

Continued Education: Get Schooled Again!

by Gretchen Gross

Just as Vermonters invented the rubber eraser, sandpaper, the ski lift, laughing gas and the Head Start Program, one under-recognized Vermonter, Evalyn Bates, Director of Adult Education at Goddard College in 1963, changed the way colleges approach educating adults. She understood that unlike “traditional” college students, adult learners generally want to stay with their families and hold down their jobs, but they still have learning needs. Bates invented the low-residency approach to continuing education.

Students can learn and work at home and, each semester, come to campus for weekends or week-long high-intensity learning. “Evalyn knew that learning comes from the inside out, not from the outside in,” says Goddard’s newest president, Barbara Vacarr. “She understood the needs of adult learners, and she valued their life experiences.” The philosophy of Ms. Bates (1917-2010) continues to shape Goddard and continues to be a powerful influence on President Vacarr and many of the other universities and colleges in Vermont today.

Goddard College is, again, alive and well, following a Phoenix-like rise under the leadership of former-President Mark Shulman. Central to the continuation of its rebirth was the board’s recent decision to hire the vibrant and passionate Vacarr to succeed Shulman. They have positioned her to take Goddard back to the roots planted by Bates decades before.

“When a learner comes to Goddard, they are invited, if not challenged, to reflect on their own stories, either professional or personal, and to construct and integrate that learning. Adults come to us with a real sense that many traditional learning settings disconnect their life learning from their academic learning. They feel alienated. We stress the importance of reintegrating the two.” Vacarr stresses adult learners should be encouraged to ask themselves, “What do I know? What do I want to know? How does that matter to my learning?”

Because of this approach, Vacarr observes, Goddard students are poised to re-enter their communities and their professions as entrepreneurs, creating jobs for other Vermonters. “Life and learning become seamless.”

Lifelong Learning the New Norm

Who are the adult learners driving today’s higher education market? They are boomers, mid-lifers, young parents who did not get a



Today 57 percent of all college students are women. More than two million women over 45 are now back in school and studies reveal they most often excel.

chance to start or complete college degrees. Professionals who want to reinvent themselves in light of a suffering economy. Soldiers taking on-line courses through Vermont Tech College’s specialized continuing education programs for veterans and service members, regardless of where they’re stationed. They finish their degrees, one paper at a time.

They also include Boomers who want to refresh their creativity, pursue new interests and stay competitive by completing a specialized professional certificate. New moms, who manage to take a course on-line with a toddler on their hip and a load of laundry in the dryer.

David Cavanagh, Co-Director of the External Degree Program at Johnson State College reminds us that the four-year college degree is becoming a thing of the past, even for non-traditional students. “Low-residency and on-line learning offers an efficient path to a degree. They make the best use of both a learner’s educational and life experiences. Our students are for the most part, people who for many reasons, started their degrees but were unable to finish them. JSC is able to offer the most affordable Bachelor’s degree in Vermont. This opens a door for these adults, especially in this economy, to achieve their goals.”

Gillian Homsted, Director of Admissions at Burlington College also lauds the hybrid model

of learning as optimal for adults. “Most of our students have to work. They have families. They have health issues. But still they can compete in the work force and complete their degrees at the same time. It works. Our students come to campus, stay in rooms with gorgeous views of the lake. They meet with their advisors to plan out the next phase of their studies, and they connect, face to face. They can then set up a schedule of phone contacts, Skype sessions and emails that keep the connection going.”

Learners who choose a brief residency programs can expect to go to their campus at intervals for intense face-to-face learning with their advisors, professor and other students. Some degrees can be completed without ever leaving home, however. For the most part, these are business-related courses of study. Through Norwich University, a student can earn a Master’s Degree completely on-line in specialties like Public Administration, Military History, Business Administration and Informational Assurance. Other Master’s degrees, like counseling, require face-to-face intensives in most programs. “JSC was approved by our governing body, NEASC (New England Association of Schools and Colleges), to offer four degrees that are more than 50 percent on-line, and two that are 100 percent on-line. We also have a very cooperative partnership with

CCV, so students can start at CCV, earn their Associates Degree, often with some or many on-line courses, then transfer to JSC to complete the Bachelors in this same integrated approach," says Cavanagh.

Many regional colleges now offer low-residency programs. All of them offer educational experiences for adults. Adult learners come to the classroom, the keyboard, or the week-long intensive with full and rich life experiences that must inform their learning. In education programs designed for adults, we are now partners in learning, not passive recipients of knowledge. For those of us who want to keep those

brain cells alive and engaged, our resumes rich and vibrant, our skills sharpened and challenged, there is no better atmosphere to engage in the process. The academicians who understand that, support that, encourage that—and give academic credit for that—are ahead of the curve. Our histories and lives can be valued, just as Evalyn Bates first saw. When Vermont academic leaders like Vacarr, Cavanagh and Homsted are passionate about that kind of learning, the sky's our limit.

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