Articles

Leadership in Continuing Education: Leveraging Student-Centred Narratives

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Abstract

For this study, we interviewed eight Canadian and American continuing education deans and directors to explore how their personal accounts or "stories" about leadership highlight the dynamic nature of their leadership roles. This article focuses on the potential impact of these stories to better integrate and serve the adult learner within the higher education environment. Four major themes emerged from our analysis of the data: the non-traditional career trajectories of the leaders; marginalization and identity; leadership and innovation; and alignment and resistance. Our study suggests that continuing education leaders generally excel in sharing student-centered narratives and in pushing boundaries—in part to convince diverse stakeholders of the importance of the field of continuing education. Interviews with participants indicate that continuing education leaders think in interdisciplinary terms and weave a master narrative about lifelong learning, combining several individual threads. Continuing education leaders strive to have conversations leading to collaborative partnerships and educational innovation.

Résumé

Pour la présente étude, nous avons interrogé huit doyens et directeurs de facultés d'éducation permanente du Canada et des États-Unis afin d'explorer comment leurs versions ou « histoires » personnelles du leadership mettaient en évidence la nature dynamique de leur propre rôle de dirigeant. Cet article examine les répercussions potentielles de ces versions afin de mieux intégrer et servir les apprenants adultes aux études supérieures. Quatre grands thèmes ressortent de notre analyse des données : les cheminements de carrière non traditionnels des dirigeants; la marginalisation et l'identité; le leadership et l'innovation et; l'alignement et la résistance. Notre étude suggère que les dirigeants en formation continue excellent généralement quand il s'agit de partager des récits centrés sur l'élève et de repousser les limites, en partie dans le but de convaincre différents intervenants de l'importance du domaine de la formation continue. Les entrevues avec les participants indiquent que les dirigeants de la formation continue pensent en termes

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interdisciplinaires et composent un récit de maître sur l'apprentissage continu, en combinant plusieurs thèmes individuels. Les dirigeants de la formation continue s'efforcent d'organiser des discussions qui mènent à des partenariats collaboratifs et à l'innovation pédagogique.

In a previous paper on continuing education leadership, "Reconstructing Myths: A Role for Adult Educators" (Miller & Plessis, 2010),[1] we argued that adult educators in higher education perpetuate a variety of myths that we tell our organizations and ourselves in order to survive both academically and operationally. These myths include the beliefs that our primary function within continuing education at the university is to serve the non-traditional learner, that we are ahead of the academy in terms of creativity and innovative programming, that we are "nimble" and competent both programmatically and fiscally, and that we can be fiscally self-sufficient while remaining aligned with the institution. At the same time, we observed how the increasing numbers of adults returning to school continue to blur the distinction we typically make between the adult learner and the traditional university student. Consequently, the boundaries between programs in the academy serving adults and those developed by continuing education for non-traditional learners have become less pronounced. We argued that in perpetuating historically based myths, we might be ignoring the potential impact of better integrating or mainstreaming the adult learner within the higher education environment. Through our research, we began to explore the possibility of reconstructing new identities for continuing education units as well as for their adult students.

In establishing the parameters for this present study on leadership in continuing education, we focused on the influences, in a professional context, of narratives by continuing education deans and directors, and the effects of these narratives on their leadership and the people they serve. Cuno's (2005) case study examining rhetoric and leadership drew our attention to Gardner's (1995) work. Cuno refers to Howard Gardner's "identity stories" as "narratives that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed" (p. 205). With similar aims in mind, we set out to have conversations with continuing education leaders to determine how the telling of their professional experiences in continuing education could help support non-traditional learners and adult students in general. These considerations would help us understand how leaders innovate and reconstruct models to serve emerging possibilities in higher education.

1 The authors wish to thank SCUTREA (the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults) for their permission to include extracts we had previously published in their proceedings (Miller & Plessis, 2010).

