

2014

The Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield: Ten Years of Growing

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Recommended Citation

Ansello, E., & Hughes, M. (2014). The Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield: Ten Years of Growing. *Age in Action, 29(1)*, 1-6.

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Case Study

The Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield: Ten Years of Growing

by Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.
and Monica Hughes

Educational Objectives

1. To review changes in patterns of continuing learning and non-traditional education.
2. To profile membership and their interests in lifelong learning.
3. To highlight the development of the Lifelong Learning Institute of Chesterfield as a possible model for replication.

Background: Lifelong Learning

The late 20th century challenged the concept that education was a one-time inoculation against ignorance administered early in life. Institutions of higher education came late to this realization, continuing to marginalize older learners in favor of the practice of recruiting and, at times, competing to enroll young adults directly from high school (Ansello, 1982). Even through the 1980s, colleges and

universities maintained emphases on for-credit classes and scheduled non-credit classes, those that might be taken just for the sake of learning, at times and places that were inconvenient for "non-traditional" learners. The recession of the early 1990s which brought drops in enrollments helped, as noted by Stephan et al. (2004), to make older adults more attractive recruitment targets for "many public institutions of higher education seeking to bolster their enrollments and corresponding full time equivalent (FTE) appropriations from government. However, these older learners often (had to) satisfy all the prerequisite academic education, class attendance, exams, and papers required for credit coursework."

Lifelong learning was soon embraced in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere by business and industry as "career-long" learning, maintaining a practical purpose to the learning undertaken by mid-life and older adults (Dunkin, 2012). Alternative forms of learning emerged during this time and some initiatives, such as the Institute for Learning in Retirement (ILR) that began in 1962 at the New School

for Social Research in New York City, gained enough traction to serve as models of learning through the life course that were detached from work or career. Elderhostel, Inc. began as the brain child of two iconoclasts (Marty Knowlton, an educator, and David Bianco, a university administrator) who wished to offer older adults academically-based continuing opportunities to learn. Their experiment began modestly in 1975 with five colleges and universities in New Hampshire; they enrolled 220 older adults who stayed in college dormitories during the vacant summer period in order to reignite their love of learning that had been interrupted by the Depression and World War II. In a decade, Elderhostel grew to become an international program with 100,000 participants. In 2010, Elderhostel, Inc. formally changed its name to Road Scholar, to emphasize both the travel and educational components of its programs.

Lifelong Learning Institutes

In 1988, 30 ILRs joined with Elderhostel, Inc., to form the Elderhostel Institute Network, later renamed the

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Road Scholar Institute Network, (RSIN), a non-profit association that draws on its members' experiences to help establish new institutes and to reinforce existing ones. The RSIN model is academically-centered, member-driven, and community-based, seeking to capitalize on the life skills and knowledge of its members and respond to the specific interests and needs of the community in which it operates. Members chair committees that shape the organization, from curriculum development to member services. Today there are about 400 Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs) modeled on the RSIN, including the LLI of Chesterfield. The Bernard Osher Foundation supports 117 Osher Institutes for mature adults on university and college campuses, with at least one in every state, each site having "a diverse repertoire of intellectually stimulating courses" (Bernard Osher Foundation, 2013).

The Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield County

Stephan et al. (2004) noted, as follows, the developmental stages of this LLI. (She and Ed Ansello of the Virginia Center on Aging first met with Debbie Leidheiser and Don Simpson of Brandermill Woods to explore the process and the four were the principals in its formation. Debbie would become the LLI's first Executive Director, guiding it until August 2007. She was succeeded by Monica Hughes):

In October 2002, the Brandermill Woods Retirement Community Foundation and the Virginia Center on Aging at Virginia Commonwealth University, the only university-based Elderhostel affiliate in

the Greater Richmond area, began to explore co-sponsoring a lifelong learning institute in Chesterfield County. The two organizations had met previously to discuss staff training and existing resources, but this was a substantial evolution in the relationship. Brandermill Woods is a retirement community with a foundation board that wished to provide lifelong learning opportunities for its own residents and for the broader community, as well. The Foundation had already conducted a survey of its residents, with an overwhelming response in favor of academic educational programs with peer groups in the community. Significantly, two residents of the Brandermill Woods Retirement Community had previously been involved in LLIs, one at Kingsport, Tennessee and the other at George Mason University in Virginia. These residents spurred Brandermill's action.

