page 212.

3. "Colleges and universities should expand and improve their noncredit offerings in continuing professional education and liberal education for adults; they should encourage Americans to make better use of leisure time; and they should not hesitate to become involved in problem-solving action programs."—Page 214.

4. "To make their work with adults effective, colleges and

universities must provide more help for the disadvantaged; must strengthen the organizational structure of their institutions and support the development of adult education as a special field of study; and must do what is possible to improve the financial situation."—Page 216.

Harrington's prediction seven years ago that adult education would eventually become a serious part of higher education seems to

be coming true. His appeal to academia to make adult education a full partner in our colleges and universities, not just a way of raising supplemental income, needs to be taken seriously.

In higher education in general, adult learners now outnumber traditional learners. Although in Adventist institutions this transition may not yet have taken place, nontraditional programs are certainly increasing. Three North

American SDA colleges now have external degree programs. Non-credit courses and part-time programs in the late afternoons and evenings have increased. Several colleges have Elderhostel programs. In addition, a number of colleges are taking various kinds of professionally directed seminars to off-campus businesses and institutions.

Unfortunately, however, organizational structures, the hiring of

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## Servants or Masters?



If you haven't yet had to plan computer use in your classroom, you may wonder why it should be such a problem. Isn't software already available to help students learn all kinds of different things? That in itself presents a problem, but a difficulty not unlike which textbooks to use.

The subtler challenge is what mindset you will bequeath to your pupils about how they will relate to computers.

When microcomputers hit the market, some educators thought they would become the great equalizer. Since prices were not prohibitive, computers could be installed in struggling schools as well as in "ivy-league" institutions. According to this line of reasoning, everyone could now be exposed to a standardized learning

environment and the "have-nots" would experience the same opportunities as the "haves."

It hasn't worked out that way—at least not in terms of results. Yes, computers of comparable quality have been installed in both poor and rich schools. Students from both categories have received equal exposure to these state-of-the-art educators. But the results have not been the same.

Students at "ivy-league" institutions have come away from their educational experience clearly in control of computers—trained to use computers to further their own goals—prepared to program their own applications.

Students from struggling schools have learned to read better, spell better, type more accurately, and have achieved better math skills and eye-hand coordination, but with this idea: I am the student; the computer is the teacher. I must do whatever the computer tells me to do. I play the computer's game, with its rules.

These divergent attitudes are developed partially by the type of interaction students are allowed to make with the computers. But they also flow, as if by osmosis, directly from teacher to student. As the teacher relates to computers, so too do his or her students.

Thus the micro-soul-searching question of the 1980s is: How do you relate—or plan to relate—to microcomputers? Do you see them as sophisticated teaching aids for ultrabright and remedially needy students? Or do you see them as hi-tech clay to be molded by students into whatever they want them to be? As bits and bytes bonsai trees to be trimmed and trained into miniature electronic gardens?

How you answer these questions may be more important than what type of hardware or software you ultimately select.—Dave Ruskjer. □

The author is publisher of *The Journal of the AMCA (Adventist Microcomputer Concepts and Applications)*.

faculty, and the running of campuses still go on as though we were largely in the business of teaching only the traditional student. If we are to recognize the changed face of higher education today and to shift our programs to include the entire posthigh-school population, we need to educate administrators, faculty, and constituents to think in new ways about Adventist higher education. □

## Writing Teachers

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time or another in the Collection Box. Every piece received an encouraging and specific response from the directors and sometimes the entire group. Cleo Martin pointed out that "People can get to be better writers by writing, and by getting response from careful readers." In her response to the writing of the group, she modelled a positive approach that focuses on a writer's excellences in writing and leads to revision.

Participants noted several effects of this intense, detailed, and encouraging response. Millie Windemuth from Grants Pass SDA School observed, "I know that what I write will be responded to positively, and I can take risks that

I would never have taken in writing before."

Dan Baker from Tri-City Junior Academy noted that people felt free to explore different kinds of writing. He commented, "I didn't expect to be writing any poetry because I had never really considered that means of expression as being my best means, but for some reason, it seemed to fit." Anita Molstead from Sandpoint Junior Academy said, "I've always wanted to see myself as 'teacher, writer' but that seemed like climbing Mt. Everest. But after three weeks of positive comments on my writing, I realize that I indeed can be 'teacher, writer.'"

### Surprising Results

Bringing together a group of writers, giving them the time and place to write, and demonstrating the motivating force of positive response can only result in good writing. And good writing resulted, sometimes to the writer's surprise, since participants seemed to be experienced chiefly in the more formal, academic kinds of writing.

Susan Gardner from Walla Walla Valley Academy expressed her misgivings thus: "You give me scholarly essays to write, and I can

go with them, but creative writing like stories; well, I am not a creative writer." During this workshop, however, she completed two short stories and had to revise her own opinion. "I learned that I can write in different forms, and I found that I could indeed be a creative person. It freed my mind to think in different channels."

The retreatlike atmosphere of the workshop provided the time and place for participants to totally immerse themselves in writing without distractions or the pressure of other duties. But just as important, the workshop provided an audience. Participants formed a community of writers, reading and responding to one another's work. Finding a knowledgeable and caring audience to read one's work and offer suggestions can have a powerful effect on a writer. And since writing is meant to be read, sharing one's work with that audience is also a natural part of the writing process.

Karen Bungard from San Diego Academy commented, "I have not had the audience before that I have had here to share my personal creative material with. Here I have an audience who will be accepting, yet helpful and who will give suggestions for improvement." Rick Jordan from Anchorage Junior Academy stated, "I learned some self-confidence in sharing my writing, and I think that's important to take back to my students. I can show them how to be more self-confident in sharing their writing."

### Why Write?

There are many reasons for writing teachers to write. Of course, their writing improves as they practice their craft. But by writing, teachers also develop an enthusiasm and love of writing that is contagious. They can then, as Leah

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