Study Methodology

For this qualitative research study, we conducted in-depth interviews with eight heads of units in continuing education: four women and four men; three Canadians and five Americans. We used purposive sampling to select individuals who were currently deans or directors of continuing education in major universities and had extensive experience in the field. All the participants were known to at least one of us, and three of the participants were known to both of us. We initially contacted potential interviewees by email to invite them to a face-to-face interview. We had a formal recorded discussion with seven of the participants at the 2011 University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) conference, while the eighth interview was conducted and recorded via Skype a few weeks later.

In order to explore how, in our study, personal stories about leadership highlight the dynamic nature of continuing education leaders' roles, we used a semi-structured format to guide us in the interviews. The open-ended questions we asked about leadership in continuing education were drawn from the theoretical literature in the field, our own experience as leaders, and the perceived stories or myths continuing education leaders perpetuate. All participants had received these questions in written form prior to the interviews. We used thematic analysis to interpret the data gathered from these in-depth interviews. Participants were encouraged to give examples as they came up naturally around the predetermined questions in our interviews. These anecdotes, in addition to the direct and indirect answers to our questions, formed the basis of our study.

We presented the interviews to participants as "conversations" and consequently engaged them in an informal tone, as represented in the participants' comments. In this study, the relationship between researchers and practitioners is especially significant. Josselson (2013) reminds us that as qualitative researchers,

> it is extremely important to understand as fully as possible one's own contribution, as the interviewer, to the co-construction of experience that the interview presents. The richness and value of an interview depend on the relational and empathic skills of the interviewer. (pp. x–xi)

During our interviews, we were mindful of our own role as researchers who are also "continuing education storytellers" when reacting to the narratives of our research subjects. The deans and directors we interviewed consistently spoke to us as fellow continuing education leaders who could understand the significance of their anecdotes. We attribute this complicity to the knowledge that we tell similar stories to continuing education stakeholders at our own institutions, including to staff, community partners, faculty partners, students, vice-presidents, the provost, and others. In considering the basic stories of the leaders we interviewed, we investigated how their rhetoric, or the very way they chose to tell their stories, could influence the field of continuing education.

There has been a growing interest in the role of rhetoric and narratives in management research and practice (Brown, Gabriel, & Gherardi, 2009; Flory & Iglesias, 2010). According to Gardner (1995), "the most fundamental stories fashioned by leaders concern issues of personal and group identity; those leaders who presume to bring about major alterations across a significant population must in some way help their audience members think through who they are" (p. 62). We know that continuing education leaders spend a great deal of time in discussion with other stakeholders at their universities, attempting to convince them of the important role continuing education plays. The interviews we conducted were replete with these persuasive stories.

We facilitated the conversations for our research project around the following themes:

- how the research study participants perceive their role in serving non-traditional learners;
- how continuing education units are innovative at their universities;
- whether the participants feel "marginalized" at their institutions;
- how the participants align with their institutions while pursuing their own unit's goals;
- what significant challenges participants face as leaders in continuing education; and
- how participants perceive changes in the field of university continuing education.

Early in the interview process, it became apparent that participants often shared their leadership experiences in the form of personal narratives. Although we generally followed the predetermined question template, we engaged in further (free-flowing) discussion based on the interviewee's comments. However, we were always mindful of our ethical responsibility in this interview relationship to listen carefully, respectfully, and with humanity to the interviewees (Josselson, 2013). The interviews averaged about an hour and a half in length. All the interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed: the transcripts ranged from 13 to 39 pages. Following transcription, we went through each interview and made notes that included recurrent themes in the conversations as well as our own thoughts about the data. We coded the data into thematic categories. Initially, we looked at coding the data according to the thematic categories guided by the questions. However, upon reading and re-reading the transcripts, we branched out into other thematic categories as well as recurrent and overlapping themes and sub-themes. Participants signed confidentiality agreements prior to the interviews being undertaken. In presenting the data for this study, every effort was made to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. As promised, we provided each of the study participants with the quotes from their interviews that we intended to use in this article. They were asked to check them for accuracy and anonymity.

