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General and Liberal Studies for the Nontraditional Student

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Khalil Gibran says "Life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday." Montaigne once wrote, "Nothing is so firmly believed as what we least know." In the 19th century James Russell Lowell said, "They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth." William Ostler in the twentieth century said, "The greater the ignorance, the greater the dogmatism."

Long ago it was discovered that the more we know the more we need to know—and that few answers are final. Now again we are reaffirming and expanding upon what wise persons centuries ago discovered: that education, learning, is continuous, a lifelong process.

Perhaps a circular story is appropriate here. Recently the teacher of a group of elementary school boys and girls decided on a field trip for general, liberal and multidisciplinary education reasons. The trip was to an airport to look over an airplane and talk to the pilot and copilot. Upon returning to school, each child was asked to write something about what he/she had learned. These are a few of the essays:

Euclid thought out how to make geometry help people to fly. He was born in the 300’s and died in the 200’s. That is another thing he thought out how to do. He thought out how to do it by using B.G.’s.

Back in 1924, eight men tried to fly around the world, but they only ended up where they started.

The navigator figures out the latitude. Latitude tells him were he is and longitude tells him how long he can stay there.
I know what a sextant is but I'd rather not say.

A visa is a passport permitting an airplane to leave the country. For round trips you need a visa versa.

Some people can tell what time it is by looking at the sun but I have never been able to make out the numbers.1

Seriously, Lifelong Education and General and Liberal Studies, our theme, suggests that it is not enough for a person to be a specialist; he needs to be broadly educated to be effective as an individual and as a citizen. To illustrate the point I would like to use the following story:

"A very wise man once described to me the evolution of his decision on whom to hire to direct an institute to attack environmental problems.

"'My first thought was to hire a basic scientist,' he said, 'a geophysicist or someone of that sort who could press on for the scientific truths about our earth which we so clearly lack. We simply do not know enough about it.'"

"'But then,' he said, 'I recognized that we weren't really making use of the pure scientific knowledge we already possessed. It seemed to me that we ought rather to begin by hurrying to the application of what was already known. So I changed my mind and decided to hire an engineer.'"

"'And then again I realized that while an engineer might develop new technologies, it is sadly obvious that we aren't really using the technologies that we already have. We already know how to purify water; our factories don't have to foul our rivers. What we need to know first is how to pay for what we are already capable of doing but cannot afford. So I decided to hire an economist.'

"'But,' he went on, 'I saw still another flaw. If the man who could tell us how to fund our needs could not make us vote the taxes and spend the money, we'd be no better off. And so I decided that my first appointment would be a political scientist who could show us how to act.'

"'And then, at last, I realized the basic problem: the political scientist would not be able to accomplish anything unless the people want to vote his schemes. That would require a basic change in our values. And so in the end,' he said, 'I knew what my first appointment should be: a philosopher.'"2

The conclusion one can draw is "No one person, no one discipline, can do it alone."3

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Indeed, there is no split between the intellectual and the practical life of an individual. The total person acts. Career education itself is a lifelong exploration and trial. President Kemeny of Dartmouth asks this question: "What do we say to all of our students when we realize that a significant fraction of them will end up in a profession that hasn’t been invented yet?"

I quote from Robert Nisbet, writing in a recent issue of *Change*:
"The ancient Greeks thought the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake possible only for a leisure class. Perhaps that phrase is too strong for the demographic-social-cultural stratum that is now growing constantly in size, thanks to increased longevity and retirement planning.

"I am struck by the increasing numbers of those returning to the university or attending for the first time, once the demands of job and household have been met and the mind can turn for the first time to interests and activities that require some degree of leisureed contemplation.

