The Evolution of Acceptance of a Non-Traditional University Program into University Mainstream Culture

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Abstract

The Department of Occupational, Workforce and Leadership Studies at Texas State University has undergone major changes since the beginning of the Office of Occupational Education in the early 1970s. A program that was before its time offering credit for work-life competencies, credit for CLEPs and DANTES, and off campus education was to survive internal and external threats through the years. In 2012, the program was awarded a name change and departmental status. This paper provides a historical narrative along with recommendations for programs and departments that may address adult student learning needs. The struggles are chronicled and specific strategies taken are discussed, such as building semester hour credit and establishing alliances with traditional departments.

Keywords: adult education, nontraditional education, occupational education, changes in higher education, history of higher education, obstacles in higher education

1. Introduction

In 1973, then Southwest Texas State University began one of the more innovative programs for that juncture in time, since few institutions had transgressed the borders of awarding academic credit for work-life competencies. This change was coupled with an outreach on the military bases in San Antonio and later Austin Bergstrom AFB, now the municipal Airport. The change ushered in a new way to look at competencies acquired and adult learning in its totality.

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This discussion will follow the program regarding the history, challenges, and lessons learned. Additionally, the goal is to provide recommendations for other institutions and individuals. The key to the article is the balance between maintaining quality and providing flexibility.

2. Historical Narrative

The early 1970s saw faculty such as the Dean of Applied Arts and Health and the newly appointed Director of Occupational Education working to provide a unique program that could validate the learning that military personnel had achieved during their tours of duty. This was an especially difficult time for the military personnel. According to the *Special Report [on the] Employment Problems of the Vietnam Veteran*, veterans were subjected to many stereotypes and a reverse cultural shock, combined with the lack of education they had prior to the war (1972). During the Vietnam era, military service presented a career liability (Cohen, Segal, & Temme, 1992). Returning from an unpopular war with skills not recognized and with limited public support, the service members of that time period needed a boost in both advisement and credit recognition.

Addressing the problem immediately, Occupational Education hired several veterans who could relate well to the intended audience and also access military bases. This winning combination allowed the fledging program to make giant strides forward and present the military, civilians, and veterans with alternatives not yet mainstreamed. These included

- Credit for work life competencies through a portfolio process,
- Credit for non-collegiate or training credits (i.e. through ACE),
- Credit for exams through DANTES or CLEP,
- Offering classes off campus located on military bases,
- Providing advising for students in off campus locations, and
- Offering on-site registration.

The degree the students originally sought was the Bachelor of Science in Occupational Education (BSOE). Containing four modules, the degree was very different than the traditional degree containing a "major" or "minor." Instead, the BSOE contained Academic Foundations, Occupational Emphasis, Professional Development, and Electives.

Essentially, the 128 hour degree had the rigor of other academic degrees, yet a more flexible format. The foundations were basics, the emphasis area were courses relating to the person's career or work-credit/training credit, and the professional development section was the direction the person was now moving toward.

In addition, this degree with a "menu" of options for the military, Department of Defense (DOD), or civilians during that early time period championed a specialized process to evaluate portfolios for the award of credit. Portfolios contain past education and experiences (Taras, 2014). In addition, the courses were also supplemented with a Cooperative Education course (OCED 4340) that essentially provided an internship for the student. This allowed the adult to transition into another position or to hone in on skills in his or her organization that were not familiar or mastered.

Supplementing and leading the coursework for the non-traditional degree was the Occupational Assessment course. It was a senior-level course that addressed evaluating one's direction, building a plan to reach the goal, and creating a portfolio documenting the past. What was critical in the process was the methodology and theory behind the evaluation. Using competency statements, performance evaluations, competency exams and the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, faculty were able to evaluate with precision the student's past competencies and award credit to the student. The faculty believed and supported the notion that indeed past experiences could be equated to academic credit. Students from numerous areas of employment including the technical areas were required to enroll in the Assessment course. This was an assurance that each student had time and opportunity to conduct a major self-introspection. Finally, this course provided a permanent gate for enrollment control. Although the concept of limiting student numbers is difficult, it is important when there is a limit in funding as there was in Occupational Education.

