Increasing UCEA's Usefulness and Relevance: A Choice-Based Classification System

Gary W. Matkin
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

Every aspect of higher education today is pressed to become more accountable and more transparent. The field of continuing education (CE) is no different. As CE professionals, responsible for the operations of university-based CE units, we are constantly challenged to use data and "evidence" to make and justify decisions. Indeed, one measure of the professionalization of a field is its ability to provide and use meaningful information. Building on established data-gathering efforts in the creation of the Management Survey, the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) has an opportunity to make a substantial contribution to our field.

THE PROBLEM: MAKING VALID COMPARISONS

A systematic annual collection of data from all UCEA members needs to be established to allow for meaningful comparisons among CE organizations. This collection would be useful to a wide range of audiences, including the following:

- CE deans and directors seeking information for management purposes by comparing their own organizations with similar organizations around the country;
- administrators in higher education who, as part of a review of their CE organizations, seek peer institutions for comparisons and benchmarking;

- search committees charged with finding an appropriate leader for their CE organization;
- researchers seeking to conduct research on the size, complexity, diversity, service capability, and impact of CE; and
- UCEA and other organizations engaged in advocacy for CE where information on the size and impact of university-based CE is important.

Often continuing educators, when asked to compare their CE organizations with others, are forced to use their parent's peer institutions, selected on the basis of the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education™. Unfortunately, the Carnegie Classification has little or no relevance for comparing CE organizations.

For example, the University of California, Irvine uses the University of Washington (UW) as one of seven peer institutions. However, the CE organizations of these two institutions differ in several important respects: Irvine's offering is much smaller than that of UW ($24 million versus $60 million); moreover, Irvine does not offer degree programs, while nearly half of the income of UW's CE comes from degree programs.

THE SOLUTION: A CLEARLY ARTICULATED CLASSIFICATION SCHEME

What the university CE community needs, both for its own use and to satisfy periodic requests for comparisons by parent institutions, is the CE equivalent of the Carnegie Classification system.

How would such a classification be developed? What are the most important similarities and differences among CE programs that need to be examined and documented? Suggested here is a set of criteria and approaches to address this continuing challenge.

Between any two CE programs, there are many possible distinctions that are difficult to arrange across a broad set of CE provisions. So any comparison scheme will have its exceptions, special cases, and detractors.

Organized and rationally based comparisons may be the most valuable way to build a CE classification database. A possible hierarchy of criteria for comparisons starts with those factors that are the most resistant to change and proceeds through several levels:

- factors that neither the institution nor its CE unit can change— local community served (urban, rural), the institutional family (public, private);

- factors that the parent institution could change if such a change were desired (but which could not be changed unilaterally by the CE leadership); and
- factors that the CE leadership and organization can influence.

In the discussion that follows, features are listed in order of importance, but may not be weighted equally. The second or third characteristic on one list may well trump the first item on another list. The conclusion of this essay provides a recommendation for how this weighting among categories may be addressed.

Differences Based on External Factors
External differences are imposed by conditions beyond the control of the parent institution or the CE administration. In this section, as in the two following, elements of a classification system will be proposed in the order of most important to least important, with descriptions about the usefulness of each element as a distinguishing feature.

1. Characteristics of defined audience/service area: Market/service area limitations can be created by either "natural" or imposed conditions. Demographics and economic factors are key. Level of education, age distribution, average salaries, and industry clusters also are important factors.

   An example can be found by looking at the extension programs of two University of California campuses. UC Santa Barbara's (UCSB) service area is relatively small, centering on the city of Santa Barbara (population 700,000). Yet its assigned service area extends into the neighboring San Luis Obispo, Kern, and Ventura counties with a dispersed population of more than two million.

   Compare this with University Extension at UC Irvine, which operates under exactly the same rules and conditions as UCSB Extension, but serves the smallest assigned geographical region in the state: Orange County. This Southern California county has a population of three million people, which exceeds the population of 22 states, and has a very diverse economy, which is ranked about 31st in the world. Population size, composition, and geographical area or dispersion also play significant roles in distinguishing one CE program from another. However, this element may be declining in importance with the implementation of more distance educa-

tion programs, a trend that can be captured by another attribute discussed later—program delivery method.

