

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS for Lifelong Learning Institutes

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KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL STARTUPS:

Early action is important. It is better to get something up and offered than spend too much time planning or fine-tuning everything to perfection.

A do-the-job champion is crucial – someone who is willing to take it upon him/herself to make things happen and recruit others to the vision. It may not matter whether this is a volunteer member/leader or a staff person – each has its pitfalls, which are:

- ◆ The staff person needs to walk the delicate line between leading/facilitating/encouraging and owning. The eager, make-it-happen staff person will squelch member ownership if the Lifelong Learning Institute (LLI) comes to be “his/her baby.” The LLI may be successful in terms of enrollment and member satisfaction with a staff person who doesn’t ever let go, but it’ll never reach the highest potential for change in people’s lives if there isn’t a transition to member ownership.
- ◆ The volunteer member/leader may not work smoothly with the sponsoring institution administration. Very often, such individuals are impatient and not very strategy-oriented – they just want to get it done and can’t see why the institution doesn’t just fall into line. The volunteer member/leader also runs some of the risk of the staff person – s/he has to move early on to involve others in true leadership and decision-making. If that doesn’t happen, the LLI rests on the shoulders of one volunteer and burnout is an early risk.

A highly placed administrative champion is also key. A president, dean, or effective director-level person can make things happen just because they are in a position to make decisions and make use of or find institutional resources that lower-level people don’t have the authority to command.

“Spreading the workload” is very important. This really is a type of organization that runs by committee, with people who feel they have a say and have the authority to act. Again, the ownership issue – ownership is what gives these groups their strength and their vitality, in all that they do.

Finally, a *realistic financial set-up* is essential. The tendency to want to “give it away” needs to be battled, however well intentioned. LLIs are not social service agencies and they will not be populated primarily by people who are looking for a social service. People are willing to pay fair amounts for something they value – the trick is figuring for each community what is a fair amount commensurate with people’s capacity and willingness to pay. If the LLI charges too little it demeans the value of the LLI and it demeans the essential worth and capabilities of potential members.

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KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL LONG-TERM LLI GROUPS:

The LLI must be considered financially viable by the membership and by the sponsoring institution. That definition will vary from LLI to LLI, but no LLI will be healthy long-term if it is at odds with the institution which houses it, or dependent on outside support that can change with changing leadership or institutional circumstances.

The start-up champion(s) and founders have to cultivate new leadership and be prepared to turn over leadership in a deliberate manner. Plan for succession and broad-based leadership.

Leadership has to be accepting of change – new ideas have to be sought from new members. These ideas must then be taken seriously and tried!

New member recruitment has to be ongoing, even if the group feels it has reached its maximum.

Eventually, the group has to develop ***an understanding about how to work humanely with aging members who become less capable.***

Regular increases in the cost need to be implemented as appropriate to changing economic conditions and group circumstances. It's not a good thing to "hold the line" year after year.

Some ways of "giving back" to the community need to be found – possibilities are limited only by the group's creativity. They might include volunteer involvement in the community; tutoring of students (and/or foreign students); recognition of supporters on the campus or in the community; or scholarships for younger students.