The Brandermill Woods-VCoA collaborative sponsorship generated direct support and assistance from a number of agencies, businesses, faith communities, and other groups to bring the dream of an LLI to fruition. Chesterfield County government was particularly interested in the project, for it was just completing a long range study that predicted, among other things, a rapidly increasing senior population; the Chesterfield County Administrator and the Board of Supervisors viewed the project as a benefit to the county. Chesterfield County Schools offered the use of an old school building that was vacant during the day and the Board of Supervisors designated funds for its refurbishment. This donation kicked the project into high gear.

The Brandermill Woods-VCoA sponsors formed a Steering Committee, composed of representatives from the two sponsors, local men's groups, county and school administration, adult education providers, church officials, local senior groups, neighboring John Tyler Community College, local media, the Senior Advocate, retired VCU professors, and Brandermill Woods residents. Local Rotary groups contributed funds and also helped with repair and painting inside the school.

Two Boy Scouts chose the property for their Eagle projects, one landscaping the yard and the other renovating three partitioned rooms into one large assembly area. Committees formed to address membership, curriculum development, fundraising, instructor recruitment, and public relations. The LLI in Chesterfield launched with a formal ribbon cutting ceremony in December, 2003, that featured county



L to R: Jack Davis (Brandermill Retired Men's Club), Dr. Billy Cannaday (Superintendent of Chesterfield County Public Schools), Beth Davis (Chairwoman of Chesterfield County School Board), Art Warren (Chairman, Board of Supervisors), Debbie Leidheiser (Brandermill Woods), Jane Stephan (VCoA), Ed Moldof (Chairman of Steering Committee, LLI), and, behind him, Don Simpson (Brandermill Woods). Photo by Ed Ansello.

officials, representatives from the two original sponsoring organizations, and community residents who had chaired the committees and guided the planning processes. The LLI began offerings in March 2004, with 17 classes in subjects such as science, criminal justice, computers, economics and finance, languages, the Great Books, health, philosophy and religious studies, and art.

Operations Today

Consistent with the philosophy of the RSIN and the LLI movement, academic quality classes rather than games or recreation are the foundation, and members drive every aspect of the LLI in Chesterfield. There is a palpable sense that members own this institute. There are committees on Budget and Finance, Community Outreach, Curriculum, Facilities, Fundraising, Library, Publicity and Membership, Social, Trips, and more, each composed of LLI members. Members have volunteered to upgrade the programs and capacity of the LLI's office computers; to streamline the registration process; to attend and, at times, to testify before county budget meetings; to raise awareness of needs in the community, such as spearheading a coat drive or hosting Thanksgiving dinners each year within the facility. The Board of Directors of this LLI includes members elected by fellow members and representatives from partnering institutions in higher education, health care, the county school system, banking, law, and communities of faith. The LLI Board meets monthly throughout the year to respond to the inevitable issues that arise with a vibrant facility that has

hundreds in its halls every day and is increasingly recognized throughout the county. During 2013, the LLI hired a part-time Volunteer Coordinator to help manage the generous outpouring of help offered by LLI members.

Although the LLI is a bustling place, person to person interactions define it. A typical day finds staff and instructors making time to answer a question, listen to a story, or continue a discussion from a recent class. Outside the office, directional signs point the way to the day's courses and activities, while "buddies" wait for newly registered peers to arrive to make sure they find their way comfortably. Classroom spaces at a premium, students chat as they wait on the benches in the hallways for their course start time. Often music can be heard as students fit in an aerobic workout before heading off to class. Other days, the music is accompanied by the tapping of shoes in a dance class or interspersed with a music history lecture. Down in the art room, students might be carving a hound dog, learning about composition for an upcoming painting, or be up to their elbows in clay. Staff and volunteers prepare the laptop computers for a class in one space and reconfigure the desk setup in another to better facilitate an upcoming discussion series. Chairs are filled to the back of the room, accommodating an overflow of students in an American History lecture, while an instructor in another room hangs a poster in Spanish in preparation for her language class later in the day.

