

Thurman White's vision for continuing education recognized that the University needed a whole new approach to meet the needs of its adult students.

Lifelong Learning: The Lasting Frontier

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

At 84, Thurman J. White can still see it clearly—his beloved mother, shaking a finger in his face and summing up all the rewards of an education with the simple phrase, “get your lessons.” He could not have known those much-repeated words would resonate over half a century to change the lives of countless adult students at the University of Oklahoma.

Numbers tell part of the story. Just last year, OU Outreach—the collective name of the College of Continuing Education and the College of Liberal Studies—educated and assisted more than 200,000 people through 2,000 courses, programs and activities. Half of all grants and contracts on the Norman campus came through Outreach, generating a total of \$90.5 million from its programs. Thanks to these successes, OU is ranked among the nation's top five institutions in the size and diversity of its continuing education programs.

But numbers cannot do justice to the whole story, which starts not long after statehood when the University's extension service offered correspondence courses, traveling music programs and debate clubs. Other chapters ensued. But perhaps the longest portion of the tale—and certainly one of the most important—belongs to White and his vision of what “getting lessons” meant in the world of adult education.

White came to OU in 1936 as a graduate student in psychology. Shortly after graduation, he was hired by the University to begin a prison education program at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester at the munificent salary of \$100 per month. Some 800 prison inmates were enrolled in the OU Extension Division Short Courses program White coordinated.

“You might think that showed a great thirst for education; actually, they got out of their cells,” quips White, who lives in retirement in Norman and still carries the title of vice president emeritus for continuing education and public service and Regents Professor emeritus of higher education.

World War II service came along, and then doctoral studies at the University of Chicago. White returned permanently to OU in 1949 as director of the Extension Division, where he found himself challenged to meet the needs of other GIs. The war had changed everything, including the economy, and veterans needed training and help finding a place in the new workforce. For many, the Extension Division filled the bill.

“During the war, OU's campus had been a haunted house,” White remembers. Then suddenly, it was flooded

with veterans. Extension classes were held in familiar surroundings—the former U.S. Navy Bachelor Officer Quarters and old mess hall on North Base, where air conditioning meant big window fans pushing around hot air. What White recalls most about the experience is that the veterans helped blaze the path OU adult education needed to take. “It was an amazing thing to have these 25- and 35- and 40-year-old students on campus. They were the ‘no-fool-around’ type of student, ‘I’m here, teach me.’ And then they were gone.”

They left behind a newly appointed dean of extension who was completely certain that continuing education would play a crucial role in a rapidly changing world, an administrator frustrated by North Base facilities “grossly inadequate” for that task.

“For adults to be properly educated and trained, they needed a unique physical facility, one that recognized them as different from 18- to 22-year-olds, and faculty committed to

the kind of program that adult students required,” White says in his book, *My Journey on the Learning Frontier: the Evolution of a Continuing Educator*.

White turned his energies to funding a new home for his division. He soon met with officials at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which had underwritten continuing education centers in several states. Foundation members had cooled somewhat to the idea of funding more centers, but White was determined. He armed himself with ideas gathered from research and conversations with leading experts. White brought the Kellogg Foundation a different concept: “a community in miniature,” where the architectural design itself played a prominent role in adult education.

The concept for what would become the Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education was based on a simple philosophy: Ideas begin in private and then are developed and shared with larger and larger groups. OCCE would embody this philosophy by offering small, private spaces, middle-sized group spaces and a large, public forum.

“It isn’t what you learn; it’s what you do with what you learn,” White says by way of explanation. “And how you ‘do’ with what you learn is that you internalize it. Internalization comes through discussion.”

Hard-fought victory came in September 1958 with a \$1.84



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In this 1958 photo, Governor J. Howard Edmondson, center, listens as Thurman White, left, and OU President George L. Cross, right, outline the unique features of the proposed “community in miniature” that would become the Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education.

million grant from the Kellogg Foundation. At the time, it was the largest grant in the history of Oklahoma higher education. Even today, OU is one of only 10 Kellogg-funded, university-based residential conference centers in the world.

Still, not everyone was a believer. “People thought we were crazy to build that thing,” White says, adding that one faculty member publicly referred to the newly completed OCCE as an “attractive nuisance—they thought it would keep faculty from doing what they should be doing.”

Getting faculty invested was the key, and then President George L. Cross passed responsibility into faculty hands by telling them, as White recalls, “Now we have it [OCCE], fellas; it’s up to you to decide what to do with it.”

White stayed in the background, helping where needed while faculty mulled over the idea that OCCE would be the perfect home for a degree program designed just for adults. A committee headed by the late Professor J. Clayton Feaver studied and discussed the problem for nearly a year before unveiling the bachelor of liberal studies degree. The degree was tailored to help adults earn a broad-based, liberal arts education at their own pace. Four decades later, options for earning a BLS or the master’s of liberal studies have grown to include a complete online experience, self-paced study and evening and weekend classes.

