Defining the Domain of Higher Education: A Look at Survey Courses

George L. Geis, Glen A. Jones, and Michael L. Skolnik

One of the characteristics of a mature field of academic study is a consensus among scholars regarding the boundaries of the field and the core knowledge contained within it. Usually this consensus about the contours of knowledge within the field is translated into the content of an introductory course which surveys important concepts, literature, empirical findings, and methodologies.

Higher Education is a relatively new field of study. Critical self-reflection addressing questions about the nature of this field dates back not more than two decades with the publication of Dressel and Mayhew’s pioneering work (1974). The modest number of publications and conference presentations examining higher education as a field of study has focused mainly on: characteristics of higher education degree programs (e.g., Crosno & Nelson, 1986; Davis, Faith & Murrell, 1991; Murrell & Davis, 1991; Skolnik, 1991); the value of higher education programs (Townsend & Mason, 1990; Townsend & Wiese, 1990); methodological issues in higher education research (e.g., Attinasi, 1990; Conrad, 1989; Milam, 1990); and programmatic issues (e.g., Dill & Morrison, 1985; Glazer, 1987; Newell & Kuh, 1989; Williams, 1984).

A much more micro-level issue which has not been widely addressed in the literature on higher education as a field of study is the feasibility or appropriateness of offering an introductory level, survey course and how such a course might be constituted and organized. (An exception is an article by Kellams, 1980). While this subject might be expected to be of particular interest to program heads, faculty, and students in higher education programs, the notion that there is a

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relationship between the design and content of introductory courses and the opinions of scholars concerning the domain of a field of study suggests that this topic also represents a way of looking at broader issues about the field of higher education. This paper represents an attempt to address this issue by presenting and analyzing some data on introductory courses in the field of higher education.

Introductory Courses

They may be called survey, foundation, orientation, core or introductory courses, but no matter what they are called, these courses undoubtedly play a very special role in the curriculum of academic disciplines and fields of study. They are special in a number of ways. They are often the first course a student takes in a program of studies. They may be the only course a student takes in a particular field, and there are probably important differences in design depending on whether the course is seen as exploratory and introductory or as terminal. They are usually team-developed and often team-taught. They serve to introduce the student to areas of study which often can be pursued in later courses, and they serve a recruiting function. Introductory courses can suggest different career paths and inform course choices. They may also provide students with an introduction to the faculty of the relevant department.

Our interest in introductory courses in higher education began with a very pragmatic quest: to find ways of improving the introductory course offered for students in the Higher Education Group of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Ontario. The course, entitled "Recurring Issues in Higher Education," undoubtedly plays a very special role in the Department's curriculum for many of the reasons outlined above. As we began to discuss various options in terms of redesigning the course, we became interested in the way in which introductory courses represent an attempt to "map the field."

Surprisingly little research has been published on introductory courses in general. While there have been periodic attempts to stimulate research on the topic (Johnson, 1937), most of what has been published can be classified as "show and tell," essentially descriptions of courses provided by the proud designer. 1 While there has been little research, there are two basic presuppositions concerning introductory courses that seem to be commonly implied within this small body of work. The first presupposition is that introductory courses suggest the domain
of knowledge represented by the title of the course or program. This domain is presumably the agreed-upon core of knowledge in the discipline. In a time in which emphasis is on specialization within disciplines, it has become particularly important to provide some integrated overview of a field of study. The introductory course suggests the territorial boundaries of the field, but it also indicates emphases, in a sense giving different weights to various parts of the domain. In addition, students are introduced to the core concepts and vocabulary of the discipline.

The second presupposition is that there are a variety of ways of mapping the territory. One might introduce a field by asking students to read the "Great Books" of the field or be familiar with the "Great Scholars" of the field. One might introduce the history of the field or discipline so that students can understand its development in chronological terms. One might focus directly on the key concepts or definitions, or introduce students to the central issues or themes which run throughout the literature of the discipline. It is easy to find examples of each of these approaches.

The discussion above suggests that besides trying to map the domain of a discipline, introductory courses typically attempt to provide the knowledge of core literature, theories, concepts, specialized vocabulary, and methodologies that are deemed necessary for one to progress to more advanced courses within the discipline. The question arises, then, as to whether one might expect introductory courses in higher education to have the properties of introductory courses in most disciplines.