"We may . . . find in the future the audience for the liberal arts in the university among those well beyond the [typical] age of undergraduates. But even for the young, the prosperity of the liberal arts will be far greater if they are woven into those professional fields central to the university's history, rather than being treated as they now so commonly are as a kind of museum of interesting exhibits which one should pass through on his way to chosen interests."4

The lifelong education student—usually older than the typical undergraduate—often has a successful career, or needs credentials for promotions, or needs renewal or up-dating after a lapse of time, or feels a need for personal growth. Each individual has unique needs, perhaps only for a general-liberal education on top of special expertise already in use. So often there is no existing program or degree that fits the individual's needs—really no place to be accepted. It becomes especially important then to have procedures and programs which differ from those already in effect. Too often in institutions of higher education specialists are insensitive to those who fall outside their particular professional enclosures.

Of major importance to the lifelong learner is information and help about formal and informal educational opportunities, cutting of red tape, waiving of time-encrusted procedures and prerequisites and acceptance, welcome, and support in the learning environment—and a source of information on fitting interests, skills and experience into new job, life or volunteer patterns.

Before you is a high-powered panel of men and women who are in the category of lifelong learners, i.e., more mature, more experienced,

somewhat older than the "typical" student. They will talk about themselves, their experiences, their feelings about lifelong education and general and liberal studies. They have not been brain-washed by the chairperson. Their lives, aspirations and plans are fascinating. They are active, effective persons. I will introduce them only by name but have asked each to sketch short autobiographies as well as their educational needs and experiences and suggestions to educators.

The Challenges of Life-Long Learning

By BARBARA ANSTINE

"The education of a person is a process never finished; it must continue throughout a lifetime."1

As a woman, a wife, a mother of two teenagers, employed as an Office Assistant (Administrative Secretary) in the Dean’s Office, College of Osteopathic Medicine, Michigan State University; serving as a co-chairperson of the Education Committee for the MSU Business Women’s Club (MSUBWC) which sponsors the Annual Education Institute in February 1975 at Kellogg Center, East Lansing (this year’s theme “Professional Development Opportunities for Women”), and giving volunteer time to a local hospital, I lead many interesting and varied roles.

To be asked how do you do it, and why do you do it, the answer is not a simple one. Perhaps it is to better understand and prepare for the future, or there could be some family or peer pressures, but I prefer to say that it is just a special challenge for me to be able to master possible abilities. With a father and a brother both with doctorates and a sister with a masters degree, as well as several family members with bachelor degrees, there is the desire to perhaps prove not only to myself but to them that it is not too late for me to achieve.

I entered MSU as a transfer student in the Winter term 1970 with 43 credits. I am now proud to say I am at junior status with a collection of varied credits. I am not presently enrolled but anticipate returning again on a part-time basis either Winter or Spring term 1975. Frankly, I am searching for a major, a home, a place to incorporate not only my interest areas, namely, managerial, administrative, 1. MSU, As A Lifelong Education University, a Position Statement by the Continuing Education Service Committee on Lifelong Education, July 1972.
personnel and public relations, writing, communications and possibly additional education credits to possibly one day teach business-related courses; but, to add to my varied completed courses and to accomplish a program of study. To date, I have completed various business skills, some office and administrative management courses, education and the basic university requirements.

The question is, where do I go from here? First, I have taken time and thought to document what I feel is necessary prerequisites for continuing one’s education or continued learning process: (1) a sincere determination, and definite need to further achieve, (2) the need for a goal or a purpose, and a desire to continually want to accomplish and to keep abreast with current events, (3) the realization that you are never too old to learn, that you can accept new ideas, and have the ability to cope, (4) the willingness to take on extra responsibilities, to accept new challenges, to have the desire to be competitive, (5) the realization of the unknown years ahead, the necessity to possibly supplement a family income or having to solely support a family or oneself, and (6) most important, to realize that in order to advance within fields and specialty areas, a degree and sometimes degrees are absolutely essential.

As an older part-time student returning to college, have I encountered problems and frustrations? Yes, without a doubt, everyone returning to college will encounter difficulties. Many situations are individual; for me, it is not financially feasible to attend college on a full-time basis. Therefore, in order to attend college even on a part-time basis, it means combining a full-time working situation with college. This is where the problems begin. Most majors within a University are administratively set up for full-time students and with little flexibility, few classes within majors are held in the evening, and you are left with the difficult task of determining some kind of major and complying with set requirements.