2.1. Early Trends in Enrollment

During the early years of the program, from 1973 to 1980, there was an initial period of sharp growth. Soldiers and others realizing the benefits of the BSOE degree began to seek the degree in greater numbers and the program quickly expanded to meet the needs. Figure 1 illustrates the sharp upward increase each year.
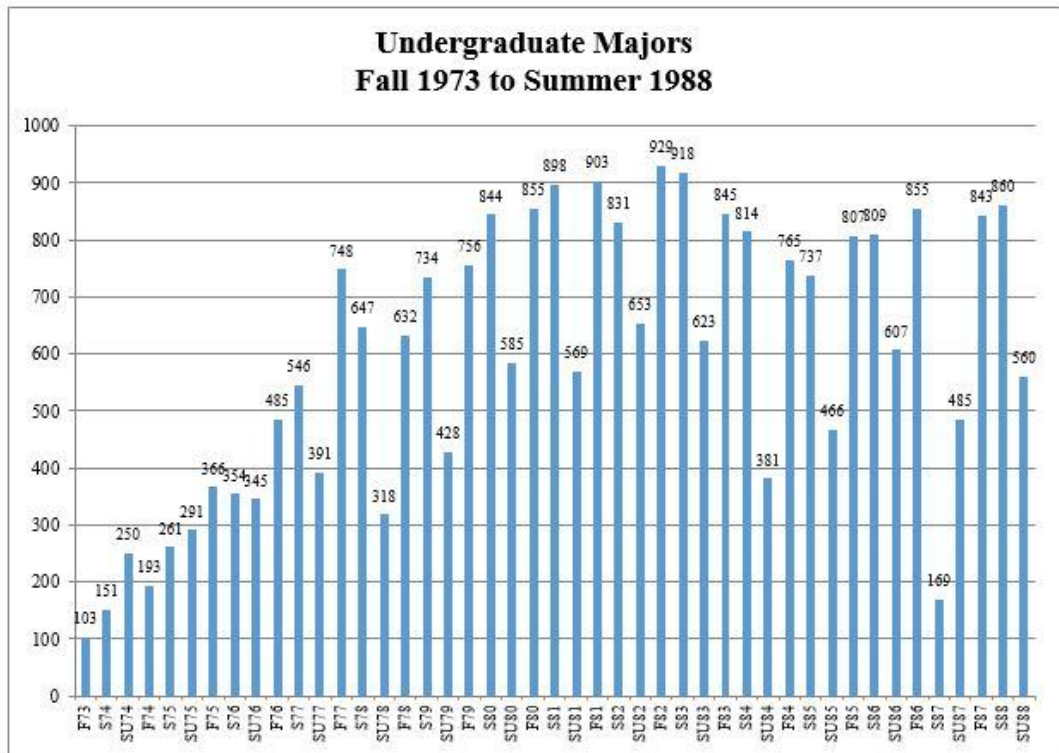
Figure 1: Enrollment growth from fall 1973 to summer 1988

Beginning in the early 1980s, the program continued moving forward hiring more adjunct faculty from different departments to teach off campus. Departments such as Political Science, History, Management, Psychology, and Sociology contracted with Occupational Education to send their faculty off campus to teach coursework. This professional relationship with major academic departments promoted the opportunities for off campus students to enroll in various coursework.

During these years the program continued in a positive forward motion. For the departments it meant overloads for their faculty with reimbursement. Most faculty teaching were in the lower ranks; however, incentives were instituted to promote senior faculty participation. A sliding scale was created that provided additional funding for ranking professors to teach in the program. In essence, higher pay was available. For all instructors, mileage reimbursements were later instituted to offset personal costs and promote participation and mobility.

Despite early efforts to promote senior faculty participation, the numbers of those in the senior ranks remained low. Some discussion was held regarding the relative value of junior faculty teaching overloads and yet still facing the publishing issues. However, due to limited salaries among those ranks, continued off campus operation remained dependent on junior faculty support.

Enrollment continued to rise in the eighties, and interest in Occupational Education became strong enough for full time faculty advisors to be located at four military bases in San Antonio. In essence, the business was brisk, and numerous civilian and military students came to the military bases to participate in the flexible learning options. During this juncture, the Occupational Education program taught few courses within its own discipline. OCED 4340 and OCED 4378 (2 courses) were the Student Credit Hour (SCH) generating courses for the program. The lack of SCH generation was later to cause concern because of the presence of generation of SCH among other colleges. Occupation Education was a facilitator for the college, not a generator of hours within itself. This issue was to continue to grow through the '80s, '90s, and even into the new century. The controversy continued to plague the program until more courses could be taught by Occupational Education.