In fact, there seems to be a consensus that higher education does not fulfill the characteristics of a discipline, but is more aptly described as a "field of study" (Donald, 1991; Dressel & Mayhew, 1974; Harclerode, 1974; Skolnik, 1991). Dressel and Mayhew suggest that, unlike the disciplines, higher education does not possess a specialized technical vocabulary, generally accepted basic literature, or a recognized place in relation to other disciplines. Nor does it devote a considerable effort to solving basic and theoretical questions. Donald notes further that higher education does not have a distinctive body of knowledge, accepted methodologies for research and "a theoretical framework which would allow us to situate and interrelate our research."

Studies in higher education frequently make use of formal theories, technical vocabularies, and sophisticated methodologies of various disciplines. In this sense, higher education is a largely derivative field of
study; and because the disciplines and subdisciplines upon which it draws are so many and so varied, it would be an unusual course which would attempt to cover all of them.

What is unique to the field of higher education is not particular theories or methodologies, but institutions, systems, processes, constituencies, traditions, issues and problems. Accordingly, these are the stuff of which one would expect an introductory course to be constructed. There are, however, many different ways in which this domain of people, things, and relationships could be conceptualized and configured, and no single approach has yet attained consensual status. Indeed, there is not, to our knowledge, a single publication which purports to be an introductory textbook in the field, in contrast to some disciplines in which the competition for that market is sometimes quite fierce. Possibly, the fact that no such book has yet come forward could be taken as a reflection of the present state of development of the field of higher education. Whether such a state is inherent in the nature of the field, and thus likely to be a permanent condition, or an artifact of this being a relatively youthful field of endeavour, only time will tell.

In summary, introductory courses represent an attempt to map the territory or define the boundaries of an academic discipline. As such, the existence and design of introductory courses can tell us a great deal about the discipline or, at very least, tell how those who design these courses view the discipline.

Method

We obtained information on introductory courses in higher education from several sources. In October 1992 we sent a questionnaire to the heads of all higher education programs listed in the computerized directory of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). The directory includes programs in the United States and Canada. Heads were asked to provide information on their program(s) and on any introductory courses that might exist within their program(s). We also requested copies of introductory course outlines. A total of 91 questionnaires were distributed. Thirty-two were returned for a response rate of 35%. Because our survey population had been subjected recently to so many surveys we did not think that a follow up for non-respondents would be productive.

Some comments on the apparently low response rate are in order.
First, using the ASHE Directory may overstate the number of programs of higher education. The Directory lists 91 programs, but repeated surveys on various program and curriculum issues have not, at least recently, produced more than sixty-five responses. Crosson and Nelson (1986) stated that there is some uncertainty as to the number of higher education programs. Nelson's survey of program characteristics, reported at the 1990 ASHE Meeting (cited in Skolnik, 1991, p. 112) had 65 responses. Despite repeated attempts to collect curriculum data, the Loyola University data base on higher education programs (from which relevant data will be summarized later) covers only 62 programs. There is, therefore, some reason to suspect that our "real response rate" may be closer to half than to one-third.

Second, with respect to general program characteristics included in the survey (e.g., type of degree offered, area of program specialization), the profile of our respondents is similar to that reported in the surveys which had greater numbers of responses, such as those cited in the previous paragraph. Therefore, our response group appears to be representative of the larger population of higher education programs in some notable respects.

Third, our mail questionnaire results can be compared with responses from the same questionnaire obtained at a symposium which the authors led at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education in Minneapolis in November of 1992. Though the fifteen individuals who completed our questionnaire at that symposium were not necessarily program heads, most were teaching faculty in higher education programs with an interest in introductory courses. The responses obtained from these individuals were quite similar to those obtained in our survey, again suggesting that our survey results are probably fairly representative. The main difference noted was that the symposium respondents assigned a much higher rating to the topic "Higher Education as a field of study," a difference which we attributed to the likelihood that the symposium title attracted individuals with a particular interest in higher education as a field of enquiry. In addition, of course, the group discussion at that symposium provided us with a much clearer understanding not only of the role of introductory courses in higher education, but also of the practical constraints faced by educators, especially the basic problem of trying to introduce a very broad field of study in a very limited period of time.
Findings: Survey of Program Heads

