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Mental Fitness and the Lifelong Learning Movement

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Educational Objectives

1. To identify the functional benefits of continued mental activity
2. To examine the role of Lifelong Learning Institutes in later life
3. To describe the motivations of participants in lifelong learning

Overview - Mental Fitness in Later Life

Baby Boomers and the generation that immediately precedes them tend to have higher levels of education and to be healthier, more active, and more mobile than their predecessors. Because of their nearly lifelong exposure to information on cognitive function and self-efficacy, Baby Boomers may be more likely to participate in activities that help to promote and maintain mental fitness in later life.

Research on successful aging (Rowe and Kahn, 1998) suggests that education and intellectual activities in later life are the strongest predictors of optimum cognitive function. Education and mental stimulation, especially in complex environments that provide a variety of choices and mental challenges, apparently have a direct effect on brain structure and brain cell formation. Furthermore, continued mental stimulation appears to lower the risk of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. Other predictors of mental fitness include social support, a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, physical activity, staying involved, and the life satisfaction gained from making meaningful contributions to the lives of others and to one's community (Fisher, 1992).

Background - Lifelong Learning and Learning in Retirement

The increase in the older adult population is producing greater numbers of retirement-age adults who seek the type of lifelong learning that is provided by academic education. Many colleges and universities provide space in their traditional credit courses for older learners, and some institutions actively recruit them. Indeed, since at least the recession of the early 1990s, older adults have been prime recruitment targets by 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 must satisfy all the prerequisite academic education, class attendance, exams and papers required for credit coursework.

The Institute for Learning in Retirement (ILR) has offered an alternative model of noncredit academic education for older adults since its beginning in 1962 at the New School for Social Research in New York City. The ILR concept spread slowly but surely to other institutions. Then, Elderhostel, Inc. entered the picture. Elderhostel itself had begun in the mid-1970s in New England as a means of complementing the education of older adults whose learning was interrupted by the Depression and World War II; in nonthreatening settings on academic campuses, Elderhostelers launched the continuation of their lifelong learning through weeklong non-credit courses on a range of subjects. They lived in dormitories and shared in some of campus life. Within a decade Elderhostel had spread across the United States, to Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, drawing thousands of traveling older learners to hundreds of learning sites. Still, another form of lifelong learning was needed, one that was community-based, run by and for local older learners. In 1988, thirty ILRs joined with Elderhostel, Inc., to form the Elderhostel Institute Network (EIN), a voluntary association that exists to help establish new ILRs and provide resources for established ILRs. Elderhostel helped to start more than 200 new ILRs over the next ten years. When the EIN dropped annual dues, institutional membership increased significantly, and there are now more than 500 college- and university-affiliated institutes across North America. These are now called Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs).

The Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield County

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, Virginia. 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. One Boy Scout landscaped the yard for his Eagle Scout project, while a second has undertaken renovation of partitioned rooms into an assembly area. Committees formed to address membership, curriculum development, fund-raising, instructor recruitment, and public relations. In December 2003 the Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield County became a reality, with a formal yet high-spirited ribbon cutting ceremony and well-attended open house.

LLI membership is open to adults aged 50 and older who pay modest annual dues. The college-level academic courses are noncredit, they require no previous educational attainment, and there are no exams or term papers. Members may take as many courses throughout the year as they choose during spring, summer and fall semesters that vary in length from four to eight weeks. The LLI also holds short lectures, single-day seminars, field excursions, and social events. The first Spring Term began mid-March, 2004, with 17 classes in art, music, drama, criminal justice, economics and finance, English literature, Great Books, health, science, computers, history, Spanish, French, philosophy and religious studies, and political science. Sample programs included a lecture on "The Science and Ethics of Stem Cell Research" by the Vice Provost of Life Sciences at VCU and a course entitled "The Middle East and International Terrorism," taught by a career diplomat, with a guest presentation by the Honorable John Hager, State Director of Virginia's Anti-Terrorism Task Force. Spring semester evaluations by the lifelong learners were strongly positive. A four-week summer term begins June 21st, offering courses and lectures on human genetics, the French Revolution, Richmond history, the Exodus, and more.

