

College for Adults

Second Chance or Continuing Opportunity?

J. E. Burkett

Regrets over not ever having gone to college . . . seem to become more widespread as people grow older and probably develop with particular rapidity among men at about the time they realize they have gone as far as they will ever go in their occupations.¹

Among those adults who have had some education beyond the high school, there is an almost universal yearning for a college degree. In fact, desire for a degree among high school graduates who never attended college is an aspiration shared by from 39 to 63% of women in this group and by 66 to 77% of the men.² However others may look at these adults, they see themselves as "college drop-outs," their education is truncated, and their personal, civic, social and vocational lives as unfulfilled.

What Is A College Drop-Out?

And yet, the education of these adults differs from that of college graduates only in the degree of their

deprivation, not in kind. This is not merely to re-affirm the folk-wisdom of the late Will Rogers ("We are all ignorant, only in different ways") but also to suggest new meaning for the term "college drop-out." For the college graduate of ten years ago whose organized educational efforts stopped at commencement is as surely a "college-drop-out" as the adult who never started college, or having begun was not able to complete his degree. The college graduate of 1968 cannot possibly know what he will need to know ten years from now. Much of what he must know ten years from now has not yet been discovered.

In our world of change, continuing education is the imperative of both the college graduate and the non-graduate. Without it both are "college drop-outs." For both groups it is no longer sufficient to provide educational opportunity as a kind of "second chance" to learn what should have been learned but was missed in childhood and youth. Both groups must,

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throughout adulthood, learn solutions to the central problems, the deep concerns of our time.

Barrier to College for Adults

Opportunities for college graduates to continue their education are expanding almost exponentially. Not so rich, however, are the opportunities for adult part-time students to earn baccalaureate degrees. Few indeed are the institutions which offer degree programs designed especially for the adult part-time student.

Although colleges and universities have created, or at least stimulated among adults, the almost universal desire for degrees, they have made it next to impossible for adults to earn degrees. The ordinary class schedule is a major barrier. Few adults can meet classes during the day. Evening classes are more accessible but they too present inflexibilities in time and space. Most adults simply cannot control their time or location for the requisite number of evenings per week for sixteen weeks. They need educational opportunities that are less scheduled and more available, educational experiences that are less place-centered and more an integral part of life itself.

A second barrier is the rigid prescriptive requirements in most institutions. The adult with degree aspirations is required to enroll in X-number of curriculum fragments (courses) and occupy a seat in a classroom for X-number of hours per week, for four years, regardless of any pre-existing experience and learning he may bring to his studies. There is no flexibility in such scheduling to offset the differences among adult part-time students in their capability, prior learning, or time available for study. They must all move with the academic lock step or not at all.

A third barrier to adult learning in colleges and universities might be termed the "barrier of irrelevance." Many university courses designed for youngsters are simply irrelevant in their content and approach to the concerns of mature adults.

There are other barriers, not the least of which, are the "cost-plus" fees charged for most adult programs. Even when institutions design degree programs with adult part-time students as the target audience, these programs may either price themselves out of reach or design themselves out of the context of need, of many if not most adult part-time students. They fail to meet the two-fold test of availability and relevancy.

Breaking the Unsound Barriers

No one would deny that there are real, even desirable, barriers to the earning of a college degree by the adult part-time student. The very essence of learning lies in the overcoming of a barrier. No adult with a real desire for learning or a real need for knowledge, is looking for an easy route to a degree. A "piece of paper" can be secured "mail order" from a variety of sources. No reputable institution wants to "break the sound barriers" to degrees, but a growing number of faculties of highly respectable institutions are attacking the "unsound barriers."

Ten years ago a group of faculty members at the University of Oklahoma began a sustained curriculum planning effort which ultimately resulted in a special degree program for the liberal education of the adult part-time student. The planning effort began with a year-long seminar of some forty scholars representative of the entire faculty of the University. The recommendations emerging from that faculty dialogue served as guide-

lines for a ten-member degree committee. Three years of deliberations of this group including consultations with no less than 100 of their colleagues produced a curriculum leading to the Bachelor of Liberal Studies (BLS) degree.

