Increasing UCEA's Usefulness and Relevance:
A Dynamic Classification and Data Collection System

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Every aspect of higher education today is pressed to become more accountable and more transparent. The field of continuing education is no different. As CE professionals, as those responsible for the operations of university-based CE units, we are constantly being 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 data. Building on established data-gathering efforts in the creation of the Management Survey, UCEA has an opportunity to make a substantial contribution to our field.

The Problem: Finding Rational Companions

Proposed here is a systematic, annual collection of data from all UCEA members that will be useful to a wide range of audiences and will allow for meaningful comparisons of CE organization.

Such a data set will be useful to:

1. CE deans and directors as they seek information for management purposes by comparing their own organizations with similar organizations around the country.
2. Administration in higher education who, as part of a review of their CE organizations, seek to "benchmark" or find "peer" institutions for useful comparisons.
3. Search committees charged with finding an appropriate leader for the CE organization.
4. Researchers seeking to do useful research on the size, complexity, diversity, service capability, and impact of CE.
5. UCEA and other organizations engaged in advocacy for CE for whom information, again on the size and impact of university-based CE, is important.

Often, when purposes one through three listed above are invoked, comparisons now rely on finding "peer" institutions.

Often, educators are forced to use their parent's peer institutions, selected based on the Carnegie classification system. Unfortunately, the Carnegie classification system has little or no relevance for comparing the CE organizations of institutions.

For example, University of California, Irvine uses the University of Washington as one of seven "peer" institutions. However, the CE organizations of these two institutions differ in several important respects. Irvine's program is much smaller than Washington's CE program ($24 million versus $60 million). Plus, Irvine offers no degree programs while perhaps half of the UW program income comes from degree programs.

The Answer: A Clearly Articulated Classification Scheme

What the university continuing education 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.

But how would such a classification be arranged? And, what are the most important similarities and differences between CE programs? Here, I am suggesting a set of criteria and approaches to address this continual challenge.

Between any two CE programs there are many possible differences, and those differences 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 useful way to build a CE classification database. I see a possible hierarchy of criteria for comparisons. This hierarchy starts with those factors that are the most resistant to change and proceeds through several levels:

1. Factors that neither the institution or its CE unit can change – local community served (urban, rural), the institutional family (public, private)
2. Factors that the parent institution could change if such a change were desired (but which could not be changed unilaterally by the CE dean)
3. Factors that the CE dean and the CE organization can influence.

Implicit in this hierarchy is the idea that the existence of certain characteristics makes meaningful comparisons between programs impossible. Under each of these categories characteristics are listed in order of importance. However, it is not the case that characteristics of each category are weighted equally. The second or third characteristic on one list may well trump the first item on another list. At the conclusion of this essay, I provide my description about how this weighting among categories can be handled.

External Differences

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

- *Characteristics of defined audience/service area.* Market/service area limitations can be created by either "natural" conditions or imposed conditions. Demographics and economic factors are key. Level of education, age distribution, average salaries, and industry clusters are important factors. For example, let's take a look at the University Extension program at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). Its local service area is a relatively small geographical area around 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 populous Southern California county has a population of three million people, which exceeds 22 state populations. Orange County also has a very diverse economy and is ranked about 37th in the world. Population size, composition, and geographical area or dispersion play significant roles in distinguishing one CE program from another. However, this element may be declining in importance with the advent of more distance education programs, a trend that can be captured by another attribute discussed later: program delivery method.

- *Parent institution form.* A standard distinction in higher education is made between public and private institutions but other distinctions between institutions are important, such as degree of research intensity and whether or not faith-based. The differences between 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.

■ *Other factors.* Beyond these two external conditions are many other possible conditions beyond 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. In many states, tuition rates for public university degree programs are fixed by law, so comparisons of financial results may be affected. Even climate may be a factor, with temperate climates able to operate year round while more extreme climates effect enrollments.

Parent Institution Based Differences

There are a number of conditions which are within the control of the parent institution that create important differences. These conditions may be imposed by the administration or the faculty through the shared governance process. Some must be taken as given or, either due to financial considerations or shifts in institutional mission, they may be revised accordingly. In my opinion, these are the five most important distinguishers, simply 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 may offer degrees and sometimes the type and level of degree are also important. Degree programs are generally more marketable, command higher tuition rates, require longer student involvement, and carry more obligations for service and support than non-degree programs. In contrast, an institution may restrict CE programs only to the offering of non-credit programs. This non-credit restriction is likely to condemn those CE programs to a relatively small size.