1. Questionnaire Data

Respondents were asked to indicate the types of degree programs offered through their higher education program. Of the thirty-two program heads that responded to the survey, 25 (78%) indicated that they offer a Doctor of Philosophy program, 23 (72%) offered a Doctor of Education program, 19 (59%) offered a Master of Education program, and 8 (25%) offered a Master of Arts program. Other degree programs reported by program heads included: Master of Science in Education (3 or 9%); undergraduate (2 or 6%); and Educational Specialist (1 or 3%).

In terms of the major areas of specialization offered by the higher education unit, a wide range of specializations were reported and many respondents indicated that their unit offers more than one specialization. The most frequently reported specializations were general administration in higher education (13 or 41%), community colleges (8 or 25%), student affairs (6 or 19%), and college teaching (6 or 19%). Twenty-six other specializations were reported, each listed by one or two respondents, including institutional research, adult education, higher education law, student personnel evaluation, higher education finance, and research and evaluation. Three (9%) respondents indicated that their programs did not have a specialization.

Twenty-four (75%) respondents indicated that their program includes an introductory or survey course. Sixteen of them reported that the introductory or survey course offered by their unit is a compulsory or required component of the degree program.

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of including each of twenty issues in an introductory or survey course in the field of higher education. The question employed a four-point scale (1 = Not necessary at all; 2 = Nice but not necessary; 3 = Probably should be included in an introductory course; 4 = Definitely should be included in an intro course). The twenty issues were gleaned from chapter headings and bibliographic categories in major reference sources and from major topics that had been used in the introductory course offered by the Higher Education Group of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The mean rating for each issue is presented in Table 1. High ratings (3 or higher) were received by well over 50% of the topics listed in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire distributed to program chairs ended with three
open-ended questions. The first asked respondents to note topics or issues that were not included in our list of issues but should be part of an introductory course in higher education. More than 40 different responses were recorded.

One frequent citation was "Diversity" of the population of students in higher education and of the types of higher education institutions (e.g. religious, racial, comprehensive colleges). "History of Higher Education" was suggested several times as was "Philosophy, Ethics and Values." Another topic which was cited a number of times was "Teaching and Learning," "Legal Issues," "Organizational Dynamics and Theory," "Policy," "Admissions," "Conflict," and "The Nature of Academic Disciplines" were all cited more than once. Some single citations of interest which demonstrate the broad and ambiguous definition of the field were: "Campus Design," "Architecture and Spaces," "Athletics," "Fund Raising," "Financial Aid," "Sources of Information," and "Career Opportunities in Higher Education."

There were generally high ratings received by the topics we had presented and there were a large number of topics generated by the respondents. The additions were usually suggested by only one or two respondents. The large number of topics (often seemingly unrelated to each other) and the scattering of support for each may imply that the field is, indeed, diffuse and ill-defined.

The second question began by asking whether or not there should be an introductory course in a program in higher education. Almost all respondents replied affirmatively; only four indicated that there should not be such a course and some of these respondents (as well as some of the affirmatives) indicated that their programs included a set of required core courses which, taken together, represented the equivalent of a survey/introductory program of study.

Those who agreed that there should be an introductory course in higher education programs were asked to define the purpose of such a course. The most commonly cited purpose was to provide an overview, conceptual framework, map, or broad structure. Thus, the student would acquire at least a superficial knowledge of the domain represented. Instrumentally, such knowledge, it was suggested, could be used as a "menu" of specialized courses offered in the program and as a way for the student to make informed choices among them.
Table 1
Issues Rated by Importance of Inclusion in an Introductory Course
(1 = low; 4 = high)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structure of higher education systems</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance in higher education institutions</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between higher education and society</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the university</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government and higher education/institutional autonomy</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The postsecondary student</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the community college</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum in universities and community colleges</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic freedom and tenure</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial issues in higher education</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professoriate</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal education</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality and its assessment</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education as a field of study</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research in the university</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations between community colleges and universities</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative higher education</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance and neutrality in the university</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relationships between higher education and industry</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A second purpose noted by respondents was to provide a coherent view of the historical development and philosophies of the field. The third and somewhat related purpose was to familiarize the students with
scholars and literature of note (i.e. the "Great Books" curriculum). A fourth purpose was to "develop a common language" and a common background among students. One respondent noted that the diversity of students entering a program in higher education suggested the need for such a socializing and homogenizing course to "produce a common identity." Also cited was the need to develop necessary skills of the entering students, such as using the library and being familiar with key journals and books.