The Continuing Education Leadership Literature

Leadership in the context of university continuing education is an understudied research area. A number of articles were written about leadership and administration in adult and continuing education during the 1980s and into the mid-90s, a time when many continuing education units were seeking an identity and trying to secure a foothold in their institutions. After 1997, the literature began to shift its focus to how continuing education units were going to adapt to their changing social, political, and economic environments, with particular implications for administrators attempting to develop the internal capabilities required for their organizations to respond flexibly to these changes (Einsiedel, 1999; Wong, 2005).

While the literature on leadership in higher education has grown over the past 15 years, little has been written specifically about leadership in continuing education. The discourse on leadership in adult and continuing education has shifted to the importance of looking at dimensions of power and politics in educational practice. Donaldson and Edelson (2000) argue in their article "From Functionalism to Postmodernism in Adult Education Leadership" for reflexivity in practice in the field, to avoid "primarily monologic discourse about its leadership and organizational practice" (p. 205). Similarly, Cervero and Wilson (2001) encourage us to examine adult education as a "site of struggle for knowledge and power" (p. 10). This reflects a more critical approach to leadership, which recognizes power imbalances and the need to challenge the status quo. However, the struggles involved in pursuing this discourse of change are not lost on those who must balance the daily demands of their administrative positions. Edelson reflects:

> But, I (Edelson) must confess that as a dean I operate within an environment of productivity standards and expectations. Very few of us, except perhaps those without direct managerial responsibilities, have the luxury of imagining the superimposition of value systems that conflict with those of the larger organization. My task, instead, is to modulate, humanize and operationalize these so that other significant organizational goals within the domain of continuing education can be attained. (Donaldson & Edelson, 2000, p. 203)

A second theme in the literature pertaining to leadership in adult education and related to the issue of power speaks to the challenges associated with administering units that are perceived as sitting on the margins of the university. Nonetheless, positioning continuing education units in the liminal space of the margins is seen as presenting both advantages and disadvantages. Burton Clark (2004) considers continuing education as part of an "extended periphery" that can "move across old university boundaries to bring in populations, general and specific, not previously in the picture" (p. 176). Glowacki-Dudka and Helvie-Mason (2004) argue that "adult education will never be mainstreamed, that we should embrace its position at the margins and use that position for social change" (p. 11). Watkins and Tisdell (2006) suggest that by bridging interests amongst stakeholders, it is possible to shift institutional interest in adult degree programs from the margin to the centre. As continuing educators, we seem to be constantly balancing the needs of individual learners, community partners, and the larger agenda for social change with our need to survive operationally. Sissel (2001) reminds us that regardless of these external influences, our fiscal responsibilities, and our lack of visibility, it is still within our power to influence our environments. The above theorists leave us to reconsider the important question: "Whose interests are we serving?" (Miller & Plessis, 2010).

Courtney (1990) in his analysis of the adult education administration literature (1936–1989) questions the extent to which administration in adult education is sufficiently unique or different to warrant a separate focus of study. Jongbloed (2002), although not referring directly to leaders in adult education, advocates for higher education leaders taking a more student-centred approach. Moroney's (2007) leadership quadrant for deans and directors provides a framework for assessing leadership skills. Landry (2011) offers an analysis of the complexity of leadership in continuing education. Finally, given the pressure on continuing education units to generate a profit, McLean (2007) raises the question of whether continuing education leaders can uphold the social goals of adult education.

Findings and Discussion

Four major themes emerged from our analysis of the data: non-traditional career trajectories of the leaders; marginalization and identity; leadership and innovation; alignment and resistance. This section discusses these themes as they emerged from the data analysis.

Non-Traditional Career Trajectories of the Leaders

To provide context and to establish rapport, we started the interviews by asking participants to tell us about their professional journey before becoming leaders in the field of continuing education. As one of the participants stated, "nobody really starts in continuing education." All the participants, who came into their leadership positions through various non-specific routes from fields as varied as nursing, business, and philosophy, confirmed this statement. Several were professional career changers, while others were influenced by early exposure to non-traditional environments as they came in contact with adult learners. Family members, parents, friends, and colleagues often served as role models and mentors for those who had returned later in life to study adult education.