2. Parent institution form: A standard distinction in higher education is between public and private institutions. Distinctions such as degree of research intensity and whether or not the university is faith-based are examples of defining and distinguishing characteristics. The variances among institutional types are naturally reflected in the CE programs they support. For instance, many private institutions expect their degree-granting CE organizations to produce large surpluses for the institution, and build the returns from CE into their budgets as an important element. In several cases, public institutions prohibit CE from offering degrees or have restrictions placed on how surpluses from degree programs can be used.

3. Other factors: Beyond these two external conditions are many other possible conditions outside both institution and CE management control. The rules and regulations imposed by particular states or accrediting agencies may be elements that need to be taken into account. Many states set tuition rates for public university degree programs by law, so comparisons of financial results may be affected. Even climate may be a factor: temperate climates allow institutions to operate year round while institutions located in more extreme climates may experience effects in enrollments.

Differences Based on Parent Institution

A number of conditions within the control of the parent institution may create central differences among CE organizations. The administration or the faculty may impose these conditions through the shared governance process. Some must be accepted as given or revised due to financial considerations or shifts in institutional mission. The following are the five most important distinguishers because they reflect the relationship between the CE organization and its parent campus:

1. Degree or non-degree: Perhaps the most important distinction among all CE organizations is whether or not the CE units are permitted to offer degrees. In addition, the type and level of degree are also critical. Degree programs are generally more marketable, command higher tuition rates, require more prolonged student involvement, and carry more obligations for service and support

than non-degree programs. In contrast, an institution may limit CE units to noncredit programs, which is likely to confine those programs to a relatively small size.

2. CE centralization: This is a well-known categorization scheme and is already repeated in the Management Survey. CE organizations may be centralized programmatically, administratively, or both. A centralized programmatic CE organization offers all or much of the institution's CE with only a few other units (e.g., the business school) offering CE of any significance. On the other hand, a centralized CE administration performs all or most of the administrative functions associated with CE for the institution, including marketing, registration, student services, classroom scheduling, technology support and grade transcription. Any particular CE organization may be centralized on one dimension or both. For example, a CE organization may be responsible for all CE programming but use institutional, decentralized administrative services. Alternately, individual schools and colleges of the institution may deliver their own CE independently, but call on the CE organization for administrative services.

3. Fee/tuition restrictions: Some parent institutions operate under a restriction that dictates how much they may charge for educational programs. Many public degree-granting CE programs must charge tuition established by the institution, often with differences between in-state and out-of-state student fees.

4. Faculty issues: Some CE organizations are confined as to whom they hire to teach CE courses. For instance, they may be obliged to employ only parent institution faculty, at established rates of pay or according to established faculty workload rules, including those determined by collective bargaining agreements.

5. Budget issues: Financial and service requirements can also create significant variances among CE units. Some CE units may be subsidized fully or in part by the parent institution, often with strings attached. Other CE programs must be self-supporting, while some must produce excess income for the parent institution. Some units are required to perform non-revenue generating services for the

parent institution out of other operations, informally known as the "Robin Hood" principle. An example of this is the CE unit that is required to operate a student re-entry program for the parent institution within its self-supporting budget. The form and scale of these budgetary requirements account for considerable differences.

6. Organizational structure (reporting lines): The position of the CE unit in the parent institution's organization chart and particularly the position to which the director of the CE program reports may also be a consequential distinction. An "instructional unit" may act very dissimilarly from an "ancillary enterprise."

7. Mission, purpose, and parent institution attitude toward CE: Related to number six above, but also often separate from it, is the overall position and reputation of the CE unit and its place within the culture of the parent institution. Is CE seen as a vital role in the institution and do senior administrators defend it? Acceptance or active support of the CE unit by the parent institution, while hard to measure, can be an important distinguishing characteristic.

Difference Based on Internal CE Organization
Finally, there are those differentiating factors that are or could be under the control of the CE unit administration.

1. Complexity and scale: The size, scope, and complexity of a CE organization have major impact on a wide range of factors including systems, employee administration, internal communication, and program diversity. Some programs serve only local audiences while others are national or international in scope. The complexity of the relationships managed by the CE organization can be a significant discriminating feature. In a very real sense, scale differentiates programs otherwise operating in similar circumstances.