Case studies: Profiles of Motivation

Older adults become members of an LLI for a variety of reasons. Some are drawn by a quest to learn, others by a desire to share through teaching, still others by the social nature of the classroom or the atmosphere of an experience. To learn more about those who are the Lifelong Learning Institute in Chesterfield County, we have begun a series of interviews and surveys. The first interviews sought to determine what five participants considered potentially meaningful about the Lifelong Learning Institute experience, what motivated them to enroll, and what their expectations were at the point of enrollment. Although LLIs have operated for more than forty years, there is little published research about them and the motivations of their members in joining the organization, nor does much research exist about the impact of LLIs on members' lives. Gaining more information about the perceived relevance of LLIs in people's lives can help shape the Institute's direction, contribute to a greater understanding of the interests, drives, and experiences of older learners and the benefits they gain from lifelong educational pursuits, and determine the relative importance of lifelong learning among the values of later life.

Five participants in the LLI in Chesterfield County were interviewed for this case study: three females, aged 55, 60 and 63, and two males, ages 54 and 75. None of the participants had previously belonged to

an LLI, although the older male had attended a similar type of program in another state. All of the participants were married, but none of their spouses was enrolled in the LLI. Participant levels of formal education ranged from high school graduate to Ph.D. All were either retired or had not worked outside of the home. All were satisfied with their levels of community and social activities, except for the woman who had not worked outside of her home. The following is a brief summary of the motivations of these participants for joining the LLI. Their real names are not given and some details are modified to protect confidentiality.

Ron is a man in his mid-70s. A high school graduate, he has always wanted to take art courses, to study art and to learn modeling in clay, watercolor, acrylic painting, and drawing. He professes to have a desire to learn several new skills, and to pursue long-held interests that he had never found the time to develop during his working years.

Irene has been involved in higher education her whole life. Now in her mid-50s, she earned a Ph.D., taught at university level, and retired early. She says that she has always enjoyed learning new things and wants to continue learning. She professes a true love of learning, and is a voracious reader.

June, just turned 60, married shortly after graduating from college. She raised a family and launched her children. Being a homemaker was a full time job and then some, she says. She reports having had a "great deal of stress" in her life during these years. However, now that things have quieted, she complains of being bored. Her family was her life's focus and she never worked outside the home. Now she would like to do something for herself. She thinks that the LLI will open doors to developing herself and will bring more mixing or socialization with others.

Philip, barely into his mid-50s, has been a highly successful businessman, earning a Master in Business Administration at mid-career. He keeps himself physically fit and enmeshes himself in community affairs. Of the five interviewees, he stands out for stating clearly that he "wants intellectual stimulation to maintain mental fitness."

Paula says that she would like to "reinforce" what she's already learned and to "expose myself to new things that I have never done or attempted to do." Now 63, she recalls having had a good high school education but wishes to build on her earlier learning. She is concerned about memory loss in growing older and has read that continued mental activity may help with memory retention.

Conclusion

The small sample of five lifelong learners demonstrates clearly how diverse are the motivations of older learners for their involvement in lifelong learning. This finding is consistent with other research (Bynum & Seaman, 1993; Lamdin & Fugate, 1997; O'Connor, 1987). The LLI can represent an opportunity for continued or new self-development, or for engagement with the world outside one's family and homemaker obligations. Some research suggests that many women who have had traditional roles envision the retirement years as a time to start doing something for themselves. At the same time, lives of employment have restricted many men and women to fairly narrow activities; in many cases, they have been rewarded in their jobs for so dedicating their time and energies. Now, near or in retirement,

the vista opens for new interests to explore, new subjects to study, new people to meet. The LLI has the potential to meet all of these. Moreover, being ultimately an organization of older learners for older learners, an LLI offers the chance not only to learn, but also to teach, to chair committees, to organize social events, tours, and learning experiences. 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.

For more on the LLI, call (804) 521-8282 or e-mail: dleidheiser@brandermillwoods.com

Study Questions

1. What benefits may be gained from mental activity of the lifelong learning type?
2. Discuss the various motivations for involvement in lifelong learning.

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