



# Lifelong learning

**Today's mature adults are seeking opportunities to learn and finding them in diverse settings. By offering educational activities, health and wellness groups can enrich their clients' lives and their organizational bottom line**

*by Marge Coalman, Ed.D., and  
Jenifer Milner*

The demographics are startling. If people survive the seventh decade of life without a lightning strike—an aneurism, heart attack, terminal cancer or accident—they will probably live between 15 and 30-plus additional years. What a waste! Or so thought a number of pessimists in the not-so-distant past. However, the news is out. Developmental and cell biologists have discovered that the human body creates new brain cells every day into its oldest

years, which means the opportunities for lifelong learning never stop.

Institutions dedicated to lifelong learning have existed longer than the scientists have known about the brain's possibilities for coding, storing and using new information. In all parts of the world a long-standing dedication to older adult learning exists, particularly in higher learning institutes.

## **Learning on the campus**

The university system across the globe was founded centuries ago on the premise of adult learning. Today, universities and other institutions of higher learning have developed numerous offerings for the older adult audience. These offerings include campus-hosted, but independent, lifelong learning institutes (also known as institutes for learning in retirement), which are specifically geared towards older adults.

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI) is an example of a university- or college-linked program network. Since 2000, the San Francisco-based Bernard Osher Foundation has awarded grants to establish 41 such institutes at colleges and universities in 11 states, to expand programming for adults ages 50 and older.

According to Mary Bitterman, director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, program founder Bernard Osher believes that people's increased longevity should be coupled with more learning. "Retirees don't simply want to play golf and drink wine," says Bitterman. "They want to sit down with other people and talk about the issues of our time." Offerings at the different institutes range from seminars and study circles to classes as diverse as the Politics of Cuba, Gregorian Chants, and the Science of Crime Scene Investigations.

In the United States, college- and university-linked lifelong learning programs have proliferated in the past 20 years, says Ronald J. Manheimer, executive director of the North Carolina Center for Creative Retirement—located at the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

Furthermore, many new programs are being planned.

According to Manheimer, a “hallmark of...such programs is the peer-learning, teaching and governing approach that gives today’s older adults a sense of ownership and control over their own education.” Additionally, “as part of an institution of higher education, these adult learning communities are well positioned to both benefit from and enhance the cultural and academic life of their host campuses,” he says, “through intergenerational collaboration, co-learning and service to both school and surrounding community.”

The catalyst for the Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI) Movement occurred in 1962, when a group of retired public school teachers formed the Institute for Retired Professionals at the New School in New York. Today, the nonprofit Elderhostel Institute Network (EIN) coordinates and assists the development of the overall movement, which now numbers more than 400 lifelong learning programs in Canada and the United States.

A partnership between LLIs and Elderhostel, Inc., which provides short-term educational adventures for adults ages 55 and older, EIN works “to strengthen and support the effectiveness of [members’] programs and spread the LLI concept to new communities.” With funding from Elderhostel, this virtual voluntary association of LLIs promotes communication between institutes, provides services and information, and offers assistance to those starting programs.

EIN attributes the success of the LLI movement to older adults caring about education. “[Older individuals] are intense, self-motivated learners, and

they define their own educational experiences and enthusiasms,” states EIN. “The Movement fosters and capitalizes on these strengths, empowering older people to continue learning, to expand their horizons and to enhance their personal development.”

Lifelong learning programs bring a new population onto campuses across the U.S., with benefits that extend beyond valuable human interaction to new revenue for struggling adult learning budgets. Nationally, state universities now offer senior-friendly courses in all areas of the curriculum—many of which are free to older adults. And retired volunteers recognized as experts in their fields frequently lead these offerings.

At more than 60 campuses, older adults actually *live* in college- or university-linked senior housing. Some communities are loosely affiliated with nearby institutions; others reap campus privileges. For example, residents of Oak Hammock at the University of Florida in Gainesville enjoy “access to sports, performing arts events, libraries, research facilities, museums and most classes taught at the University.”