The BLS: A Degree Program for Adults

The Bachelor of Liberal Studies curriculum is designed to provide the adult part-time student with:

1. Knowledge of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities in sufficient depth and breadth to enable him to understand the relation between the broad areas of knowledge, to understand the investigative methods used within each area, and to read, interpret, and evaluate the works of scholars within each field.
2. Understanding of self.
3. Understanding of the behavior of individuals and groups and an understanding of his own and of other contemporary cultures.
4. An historical view of man's development; social, intellectual, scientific, artistic, and religious; and the probable direction and effect of political, economic, and technological change.
5. Understanding and appreciation of some of the great literary, scientific, and artistic works of man.

The BLS approach avoids the extremes of being either exclusively subject-matter centered or problem-centered. It rather places these two in fruitful tension. It seeks to bring the relevant knowledge of our time to bear on some of the central problems of our time.

The BLS degree program consists of three broad areas: Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Humanities—each of which may be taken in any

sequence—culminating with a fourth major integrative component, Inter-Area Studies. These areas are arranged in a sequence of four courses of independent or guided study plus four related residential seminars.

The Oklahoma BLS curriculum consists of a minimum number of courses designed to achieve broad objectives rather than narrow specialization. The curriculum recognizes and deals with the reality that its students are changing individuals in a changing world. The flexibility demanded by such realities is not merely that of providing for individual differences among the intended clientele but rather providing a curriculum adaptable to the factor of change, itself, both as it relates to the individual and to the society of which he is part.

The study of broad areas—social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences—permits more adaptability and flexibility for each student than does the study of separate subjects or disciplines. The BLS program comes to grips with the problem of depth versus breadth, not, however, by insisting on the same learning experience for each student. One student in the BLS program, for example, may delve more deeply into economics while another gains more depth in political science. In BLS seminars, students develop papers on an aspect of the problem or theme of greatest importance to them. Depth and breadth of study are placed in tension throughout the BLS program. Independent study in the area represents the optimum approach to breadth of study. The topic-in-depth required of the student during his final inter-area study represents the optimum approach to depth. Flexibility within the planned reading program for each student and of each student's participation in the problem or theme of the seminar lie somewhere

between the desirable qualities of breadth and depth of study.

Above all the BLS program provides the adult student flexibility of learning experiences. The program of each student is tailored to his own capability, needs, prior learning, and time available for study. He may proceed at his own pace. The gifted student may complete more than one area of the program per year while the average or slow student pays no additional fee when he requires two years or more for completion of the area. The BLS student is not required to place his body in a classroom for X-number of hours per day for four years. He may achieve his learning in many places, at his own rate of progress, utilizing all learning experiences available to him but especially utilizing directed reading with the assistance and guidance of a faculty adviser.

What About Tests?

Tests are important in any program where faculty contact is not continuous. The BLS student takes comprehensive examinations six times during his program of studies. Prior to his initial advisement he completes a day and a half of placement tests. These tests with other evidence of prior formal and informal learning assist the BLS adviser in placing the student in the program at his own level of prior attainment in the area and in designing a reading program suited to the student's background and need.

At the conclusion of each area of study, and on recommendation of his area adviser, the BLS student completes an area comprehensive examination. When the student enters the final inter-area seminar he takes the area tests of the Graduate Record Examination published by Educational Testing Service, Princeton University.

These relate his academic performance to a national norm group consisting of seniors in more traditional degree curricula. Finally he completes an inter-area comprehensive essay examination.

This emphasis on testing may threaten the adult unless he understands the uses to which these tests are put. Tests in the BLS program are used in the way tests should be used. No one fails a BLS test in the usual meaning of the term. He may not pass it in the sense that the tests reveal the need for additional study; but he cannot fail it in the sense that he is excluded from further participation in the course or required to pay another course fee.

