

Essay

The Last Mile of Learning: It's Further than You Might Think

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There are certain concepts that conjure up such powerful images that they can be very difficult to change. “Student” and “learner” are two such examples. When I think of students, pictures of boys and girls stuffed into neat rows of prefabricated desks come immediately to mind. For others, it might be an image of young adults bustling across a college quad or teenagers hunched over laptops. These mental models shape how we think about education—whom it is for and what it delivers. They can also blind us to opportunities for investing in the education of groups we are not used to thinking about as learners.

Over the past few decades, our concept of students has steadily expanded. Until recently, few people would have included a child under the age of 5 in their definition. But with the spread of early education, our schools now serve learners in diapers. Similarly, our image of college students has expanded to include adults in their thirties and forties. With each expansion, we have developed policies and programs to meet the particular needs of those learners. Gradually, we are building a system of lifelong learning that spans from infancy through adulthood.

But our mental models and, more importantly, our policies continue to turn a blind eye toward a growing segment of students—those over the age of 50. Older Americans—the people who were our teachers, bosses, mentors, and parents—increasingly find themselves back in school and in search of new skills and credentials for work. But these learners are poorly supported through our education policies. You might even say they are invisible.

Why have we developed a learning infrastructure that serves our very youngest citizens but not our oldest? Part of the answer has to do with our general reluctance to invest in education for adults, particularly the low skilled. A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [study](#) confirms that the United States has one of the largest

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low-skilled adult populations among developed countries, and has comparatively few resources to support their learning. But an even bigger reason for this weak link is that, until recently, older adults have not needed much access to education and training. For many decades, Americans completed their formal education in their late teens or twenties and never returned to school. Job tenure was long and job security strong. Older workers were pretty well protected, particularly those in unions. Seniority increased job security and also ensured workers had opportunities to learn new skills.

Decades of globalization and rapid technological change have changed all that. The skill requirements of jobs are increasing and labor markets are more competitive and less stable. Job tenure and security have diminished, even for those with seniority. Laid-off workers today are far less likely to be called back, or be offered sweet, early retirement packages. And pensions—particularly in the private sector—are rare enough to qualify for the endangered species list. These changes to our economy began disrupting adults in the middle of their careers in the 1980s, sending many back to school for new skills for new careers. The Great Recession accelerated the trends and extended their reach to adults approaching the end of their careers.

One of the harshest lessons of the recession is that when older workers lose their jobs, they face long odds getting back into the labor market. They are significantly more likely to join the ranks of the long-term unemployed and to suffer steep wage losses if they return to work. For adults who never went to college, the labor market is particularly difficult.

Making things even harder, older adults in search of job training will not find programs designed around their unique learning needs. Educational programs targeting seniors are often designed as leisure activities, built on the assumption that a student is enrolling only for personal enrichment. The programs rarely result in a credential or are organized around skills for work. As a result, older adults seeking training will have to enroll in programs designed for younger adults. But there are important differences between older and younger adults that we would do well to consider as we try to meet their educational needs. For starters, older adults are likely to have a lot of work experience, which can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, they may have lots of prior knowledge that can translate into college credit or an industry credential. On the other hand, they

may have been working for the same firm, or in the same occupation, for their entire career, limiting their knowledge of new technologies, industry practices, or job search techniques. They are also more likely to have been out of school for a long time, which can make the transition back jarring. Because they will have less time than younger learners to recoup the cost of their education, they need programs that are both affordable and short term.

Building out the last mile of our learning infrastructure is not an insurmountable challenge. Thanks to new research and targeted initiatives, we know a lot about older learners. For example, students over 50 lack sufficient access to high-quality counseling tailored to their unique career and educational needs. They also need more opportunities to learn with their peers and more access to financial aid through grants, not loans. How do we pay for all this? Expanding Pell Grant eligibility to short-term training could help, as will the stronger focus on serving long-term unemployed in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. But this last leg of our learning highway will require its own dedicated policies. Lifelong learning accounts—employer-matched, portable, individual accounts that people can use to pay for their education—would help pave the way for adult learners of all ages to continue learning. The final step will be for us all to add a new image to our mental inventory of students, one that has a few more gray hairs.

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