Further, as discussed previously, attending college as an older student means combining the complexities of a marriage, motherhood (or fatherhood), a working situation, etc.; that is why the desire and determination are so very important. It takes patience and continued endurance and organization to realistically continue. To realize the competition within the classroom, that younger people are much better prepared—I have two teenagers to prove it. The instructors are many times younger or your same age, and yet somehow the older student must get to know the instructor in order to be better prepared to ask questions, to seek advice regarding a subject matter for that term paper, how to handle testing situations, etc. Many times the classrooms are overcrowded with more than one instructor with the course requirements not always consistent. There is the horrible encounter with multiple choice examinations; you have chewed off all of your
fingernails, have put down too many cups of coffee or tea, and have eaten not just one but five of those cookies not included in your diet, just to prepare. You realize through experience that essay examinations and term papers have proven your true worth, and yet how can you explain or ask for special consideration or substitution when you fully realize it is not that simple within a large university setting? Most universities use the computer system to accomplish the monumental testing task, and in most cases are much too large to cope with individual situations. To the older student, there is the fear of losing a precious minute, or of possibly making a mistake; you study compulsively (over study) in order to achieve. Every paper, every test, and every grade is treated as the only means of your worth. You take every possible note for fear of losing something, e.g., as a secretary, to learn to switch roles, to realize it is not necessary to record every word. It is better to listen and understand.

As I look back, I realize that it takes guts and determination just to be admitted to a university. To find yourself facing all those directions in the registration arena, to realize that you complete all directions correctly and precisely is essential. For example, never mistakenly mark the wrong box that says NC (no credit)—only to not realize the mistake until the end of the term and having earned a 3.5. The red tape, time and explaining spent to correct a mistake is unforgettable. Among other lessons of having to learn the hard way include a suggestion “never to take an I (Incomplete).” If at all possible, stick with the class, and complete and meet the requirements. For the older student in a large university, completing those requirements alone can be a frustrating experience.

The struggles and exasperating moments are well worth it for there are no words to describe the accomplishment when you really do it. We must be honest and admit that the older we get, the harder it is to accomplish. Many older students lack self confidence, feel self defeated and need reassessment and reassurance that it is possible to attain a purpose and meaningful goal. Continuous approval and encouragement are special and important to the older student returning to college; in fact, it is necessary. In a large university, it is necessary that you find the time to communicate and better understand the university system. With credits and experience behind and with two years yet to accomplish, it seems only realistic that the university structure should include an office, a center, or a place for the older student to return for counseling, to better understand the system, to realize possible majors with flexibility to incorporate earned credits and interest areas to possibly complete a degree. There is a definite need for a general and liberal education major to realize such educational possibilities.

Most universities are set up administratively for the 18-25 year
old students; they are not prepared for the over-30-year-old student, and most important, are definitely not prepared for the over-60-year-old student returning to the campus. If education is to be a life-long learning process, and if they write about and predict that individuals can possibly have more than one career within a lifetime, why are the universities not better prepared to receive us?

We do not want special privileges, we just want to be heard, to provide an awareness that there is a need for life-long learning, and especially that there is a place for the older students to return to within a university structure. An awareness is also needed that not all older students wish to return to specific educational fields; therefore, other fields of interest need to provide classes in the evenings and on the weekends. Flexibility is an individual concern but in conversations it appears to be a concern with many older students. If returning older students could be given an opportunity to voice their opinion, I feel that two major concerns would stand out, namely: (1) need for varied interest major areas, and (2) that the prerequisites for those major areas would be realistic. Returning to the classroom after an absence for whatever reason should not necessitate continuous frustrating experiences.

