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Abstract
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Keywords
ILR, Cornell University, college, white collar, blue collar, worker, education, American, employed, employee, social prestige, income, AFL-CIO

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Organised Labour and Community Colleges*

by L.S. Gray, Professor and Assistant Dean, New York State School of Industrial and Labour Relations, Cornell University.

This paper will explore areas of labour-community college cooperation, survey jointly planned programmes currently underway, and analyse problem areas.

Workers as college students

Traditionally left out of the mainstream of higher education, blue collar workers and low paid white collar workers are beginning to enroll in college. Among the factors contributing to the drive for college education for workers are the following:

Firstly, a shift in the composition of the workforce. In this decade for the first time in world history, a majority of American workers are employed in occupations classified as “white collar” (office, clerical, and professional). Since white collar work tends to be associated with “middle class” status, employees in these occupations have traditionally valued formal education as an evidence of accomplishment and social prestige. Furthermore, upward mobility in white collar work is strongly linked to years of school completed.

Second, the increasing skill requirements in many occupations. Technological advances have raised the skill requirements for jobs in such fields as health care, printing, and the mechanical building trades. The result has been a shift in the mix of classroom and on-the-job training with greater emphasis on formal instruction.

Third, the rising income levels of unionised workers. A recent survey by the AFL-CIO reported that the average union family has an income of $14,000 per year and owns its own home. The American dream of education for the second generation is beginning to take hold with the first.

Fourth, new constituencies of union membership. In recent years the major growth sector of the American labour movement has been public employment for which educational credentials are essential to upward mobility. Furthermore, minorities, women, and young people add to the pressure for educational opportunity as an avenue to recognition in the union and on the job.

Fifth, new and increased demands on union leadership. As collective bargaining has become increasingly technical with a proliferation in the range of benefits negotiated, union officers find it necessary to master such subjects as economics, accounting, and labour law. With membership ethnically and occupationally diverse and influenced by communications from many competing sources, union officials also need skills in communication and an understanding of sociology and psychology. With increasing political involvement, they must be well grounded in the structure and functions of government and the art of politics. Their responsibility for analysing the impact of technological change on employment calls for basic understanding of science. In short, union leadership is a profession which, like other professions in our society, calls for expertise which can be acquired not only through experience, but through education.

All of these factors—economic, social, and institutional—have contributed to labour’s growing interest in opportunities for higher education. It is important to note that the needs and goals of blue collar and low paid white collar workers are significantly different from the needs of the middle class youths and adults who constitute the usual college student body. They are apt to have less self-confidence as learners than other adults and tend to opt for courses of study directly related to their everyday life and work. A recent study found strong interest in continuing
education among blue collar factory workers but concluded that providers of educational programmes to this population need to be aware of their special needs and lifestyles.

**Labour unions and community colleges**

Community and junior colleges are natural allies for this new and emerging challenge in higher education. Their tradition of community service and their close links to the world of work equip them to provide relevant job-related instruction and give them a head start in meeting other educational needs of working people.

Nonetheless, in embarking on an uncharted course, college administrators need a compass or at least an experienced first mate. Unions which represent the majority of blue collar and a growing segment of white collar workers are equipped to serve this role in opening the doors of higher education to this new student body.

Union support for further education of working people is evidenced by the emergence of educational benefit plans as a new type of demand in collective bargaining negotiations. Currently it is estimated that more than $200,000,000 is potentially available for employee education benefits with the numbers covered by such contract clauses multiplying each year.

Knowledgeable observers have predicted that educational benefit plans will one day be as comprehensive in coverage as pension rights. Also underway are efforts by building trades unions to link apprenticeship training with related instruction leading to a college degree.

Responding to rising interest in higher education, there are several union sponsored college degree programmes. The AFL-CIO Labor Studies Center, which carries out a year-round programme of leadership training for union staff, now features an external degree in labour studies offered in cooperation with Antioch College. In New York City, District Council 37, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, set up its own in-house institution of higher education (with a branch of The College of New Rochelle) to equip civil servants with the skills and knowledge required in competing for higher level jobs.

In meeting the educational needs of working adults, unions are turning to community colleges. Many unions are already engaged in cooperative programmes. Notable has been the pioneering work of Carroll Hutton, education director of the United Automobile Workers, who sees a national network of college credit programmes as essential to reaping the gains of negotiated educational benefit plans. The AFL-CIO education department, under the leadership of Walter Davis, has encouraged and advised state and local affiliates in their efforts to build programmes which are adaptive to the needs of union members. The International Union of Electrical Workers obtained a Labour Department grant to promote utilisation of educational benefits at the local level, looking to community colleges as a major resource. Construction trades unions, building on their experience in collaboration with public schools in apprentice training, are turning to community colleges for training at a more advanced level. For example, Reese Hammond, education and research director of the International Union of Operating Engineers, has developed dual enrollment programmes which credit apprenticeship training toward an associate degree in more than twenty colleges throughout the country. In the health field, Local 1199 of the Drug and Hospital Workers Union has established a cooperative programme with Hostos Community College (Bronx, New York), drawing on the resources of its employer financed training fund.

