

The Next Twenty Years in American Independent Study

Harold Markowitz, Jr.

This is our status after nearly a century of American independent study: we are still emerging, still seeking a stronger identity with the rest of the university, and still employing cottage industry techniques in course development. In the past twenty years we have witnessed important changes: we are less ambivalent about our obligations for program quality, more aware of independent study as a distinct field of endeavor, and much more involved as professional managers and staff of independent study programs.

The Past as Context

It has been twenty years since the publication of *Correspondence Instruction in the United States* (MacKenzie, Christensen, & Rigby, 1968), a landmark study. Both continuity and change was cited in that study, which documented the status and tasks of the field. In the ensuing years, strong elements of continuity have blended with weak forces of change to form the state of correspondence instruction today.

"Correspondence instruction," twenty years ago, was an accepted term for any method of teaching in which student and teacher interaction was through writing. Machine and computer grading was acknowledged as a form of correspondence instruction in the 1968 work. Nonetheless, the term grew increasingly obsolescent. "Independent study" came into general use by the 1970's to describe university-based programs in America, partly out of a desire to imply more than postal interaction and partly to rid ourselves of a term that had acquired a connotation of questionable quality. Though sometimes defined as a broader term, "distance education" is generally accepted in the U.S. as a synonym for independent study.

Reviewing the problems facing correspondence programs in 1968, the researchers cited financing, professional staffing, maintaining a favorable image, and becoming an integral part of the parent institution. The same problems, each external to the teaching function, confront independent study programs today, although noteworthy progress has been made in each area. The researchers also identified some internal limitations of correspondence study—including a lack of stimulating interaction with teachers and classmates and the relative inflexibility of course presentation. These problems are with us yet.

On some fronts, our situation has improved significantly. To quote from *Correspondence Instruction in the United States*, "Some universities offer weak courses that serve little purpose and only confirm the prevailing opinion of many academicians that correspondence is an inferior method of instruction." Today it would be an overstatement to cite the existence of vastly deficient programs. Where deficiencies exist, and they do, they reside in isolated courses which are regarded as special problems.

Today the standards of the Independent Study Division of NUCEA are generally accepted, there is some research and much publication in the field, and there is growing collegiality of independent study staff throughout the nation. All of these developments are indicators of problems being solved.

These encouraging signs have led some to predict a blurring of distinctions between distance and traditional education. Still, most believe that without strong support for change, and in the absence of a recognized discipline underlying our efforts, independent study is likely to retain its traditional position on the bottom half of the academic totem pole.

With Canadian, American, and Australian journals in the field of distance education, virtually every professional is exposed to the best thought in the field. Twenty years ago the only publication in the field was the National Home Study Council's *Home Study Review* (MacKenzie, 1971). Research and publication is growing rapidly: the NUCEA Independent Study Division's Wedemeyer and the Powell publication awards are now well established, and in the past two years there have been at least eight Canadian and American theses and dissertations written on independent study and distance education.

The growth of the professional independent study staff is an especially significant trend, and it is the key to understanding much of the progress that has occurred and will occur in our field. Full-time staffing in American independent study is largely limited to administrative personnel; faculty work as an overload. The employment of nonprofessional administrators—the "correspondence secretaries" that Childs (1987) cited as a widespread practice in earlier correspondence education—was bound to disappear as jobs throughout our society became more professionalized and as educational achievement continued to climb.

One result of the professionalization of independent study staff has been the ability to work with faculty and other administrators as colleagues rather than as supporters of the professional work of others. Another important result is that our programs are better managed, and better attuned to the goals and values of our universities. Further, collegiality among independent study staff members at institutions nationwide is built on shared professional status, which is to say that as individual professional status grows, we see it reflected in the growth of communication between institutions and shared values on a national scale. Research is increasingly encouraged and respected, and it has become a part of

our professional environment in a way that was difficult to envision twenty years ago.

