

ADULT LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE:
A CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MODEL OF THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY

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(Abstract)

By exploring the historical development and current state of the corporate university through literature reviews, case study analyses, and interviews with corporate university practitioners, this study conceptualizes the corporate university. The shortage of knowledgeable workers in technical areas and rapid advances in technology have energized adult learning in the United States. In response to these changes and needs, many corporations have incorporated formal learning programs into their organizations. As conceptualized in this study, the corporate university is Corporate America's vehicle for providing learning programs to their workers with the goal of developing and maintaining a highly skilled, knowledgeable, and adaptable workforce that contributes to organizational performance.

Through an historical development and conceptualization based on interviews with corporate university practitioners and case study analyses, this study also examines the strengths and weaknesses of the corporate university. The corporate university does, in fact, provide a useful and innovative way to reach a portion of the adult learning population. Moreover, the corporate university provides learning initiatives that are related to the adult's current and future role in the workplace. In this way, the learning opportunities provided by the corporate university make the knowledge relevant and accessible to the adult learner. However, the corporate university is not founded on adult learning principles and is chartered to consider corporate success rather than individual development. This purpose endangers the corporate university in that it has the potential to exploit the American workforce by forcing undesired learning opportunities.

This study identifies a basic component, partnership, that helps many corporate universities avoid employee exploitation and provide learning opportunities that have meaning to both the individual learners and the organization. The partnership component is foregrounded in a model for program development that is presented in this construct for future and current corporate university planners. The model is not tested in this thesis; however, it has been reviewed and endorsed by a panel of corporate university experts. Provided that partnership is considered and integrated into the approach, this study concludes that the corporate university, as a conceptual and an interactive model, is a useful vehicle for reaching the adult learner and for preparing and maintaining an American workforce able to manage change and remain competitive.

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