Colleges are responding to union overtures, not only out of a sense of social obligation to residents and taxpayers in the areas where they are located, but in recognition of this vast, largely untapped student potential which might offset declines in enrollments anticipated with a drop in population of traditional college age. A survey conducted by the University and College Labour Education Association three years ago indicated that 155 community and junior colleges were offering courses designed to reach union members.
Current practices

To assess the current state of this new movement, labour-based programmes in community colleges, the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges circulated a questionnaire to presidents of affiliated institutions. By the deadline date, 40 percent (366) had responded. Respondents came from all sections of the United States with southern states somewhat under-represented. Size of the responding institutions varied. Almost half reported a student enrollment in excess of 3000. One in five had more than 10,000 students and 30 percent had enrollments between 3000 and 9999; 28 percent between 1000 and 2999; the remainder (23 percent), less than 1000. A majority of these institutions are heavily involved in adult education; 55 percent reported that more than half their students were over age 21.

The survey reveals a high degree of interest in developing educational programmes for union members. Four out of five college presidents responded positively to this idea. On the other hand, many lack knowledge concerning unions and union practices. Approximately half of the presidents did not know (or did not report) the number of union members in the area served by their institutions, nor were they able to list the names of leading unions. The same proportion (about half) were not familiar with union negotiated educational benefit plans and whether such benefits are available to working people in their areas. Most institutions (two-thirds) were unable to report the number of students receiving tuition reimbursement from their employers. Many college presidents made explicit their lack of knowledge about how to contact unions and lay the "necessary political groundwork" for union-college cooperation.

Nonetheless, a substantial number of labour oriented programmes are already underway. The vast majority of reporting colleges (80 percent) have already developed programmes on request of employers and more than half (53 percent) have responded to requests from unions. Programmes developed with labour and management cooperation are strongly work oriented (occupational and technical), but many include offerings relating to union participation and leadership.

Occupational education was reported by 72 percent of the colleges, leadership courses by 56 percent, apprenticeship training by 48 percent, preretirement education by 20 percent, and labour studies by 17 percent.

Other labour-based programmes listed include safety education and public employment. Several community colleges have received federal grants to provide education on the newly enacted Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), e.g., La Guardia Community College in New York City. The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges is coordinating a national community college training programme under contract with OSHA.

Most of these course offerings carry college credit. However, accreditation is more common for occupational (78 percent) and apprenticeship programmes (70 percent) than for labour studies (50 percent) and preretirement education (15 percent).

Approximately 2 in 5 of the responding colleges offer courses in labour relations and about one-third of these (a total of 45) link the courses to an associate degree in labour relations. While in some cases these courses appear to be designed for supervisory or management personnel, most are oriented toward labour leadership.

Labour studies as a community college major

Labour studies degree programmes, designed specifically for union members, are a rapidly growing sector of the higher education scene. A separate survey (conducted by the author for the University and College Labour Education Association) found 47 labour studies degree programmes underway in 16 states with many others in planning. Most of these programmes are offered by community colleges. Students are typically part-time; almost all are union members and over 25 years of age. Curriculum usually includes courses in collective bargaining, labour history, union administration, labour law, along with
insights from the social sciences relevant to union leadership and understanding of the union’s role in society. Where labour studies course offerings constitute a major, this concentration accounts for one-fourth to two-thirds of the required credits toward a degree. Generally speaking, community colleges have not, as yet, created labour studies departments. Labour course offerings come from existing departments of social studies, occupational education, and business.

Almost all of the colleges offering labour studies are available on an open admissions basis. While nontraditional in this respect and innovative in subject matter (compared with traditional community college offerings), they tend to be traditional in degree structure. Few allow credit for knowledge acquired through experience or provide for the completion of course requirements outside the classroom mode. Almost all evaluate student progress with traditional letter grades.

All of the existing labour studies degree programmes in community colleges are at least partly supported by tax dollars. Therefore, tuition rates are relatively low, ranging from zero in several California locations, and four in Texas to eighteen dollars per credit hour in Kentucky. Typically, tuition provides one third of the financial support.

Labour advisory committees

In the history of labour involvement with higher education, unions have consistently demanded, as a price for cooperation, the establishment of a machinery for union officer participation in educational decision making. The University and College Labour Education Association (UCLEA), representing the experience of long established centers in this field, recommends that any educational institution offering services to labour union members establish a labour advisory committee.