I would like to close with a statement taken from an article, “How to Stay Younger Longer,”—professional sociologists and gerontologists tend to harp on the word “education,” which is enough to turn many adults off. “Learning” is a simpler and better word, and if we keep on learning something new, we fend off one of the most damaging features usually attributed to aging—a fixed and unchangeable state of mind.2

A Pilot Study
The Mature Woman Employee

By Grace Reid
Lansing, Michigan

Perceptions of Assets and Liabilities from Selected Successfully Employed Mature Women and Employers in the Lansing Community.

A hundred years ago, a woman’s life expectancy was one half of the 75 years that it is today. (1, p. 28)


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Only 50 years ago, a woman’s youngest child left home approximately 10 years before she was likely to die. (3, p. 28)

Today, women can expect about three decades of life after the youngest child graduates from high school. (8)

The number of mature women in the total population grows larger as medical science extends the years of health and vitality. These added years of potentially productive life find women without a traditional role to fill. Cultural expectations have bordered women’s lives with service for home and family to which she becomes less essential. Recognizing the need for new activities in an unprecedented stage of life, many mature women look to employment. But the transition from housewife to job can be fraught with conflict and frustration for the older woman long removed from the work force. The media provides incessant cues to the unenviable position of older women employees. They have difficulty finding work; rank very low on pay scales, have high unemployment rates and are subject to covert discrimination. The barrage of negative information creates a climate for self-fulfilling prophecies which result in rejection by employers and intimidation for the older woman.

As one of the numerous mature women enrolled at Michigan State University, I studied local mature women employees for a project in Dr. Sower’s class in Contemporary Communities. It was hoped that establishment of the value of the mature woman employee would serve two purposes:

1. Develop employers’ awareness of the value of mature women workers.
2. Develop personal awareness of her own value as an employee.
   Lack of self-confidence is a critical problem for mature women seeking employment.

The 13 women included in the study made a successful transition to employment after a span devoted to family care which ranged from 8 to 24 years. They were in the 35 to 65 age group with most over 45. Commonalities were evident in high educational commitment, supportive families, extensive participation in activities during the “at home” years, and an awareness of the value of maturity. The 10 local employers, both male and female, were in organizations in which a large number of women of various ages were employed.

To establish a basis for comparison, qualities that employers prized in employees regardless of age were first determined. Two thirds of the employers gave highest priority to personal qualities in estimating the value of an employee. Most important were:

- Stability
- Dependability
- Pleasing personality

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Good employee potential
Ability to relate to others

Job-related qualifications were primary in the minds of one third of the employers who were mainly concerned with the applicant's mental and/or physical ability to perform a job. The emphasis on personal characteristics by most of the employers provides a clue to the value of the mature woman as an employee. WHAT SHE IS becomes the crucial determinant of the value of her expertise to the employer.

Both women and employers were asked to name their perceptions of the assets and liabilities of mature women employees. Women considered the assets to be:

- Stability
- Work efficiency
- Dedication to work
- Ability to get along with many people
- Fewer family responsibilities

The employers' list of assets included:

- Stability
- Dedication to work
- Ability to get along with many people
- Fewer family responsibilities

Agreement is evident in the qualities considered as assets by both sets of respondents. The combined list compares favorably with the qualities employers value in an employee regardless of age.

The list of liabilities of mature women employees was conspicuous in its brevity. Whole-hearted satisfaction was expressed by a third of the employers who could think of no disadvantages. Lack of self confidence and the possibility of education and skills being out of date were cited by both sets of respondents. Women added that energy tended to decrease with age. Employers noted that mature women were more inclined to be set in their ways.

The years spent as a housewife contribute to both the assets and liabilities of the mature woman employee. No special competence, training or education is required for the role and it is accorded little status or significance. Society's contempt for the housewife deflates her self esteem and diminishes her self confidence. But judging the housewife's value by simple household tasks is literally not seeing the forest because of the trees. Caring for a home and family involves managerial and administrative skills, intricate time management, allocation of human and non-human resources and coping with the nuances of human interaction. In these aspects, the housewife's job has
been compared to running a small but complex corporation. (6, p. 56) It is these often unrecognized elements of her function that temper the housewife’s personality, work habits and interpersonal skills into qualities prized by potential employers.