Billed as a *life fulfilling community*, Oak Hammock focuses on lifelong learning, fitness and preventive health. Not content with just university affiliation, Oak Hammock residents enjoy one of only two lifelong learning institutes established in a senior living community—an institute that Nancy Merz Nordstrom, network program manager of EIN, calls “a health club for the brain.”

### **Communities of learning**

Among the thriving programs that approach lifelong learning from the perspectives of spirituality and service is the Spiritual Eldering® Institute (SEI) in Boulder, Colorado. SEI nurtures the concepts of lifelong learning and harvesting the wisdom of older men and women to the greater good of all. (For instance, enrollees at SEI develop programs specific to the needs of their individual communities.) This national,

not-for-profit institute is dedicated to the spiritual dimensions of aging and conscious living, and provides educational resources and programs for older adults.

In addition, SEI has begun establishing centers across the nation in partnership with such supporters as healthcare systems, educational institutions, community centers, service groups, and faith-based communities. Besides a financial investment, the requirements for operating a licensed center include offering a minimum of three workshops or seminars on spiritual eldering; committing to sponsor or provide resources “to create a sustainable enterprise with a long-term vision of service to the community”; and establishing an advisory board of community leaders to “guide the local vision from a ‘sage-ing’ perspective.” According to SEI, Sage-ing® Centers are places of learning and education, where older adults can develop their full potential and refine their leadership and mentoring skills.

The Retired Senior Volunteers Program (RSVP), one of the largest volunteer efforts in the United States, also encourages adults ages 55 and older to get involved in their communities. RSVP is part of Senior Corps, “a network of national service programs that provides older Americans the opportunity to apply their life experience to meeting community needs.”

Both public and private local organizations are awarded grants to sponsor and operate RSVP projects, then older adults are matched with groups. Time commitments by volunteers range anywhere from 4–40 hours weekly. Among their activities, RSVP participants mentor at-risk youth, assist community groups, teach English to immigrants and help with public safety. In the process of teaching the program’s mission, participants engage in lively, ongoing dialogue about solutions for community needs,

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opportunities for service, and the importance of recruiting and training older volunteers to facilitate and lead established programs and services.

Empowering older adults to lead is also a hallmark of SeniorNet, a forward-thinking nonprofit organization based in San Francisco. In 1997, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education identified Internet use as one of three major trends in older adult learning. But SeniorNet, founded in 1986, was already providing “access to and education about computer technologies and the Internet” for adults ages 50 and older.

Today, older adult volunteers teach their peers to use computers and the Internet in more than 240 SeniorNet Learning Centers and satellites across the United States. Learning Centers are housed in a wide range of locations: senior centers, community centers, clinics, hospitals, public libraries, schools, colleges, and the like. To open a site, a one-time fee of \$6,000 is required. Thereafter, SeniorNet charges an annual support fee of \$500. The initial, one-time payment covers start-up costs, including software, curricula, training and future software upgrades. Where necessary, SeniorNet can also furnish full computer labs for approximately \$8,000 each. Other factors involved in starting a Learning

Center include location, the depth of the volunteer base and the purchase of SeniorNet memberships by enrollees.

SeniorNet members worldwide sustain a dynamic, eager-to-learn community—both online and in person. Through the organization’s award-winning website, millions of older adults enjoy learning opportunities such as courses and tutorials, book clubs and readers’ guides, more than 600 discussion groups, and sections on topics of interest.

### **Older adults and learning: needs, interests and barriers**

All the evidence points to a great flowering of education for older adults. But *what* exactly do people want to learn and *why*?

To explore attitudes towards learning, AARP, a nonprofit membership organization for adults ages 50 and older, undertook a *Survey on Lifelong Learning* in 2000. The survey results show that the older generation is “interested in learning so that they can keep in touch with themselves, their community, and the world.” In fact, respondents across most demographic subgroups agree with the following reasons for wanting to learn:

- To keep up with what’s happening in the world (93%);

- For spiritual or personal growth (92%);
- For the joy of learning something new (91%).