White says the BLS owed its success to faculty ownership and

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recognition of adult students' needs. “Traditional instruction is Monday to Friday on campus. That isn't the way people's lives are built. When you're out earning a living and raising a family, you have to splice in your education. It had to be on the terms of the learner's availability and not necessarily the professor's. You take them when they can come.”

Naturally, some potential students could not come at all. In 1964, White and Walt Scheffer, chair of the OU political science department, went to California to hear U.S. Civil Service Commission head John Macy talk about changing the way civil servants advanced in their careers. Previously, seniority had ruled all advancement; Macy thought only the best should rise to the top. He challenged U.S. colleges and universities to offer programs that would help civil servants reach their potential.

“On the way home, Walt turned to me and said, ‘We ought to do something about this.’ So we came home and did it.”

“It” was Advanced Programs, which offers courses to military and civil service personnel around the world. Scheffer, White and David Ross Boyd Professor and Regents Professor of Economics Alexander J. Kondonassis designed Advanced Programs' intense teaching format, which allows students to take OU courses by preparing in advance, completing a directed reading and attending one or two weekend class sessions. The first class held at Tinker Air Force Base attracted approximately two dozen students. In FY 2005, 13,632 attended Advanced Programs courses in 50 locations ranging from Guam to Iceland. Some say that the sun never sets on the University of Oklahoma, thanks to Advanced Programs.

The sun eventually did set on White's formal career in adult education in 1979. But do not try telling him that—or indeed, anyone else in the profession. White's name is front and center on the OCCE forum building, the centerpiece of what many feel is his legacy. He has received plenty of accolades, from an OU honorary doctorate to being named among the first inductees of the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. But a larger part of White's legacy is the thousands of colleagues and students he has influenced during the past six decades.

Counted among them are James Pappas, OU's vice president for Outreach and dean of the College of Liberal Studies, and Jerry Hargis, regents' professor of communication at the University of Science and Arts in Chickasha and former executive director for the Oklahoma Higher Education Heritage Society.

“This is one of the premier continuing education units in the country, and Thurman created the basis for what we do. He really was a visionary,” says Pappas, who adds that White's fingerprints still are plainly seen on much of what OU Outreach does. Take, for instance, Outreach's online degree program. While figuring out how best to design the degree, Pappas says he and others were able to pattern their efforts after what White, Kondonassis and Scheffer achieved with Advanced Programs.

Pappas acknowledges that the innovations White brought to

adult education at OU were a growing trend nationwide in the 1940s and '50s. The difference is that White got there before most. “Thurman was riding the crest of the wave. When other people were talking about it, he was doing it. OU has always treated the adult learner as a special group. The model for that was established by Thurman.

“At a core level, he really believed that we ought to be offering services to people who needed them. He believes that learning is lifelong learning, that everyone has to continue to change and learn.”

Pappas is proud to call White his mentor and says that if you polled 30 of today's leading continuing education professionals about the most significant influences on their field, White's name still would be mentioned by nearly all of them.

White's name surely would be on the lips of Jerry Hargis, whose 15-year OU career ended as vice provost for continuing education and public service. He left for the University of Georgia Center for Continuing Education, where he retired as director of educational programs. Hargis credits White for introducing him to the world of adult education. “It's an admiration society on my part,” Hargis says. “Thurman had a confidence, an optimism and a persistence that made his staff feel any goal was possible; as a result, it was. We didn't know we couldn't do it.”

Hargis says the secret to White's success was “a remarkable coincidence of character and training . . . he spanned an era of definition, development, growth and progress that we're not likely to see again.”

Both Pappas and Hargis feel White's character was strongly shaped by his childhood on the north-central plains of Kay County. “Thurman has a core practical streak. He's a product of Oklahoma populism, where people pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” Pappas says.

“He happened to be an Oklahoman,” Hargis agrees, “conditioned by the vistas of the high plains, where you have an unlimited view of the horizon and can dream big dreams.”

As for White, he narrows that view back down to his mother's kitchen and the encouragement of a woman granted only an eighth-grade education. “For her, the ladder to climb was the educational ladder,” he says. Of the five children in the White family, three, including Thurman, climbed as high as the ladder went to earn doctoral degrees.

More than two decades after retiring, White still is concerned about helping others reach their potential. “Someone said that change is inevitable, growth is intentional,” he reflects. “I think growth is essential now—and the only way you can grow is by learning. What you don't know can kill you—physically, financially, emotionally. I think I would call continuing education an imperative. You don't have a choice any more. You never get through the need to know.”

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