The interests and personal goals of the membership are as diverse as

their life experiences. Creating a program that unlocks their curiosities and nourishes their passions must begin with the students themselves. The first step is to provide continuous opportunities for members to evaluate LLI's courses. The Curriculum Committee then employs the feedback to develop a balance of offerings across the curriculum. Keeping the focus on the academic core, the Committee adds fitness, social, and creative activities to round out the program. Understanding that we often limit ourselves to the familiar, the Committee explores ways of taking students from one academic area across the various subjects. The LLI encourages students to share their own experiences and knowledge through teaching, where appropriate. When members cannot fill instructor roles, the committee reaches out to the community, beginning with the LLI's partners. This ongoing process culminates three times each year in the publication of the course catalog. Students make their course selections with the release of each new catalog, but are welcome to add additional classes, where capacity is available, at any time. By utilizing a flat membership fee and holding classes in a familiar space, the LLI offers an environment for students to try new things with little personal risk.

Developing relationships doesn't happen just within the building's walls nor only between individuals. Connections with the larger community manifest in ways sometimes unexpected. Opportunities for talks with local college students or tutoring from high school language students prove mutually beneficial.

Professionals and local service providers often bring their expertise to the classroom; but the reverse is also true: LLI members are invited to take their learning out into the community for true hands applications. Networking provides a format for discovering the needs of local programs and LLI members may respond together to assist.

At the same time, both the County Board of Supervisors and the School System have recognized the pivotal role that the LLI is playing in the lives of so many older residents (for example, LLI members come from 28 different zip codes). The Board has continued to appropriate a modest appropriation to provide a base and has financed a paved and lighted parking lot; and the School System has instituted repairs and renovations to the physical plant that include new dropped ceiling, an automatic front doorway for handicapped access, upgrades to interior lighting and flooring, a ceiling-mounted LCD projector in the auditorium, new sidewalks and exterior signage, painting, and landscaping, and quite a bit more. The LLI has purchased a new stage curtain and black-out blinds to enhance presentations in the auditorium. These collectively have helped to transform a vacant school from the 1930s into a warm home for LLI members.

As the LLI celebrates its tenth anniversary, it now embraces over 750 members and 265 instructors. Since that launch in spring 2004 with 17 courses, the range of classes and subject matter has grown significantly: in calendar 2013, this LLI offered 463 courses, lectures, and events (not including special

"additional social events") that generated 12,070 registrations over three terms, resulting in 78,529 total classroom hours.

Growth in membership presents its own challenges. The physical facility sits in a residential neighborhood, so parking is sometimes an issue. The building pre-dates ADA compliance regulations, so part of it is minimally accessible by members with physical impairments. Class fill rates have to be constantly monitored and assignments to the classrooms are sometimes changed daily when individuals who use wheelchairs sign up for courses. With only six modest-sized classrooms and one auditorium that seats about 60, the growing membership numbers have triggered long-term planning within the board in order to accommodate learners' interests and to maintain high standards for quality.

Case Studies

(The following composite cases incorporate aspects of different members and are meant collectively to represent the range of involved members in this LLI.)

Joe W. is in his mid-70s. With a business degree and two decades of small business ownership, he found himself feeling void of a personal identity or significant purpose once he retired. He and his wife almost accidentally discovered the Life-long Learning Institute in Chesterfield when they visited it out of curiosity. Initially participating in financial and wellness courses together, Joe soon realized that he found the most enjoyment by joining in conversation with others

involved in local, national, and international current events discussion groups. Participating in these discussion courses further sparked an interest in exploring history, cultural geography, and anthropology. Delving into historical decisions and the motivations behind them brought new perspective to modern world happenings for Joe. Listening to the opinions and ideas of others with varied experiences has challenged him to examine and understand his own viewpoints. It has also spurred an interest in exploring his own family history. While this research is still in its infancy, he is looking forward to discovering more about his ancestry using tools he learns in the genealogy courses. Feeling the desire to give back to the LLI community, Joe has brought his business leadership experience to the classroom format he most enjoys by occasionally facilitating topical discussions.