2.2. Academic Housing

One of the key issues in the long history of Occupational Education, now Occupational, Workforce, and Leadership Studies (OWLS), was the academic housing. Today, the OWLS department is under the College of Applied Arts (Texas State University, 2014). This issue, debated and discussed throughout the years, was resolved in 2012 with the program becoming a department and moving into a new more independent era. However, this was not without new challenges and concerns needing to be discussed.

In the beginning (1973), Occupational Education was an office attached to Public Service, Adult and Continuing Education (PSACE), and the first director was hired to administer the office. The program was reporting directly to the Dean of Applied Arts and Sciences. At that time, Occupational Education began the early outreach and growth leading to the next phase of reporting lines.

During the 1980s, it was clear that the program needed to have a better defined home. The program was then moved to the Department of Technology with the Director reporting to the Chair of Technology. With this move, the Vocational Education component that supervised Trade and Industrial Education, Marketing, and Office Education was also moved to the Department of Technology. The justification for the attachment was in essence that Technology was application based, and so was Vocational and Occupational Education.

In the early 1990s, with the second Director of Occupational Education being selected, the University again reviewed the academic housing, and the Vocational Education component was combined with Occupational Education. This meant that Vocational Education personnel reported to the Director of Occupational Education who reported to the Chair of Technology. This structure also changed the seat at the table on the Chair's council. The Director of Occupational Education did not attend the Dean's meetings and was represented by the Chair of Technology.

In 2000, the University made some major structural changes. The Technology Department was split off from the College of Applied Arts and Sciences and moved to the College of Science. Another Dean was appointed for the newly created College of Applied Arts. Occupational Education was consulted about where it should be housed. Some discussion was held regarding moving to the College of Education. However, the final decision was made to retain Occupational Education in the College of Applied Arts. With this administrative change, the Director of Occupational Education was again seated on the Chair's council for the College.

During the majority of the history of Occupational Education, the faculty wanted to departmentalize the program. Both internal and external reviews pointed toward moving from a program to a department. Numerous issues slowed the process down during the years including number of tenured and tenured track faculty members. Then, after the latest major program review in the fall of 2010, another effort was initiated that culminated in the 2012 approval for both an updated name change and a departmental status. A title for the new department was considered prior to final approval, and the faculty voted to submit Occupational, Workforce and Leadership Studies as the new name. This was deemed strong because it maintained a successful identity with the word "occupational" and yet moved the department to a new identity that was in line with the perceived role in the community and the University.

3. Major Challenges

The material provided thus far may seem simply narrative of the evolution of the department under normal circumstances. However, this was not a normal process of evolution. There were key obstacles that impeded the process that may still be found in institutions of higher education. The next sections of the discussion will address the obstacles that slowed the becoming of a free standing department and what was done to confront the obstacles. There are three central obstacles that will be addressed in this narrative: confusion regarding non-traditional education, traditional attitudes toward change, and trained faculty.

3.1. Confusion Regarding Non-traditional Education

One issue that continues to plague non-traditional education (NT) is the confusion about its purpose, quality, and value. Some would argue that NT education means providing a shortcut to a degree and watering down quality. Moreover, NT education was getting criticized by relevant scholars due to its vague requirements as early as in 1970s (Ashworth, 1978).

According to Keegan (1996), the value of non-traditional education lies in areas where traditional education fails to fulfill the need, such as serving large and/or dispersed student communities. Also, the quality of non-traditional education is a part of the larger accountability movement in higher education (Masoumi & Lindstrom, 2012). These issues have not yet been resolved and are raised anytime innovative methods are presented. Work-life credit, testing out, and reduced time for course completion all signal red flags for individuals who are concerned with quality in non-traditional programs. Fortunately for Texas State, the Deans overseeing the program not only agreed with the concepts but also promoted them. This is not to indicate that all senior professors bought into new options; however, this 'buy in' and developmental support made the initial program development much easier.

3.2. Traditional Attitudes toward Change

Although some individuals may understand NT education, not embracing the concept is a serious hindrance for full implementation. Professors who cherish teaching day classes, those who dislike driving to remote class locations, and who prefer not to experience older adults verbal challenges or more direct questions may not be interested in teaching NT education.

