Keeping Adult Education in the Mix: Using the Marketing Mix to Foster Viable and Sustainable Graduate Programs for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

Generally, educators dislike marketing their programs and have traditionally operated on a “build it and they will come” principle. This method is potentially jeopardizing the sustainability of adult education graduate programs throughout the United States, resulting in some graduate programs being integrated into larger programs, discontinued, or even closed. In this article, the authors focus on adult learners in adult education graduate contexts and posit that marketing does not have to be driven blindly by market forces, but instead can be used to build more useful and viable graduate programs that fit the highly contextualized needs of adult learners. To bridge this gap, the 4P’s of marketing, which have been referred to as “the holy quadruple…of the marketing faith,” will be presented and then integrated with adult education praxis with the intention of providing a way forward for bringing adult learners together with relevant programs and creating ethical and sustainable programs (Kent, 1986, p. 146).

KEYWORDS

4p’s, Integration of Professional Programs, Place, Price, Product, Professional Identity, Promotion, Retention, Revitalization, Strategic Planning

INTRODUCTION

While the direction and discourse of Adult Education have changed a great deal over the years (Merriam & Grace, 2011), the general definition of the field has not. Contemporary authors tend to either cite much earlier work (e.g. Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010; Merriam & Brockett, 2007), or avoid it altogether, instead focusing on adult learning concepts or the adult learner (Brockett, 2015). It has, nonetheless, been defined a number of different ways over the years. Merriam and Brockett (2007) define adult education as “…activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults” (p. 8). Adult education, according to Houle (1972) is “the process by which men and women (alone, in groups, or in institutional settings) seek to improve themselves or their society by increasing their skill, knowledge, or sensitiveness…” (p. 32). For our purposes, these two definitions will suffice. For those readers, who seek additional information on defining adult education, there are many helpful sources (e.g. Cross, 1984; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Adult education emerged as a field of study in the late 1920s to meet the demand of teachers who were engaged in teaching adults vocational education (Rubenson, 2011; Milton, Watkins, Studdard, & Burch 2003). This demand for ‘education of adults’ led to the development of graduate programs that focused on that domain. Although, a growing number of adult education programs have been prevalent in a wide variety of educational settings (e.g. training and development, adult basic and literacy, English as a Second Language, General Education Development), the ideas advanced in this
article are focused on adult education graduate programs that are offered in colleges and universities throughout the United States.

As conversations among adult education graduate faculty and administrators continue about achievements, accomplishments, and growth in the field (Peters & Jarvis, 1991; Rubenson, 2011), the sustainability is being jeopardized. Literature suggests that professional identity; integration, discontinuous and/or closure of programs; and the lack of strategic planning are some of the dynamics that are putting the sustainability of adult education graduate programs at risk. These aspects will be discussed later in the article.

In an effort to combat these dynamics, the 4P’s of marketing are presented and then integrated with adult education praxis with the intention of providing a way forward for bringing adult learners together with relevant programs and creating ethical and sustainable programs. The 4P’s of marketing will also be presented as an insightful learning solution for adult educators and administrators in the Adult Education field, who want to keep up with evolving needs of their adult learners. Often considered a business concept, the 4P’s will be analyzed to help explain the magnitude to which this concept can help minimize the ebb and flow of professional programs as well as build a long-term utility for meeting the needs and interests of adult learners. In conclusion, the article will provide broad implications of utilizing the 4P’s to revitalize graduate programs, and provide a set of practical questions that adult educators and administrators should consider before apply the 4P’s of marketing.

SPECIFYING ADULT EDUCATION

In the following sections, the terms graduate programs, professional programs, and advanced programs will be used interchangeably to indicate particular academic programs, which are masters, doctorates, certificates, and specialists. Educational institutions, where professional programs are offered, present adult learners with opportunities to grow as scholars and innovators, who contribute immensely to research and publication in the field. Kasworm, Rose, and Ross-Gordon (2010) acknowledge that adult education graduate programs have been “major vehicles for preparation of practitioners and scholars working in the field” (p. 131).

SUSTAINING PROGRAMS

Sustainability is not a new word in the Adult Education literature, but strangely enough, it has not been addressed quite as directly in terms of the field itself as it has with other areas, including agriculture (Grudens-Schuck, 2001), democratic practices (Lysaght & Kell, 2011), ecology (Woodhouse, 2011), social community (Mont & Power, 2010), and building civil capital (Sumner, 2000).

It is at precisely this point that one runs into a problem trying to draft a poignant scholarly manuscript to carry this point forward. Literature reviews, by definition, are constrained by definition to include evidence cited from the academic literature. While this is a noble goal and the case can certainly be made that it is a good general rule, it is at least a partial culprit for fostering the theory-practice gap and keeping it alive and healthy. There are many cases for which the academic literature fails to document highly specific anecdotal cases, no matter how relevant and empirically confirmable they may be (c.f. Taylor, 2014). In the present case, one has only to speak with senior faculty in the academic field of Adult Education to hear about long lists of program closings, blendings, and dissipations over the past decades. While we suggest and encourage an in-depth empirical study of this phenomenon, we take the liberty of relying in this instance, on the knowledge of the reader to suffice. At a time when so many traditional fields of study are coming under scrutiny, it does not seem