Mary J., after finishing the full time job of raising her family, worked in a few part-time positions outside the home. In her early 60s she suddenly and quite unexpectedly found herself alone after her husband's fatal illness. Having poured everything she had into her family and then caretaking for her husband, she spent most of her time tinkering around the house. Her daughter, recognizing that her mother deserved (and needed) to do something for herself, gave her the gift of a year's membership in the LLI. Mary began by participating in "a little bit of everything," exploring a sampling of classes that piqued her interest. Participating in the Great Books course helped her discover writing styles previously unknown to her and sparked her own creativi-

ty. Venturing into a poetry course, a storytelling course, and a memoirs course, among others, Mary began authoring her own short stories. She has discovered the thrill of having some of her own writing published in creative writing publications. Her love of reading and writing has led her to assist in the LLI library, helping others discover new authors and genres and helping keep the library in order. The possibility of exposure to new experiences now drives her to read the course catalog from front to back in order not to overlook something that might become a new passion. Her family reports that the Lifelong Learning Institute revived their mother's life and, in doing so, changed theirs.

Ruth S. came to the LLI to teach. Retired for a few years from a career in education and now in her late 60s, she realized that she missed the classroom environment. In her first class at the LLI, she encountered curious and highly engaged adult learners and was immediately energized. The students discussed, challenged, and engaged in ways she had not encountered in some time. Few were silent in discussions. They were learners. Ruth found herself conducting more research to prepare for each class and began to investigate ways of offering additional course topics. The process also stimulated a desire to broaden her own learning, so she has enrolled in an International Language course.

Conclusion

We continue to grow through the life course and this growth is increasingly heterogeneous. We

become less like our age mates as we age. As noted, education and learning are no longer considered the province only of children and young adults, nor is lifelong learning strictly practical and career-focused. Lifelong Learning Institutes, therefore, offer a rich menu of opportunities for mid-life and older adults, from a core of academic quality courses to complementary social, recreational, and health-related activities.

An LLI can present opportunities for self-growth, contributions to others, recognition for skills and expertise, self-efficacy, social engagement, improved sense of well being, and more (Hammond, 2004). Moreover, being an organization of older learners for older learners, an LLI presents chances not only to learn, but also to teach, chair committees, organize social events, take advantage of spontaneous learning experiences, and help ensure the continuity of the institute itself. We conclude with wording given by Stephan et al, (2004): "Moody (1997) includes lifelong learning and late-life creativity as important components in 'conscious aging,' the fuller realization of, or at least the attempt at, understanding the meaning of one's later years. Cohen (2000) suggests that the lifelong learning experience can nurture inner creativity to enrich and transform our lives. LLIs also offer the opportunity for the participant to contribute to something greater than oneself. The community usually benefits when an LLI emerges."

Study Questions

1. How has the concept of lifelong

learning evolved since the 1980s?
2. What are key elements in developing a successful lifelong learning institute?
3. List some actions that older learners can take as learners and as managers in their LLI.

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About the Authors



Edward F. Ansello is Director of the Virginia Center on Aging. While at the University of Maryland Center on Aging,

Ed invited Elderhostel's co-creator Marty Knowlton to campus in 1977 to discuss the promise and practice of this new enterprise and thereafter began hosting Elderhostel at the university in 1978.



Monica Hughes is Executive Director of the Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield. She has held an array of positions,

ranging from teacher to master scheduling analyst to Minister for Christian Formation. She has a love for Lifelong Learners and gains the most personal satisfaction when she helps others discover a new passion.

Visit this LLI's website at www.llichesterfield.org.