Participants described a sense of "fit" they felt early on in their careers in continuing education, and expanded on how these positions resonated with their professional values. Their belief that adult learners are different from traditional learners and that continuing education can have an impact on individuals, communities, and society was a common theme in all of the interviews. Participants in the study cited a number of strong core values, including the importance of access and equality of opportunity for non-traditional learners, a learner-centric focus, engagement with the community, social and civic justice, and development of programs that are responsive to need and are of high quality. The importance of these values and beliefs, accompanied by the leadership behaviours and skills needed to *action* them, is represented in the following excerpt from an interview:

> A leader in continuing education is first and foremost a lifelong learner. It's also someone who is confident in their values. You don't stay long enough to be the dean of continuing education unless something about public service touches you. I think that the successful continuing education deans, the ones that I respect the most, are about access. If there had been a major in social justice, we probably would have been here. They have to be. You can't be a one-trick pony. You've got to have business skills, you've got to have vision skills, and you've got to have people skills. You have to have all these different sets of skills. And if you don't have the skills, you have to have a deep appreciation for the people who do, and get those people on board to help you. You have to be OK with ambiguity; you've got to be able to take some risks.

The participants in this study stressed the importance of listening and being empathetic when working with deans from other disciplines and backgrounds:

> And my gift, I thought, was really that I could be an attentive listener and see connections that didn't exist, and then put them together.
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> I never go to a meeting where I don't end up figuring out how I can pull pieces from everybody and create something that actually is a little bit of everything.
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> But I think that what had made me effective is that I really have great empathy. And I think it's an important thing. I have empathy for people but also for the intellectual and professional ambitions and missions of a variety of communities. So I'm able to honour in my actions and my conduct and in relationships, and in the programs that I develop or not. I'm able to honour that sense of identity and can develop trust.

Listening skills and empathy allow leaders in continuing education to understand the communities their units serve and to adapt their strategic directions. Being passionate about what you do and "believing so much in the right of it" was echoed in a number of participant statements, regarding their conversations not only with their provost and other deans, but also with their own staff. Their beliefs and behaviours speak to the values-based culture of continuing education leadership. This leadership style includes the ability to consider situations from different perspectives and to honour the contributions of others (Kraemer, 2011).

Marginalization and Identity

In response to our question about feeling marginalized at their own institutions, the participants offered the following perspectives:

> How close to the core do you want to be? What happens when you get close to the core? You get more and more control put on you. And one of the things that makes our work interesting is that it is happening out at the edge, so we get to do all sorts of things constantly.
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> Well, the periphery is where everything grows. You grow from the periphery out; you don't grow from the centre out.

One participant suggested "institutionalizing" marginalization, as continuing education is always going after the next thing.

Participants in our study envisaged themselves in a number of ways, as: a "portal" to the university; opening doors for people; mobilizing knowledge; preparing adult learners to be successful; and complementary to the university. These are not images of a marginalized group. It is through their conversations and actions that they promote this vision of themselves and employ a number of unique strategies to influence change from the margins (Watkins & Tisdell, 2006).

One important and ubiquitous strategy used by our participants was to form collaborative partnerships with faculty, with an emphasis on building relationships, as the following quotes suggest:

> We do not have the power to do anything we want . . . we can be blocked by academics any time.
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> I only pick battles when I can win. And that's how even working within a university is to try to work with people who want to work with us.

The interviewers very use of the word "marginalization" was challenged by one participant, who suggested that by virtue of asking the question, one was propagating the "us and them" idea. Another participant questioned whether serving disadvantaged groups automatically makes continuing education marginalized, arguing that disadvantaged populations are marginalized because they do not have power. Several of the deans and directors pointed out that participating on an executive group such as a deans' council or the equivalent offered a kind of relational equality and gave them the opportunity to let others know what continuing education is about.

Nevertheless, leading a "hybrid" unit in one's institution, a unit that straddles both business and not-for-profit models, presents many challenges, as the following comment suggests: "So the fact that we are highly ranked in professional communities because our programs prepare people to be successful and help lead companies isn't valued. It's an absurd identity issue."