Furthermore, 50-plus adults “are most interested in learning about subjects that would improve the quality of their lives, build upon a current skill, or enable them to take better care of their health.” Among survey respondents, “[s]ix topics generate the greatest interest:

- Learning more about a favorite hobby or pastime (62% extremely or very interested);
- Learning more about advanced skills (52% extremely or very interested);
- Getting more enjoyment or pleasure out of life (51% extremely or very interested);
- Having a healthy diet and nutrition (49% extremely or very interested);
- Measuring personal health status (48% extremely or very interested);
- Managing stress (46% extremely or very interested).”

Interestingly, the learning formats preferred by older adults vary depending on the topic, the survey reveals. For 11 of 17 proposed topics, three formats win approval: “learning in loosely structured groups, in workshop settings, or by teaching themselves.”

The AARP survey concludes, "Lifelong learning experiences that would likely hold the most appeal for mature adults include subjects that are personally meaningful, taught in environments which provide a direct learning experience, allow adults control over all aspects of the learning process, and are not too expensive."

What *discourages* older individuals from pursuing educational activities? Research into older adult learning reveals three types of barriers (Blacklock, 1985):

- **Situational barriers.** These factors stem from a specific life situation at a given point in time. Examples include cost (i.e. fees, transportation) and reduced mobility (i.e. physical disability, ill health, lack of adequate transportation or time).
- **Dispositional barriers.** These factors stem from the individual and may be rooted in societal expectations or past learning experiences. For instance, a negative educational experience may leave a person feeling as though he or she is too old to learn. Or an individual may succumb to societal pressure that says older people are unable to learn.
- **Institutional barriers.** These factors stem from the educational institution. Some examples include difficult-to-use registration systems, inconvenient program times or inaccessible locations.

To develop successful educational programming for older members or residents, health and wellness professionals must first understand and address their clients' needs and obstacles when it comes to learning. The Lifetime Education and Renewal Network (LEARN), a constituent group of the American Society on Aging, is one group working to improve this understanding.

LEARN aims to increase its members' knowledge of the nature and promise of lifelong learning, with the goal of enhancing the quality and quantity of older adult programs. The products and services offered by the network include

recommended Web-based and other resources, conferences, publications (with articles on best practices, research, public policy, etc.) and the MindAlert Awards program. In addition, LEARN brings together a multidisciplinary membership of professionals involved in educational programming for older adults, providing valuable networking and information-sharing opportunities. Members include representatives from college and university lifelong learning programs, creativity programs, senior center and community offerings, health promotion programs, and more.

### **The wellness dimension**

Within the senior health and wellness industry, organizations of all sizes are introducing programs and activities that include elements of lifelong learning: skill and strength development of mental and cognitive function.

Senior living providers such as Sunrise Senior Living, Classic Residence by Hyatt, and Leisure Care are adding computer training courses, foreign language studies, genealogy, and other *mental aerobics* programs to their traditional activity offerings. Touchmark Living Centers, a leading senior living organization, has a full program of lifelong learning opportunities for residents at all levels of care, including skilled nursing.

Mather LifeWays' Institute on Aging hosts a lecture series that brings in national experts to give presentations on topics ranging from spirituality to mental fitness to creative aging. Another Mather LifeWays initiative is the award-winning Mather Café Plus™ program, which brings stimulating activities and events, food and free coffee to older adults in a number of Chicago neighborhoods.

Organizations in the fitness and recreational fields are also enhancing their programming to address intellectual and cultural pursuits. The Houstonian health club organizes social gatherings, outings, and a meal and

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## Resources

**Elderhostel Institute Network**  
network@elderhostel.org  
www.elderhostel.org/ein/intro.asp

**Lifetime Education and Renewal Network (LEARN)**  
learn@asaging.org  
www.asaging.org/learn/

**National Senior Corps Services**  
Retired Senior Volunteer Program  
Toll-free: 800-424-8867  
www.seniorcorps.org

**SeniorNet**  
Tel: 415-495-4990  
www.seniornet.org

**Spiritual Eldering® Institute**  
Tel: 303-449-7243  
www.spiritualeldering.org

lecture series for its 60-plus program, the Houstonian Voyagers. Recently, speakers have presented lectures on Nation Building in Iraq, the Enron Backlash, TV From the Farside, and the Library as Communal Expression. Jewish Community Centers regularly feature arts and humanities offerings, including lectures, arts activities and exhibits, and film festivals. In addition, YMCAs and YWCAs across the continent offer a wide range of adult education activities.