In response to the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) survey, a majority of community colleges (59 percent) reported union representation on boards of directors and/or advisory committees. Almost all of those with labour studies degree programmes have established labour committees. These committees help to recruit labour students and mobilise political support for funding from city, county, and state government. In tight budget years, this support is often decisive. In addition, labour advisory committees guide the administration in planning curriculum, selecting faculty, and adapting degrees structure and format (including time and place of course offerings and tuition rates) to the needs of union members. It is, therefore, important that advisory committees be representative of major unions in the area served by the college and that union representation selected to serve on these committees be actively interested and involved in the programme, not merely public relations figureheads.

Concerns of college administrators

Many college presidents reacted to the prospect of working with unions by expressing apprehension about community and employer reaction along with fear of unreasonable union demands. Others, particularly those with experience, were positive about the idea but concerned with problems of implementation—recruiting students, selecting faculty, structuring curriculum, designing course materials, securing financial support, providing supportive tutorial and counseling services, and finding jobs for graduates.

Viewing the union as a “special interest group”, some see a conflict between college commitment to serve all of the community and perceived demands of a particular segment with specialised interests and a partisan point of view. A few anticipate resistance at the state or local level, citing anti-union bias. Also of concern is how the programme would work in practice, e.g., will it be possible to maintain a balance between union and management viewpoints? Will union demands conflict with academic independence in curriculum planning? Do programmes restricted to union members (for example, apprentices) undermine open admissions policies or contravene affirmative action legal requirements?
Among colleges with ongoing labour programmes, problems most frequently encountered are recruiting, funding, and staffing. Since these programmes are relatively new, they have, with few exceptions, reached a fraction of the potential market. Administrators are understandably concerned about whether new programmes will recruit sufficient enrollment to fill FTE (full-time equivalent student enrollment) quotas which justify continuing funding from state and local governments. As one community college programme director expressed it, the labour group is a very unique target group that requires non-standard channels of communication.

"Selection of faculty" is another critical issue. Whether to retool faculty from social sciences, humanities, and business administration departments or to recruit new instructors with labour experience is a critical issue. The Academic Policy Committee of the UCLEA recommends that labour studies degree programmes be headed by at least one fulltime experienced labour education specialist and that labour experience be a criteria for selection of instructors. One community college programme faced a labour boycott when it announced a series of labour classes taught by an instructor with an anti-union reputation. Others have failed to attract students because course offerings appeared to be academic and instructors lacked expertise in labour subjects and rapport with the local labour community.

The UCLEA survey of labour studies degree programmes revealed that most institutions take into account practical experience as well as academic credentials in selecting instructors. This pattern is also characteristic of occupational education, including apprentice training. In many cases, union officials serve as adjunct (part-time) instructors.

"Finding suitable course materials" is a major problem. Texts are normally written for students who enroll in college directly from high school. Rarely do texts, even in such applied subjects as collective bargaining and union administration, draw on the work experience of the students. As labour programmes expand to new areas where experienced labour educators are in short supply, there is an increasing need for specially designed texts and supplementary reading materials for this new student population. Even in apprenticeship training, for which there is a longer established body of experience, college administrators express the need for standardised texts and course materials.

"Counseling, tutoring, and remedial education" are required services for students who have been away from formal education for a period of years. Open admissions programmes, even for young students with recent high school experience, have above average dropout rates and working adults have even more serious difficulties in meeting college standards. Experience shows that student retention rates vary directly with the availability of backup services.

In considering inauguration of a labour studies programme, college administrators frequently ask: What is the market for the graduates? What career opportunities are available to those who take these courses? These are difficult questions to answer. Union officials are usually selected or elected from the ranks of the membership based on their record of contribution to the organisation. While further education may be expected to contribute to effectiveness on the job and in the union, there can be no guarantee of upward mobility as a direct result of formal education. It is too early to evaluate the impact of college education in labour studies.

A Carnegie-funded study of Cornell's Labor Studies Two-Year Certificate Program yields a few clues. A high percentage of graduates reported assuming greater responsibility in their unions, a form of recognition which they attributed to skills and knowledge acquired through this course of study. Some moved into government, community, and a few into management positions utilising the certificate as an aid to changing careers.

Perhaps most critical of all concerns at this point in time is worry about financial support. Colleges considering new programmes with labour cooperation hesitate to make the commitment in light of anticipated cutbacks in appropriations. And even those
with labour programmes underway fear that this new type of offering will be considered marginal when funds are tight. One reassuring note, based on the experience of university labour progress, is the efficacy of union political support in competing for public funds. Adding another constituency may be decisive in a budget crunch.