According to Rashid and Rashid (2012), it is an imperative for faculty participating in NT education to believe in it and be properly trained and guided. Moreover, teaching adults requires using new techniques and different motivational approaches (Goddu, 2012), which might not be a desirable option for some faculty. Any of these attitudes can impact senior faculty teaching off campus or through distance education methods, course delivery to rural or inner city populations, providing support to adults who have irregular hours, and more options for various degree plans.

3.3. Trained Faculty

Although we may think that regular faculty can migrate from teaching 'live' classes to teaching online or off campus without issue or concern, this did not prove to be correct. According to Ocak (2011), once faculty decide to change their way of teaching they have to deal with complex issues in the areas of instructional processes, community concerns, and technology.

At OWLS, several areas were problems that impacted faculty:

- Failure to communicate changes in schedule to building monitors resulting in students having a problem finding the correct off campus rooms,
- Teaching adults and making the transition to adults with various experiences can be difficult for a professor who has taught traditionally aged students,
- Understanding the students' need for flexibility was a continual issue,
- Absences and tardiness due to family issues as well as work requirements causes discouragement on part of the professors and the students.

Faculty, in essence, had to adjust to three different issues. First, traveling to a remote location, learning the rules of the location, and the difficulties and length of the commute. Second, teaching the students with various experiences was different and sometimes more challenging than traditional campus based teaching. Moreover, using the wrong method of teaching can hinder student motivation and success (Pew, 2007). Finally, non-traditional students brought with them family, personal, and professional issues with each one being a potential issue needing to be addressed. According to Colvin (2013), non-traditional students often experience social and emotional role conflicts when embracing a challenge of NT education. The changes in nuclear and extended family roles, together with changes in work roles, are all external barriers to learning (Falasca, 2011).

Additionally, while faculty try to create the authentic environment for learning, non-traditional students might feel disadvantaged in that regard due to their physical location (Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009).

4. Texas State University Approach

It is clear that any change an organization initiates does not come without cost, concern, and counseling. The Texas State non-traditional program was no exception. Despite the Coordinating Board approval, as well as the campus-based administrative approval, several problems loomed over the direction the program was to follow.

- Off campus outreach to include staffing offices was expensive and drained the limited resources
- Two different types of faculty emerged from the program
- Other universities came on the scene with PR materials and assertive actions to increase numbers
- The student composition was changing from older more established adults to younger more traditional students
- Adults and even younger adults began to prefer distance learning classes
- Expectations for scholarship and other personal performance measures were altered
- Faculty changes were occurring due to more being on tenure track and others approaching retirement age.

These issues can also be found in the academic literature. According to Zaback (2011), staffing is a large portion of the budget for any university. Currently there are no gender or age differences that determine student success in non-traditional programs; students' determination and motivation is what drives the success of distance learning classes (Wang, Shannon, & Ross, 2013). Therefore, concerns about the mix between younger and older students in the formally all older adult program is something to be worked through knowing that it can be successful. The next few sections address the common areas mentioned above in detail and provide direction on dealing with these issues.

4.1. Off Campus Outreach Costs

Because the Occupational Education Program was, in essence, the main or most visible off campus player from the University, a number of tasks fell on the program itself. Staffing off campus offices, recruitment of specialized populations, and negotiations of Memorandums of Understanding with the military are just a few of the obligations that the program faced. According to Steenhausen (2012), adult education systems develop over a period of time, with ambiguity and limited funding.

Although pleased to have the opportunity to serve, the Occupational Education Program only had one tenured professor, two tenure track assistant professors, and four lecturers. Zaback (2011) claimed that quality staff is one of the main components of quality education. The program had quality staff, yet not enough. Serving four bases in San Antonio and maintaining campus obligations pressed the resources.

When the lecturers were at the bases, outreach to civilians was diminished. Conversely, if a Texas State representative was not at the bases, other universities, with larger staffs, were able to greet the students first. Costs of staffing are high due to the fact that on some days the staff would not have an appointment every hour. However, if hours were cut, then service and commitment would be suspect.

4.2. Two Types of Faculty Emerging

A difficult issue faced by administrators of any university department, school, or college is the "release time" for various important responsibilities. These could be internal or external projects to include curriculum revision, course development, advisement, and numerous others. The process for new program creation for adults carries its own challenges, and the road to approval is paved with various adjustments and compromises, especially in the case of interdisciplinary studies where faculty is to come from different departments (O'Callaghan, 2011). In the development of this program, part of the responsibility of faculty in much of the forty-one year history was a dual role of faculty. Essentially, faculty was required to advise students as part of their regular duties, which required having additional knowledge. Student development, communication theory, and knowledge of academic discipline are necessary skills an advisor should possess (Wiseman & Messitt, 2010). Having or being trained in these skills together with their faculty requirements demonstrates the magnitude of the faculty burden in this new program creation.