More than 750 YMCAs in the United States offer arts and humanities programming—from pottery workshops and performing, to book clubs and creative writing. Among the educational opportunities provided by the YMCA of Greater New York, for instance, two courses particularly engage older adult learners: Writing Memoirs and Computer Awareness for Seniors. And the Cooper Aerobics Center, an organization specifically concerned with

physical fitness, now offers lifestyle modification programs, wellness seminars, and integrated mind-body activities for its clients.

Besides adapting traditional mind-body activities such as yoga and tai chi into innovative classes, today's health and wellness professionals are creating novel ideas that combine cognitive learning and physical fitness, such as seated exercise combined with calligraphy. Other opportunities based on the strengths and skills of participants appear on the threshold of class offerings in many senior wellness settings.

*However, the key to success is to ask older learners to identify their dreams and desires, and actualize them through programs and offerings that provide support and skill building.*

## Closing the circle

The last years of life parallel the first years of life: learning is critical to surviving in a complex environment. The last third of life also offers individuals the opportunity to give to the community their talents, skills, knowledge and experience. More and more educational programs aimed at 50-plus adults seek to involve these learners in community leadership and problem solving, while volunteering and mentoring programs encourage older individuals' to apply their life experience to helping others.

Senior living providers increasingly find that living environments need to be connected to the community and culture around them. Learning centers for older adults in these environments provide physical activity training, wellness workshops, computer labs, arts and lecture programs, language courses, music training, and more.

The notion that golf and food are the only interests of vital older adults is

gone. Instead, the diverse interests of Baby Boomers and older adults are increasingly acknowledged, and the wide range of organizations committed to serving the 50-plus market are expanding their educational offerings in response.

On city campuses, learners of all ages intermingle in classrooms, ending the isolation of the older adult in most environments. And as 19 year-olds join study groups with participants in their 70s or older, the fabric of the learning environment changes to inclusive and supportive.

The family of man long held to be the most productive and holistic model no longer exists just as a vision in the minds of Bill Moyers, Walter Bortz, Ken Dychtwald and other prominent researchers. The new millennium is the classroom for learners of all ages. ▼

*Marge Coalman, Ed.D., is president/owner of Coalman Consulting in Portland, Oregon, and a regular contributor to the Journal on Active Aging. She is also the national director of wellness and programs for Touchmark Living Centers, Inc., a provider of quality senior housing in the United States and Canada.*

*Jenifer Milner is editor-in-chief of the Journal on Active Aging. Her career path has included four years as an instructor of drama programs for children and adults of all ages.*

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## Older adult education: why support is vital

by Marge Coalman, Ed.D.

As the global population lives longer and relies more on older adult workers and volunteers, the profile of the representative world citizen continues to change. Adults ages 50 and older now make up the largest segment of the population and the majority of the workforce in most countries. Older adults literally take care of older adults who require support and services. This paradigm shift in vital world citizens is critical to the promotion and production of skill training programs and courses to equip the older worker.

Many companies and organizations in need of a vital, vibrant and productive workforce are recruiting workers who were once considered *retired*. Through the knowledge and wisdom these new hires bring to the mix, older workers are helping to dispel the myth of what aging is supposed to resemble.

The proponents of programs and services for older adult learners have networks of support and empowerment. But they fight an uphill battle in trying to persuade governments and private funders to invest in sponsors and products that ensure learning opportunities for older adults. That's because consumer groups representing the needs of younger citizens compete for the same funds and services.

The importance of research on lifelong vitality cannot be overstated to advocates of older adult education. Empirical evidence must be collected to measure the impact and opportunity provided by local, national and global programs. Sociologists and scientists can convert this evidence to fact-based findings that influence the funding sources and community partners needed to establish points of entry for older learners.

In addition, marketing by universities, foundations and organizations rarely captures the attention of people under age 50. To influence younger adults to support and lobby for older adult learning opportunities, intergenerational awareness and action are necessary. By working to bridge the generational divide, health and wellness professionals can help perpetuate a range of services and programs for adult learners of all ages.

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