The placement tests are solely for purposes of advisement. The GRE tests measure attainment of BLS students as compared with other college students. It has no pass or fail connotations. On the area examinations the student may attain any of the following three grades or standings: "Pass," "Pass with Deficiency," or "Re-Study-Re-Test." The standings are almost self-explanatory. If the student attains a score of "pass" he has completed independent study in that area and may enroll immediately for a second area. "Pass with Deficiency" is a score slightly below the "pass" line. The student in this group must complete an additional assignment as recommended by his adviser for removal of the deficiency. The student who scores in the "re-study-re-test" group must redesign his program with the assistance of his adviser, do a substantial amount of additional study and at the appropriate time apply for testing on an alternate form of the examination. Tests are used to assist the faculty in determining the point at which the student has reached an appropriate level of competence in the

area. This level may be reached by one student in six weeks, by another in sixteen weeks, by another in sixteen months. The only way the adult can "fail" with this kind of opportunity open to him is by not really trying.

Gone are the crisis periods which occur at the close of the typical residential semester. Adults can run the course and complete degree curricula . . . rigorous degree curricula. To insist that all must run at the same pace would be ridiculous. In the BLS, the fleet of intellect can take advantage of the program's flexibility to reach goals quickly that would require four years in a traditional resident credit-hour program. But the BLS also provides for the adult with less time for study, less capability, less background—all the time he needs to complete each area in which he is enrolled. Failures in the BLS program are not scholastic failures but are rather failures of the student in the matter of motivation, self-discipline, persistence, and self-direction. The adult with these qualities can complete the BLS program successfully even with limited intellectual prowess. The adult without those qualities will go nowhere in the BLS program even though he possesses a brilliant mind, significant prior learning, and superior scores on his placement tests.

The BLS recognizes a truth stated in a recent article by G. Bruce Dearing: "The University," said Dearing, "cannot successfully educate students who merely present themselves *passively* to be taught; it can provide an environment in which a well-motivated student may learn up to the full limits of his capacity."³

The idea that each student should be permitted to enter a curriculum at his own level of prior learning and to proceed to completion of the curriculum at his own pace did not, of

course, originate with the BLS program at the University of Oklahoma. We are merely "catching up" with a recommendation made thirty years ago by Learned and Wood in their extensive study of higher education in Pennsylvania:

"Each individual has some level peculiar to himself at which his education in any given subject must begin. Average levels, like the 'average man' do not exist for practical education. There exist only different starting points from which alone progress is possible. This suggests that instead of expecting the members of a college class to conform to an average, we might better arrange circumstances so that each student could make full use of what he has learned and could advance from the point where he really stands. His permanent gains derived from schooling would thus be substantially increased."⁴

But Why An Adult Degree in Liberal Studies?

In an age of specialization, training directors in business and industry may ask, "Why a degree in Liberal Studies?" The answer to that question was the subject of an earlier article in this *Journal*⁵ and space does not permit its repetition here. Perhaps Marshal McLuhan provided the best one sentence answer to that question in his now frequently quoted statement: "Paradoxically technology has made liberal education mandatory."⁶

Other answers to the question accumulate day by day in the enrollment data for the BLS program. The last annual report of the College of Continuing Education indicates that the student body represented more than 100 occupational classifications. Is liberal education job related? Apparently it is related to at least 100 occupational classifications. Liberal

education is the most "practical" of all types of education because it not only is job-related; but it is also more than job-related. Like the human hand the greatest value of liberal education in a changing world inheres in its un-specialization.

Who Enrolls in BLS?