The continued use of binary terms such as full-time/part-time, credit/non-credit, and traditional/non-traditional does not reflect the university's diverse enterprise. Furthermore, as our own sample of institutions illustrates, continuing education units are not homogeneous in terms of whom they serve. The importance the leaders in our study placed on serving the non-traditional learner is found in their core values of inclusivity and accessibility: "We're about people, many of them." This suggests the need to update our stories about whom we serve in order to eliminate the dated binaries, to reflect a more diverse student and workforce population, and to bring our learners from the margin to the centre.

The issue of identity for those we interviewed was tied to their ability to facilitate the application of knowledge. This was seen as a unique strength, as the following comment suggests:

> But I became really fascinated by this notion that we were validating knowledge that was produced and applied in the marketplace . . . as opposed to the traditional university, where it is what has been thought and validated, then is disseminated and preserved.

In spite of this applied advantage, some of the participants commented on the pros and cons of not having a specific discipline. On the one hand, leaders identified the positive aspects of being able to bring diverse faculty together to create synergies in learning models and strategies. On the other, some of the participants identified a loss of credibility from not having a research mandate, in an institution where this type of academic activity is highly prized.

The following comment suggests that marginalization is a story that continuing education leaders can influence themselves.

> I think marginalization is more our own fault than the fault of others. They can't marginalize what they don't know about . . . it's the need to really think about how we tell the story. We were asked to kind of educate some of the senior leadership in our institution. And their way of wanting to be educated was they sent us a laundry list of 20 questions or so that they wanted the answer to: "How do you do your budget?" "Explain your credit program," and those sorts of things. And we felt we could answer those questions, but they wouldn't be any wiser about us. So we had to contextualize it and tell the story in a way that helped them understand how we were already integrated with the university in the many facets that we are; how we connect, and what the touch points are, and how we're advancing the strategic mission of the university. . . . it's no longer just telling a story to the community to get the registrations, but we have to tell the story internally in ways we haven't had to before.

Working Within the Differences.

The stories the leaders in our study tell reflect their different organizational cultures and contexts. Continuing education typically makes its focus the adult learner, while the rest of the institution still focuses on the traditional-age learner. It is within the context of these differences that leaders in continuing education tell their stories.

> Can we just talk language that everybody understands? And that's what we've been struggling with in our case for support. It's trying to use language that everybody gets. You know, because we have a lot of "internal speak" in the academy.

Another dean referred to it as an issue of "cultural translation," whereby he is able in conversations to speak about continuing education's high standards.

Even taking a "learner-centred" approach can mean something different for continuing education or for the university. Helping students in institutions that are by their nature "elitist" creates tensions for continuing education leaders and highlights the differences between continuing education units and their universities. These differences are summarized by one of the participants, referring to online learning and the importance of asking the right questions at his institution:

> And the idea that somehow if students aren't successful, it's their fault, no matter what, is, like, a crazy idea. And especially in research institutions . . . we have gotten too far away from the teaching and learning process and too much into, "it's only about the content." And therefore, making sure that students are successful is part of what I do. And that is

> what I want us to talk about: what is an X university degree delivered online? What does that mean? Is it any different than a person being there? Not, how many courses did you take online?

This leader went on to outline the supports he was providing for the students to ensure learner success, in terms of student advising, remedial developmental math, and the use of social media to engage students with one another. Continuing education leaders typically have "disruptive" conversations with their provosts, deans, and other relevant stakeholders, conversations that have the potential to shift practice in the institution away from its focus on instruction to a learner-centred focus. In their book *Authentic Conversations*, Showkeir and Showkeir (2008) acknowledge the importance of these conversations and that keeping them going over the long term is very demanding when you operate in an uncertain environment of relationships.

There was consensus among the participants that our continuing education stories need to be told and retold at the university:

> So I think in terms of our profile within the university, we've been probably our worst enemy in terms of letting people know what we do. Because I think there are a lot of ways that we are connected to the university, that we add to the strategic value, that we work towards the mission. We're key to the academic mission. But we haven't told people that story. We tend to fly under the radar.