The Future as an Extension of the Present

Over the years, more trends have been discerned than really existed. Our history has been filled with predictions of massive infusion of new media, massive insertion of corporate interest and widespread cooperation between institutions. Major change has always been just around the corner. At the risk of violating tradition, I would predict massive stability, the continuation of current trends, and modest levels of growth.

A central article of faith has been the idea that technological change will affect striking change in all education, and overwhelmingly so in independent study. My contrary belief is that the independent study programs of the next twenty years will be different, but not radically different, than those we know now. Just as the structure of independent study in 1988 is strongly linked to the realities of 1968, so it will be that the programs twenty years in the future will be rooted in the realities of today.

It would be reasonable to predict that cost-effective independent study systems will be print-based for the foreseeable future. We will see the growth of computer disks and home-use video tapes to *supplement* print-based courses as they become more convenient for students to use. Both the cost of audio tapes and the means to use them are now adequate for much more extensive use in our courses, but like video and computer supplements their spread will only occur as textbook publishers incorporate them with print materials or as audio, video, and computer program publishing comes to parallel book publishing houses in variety, specialization, and availability. Independent study is an industrial form of education, but for the next twenty years it will continue to be reconciled with cottage industry means of producing materials. Pittman (1987) recently summarized it this way:

“Independent study offices will undoubtedly make greater use of new high-tech delivery systems as the costs decrease to approach those of traditional correspondence study. But even then, print-based and mail-delivered correspondence study will persist. It looks as if the long anticipated demise of traditional correspondence courses is neither imminent nor inevitable.”

Course production advances using desktop publishing will result in the more polished appearance of printed course materials, but a long process of both faculty and staff development will have to occur before new publishing capabilities are used to increase the educational effectiveness of the materials produced. Applications of technology are certain to increase, but demonstrated educational advantage is not going to be the reason for much of the change that takes place.

Though there are several consortia and some grant-funded course development projects, cooperation in course production is not likely to be a major factor in this country in the near future. The failure of the University of Mid-America, well documented by VanKekerix (1986), will dampen some future attempts at massive interinstitutional cooperation. Leasing of courses will continue, though restricted to course-by-course arrangements; course sharing on a larger scale will require administrative structures that do not exist at present. Media-based projects will find application at many institutions, but since they are most unlikely to recover the costs of their production through enrollment fees and charges for materials, they will succeed only as a result of the infusion of outside funds.

In the next twenty years independent study and adult education in general will continue to grow in enrollments and in popularity, in reaction to both population growth and the costs of traditional education. Striking growth of independent study or the incorporation of whole new populations (such as the retired population) will require new patterns of education to be adopted by both individuals and institutions, and that is not apt to happen quickly.

Professional qualifications of independent study administrators and staff members also will grow, partly as a result of having obtained good results from the well-qualified people presently in the field and partly as a result of the higher qualifications of the available labor market. The increased availability of journals focused on independent study, of sound research reports, and of graduate study in the field will encourage the growth of specialized knowledge. The closer communication of colleagues in independent study is apt to encourage more second-tier professionals to move between institutions—a trend already begun, to the great advantage of the field.

Few changes will occur in the line-up of major independent study institutions in the next twenty years, though some medium-sized institutions may blossom and some larger ones may decline. Any major new program is most apt to be introduced at a larger public institution with an already well-developed continuing education activity, if predictions can be based on current institutional patterns. Some existing independent study institutions are apt to reduce their activity, refocus their activities on selected fields, or cease operation altogether as conservative elements in the university come to play.

Conclusion

The goal has been to project the status of American independent study twenty years hence, and the method has been to discern change by testing a benchmark study of twenty years ago against today's reality. Following that I have cited some broader trends that will shape independent study in the future. If the past twenty years is taken as an indicator, change will be gradual and rather predictable. One of the most significant trends is that of developing a body of

well informed, professional managers of independent study.

The current status of major independent study programs, their current methods and current staffing, provide a window through which we may view the programs of twenty years hence; they will look a lot like those around us.

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Harold Markowitz, Jr.
University of Florida
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