The final survey question asked what the format or "framing" of the course should be. The design of survey and introductory courses can differ greatly. As noted above, the Great Books or Great Scholars approach is a common one and was suggested by several respondents. The chronological development of the field, key research questions, current topics, student generated topics, occupational roles ("the actors in higher education"), systems, and even our own choice—recurring issues—were all suggested as possible frameworks for such a course.

2. Course Outlines

In response to our invitation to respondents to send us outlines of their courses, we received seven course outlines, six from universities in the United States, one from Canada. Both doctoral and master's programs in higher education or related areas were offered in all but one of these institutions, that one having only a master's program. Six of the seven are large state universities, the other one a large private university.

It is difficult to present a comparative summary of these course outlines because they differ so much in format and style. They range in length from two pages to thirty pages, and the reading lists range from one with thirteen items to one which has 258 items. Two courses indicate a main textbook (one of them indicates two additional "supplementary texts") and two others indicate three texts each. The only book indicated as a text in more than one course (specifically, two) is Altbach and Berdahl's Higher Education in American Society (1987). ASHE Readers are listed as texts in three courses, but the same Reader is not listed in more than one course. One course includes three ASHE Readers as its texts: the ones on students (Kuh et al., 1989), faculty (Finkelstein, 1988), and governance (Peterson, 1991). All the readings in this course are selections from these three books, and the course seems to be designed around the Readers. Three of the courses
advise the student to become a regular reader of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Four of the seven courses specify course objectives. These are in point form and vary from a single objective ("to provide students with an introduction to postsecondary education..."), to sets of three, nine, and sixteen objectives. The objective statements are more precise in the outlines which have more objectives (e.g. "become acquainted with career paths and planning in higher education"); "to be able to identify leaders of both national and state higher education communities, and to become familiar with the principal organizations through which the many interests of higher education are expressed and realized").

In addition to those with formal statements of objectives, one simply says at the beginning of the outline: "The course is designed to meet the needs of ... advanced graduate students who are planning careers in higher education, and those who wish to become more knowledgeable about one of the more important movements in American life." Unfortunately, there is no way of telling whether the difference between courses like this one and those with nine or sixteen stated objectives reflects differences in the nature of the courses or in the styles of writing course outlines.

What is perhaps of most interest is the substantive content of the courses. Again, owing to differences in the way that such information is presented in the course outlines, it is difficult to assess the extent of similarity among courses. For example, some outlines indicate only major subject categories, while others provide almost minute disaggregation into subtopics. The more detailed ones cover all the topics listed in our questionnaire described above. The less detailed tend to concentrate on fewer topics—usually structures, constituencies, and governance, and often curriculum and instruction.

Overall, the impression that we get from going through these course outlines is of substantial similarity in the broad topic coverage of the courses, but also substantial differences in emphases. All the courses seem to be predominantly in the lecture/discussion mode geared each week to specific readings under the rubric of a specific topic (e.g. under "Faculty" a reading entitled "The Academic Profession in the 1980's and Beyond"). In all cases except one, the topics are formulated in descriptive terms, i.e. Current Forms of Higher Education, The College Student, Academic Freedom, and so on. However, in the case of one course entitled "Contemporary Issues in Higher Education," the topics are formulated as issues such as "Who Should Teach?", "How
Should Colleges Be Managed?" and "Who Should Run the College?"