As Ospina and Foldy (2010) point out, "[b]ridging differences within a complex web of interconnected yet separate actors is not easy" (p. 292). For social change leaders, they suggest a number of practices to achieve this connectedness, which include further interrogating identity and engaging in a dialogue around difference (pp. 297–298).

Leadership and Innovation

In response to our question about how continuing education is innovative at their universities, the participants offered the following perspectives:

> So I think being the innovator is in listening to adults and what they need and what they want and pushing the boundaries of how to offer that to them; being innovative in how you find experts to work with you so that your curriculum is really dynamic and innovative.
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> So what we've done is really focus on what I call "21st-century jobs" and the kind of skill sets and knowledge sets that people need and the competencies they need for those jobs. And we've done that by creating highly interdisciplinary degrees that help people move into jobs that are either just evolving or about to evolve.
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> We've always been innovative in terms of developing curriculum that corresponds to rising areas and need in the marketplace, and then over time, moving them from non-credit to credit to demonstrate their degree worthiness.

The importance of responsiveness to change and innovation in programming as core values in continuing education leadership was highlighted in one form or another in each of the interviews. As another dean pointed out, "Innovation isn't an intellectual concept; it gets manifested in terms of programs that have effects." A recent example of this responsiveness is how leaders of continuing education are assuming the opportunities and challenges of massive online open courseware and the changes that provide free access to both credit and non-credit programming.

Another participant explained her experience with innovation in this way:

> I guess I try to listen for opportunities and so make connections . . . I mean, part of it is accumulation of experience and a kind of broader understanding of what's possible, what's going on in other places, how we've dealt with issues. So I think it's part of just maturity and experience.

The ways in which our interviewees told the stories about their own leadership were creative and innovative. In articulating their units' narratives based on relationships with their presidents, vice-provosts, faculty, colleagues, staff, and community partners, these continuing education leaders communicated in a conversational rather than directive style. One of our participants used the metaphor of dance to describe her leadership: "sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow, but you always have to be nimble." Is it the structure of continuing education units that leads to this leadership style, or is it the need to constantly respond to the changing demands of lifelong learners? In either case, flexible leadership appears to lead to greater innovation.

Innovative Leadership and Entrepreneurship.

While some leaders we interviewed focused on the unique entrepreneurial opportunities available through working at the margins of the university, others pointed to the importance of integrating educational and business goals within the university mandate:

"Now, I would then admit five, maybe 10, benefits to the university, which I demonstrate with actual things that we have done or somebody else has done. So add those things up, and they've become, I think, persuasive." Innovation leading to entrepreneurship can also be in the design and delivery of programs that benefit students, as the following quote illustrates:

> And I think being able to deliver—that's where the rubber meets the road. If we say we're truly the resources of the institution to new constituencies, then we need to be able to prove it, and do it. And I think if we can do that and we can communicate that to the other administrators, that carries a lot of weight.

The entrepreneurial roles of continuing education leaders can take the form of facilitating conversations, developing partnerships, or fostering program development and designing the next "big thing." Creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship are described as core values in continuing education, but they also lead to more flexible business models. As one interviewee explains:

> But what I discovered was that I gave them [staff] a licence to be creative. I told them what they might do to have confidence. I often talk about the power of convening, that even if we are not seen as a leader of the university in some areas, if we organize a seminar or a conference and we're convening, it gives us a place at the table, to allow other conversations to occur. So that's what is happening . . . I'm feeling good about that.

Leadership within the organizational culture of the university comes from the ability of continuing educators to be entrepreneurial and to think of different business models based on the core mission of the institution:

> It isn't about teleconferencing, or fancy rooms; it's really about reconceptualizing, deconstructing teaching and learning, and reconstructing in a different format. So, I mean, we're innovative there. We are continually reshaping our curriculum in response to changes in the environment.

A number of those interviewed saw growth in programs and revenues as being a result of innovation and success for continuing education units. As one participant remarked:

> It's about growth. I don't think continuing education is ever about where you are; it's always about where you have to go . . . growth in programs, growth in services, growth in students, growth in partnerships, and growth in opportunities. I think we model continuing to learn.