2. Programs and audiences: In addition to the importance of degree versus non-degree offerings, other features are critical, such as the mix between credit and noncredit; local, national, and international audiences; contract and public; and professional and personal development. For instance, programs serving international students

may require major adjustments and accommodations, from airport pick-up service to 24/7 on-call assistance. Sometimes, CE units administer pre-admission programs for high school students, which also stretch institutional capacities such as on-campus dormitory space. Other programs are distinguished by constant innovation while some remain relatively stable. Further, CE units are often asked to administer activities related or even unrelated to their core competencies, such as summer sessions, economic development initiatives, learning-in-retirement programs, and non-CE-related distance education.

3. Funding sources: CE organizations vary widely depending on the mix of funding sources. CE operations funded primarily by public offerings can differ substantially from those funded by government training grants. For example, public programs require extensive marketing infrastructure, while those dependent on government grants rely on activities that foster and maintain close relationships with funding agencies. Some programs engage in extensive development activity (foundation grants, private donors), while others do not seek such funding.

4. Program delivery methods: With the increase in online programs, the extent to which a CE organization engages in distance (online) education is predictive of much dissimilarity, including marketing, instructor compensation, student services, technology support, and other important factors. Moreover, some CE organizations operate major conference facilities, which also require special services.

5. Organizational structure: The most easily and frequently changed element is organizational structure. Some CE organizations are structured along subject-matter lines, such as arts and humanities, engineering and business, among others. Some are organized along course type, such as credit and noncredit, classroom-based and distance education. Still others are organized along geographic location, such on-campus, off-campus, North County, or downtown center. Organizational structure often becomes the "dependent variable," which typically falls under the control of the CE director and is therefore the one most sensitive to external and parent-institution based change.

While these three lists may not be exhaustive of the diversifying elements among CE organizations, they contain sufficient detail to support the point that many factors distinguish CE organizations from one another. For this reason, CE programs are difficult to compare. A new kind of classification scheme based on rational choice is necessary due to the extent and variety of CE programs in this country.

THE CHOICE-BASED CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

Under this purposed choice-based system, institutions would have the ability to select the variables they feel are most useful for comparative purposes. All CE organizations could be analyzed according to an internally exhaustive set of variables, under a refined set of dimensions, chosen from those listed above. CE organizations could be "tagged" with the external variable for market/audience: urban or rural, service area population by size, geographical service area size. CE programs could then be identified within the internal dimension by factors such as funding sources and delivery methods. CE programs could be further categorized by parent institutional type (perhaps using the established Carnegie Classification), degree granting/non-degree granting capability, degree of centralization, scale, and program delivery methods.

An informal poll of the participants (about 40) at the UCEA Executive Assembly in September 2008 listed the following elements in order of importance for comparisons they might want to make between their CE organization and others:

1. complexity and scale of the CE unit;*
2. level of offering (degree/non-degree) of the CE unit;*
3. degree and type of centralization of academic and administrative functions;*
4. size of budget and source of funds (self-support/subsidized);
5. parent institutional form (public/private, Carnegie Classification);
6. academic/service area;
7. relationship of faculty to CE;
8. internal organizational structure; and
9. type of program/delivery/audience for CE

*Items 1–3 tied for first in order of priority

By placing all CE organizations in a database, a set of comparison programs could be selected by inputting required attributes. For instance, the query might produce a list of all CE organizations that serve an urban audience of between one and three million people, offer degrees, are both programmatically and administratively centralized, and offer at least 20 percent of their programs in a distance format.

While there are certainly obstacles to implementing this recommended several-dimensional, choice-based classification system, such a database, comprised in part by the data that UCEA already collects, would address many issues faced by CE administrators. As the database is periodically updated and refined, trends could automatically be discovered through global searches. The database could also chart the growth of distance education across its entire population. The UCEA database could also be compared against other data, like CE administrator compensation levels on multiple variables. This UCEA data could also be used for its membership and its many functions such as advocacy.

The first step in the creation of a database of this complexity is the convening of a panel to choose and rank the most important distinguishing features of CE activities—an extension and formalization of the poll taken at the UCEA Executive Assembly. Once the criteria are established, the Annual Management Survey can be amended to collect the data. UCEA would then need to make the data available in a public, searchable way.

The creation and maintenance of a CE organizational database can become a significant service to administrators, educators, and researchers in the continuing education field. 🌐