Although the current model nationwide is to have advising centers and to remove faculty members from these tasks, numerous faculty members in Occupational Education were also 'dual hating' as advisors for undergraduate students. Certainly this was not without success, noting the strong positive student response through the years. However, when the University began to move toward such goals as being a research institution, the faculty on tenure track was hard pressed to advise and conduct the required research for tenure and promotion.

Therefore, the program emerged with two types of faculty operating side by side. Some non-tenured faculty members were fully immersed in advising, and others were more in the research realm. Therefore, this required an education process for both of the types of faculty. Although this was accomplished, it was not without hard work and discussion.

4.3. Other University Competition

Despite exponential growth in the late seventies and eighties, Occupational Education found that it was no longer unique by the mid-nineties. National Center for Education Statistics found that the number of adult students has been on a consistent rise in the last thirty years, and now represents 40% of total university enrollment (Gast, 2013). Other universities reviewed the options to branch outward and offer some or all of the options. While other universities were becoming involved in non-traditional degrees, Occupation Education was struggling to handle the enrollments. Many adult universities today have moved online, following the footsteps of schools such as UMass Amherst University Without Walls (UWW), founded in 1971 (Taras, 2014). Some other examples include University of Wisconsin, University of Nebraska, and Indiana University, which all have virtual adult campuses. Moreover, University of South Carolina and Kansas State offer hybrid degree programs (Gast, 2013). Finally, Occupational Education was told to reduce the number of students due to the lack of faculty. Later, when changes did allow the program to continue the heavy recruiting option again, the competition was well situated, and the recruitment effort showed a flatter growth. Therefore, it was found that without sustained recruitment, it is difficult to maintain numbers and subsequent status to attract the students. Furthermore, with the military bases being realigned, the original population of the program was also becoming a smaller part of the student population.

4.4. Student Changes

In the early years of the program, students tended to be older and more mature. It was not unusual to see students in their 40s or 50s graduating with the BAAS (Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences). These students tended to be accepting of assignments and requirements. As the new century brought other changes, the years also saw younger, more traditional students beginning to consider the BAAS and the flexibility it contained. These students needed support in different areas. Moreover, although these younger students would not have a significant work history for work-credit or training credit, they still saw favor in taking a degree with flexibility. Furthermore, the degree allowed the younger students to receive more comprehensive advisement.

Although the change in student composition does not sound threatening, this was a difficult adjustment for faculty. The problem was that these faculty had been working exclusively with older adults. There are some specific differences in the 'need' each generation has, and faculty has a task of identifying and meeting those needs including more distance learning.

5. Need for Distance Learning

Assuredly, the Internet made a tremendous impact on traditional education and also provided another exceptional tool for use in the non-traditional arena. According to Yelken, Kilic, and Ozdemir (2012), students' opinion about distance education revealed that students mostly appreciate being able to pursue a degree while employed and having clear communication expectations. Furthermore, students with previous experience with distance learning tend to have a more positive perception of it (Hussein-Farraj, Barak, & Yehudit, 2012).

At the same time, placing courses online brought up a quality issue. Essentially, Occupational Education did not want to fall in the mode of simply having students read and then answer questions. Instead, building courses with online content in a more complex manner was sought. The early online courses were virtually all hybrid. The online content was not strong enough to stand alone initially. In the last several years, there has been a migration to totally online courses using the TRACS platform. This platform, in addition to assistance from IT on campus, has opened the door to stronger courses being developed.

Despite the advent of new tools, new issues arose when there was interest in moving more courses to distance learning. Would there be funding for faculty release time to develop courses? Second, would there be those with expertise to assist in the process? Finally, would the faculty feel comfortable moving the coursework online? As it unfolded, it was a slow process due to the difficulty in covering classes and releasing faculty. At the time of this writing, a commitment to distance learning has been made, and there have been some funding allotments to enable faculty to develop courses. However, it still concerns some faculty regarding the limited face time with students. This remains a growth and evolutionary process.