The myths, misconceptions and stereotypes that have constricted the mature woman’s acceptance in the work world are being negated. They have been regarded as difficult to train.

But research reported by the 1971 White House Conference on Aging shows that older people learn well in comparison with young adults. In tests measuring conceptual thinking, women do better as they age. Intelligence tests indicated that women of 50 surpassed their previous scores as college freshmen. The results for 61 year olds were the same except for a slight decline in sharpness on numerical tests. (5, p. 6)

It was thought that older women would not stick with their jobs. But the turnover rate for women in the 50’s is one sixth the rate of women in the twenties. (5). A local employer puts it this way:

“They stay on the job long enough to learn it well. The job is a more permanent thing with them.”

It was thought that older women had high rates of absenteeism: But a study of Federal employees shows that women over 40 use less sick leave than younger women. Local employers say:

“They are dependable. They come to work and do what is expected of them.”

The implications of the value of mature women in the job market go far beyond the present set of mature women. Brought up with the life expectations of another era, the women included in the study focused life plans on home and family. Only two gave thought to the lifetime potential of her career choice and only one specifically planned to return to work later in life. Yet, all had reentered the work force. They typify the greater responsibilities which social changes and longer life expectancies are outlining for women.

Nine out of ten girls can expect to work sometime during their lives. They are likely to work at least 25 years outside of the home and most of this time will be after marriage. (8) The importance of career decisions must be emphasized early in a girl’s education because such decisions reverberate throughout her future. Awareness can forestall the problems today’s mature women face as they seek new horizons. Demographers estimate that in one generation, one half of the population will be over 50 years of age. The economic implications posed by this fact add even greater impetus to the need for realistic career choices and work plans in the lives of women.
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CONCLUSION OF PANEL PRESENTATION

It is time, according to Alvin Toffler, that “education shift into the future tense,” a recognition that many consumers in higher education differ from recent high school graduates who find it possible to devote fulltime and energy to their educational enterprise.

Rapid changes, increasingly accelerating, make it vital that individuals become broadly educated for maximum flexibility and understanding. The “yo-yo phenomenon in which supply of skills so often is down when demand is up” requires effectiveness in many areas and as whole individuals.

Dr. Arnold Clark, professor of biological sciences at the University of Delaware, sums up some of our ideas effectively:

“A major function of a University education should be to encourage people to be generalists. This is the reason for the breadth requirements. But breadth requirements in themselves are meaningless if they are viewed as a dabble of history and a dash of sociology and a drip of mathematics. This produces only pseudo-intellectuals and educational dilettantes. Courses for citizens need to show connections to other areas of knowledge. Biology must relate to the Humanities, and History must relate to Science, and Sociology must relate to Mathe-
matics. And all of them must be related to the hopes and goals of mankind. An educated person is one who can make the connections between knowledge and world problems. We don’t need interdisciplinary courses as much as we need interdisciplinary people.

"It is clear that the University makes no serious effort to train the generalist. Students do not recognize the need for such training and generally resent it. ‘Why do I have to take history? I am going to be a chemist.’ Professors are so involved in their own specialty that they rarely see the need for relating their teaching to other areas. They, like the student, resent the involvement in this kind of teaching. They fail to recognize such teaching as a social and moral responsibility. The reward system of the University does not recognize this kind of teaching. There are very few courses taught in such a way as to stimulate students to think broadly and to make the connections. There are no special courses on “Great Issues” and there are no special courses on “Great Ideas.” Professors generally do not like to teach such courses. And indeed do not know how to teach them.

“And yet, this is an important aspect of teaching and learning. The University needs to take more seriously its responsibility to this kind of program. And convey to the student the real intent and importance of a liberal education. In our present world community with problems of population and pollution and war, what is at stake in such a teaching effort is merely survival.”

M. B. Erickson