2. *CE centralization.* This is a well-known categorization scheme. CE organizations may be centralized programmatically, administratively, or both. A centralized programmatic CE organization offers all or much of the continuing education of the institution, with only a few other units (e.g. the business school) offering CE of any significance. A centralized administration CE organization would perform 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. Or, individual schools and colleges of the institution may do their own CE independently, but call on the CE organization for administration services.

3. *Fee/tuition restrictions.* Some parent institutions operate under an institutional 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 students.

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

5. *Budget issues.* Financial and service requirements can also create significant differences among CE units. Some CE units may be subsidized all or in part by the parent institution. This subsidy often comes 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, which is informally known as the "Robin Hood" principle. For example, one CE unit 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 significant differences.

6. *Organizational structure (reporting lines)* The position of the CE unit in the organization chart of the parent institution, and particularly the position to which the director of the CE program reports may also be a significant distinction. An "instructional unit" may act very differently 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 in the culture of the parent institution. Is CE seen as an important role in the institution and is the top administration supportive of it? These characteristics, while hard to measure, can be important distinguishing characteristics.

Internal CE Organization

Finally, there are those differentiating factors which 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 significant impact on a wide range of factors from systems to employee administration to internal communication to program diversity. Some programs serve only a local audience while others are truly national or international in scope. The complexity of the relationships managed by the CE organization can be a significant feature of difference. In a very real sense, scale makes much of the difference between programs otherwise operating in similar circumstances.

2. *Programs and audiences.* We have already mentioned the importance of degree versus non-degree offerings, but other program differences also are important including the mix between credit and non-credit, local and national/international, contract and public, professional and leisure/personal development. Programs serving international students require major adjustments and accommodations. Sometimes, CE units administer pre-admission programs for high school students, which also stretch institutional capacities. Some programs are characterized by constant innovation and renewal while others remain relatively stable. Also, CE units are often asked to administer related or even unrelated activities 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 be very different from those funded by government training grants. For example, public programs require extensive marketing infrastructure while those dependent on government grants rely on fostering and maintaining 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 many differences including marketing, student services, technology support and other important factors. Some CE organizations operate major conference facilities which, again, 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 non-credit, classroom-based and distance education. Others are organized along geographic location, such on-campus, off-campus, north county, or downtown center. Organizational structure often becomes the "dependent variable," which is most under the control of the CE director and therefore the one most sensitive to external and parent-institution based change.

While this five-part list may not be exhaustive of the important differences among CE organizations, it contains enough detail to make the point that there are many reasons CE organizations differ one from another. Therefore, CE programs are difficult to compare. Because of the extent and variety of CE programs in this country, I am calling for a new kind of classification scheme based on rational choice.

The Choice-Based Classification System

Under this rational choice system, institutions will have the ability to select the variables they feel are most important for their own comparative purposes. All CE organizations could be analyzed according to an internally exhaustive set of variables under a refined set of headings chosen from those listed above. A particular CE organization 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 also be categorized by parent institutional type (perhaps using the established Carnegie classification), by degree granting/non-degree granting, by degree of centralization, by scale, and by program delivery methods.

An informal poll of the participants (about 40) at the UCEA Executive Assembly held on September 11, 2008 listed these elements in order of importance for comparisons they might want to make:

1. (Tie) Complexity and scale of the CE unit
2. (Tie) Level of offering (degree/non-degree) of the CE unit
3. (Tie) 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
9. Type of program/delivery/audience for CE

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

While there are certainly obstacles to implementing this classification system, it would address many of the issues we face as CE administrators. The database could also be refined as issues arise. As the database is periodically updated, trends could automatically be discovered through global searches. The database could also chart the growth of distance education across its entire population. Much of this data is already being collected by the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA). The UCEA database could also be passed against other data, like CE administrator compensation levels on multiple

variables. The solid UCEA data could also be used for its membership and its many functions such as advocacy.

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