6. Changes in Expectations for Faculty Performance

Amidst the move to distance learning and less reliance on 'live' classes and face to face advisement, the university made another major transition from Southwest Texas State University to Texas State University-San Marcos in 2003, ushering in a clearer direction that the university would become a more national university campus rather than regional in nature (Forsyth, 2003). A decade later, the university dropped the location from its name, now being known as just Texas State University. As numbers topped 30,000 and began to rise, it was clear that the Occupational Education model for faculty would need to be rethought. Essentially, having faculty to advise and also to meet tenure expectations was becoming more difficult due to scholarship requirements.

Fortunately, as tenure track faculty members were hired, two events helped make the transition from a teaching/advising faculty to a teaching faculty more realistic. These events were the development of the university advising centers taking some of the advising load and the move to electronic coursework and advisement. Although this transition, at the time of this writing, is not complete, it is evident that the move is in that direction.

7. Changes in Faculty Skill Requirements

Connected to several discussions in this article is the final change over time. Occupational Education and now Occupational, Workforce, and Leadership Studies, expects a different set of skills to be brought with a new hire.

Although teaching remains important, research and grantsmanship are needed in the department as the evolution continues. Occupational, Workforce and Leadership Studies is positioning itself beside larger more traditional departments in faculty performance such as scholarship and grants. Yet, while making this dramatic transition, OWLS continues to reach out to the older adult, veterans, and underemployed individuals with options developed and practiced from the beginning. In addition, younger and more traditional students remain welcome to share in this interdisciplinary degree.

8. Applications to Other Universities

Although circumstances will not be the same in every university, there are some recommendations for programs or departments to consider as they review evolutionary changes. These are drawn from the successful and not so successful experiences through the evolution of the department at Texas State University. There are four recommendations.

8.1. Expect Controversy

Change can be slow in any organization and may be especially slower in larger or state universities. Therefore, knowing there will be controversy, the agents of change are advised to prepare for questioning by having facts and solid information rather than opinions. Second, personal goodwill toward others who may or do oppose the changes, still remains important. During the changes implemented at Texas State, goodwill was still retained even when it looked like the changes might not take place. It never pays to upset a larger system and then request resources.

8.2. Do Not Ignore the Least Powerful Stakeholders

One of the difficult recommendations to follow is one that may not be a result of purposeful or benign neglect. This is when the change agents forget the adjuncts, untenured, or other groups in the department or school. When changes were being made through the years, those who had less authority or clout were considered and provided time. This seems like a fundamental principle; however, it is often overlooked.

8.3. Change May Entail Loss of Some Options and Gain of Others

Working many years to move OWLS to departmental status provided both positive and negative results. First, becoming a department provided a 'seat at the table' and options for more faculty and status both on and off campus. Yet, in the same breath, it must be noted that status, seats at the table, and more faculty are also requiring higher scholarship, more accountability, and more spotlights on productivity. Certainly, the days of being more isolated as a non-traditional and interdisciplinary program are in the past. Therefore, as programs move forward, it is not without seeing some collateral damage, so before moving we must count the costs.

8.4. Keep a Watchful Eye on Progress as Changes Are Implemented

Knowing the history of a program is important. Some changes fail in one year and are brought up again the next and are implemented. However, knowing what has been done and keeping electronic records of efforts, results, and recommendation is extremely important. Giving credit where credit is due is extremely important. Even detractors in the university may actually play a positive role as your program accepts the challenge and moves past the criticism.

9. Conclusion

The history of a program simply for reading is not the sole reason for the observer or faculty member to review it. Instead, the direction and obstacles that were faced years earlier lend to the understanding of current culture and issues. In addition the understanding of older faculty and staff history is also crucial.

Without being aware of past issues and conflict, human nature, history and personnel beliefs, we can find ourselves making mistakes on a consistent bases. Because we suggest that we should expect conflict, does not mean that we are fearful or negative. Rather, we must be prepared for any occurrences if we establish a non-traditional program. In addition we should consider the least powerful stakeholders. True change that is lasting picks up support from the various nooks and crannies of any organization. We are working together!

Certainly we understand that change provides options and removes some the positive old ways that may have been appealing. However, if we are watching change closely, keeping an eye on the results, the effect on traditional programs can very positive. Watch as you make changes.

The most important outtake is the sense that interdisciplinary and adult programs can survive and even thrive despite the sometimes numerous climatic issues that continue to rise within the traditional university environment. It will work if we watch, review and use our resources wisely.

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