Union concerns about college cooperation

Union officials, while increasingly interested in collaborating with educational institutions, have a heritage of suspicion of intellectuals and a skepticism about the ability of educators to adapt to the real world. They look for tailor-made programmes, a voice in decision-making, flexibility in format, streamlined requirements, and innovative approaches. Unions, like business, agriculture, and other organised groups seeking educational services, want programmes which are responsive to their special needs. They want a curriculum which builds on the work and union experience of their members and which deals with subjects required for more effective performance of job and union responsibilities. This requires a needs assessment prior to course announcement. They expect course design and instruction to be relevant to their everyday concerns. They expect a voice in decisionmaking through representation in an advisory committee with real, rather than perfunctory, functions. To be worked out through mutual agreement are such questions as course content, selection of faculty and materials, and evaluation of results. In return for this voice, unions are willing to carry responsibility for recruiting students, publicity, serving as guest lecturers, and promoting financial support from public funds. In addition, many unions make available tuition support for member students through scholarships funded from union treasuries or, as noted above, through union negotiated educational benefit funds.

Flexibility in design and format is expected. Colleges must consider whether instruction can be offered at hours convenient to working adults, including weekends, and in places easily accessible, e.g., work sites or union halls.

With the drive for accreditation of labour programmes comes pressure to streamline degree requirements. Ideally, from the union point of view, colleges should recognize knowledge acquired through experience when it can be demonstrated that it is the equivalent of knowledge normally transmitted by college instruction. This idea is basic to dual enrollment apprentice programmes. In labour studies experience, credit is granted by several institutions—the AFL-CIO Labor Studies Center-Antioch College, Empire State College's Labor Division, D.C. 37-The College of New Rochelle, and Florida International University. So far it has not caught on in community college labour studies programmes. One of the barriers is lack of know-how on how to evaluate experience for credit. Carnegie Corporation is currently engaged in a study which may provide guidelines.

Above all, labour programmes call for innovative nontraditional thinking. Instructive is the record of Wayne State University's Weekend College. Launched two years ago on a shoestring, this college currently enrolls 3400 students, all working adults, mostly union members. Phenomenal growth is a product of the nontraditional innovative approach of its director, Otto Feinstein. Curriculum draws from the liberal arts but focuses on issues of concern to working union members in an urban setting. Classes are offered in union halls and much of the instruction takes place by television, making it possible to study at home and near work in a compatible setting. Credit for experience is built-in, streamlining progress toward a degree. Most students receive financial support from veterans benefits or union negotiated educational benefit plans. Wayne State has resolved the recruiting and support problems faced by most labour programme administrators.

Assistance needed

Community college presidents, while expressing interest in developing programmes
with labour cooperation, indicate that they would like assistance. Financial assistance may be required for startup costs. It is not clear whether new programmes will be self-supporting in terms of tuition payments; whether they can be absorbed into existing structures and carried from existing resources, or whether they will generate additional appropriations through broadening the base of public support. Their funding is a major area of concern.

As already indicated, about half lack knowledge about and presumably contacts with unions in their areas. Therefore, it is not surprising that they ask for assistance in acquiring manpower information and conducting needs assessment surveys. Recognising the need to recruit union representatives for service on college committees and boards of directors, colleges seek guidelines for selection of committee members. In addition, both the experienced and the inexperienced look for model programmes and appropriate instructional materials.

Sources of help

Fortunately, there are a number of resources available to community colleges interested in developing labour programmes. The AFL-CIO education department staff is available to provide guidance on programme structure and contacts with local labour leaders. Many international union education departments are also willing to help. The UAW education department, for example, not only makes available staff time for planning and organising new programmes, but has prepared a handbook with guidelines for establishment of labour studies programmes, along with a collection of course outlines and suggested reading materials.

Another source of help is the UCLEA which has established an academic policy committee for this very purpose—i.e., to recommend guidelines and provide advisory service to educational institutions entering this field. Many university labour education centers are already involved with community colleges in active programmes of labour education. Relationships vary from advice on curriculum and assistance with labour contacts to cosponsorship of educational programmes. For example, the University of California (Berkeley) Labor Center has developed a network of labour studies degree offerings in cooperation with community colleges in the San Francisco Bay area (Merritt, San Jose, and San Francisco City Colleges) in which the Labor Center provides direction to curriculum planning, faculty for many of the course offerings, and funding from a Ford Foundation grant. Rutgers, Cornell, Iowa State, Connecticut, and Michigan State are also cooperating with community colleges in a variety of labour programmes.

Through these sources, AFL-CIO international union education departments and the UCLEA, a corps of professional labour educators, may be enlisted to advise and assist in planning new programmes.

Labour-community college cooperation is in an embryo stage of development. Much better established are programmes of cooperation with business and industry. Guidelines for working with unions may, in part, be derived from experience with business. Also relevant is the history of cooperation between agriculture and the land-grant colleges in cooperative extension.