BLS students come from every state in the Union. The student body also includes a number of business, civil service, and military personnel overseas. Several Canadian nationals are enrolled. Approximately three-fifths of the students reside outside the State of Oklahoma. Nearly all BLS students fall within the age range of 21 to 60. Only four students are younger than 21; only 14 are older than 60. Men outnumber women in the BLS program by a ratio of three to one. More than 100 occupational titles, ranging alphabetically from accountant to writer, are listed among the BLS student body. Bakers, buyers, caseworkers, contractors, gaugers, ministers, jobbers, mechanics, pilots, salesmen, taxi drivers, and warehousemen are some of the less frequently represented occupations. Clerk - secretary - stenographers, engineers, nurses, instructors and housewives are among the more frequently represented occupational groups.

An even larger group included within the BLS student body is composed of management and supervisory personnel of business, industry and government. These students who list their occupational titles as "administrator," "coordinator," "foreman," "manager," "supervisor" and assorted other titles indicating administrative responsibility, comprise at least twenty percent of the total student body. If officers enrolled from the armed forces were included as administrative types, the group would be even larger. Clearly

the BLS program has attracted a substantial clientele at all management levels in business and industry.

Who Succeeds in the BLS Program?

The BLS program, with its flexibility in allowing each individual to move at his own pace, accommodates a wide range of academic talent. Students may move rapidly or slowly in the program depending on their prior learning, capability, and time available for study.

Regardless of his prior learning and aptitude, the student who succeeds in the BLS program:

1. Is a self-starter with "built in" motivation to learn.
2. Works at his program of independent study seriously and continuously and not by "fits and starts."
3. Maintains regular communication with his BLS faculty adviser.
4. Has reasonably good health and a fairly stable personal life.

How Long Does it Take to Complete the Degree?

A few adults with unusually rich experience and prior learning complete the BLS in two years or less. The adult who enters the program with the educational attainment equivalent to high school graduation should anticipate spending at least four to six years in the program. An excellent rate of progress is the completion of independent study in one of the four areas each year followed by the related area seminar in the summer of each year.

What Does it Cost?

Since the fee schedule for the BLS program is designed to recover the actual instructional costs, there is no difference in the fee schedule for in-state and out-of-state BLS students. Fees for the entire BLS program, in-

cluding the use of books assigned for independent study, now total \$1,750. Out-of-state students enrolled in other degree curricula at the University of Oklahoma would now pay \$30 per credit hour or at least \$3,750 for an entire four year curriculum not including the cost of books. The BLS is, accordingly, an excellent "buy" in terms of its tuition costs.

The primary cost of any program for the adult, however, is not in terms of fees paid. When a valued employee is granted an equivalent of two to four years of leave from his job to complete a degree, the loss to the organization is very substantial. If he is the type of employee the company would encourage to further education, he is also the type of person the company can scarcely do without while he returns to full-time study on a college campus. Even the most valuable employee, however, can usually be spared for the three-week period each year in which he must attend BLS seminars. In fact, it may be to the advantage of the government agency, business or industry to grant him special leave to meet his residence requirement.

By the same token, the primary cost to fully-employed adult in the completion of four years in residence is loss of salary for the period. The BLS program makes it possible for him to earn a quality degree while also earning a living. Even if he had to arrange leave without pay for the thirteen weeks in seminars, spread over four summers, he should find this within his capability.

After BLS What?

In July of 1967, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education approved a program of graduate study at the University of Oklahoma leading to the degree Master of Liberal Stud-

ies (MLS). This program, which may be completed in a minimum of two years of directed part-time study off-campus with seven weeks of intensive residential seminars, requires that the candidate elect one of the three broad areas of knowledge (Social Sciences, Humanities, or Natural Sciences) for concentration. The candidate must also complete an appropriate thesis. At first thought, MLS might seem to be the answer to the question "After BLS What?" Although five graduates of the BLS Program were numbered among the very first candidates entering MLS, the MLS appeals primarily to the graduate of a specialized undergraduate program who desires broad liberal learning at the graduate level rather than further specialization. BLS graduates, on the other hand, tend to matriculate in graduate programs in professional or related liberal arts fields.