Another course stood out for its explicit attention to the different political points of view and values that underlie debates over the goals and directions of higher education. After covering the "Classical" points of view (e.g. Newman, Ortega, and Flexner), there are sections on "The Right" (e.g. Bennett, and Bloom); "The Left" (e.g. Friere, and Illich); and "The Middle" (e.g. Bok, and Kerri). This course also gives critical analysis a prominent role and lists numerous articles giving minority and feminist perspectives. This is not to say that alternative perspectives are ignored in the other courses, but neither the concepts nor the readings of critical analyses are so apparent in the other course outlines.

As noted earlier, one indication of the state of a field of study is the degree of consensus on core literature. This sample of seven course outlines allows a very weak, but nevertheless quite revealing test of that question. If we exclude the Canadian source because of national differences in (at least some) literature, the course description which omitted its reading list, and the outline which had 258 reading items because that could hardly be considered to constitute a core, we are left with two pairs of roughly comparable courses: one involving two courses titled "American Higher Education"; the other with "Contemporary Issues in Higher Education" and "Policies and Issues in Higher Education." The combined total of items in each pair of reading lists is about 50. It turns out that in each pair not a single item is common to each of the two lists. This is, of course, a very small sample, but still it seems remarkable that similarly focused introductory courses do not share a single reading! One would expect that if there were anything at all approaching a core literature for a field of study, there would be at least a few readings in common in any such pair.

Finally, it is interesting to note the considerable similarities in evaluation procedures among these courses. Six of the seven courses have exams which account for 20 to 33 percent of the mark. The largest factor in evaluation is some written work, usually including a major paper, but often including as well book reviews, annotated bibliographies, position statements, and various types of independent study reports. In three of the courses, class participation is counted, for ten to 33 percent of the mark.
Course Data from the Loyola University Data Base

For several years, Professor Barbara Townsend of Loyola University in Chicago has been maintaining a data base on higher education programs in North American Universities. At the time that we obtained computer printouts from her (Fall, 1992), course listings for 54 doctoral programs and 27 master's programs were available. Of the 54 doctoral programs, 28 (52%) listed what appeared from the title to be an introductory survey course. It should be emphasized that these judgments were made by the investigators solely on the basis of the title of the course. Thus, the data reported in this section are not of the same quality as that obtained from the questionnaire data; but as the Loyola data are more extensive than the survey responses, it provides hopefully a useful indication of the broad parameters of the question, complementing the data from the survey.

Table 2 shows the titles of the indicated introductory survey courses listed for the doctoral programs. Since most of the courses listed for the master's programs were also listed for doctoral programs, we have not presented a separate table for master's program courses. It will be noted that 32 courses are shown in this table, because four programs had two courses which looked like introductory survey courses. From the titles, the courses seem to divide between those which have an "institutions focus" and those which have an "issues focus." In addition, one explicitly references both, and four do not fit this classification.

The methodological limitations of relying simply on course titles notwithstanding, these data suggest that the majority of higher education programs have introductory courses. In about two-thirds of the cases, the emphasis is institutional/historical and in about a third the emphasis is on issues or problems. While one hesitates to read too much into titles, there is a suggestion also that the institutional focus is predominantly American rather than comparative/international. As for the issues focus, it is interesting to note the variety of adjectives, i.e. "current," "critical," "emerging," and "recurring."
### Table 2
**Titles of Introductory Survey Courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institute</td>
<td>Higher Education in the United States</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Higher Education</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development &amp; Scope of Higher Education in America</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher Education in a Democracy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The American College &amp; University</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The American Education System</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization &amp; Structure of Higher Education*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization &amp; Administration of Higher Education*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>Current Issues in Higher Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Issues in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Critical Issues in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emerging Issues in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recurring Issues in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problems in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Current Problems in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Issues &amp; Institutions in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Introduction to Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher Education as a Field of Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Basic Understandings in Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20th Century Higher Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Program had no title that looked like an introductory survey course. Courses with these titles were not counted in cases where there was another course which appeared to be an introductory course.*
Conclusions and Impressions

The results of this preliminary study suggest that introductory courses are common components of, and often compulsory elements within, many higher education programs. Some of the purposes for the introductory courses which we had noticed reported in the literature were also reported by our respondents: to provide students with an overview or conceptual map of the field and a coherent view of its historical and philosophical development. Another important function noted was to familiarize students with important scholars and literature and to develop a "common language."