However, to remain "nimble" in the context of the academy, continuing education leaders challenge the old ideas of the university and often create new business models. This entrepreneurial behaviour may create tensions with faculties, especially when continuing educators reap financial benefits and are given the credit by senior university administrators for new ideas.

Focusing on Learner Success.

In talking about innovation in online education, one leader was clear about pointing out that the contribution of continuing education resides in the focus on the learner's success.

> And I would say the two things I think are critical in terms of innovation at our university: one is the focus on being learner-centric, and I brought that in when I first started. I had run across a button that said, "It's not about me." And I transformed that into, "It's not about us." And in our very first annual gathering, which we started, I began to talk to our staff about the need to understand that our work was about our students and not about online, and that therefore, "It's not about us" was a model that all of us had to really embrace. So, I even had people doing things, you know, saying it out loud at the meeting, standing up. And we do it every year now—try to imprint on them the importance of this looking from the students' perspective rather than ours.

For the leaders we interviewed, innovation is about creating an awareness of the needs of a variety of adult learners in the academy. Participants spoke about taking the initiative to experiment with online courses and open courseware, with new formats such as summer intensives and weekend sessions, and with incubating programs, even while recognizing these programs might go to another part of the university some day. Nevertheless, the continuing education leaders we interviewed were realistic about their limitations with respect to innovation. For many, in contrast to their faculty counterparts, innovation would not come from the research they conducted. Recognizing that in research-intensive universities, rankings are tied to research success rather than to the individual success of the learner, one leader in our study explained: "I try to position it as our particular expertise, value, that kind of thing, as opposed to trying to play the game of publications or tenure-track faculty."

Alignment and Resistance

The participants in our study align with their institutions, respect the academic context, but are not bound by it.The leaders echoed this position in a number of ways. It was seen as important to align with the university while maintaining one's focus on the adult-learner agenda and offering innovative and creative programming. Being perceived as different also helps in demonstrating continuing education's connection with the community, as well as meeting the university's goals.

"Believing in our mission" was expressed in many of the stories we heard in relation to motivating staff and building strong teams, as well as in the conversations these leaders had with others inside and outside the academy. "Because you have to believe in yourself . . . because you don't get many other people saying, 'you guys are the best.' No, you have to believe in it yourself."

Participants shared stories of the various strategies they use to achieve alignment with the broader mission of their universities, including encouraging faculty ownership of their programs, working in collaborative partnerships, and finding the "best outcome" for all parties.

> I always try to be very generous in what I share with them, never withholding what I know; sometimes it works out, and sometimes it doesn't. In continuing education, you don't have the power of the academy behind you. You're never going to be the loudest voice, so you have to find more cooperative ways to work.

Educating provosts, university presidents, and faculty about the role of continuing education is an important part of telling the story. More than one leader expressed the concern that their academic colleagues know so little about them: "But you have to find ways to educate them. You have to find ways to feed them information. You have to find other people to speak for you." Another dean talked about the power of "re-framing" to enhance faculty buy-in when, for example, discussing revenue sharing with faculty—"my money is your money." Having empathy for other faculties and disciplines was seen as one of the keys to forming partnerships.

We have numerous examples from the interviews where continuing education leaders either initiate or enter ongoing conversations related to their core values of widening access and serving underrepresented populations. One dean gave an example of the important function continuing education has for the immigrant community in terms of offering postgraduate diplomas:

> But my discourse reminds them that we may be different in the character of our programs, but we're still motivated, and our faculty are motivated, by constant learning and reflection. And also, in that regard, I think we're pretty much aligned.

Still another dean described his efforts to position continuing education at his university: "And we've done that by creating highly interdisciplinary degrees that help people move into jobs that are either just evolving or about to evolve."