In the most recent survey of 82 BLS graduates, 64 responded. Of the 64 responding 29 had enrolled in or had completed programs of graduate study. Sixteen of the 29 enrolled for graduate study at the University of Oklahoma. The other thirteen students were distributed among the following institutions: Central State College (Oklahoma), Drexel Institute, Midwestern University, North Texas State University, Oklahoma City University, Syracuse University, Temple University, Tulsa University, University of Arizona, University of Miami (Florida), University of Puerto Rico, University of Southern California, and Washburn University.

One BLS graduate completed the Master of Social Work Degree at the University of Oklahoma in 1965. Another completed the Master of Communications Disorders at the University of Oklahoma in 1966. Another completed the M.A. in English in

June of 1967 and is now working toward the Ph.D. in English. One of the early BLS graduates, now a faculty member in another institution of higher education, should complete the Ph.D. in Philosophy in 1968. Master's degrees in Journalism have been completed by BLS graduates at both the University of Oklahoma and Syracuse University.

While grade point averages for BLS graduates pursuing graduate programs at other institutions are not yet available, the Office of Admissions and Records has compiled the record for the 14 BLS graduates who have completed one or more hours of graduate study at the University of Oklahoma. Only one of the graduates attempted a course without completing it, withdrawing from the course with three hours attempted and no grade points earned. Another BLS graduate has completed a total of 55 hours of graduate work with 217 grade points earned.

The group of 14 graduates attempted a total of 270 semester hours of graduate work; completed a total of 267 semester hours for a grade point average of 3.57. Graduate students of

the University of Oklahoma are expected to maintain a grade point average of 3.00 on a 4.00 scale.

Graduate study is only one answer to the question: "After BLS What?" Of 64 graduates responding to the follow-up survey, 18 found employment or returned to gainful employment as a result of the program; 13 changed jobs; 15 credit BLS with their receiving a promotion in their job and 22 think the completion of the program gained them an increase in their salaries. In summary, a surprising majority (46 of 64) found the completion of the Liberal Studies Program to be definitely job-related!

An even larger number (52) reported that the completion of the BLS resulted in "greater appreciation and enjoyment of life"; 15 became more active in public affairs; 31 reported improvement in their mental health or personal adjustment; and 22 "were helped by new friends gained in BLS."

Seven Years and 1,200 Students Later

Now some seven years after launching the BLS program the faculty of

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the College of Continuing Education sees results beyond its expectations. For more than 1,200 adult part-time students, the BLS has provided not merely the "second chance" but the "continuing opportunity" to earn a bona fide college degree. Degrees have been earned by 82 students; the group of candidates grows with each commencement of the University.

The BLS is an integral part of the educational program at the University of Oklahoma. It has also attracted the attention of scholars in a number of other institutions. In an article in *Educational Record*, Liveright⁷ classified new adult degree programs at Goddard, South Florida, and Syracuse as based on the "Oklahoma" pattern. Several other institutions have sent representatives to the University of Oklahoma campus to explore the possibilities of the BLS pattern for their own adult divisions. As these and other institutions develop degree programs designed especially for the adult part-time student, the continuing opportunity for non-degree holding adults to earn degrees may eventually approach the now rich opportunities

for the continuing education of graduates who must study to keep abreast in professional and technical fields.

Regardless of the patterns which may emerge, it would appear that faculty members of a growing number of institutions are meeting the challenge presented by the late John Schwertman⁸:

"The ancient idea of the university," said Schwertman, "was to enhance the unity of human experience, to seek the meaning of life, to ask not how, but why . . . (these) become crucial problems for mature people. The university has much to offer them if only we have the courage, vision, and wisdom to think creatively and to act accordingly."

If the adult part-time student has the desire, the capability for self-direction, the persistence, and the patience, he can now complete a degree without the loss of four years of service to his employer and to support of his family. He can integrate the roles of producer-learner-earner. He has both the "second chance" and the "continuing opportunity."

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