While introductory courses may be common within the field of higher education, there seems to be relatively little consensus on the core body of knowledge on the territory of the field that a student should be introduced to. Of the twenty items on our list of issues, thirteen received an average rating of three or higher on a four-point scale and respondents suggested an additional forty possible topics that might be considered for inclusion in an introductory course. We found that while there were substantial similarities in the broad topic coverage of the courses, at least in terms of the course outlines we analyzed, there were substantial differences in emphases. The questionnaire data suggest that the "Great Books" or "Great Scholars" approach is quite common in terms of framing the introductory course. We obtained only a few course outlines, but our analysis of reading lists suggests that there is almost no agreement on a core literature within the field.

In addition to these basic conclusions, a number of other notions emerged from our analysis of the data. It is our impression, for example, that in introducing students to the field of higher education, emphasis is often placed on introducing or describing the particular higher education system in which the student functions. Fifteen of the thirty-two American course titles we analyzed included a specific reference to higher education in the United States and it is not unlikely that many of the courses that have an issues focus emphasize local or national problems and concerns. Comparative higher education, on the other hand, received a relatively low rating from questionnaire respondents.

Secondly, it appears that a considerable emphasis is placed on administrative questions and issues within the field of higher education. Two of the topics assigned the highest ratings by respondents were the structure of higher education systems and governance in higher
education institutions. Many of the program specializations noted by
respondents were administrative, ranging from a general emphasis on
administration to programs focusing on quite specific administrative
careers, such as student services and institutional research. This reflects
a historic dichotomy in higher education. On the one hand, there is the
profession-oriented program designed to provide leaders, administrators,
student service personnel and, to a lesser extent, teachers. On the other
hand, we have the research/field-oriented program designed to produce
scholars of higher education. While that issue goes far beyond the scope
of this paper, it clearly suggests that difficulties would arise in trying to
develop a single prototypical introductory course or a common
textbook.

In a related vein, more emphasis seems to be placed on higher
education in terms of the enterprise or superstructure level of analysis
than at the understructure level. There seems to be a system or
institutional focus in many of these courses, while somewhat less
emphasis is placed on activities at the "grassroots" or classroom level.
The five items which received the highest rating by questionnaire
respondents all focus on higher education from a system or institutional
perspective. However, it should be noted that several programs do offer
specializations in adult education (variously termed the adult learner,
college teaching, and adult continuing education), though this fact, in
turn, raises a number of interesting questions concerning the
relationship between higher education as a field of study and adult
education as a field of study.

While our exploratory study produced some interesting findings, it
also suggests a number of important topics for further research. A more
comprehensive examination of course outlines should be undertaken for
higher education introductory courses. Programs outside Canada and
the United States should be included in a larger survey. Teachers in
such courses should be interviewed in order to examine further: the
intended purposes of the courses, the factors influencing decisions of
design, sequence, inclusion and exclusion of topics and materials. In
addition, a comparison should be made of introductory courses in
higher education with those in other disciplines. Perhaps the degree to
which the nature and design of introductory courses differ at graduate
and undergraduate levels as well as among disciplines and courses at
each level should be examined.
Notes

1. A more recent, interesting set of observations on introductory courses can be found in the New Directions volume edited by Spear (1984).

2. The number of contact hours is obviously a factor that must be considered when an instructor is deciding what and how much material should be included in a course. While it is our impression that most of the introductory courses in higher education discussed in this paper are one semester in length, there may be some variation in the number of contact hours associated with these courses. The introductory course that we are associated with is a full (two semester) course.

3. Since there are very few undergraduate offerings in higher education, students in the field, unlike in many other disciplines, enter graduate school with little or no formal knowledge of their chosen area of specialization.

4. These findings might be compared with the results of the recent survey of courses in higher education programs conducted by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education as reported by Fife (1991). The Fife data show a preponderance of courses related to administration, policy and organization. With regard to foundation or introductory courses, Fife reported frequencies of courses by title: Current Issues in Higher Education = 33; Foundations of Higher Education = 10; Introduction of Higher Education = 6; Literature of Higher Education = 5; Higher Education as a Field of Study = 4; Case Histories in Higher Education = 4; Future American College = 1.

References