Aligning with one's organization while building on one's own values and goals can create tension. "I had been on the course of helping people understand that we are a mission-driven organization that produces revenue, not a revenue-generating machine." This tension, however, may be necessary for innovation. While participants acknowledged that one of the biggest assets continuing education has is to be part of their universities, "our biggest opportunity and our biggest threats come from our own institution": "So, I think it's how you craft things and where you put yourself, but I certainly don't feel constrained by that. I think that's one of the good things about being a little bit more on the margin."

Changing the Organizational Culture.

The continuing education leaders in our study recognized the importance of trying to create a culture in their own continuing education units through the stories they tell not only to the institution and the community, but also to their own staff.

> And I think as a leader you have to be inspirational, and you have to convince people that you're driving a bus and they're going to love being on your bus.
>
> ***
>
> It's around providing the challenge to broaden the thinking and to look outside and that kind of continuous improvement mindset without creating chaos or without it being seen as criticism.

While the participants in our study spend a good deal of time in conversations with their provosts and others about the ways in which continuing education can align with their organization's mission and goals and add value, they are acutely aware of the different contexts in

which they operate. It is within this realm of differences that continuing education leaders look for a common ground in the core mission of teaching and learning. As institutional leaders, continuing educators can advocate for a diversity of learners and learner-centred approaches. It is in this domain that they can best answer the question about whose interests are being served.

Conclusion: Retelling a Master Narrative of Continuing Education

During our interviews in the context of this study, we sought to understand how continuing education leaders share their experiences, and how these stories affect the way others perceive them. This study shows that the telling and retelling of an overarching continuing education narrative helps leaders stay at the forefront of change and enables them to advocate for the adult learner.

While innovation in continuing education is built around the best ways to serve adult and non-traditional learners, the focus on innovation and entrepreneurship also helps define the continuing education field itself. The very stories leaders refer to about serving non-traditional students contribute to the cycle of innovation in the field of continuing education. For example, leaders in our study referred to using narratives about their educational goals and successes to incite faculties or partners to work with them. Our study shows that continuing education leaders generally excel in sharing student-centred narratives, in part to convince various stakeholders of the importance of the field of continuing education.

The interviews with our participants confirm that continuing education leaders think in interdisciplinary terms and reconstruct narratives combining several threads from a master narrative that helps perpetuate the mission of serving lifelong learners. The intersections of these threads are pivotal in bringing diverse faculty and partners together to develop innovative programs and new stories.

The interdisciplinary backgrounds of our participants also inform the broader perspectives they take as leaders in developing innovative programming. They tell stories of bringing people together, working with faculty from diverse disciplines, and influencing organizational change. Continuing education leaders distinguish themselves from other institutional leaders through their focus on making these connections. The stories they tell about the learners are a purposeful way of trying to connect with faculties that are very different from their continuing education unit. The interviews highlighted how their conversations lead to collaborative partnerships and educational innovation.

Rather than leading from the margins, continuing education leaders operate most effectively at intersection points with the rest of the university. The comments of our participants reinforce the hypothesis that continuing education leaders address the needs of a complex institution while trying to balance their own identity. We maintain that there is little in the general leadership literature that addresses the proficiencies of continuing education leaders trying to achieve this balance. Further research into advocacy for non-traditional learners through student-centred narratives, consideration of innovation as the mandate of continuing education units, and the construction of identity to achieve legitimacy in the daily "dance" of alignment and resistance, has the potential to offer further insights into the roles of continuing education leaders.

During our study, we were impressed with the creative ways leaders tell individual stories about how they help lifelong learners succeed. The leaders' innovative ideas, as well as their pivotal conversations with university presidents, provosts, faculty, colleagues, staff, and partners, help to maximize the educational opportunities for continuing education units. How can

institutions reconsider mandates in response to the student-centred narratives of continuing education leaders? What kinds of stories or narratives resonate with other leaders in higher education? Further research around conversations with university stakeholders could lead to a better understanding of the potential for leaders to advocate for lifelong learning in a changing higher education landscape and construct new identities for continuing education units. Most significantly, a deeper understanding of how "authentic conversations" operate in the context of continuing education stakeholders at the university and in the community could ultimately help champion the diverse educational needs of non-traditional learners.

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