

## **“Talking Points” on Maine Senior College Curriculum Planning**

Following is the section regarding curriculum planning from the OLLI Policy and Procedures Manual (revised March 2002)

1. The OLLI program will emphasize the liberal arts curriculum, but will not exclude other forms and subjects for instruction when requested by the membership. The program should not duplicate other programs/courses available to seniors elsewhere in the community.
2. The goal of the Curriculum Committee is to support the mission of OLLI by identifying, developing, and delivering appropriate courses to meet the needs of the membership.
3. A balanced selection of courses will be identified which provides breadth of offerings from major topical clusters including but not limited to:
  - A. Fine Arts
  - B. Religion and Spirituality
  - C. History and Social Science
  - D. Math, Science and Technology
  - E. Language and Literature
  - F. Current Issues
  - G. Health and Well Being
  - H. Miscellaneous
4. Member interest, instructor and space availability will be prime factors in course selection.
5. The committee will seek and welcome course proposals from the membership and other available resources.
6. Instructors:
  - A. Selection of instructors/facilitators will consider individuals with appropriate expertise, experience and desire to work with senior learners.
  - B. Quality instruction is dependent on quality instructors. OLLI has attracted and continues to attract outstanding individuals to teach and facilitate its courses and events. This incredible resource appears unlimited, but must be discovered.
  - C. OLLI should continue to attract its instructors/facilitators from local sources and also explore potential exchange opportunities.
  - D. Ideally, instructors will be:
    - 1) Senior learners and scholars themselves (55+).
    - 2) Knowledgeable in their fields (academically and professionally).
    - 3) Recognized for achievement and accomplishment.
    - 4) Experienced as teachers.
    - 5) Volunteers.

7. A variety of instructional techniques and methods appropriate for senior learners may be employed. Active learner participation is encouraged. The Curriculum Committee will:
  - A. Invite submission of course proposals, addressing stated interests of the membership, from prospective instructors not later than the second week of the preceding term. Winter and summer sessions will be organized similarly the fourth week of the preceding term. This timing should permit adequate development and advertising of final curriculum in time for initial student sign-ups during the last week of each term.
  - B. Upon approval of course proposals by the Curriculum Committee, each approved instructor will be requested to submit a syllabus which outlines texts to be used, special equipment required, and the general nature of material to be covered in each class.
  - C. At least two weeks prior to the beginning of each term/session, the Curriculum Committee will assemble all instructors to review the highlights of the program and insure that all needs are addressed.
  - D. The Curriculum Committee will monitor each instructor to insure a high quality of presentation. Course evaluations will be solicited at the conclusion of the semester. Results will be shared with the committee and appropriate instructors/facilitators.

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### **Additional Thoughts on Curriculum Planning**

At OLLI we actually concentrate on finding teachers rather than courses. We start with the people, not the topic. We encourage people that we know or who have been recommended to us as good teachers to put in proposals. THEN we look at the balance and make adjustments.

Most of the courses proposed are college-level courses of the kind that nobody has any trouble discerning to be liberal arts in nature. Curriculum committees typically spend most of their discussion time on the few things that are, or appear to be:

- A. Sectarian religious
- B. Financial planning
- C. Craft workshop or "adult ed." types of practical courses

The OLLI curriculum committee has taken the tack that we want a balanced curriculum to meet peoples' interests; therefore we do approve a few courses from types B. and C. (above) each semester with caveats:

1. Financial courses should be taught by people who do not stand to gain from them (investment brokers, etc.) An example of a "financial planning" course and instructor approved by the OLLI curriculum committee is an estate planning course taught by a somewhat retired lawyer who teaches it without recommending specific products...the latter is the major issue to watch out for when someone starts talking about teaching finance courses. Will they try to sell either goods or services, either directly or indirectly?

2. Make friends with the local Adult Education people (a couple of Sr. Colleges have the local Adult Ed. directors on their Boards) and let them know that you intend to focus on more "academic" courses than they typically do. You may however overlap with them occasionally. The Maine Senior College Network office is working with the statewide Adult Education Alliance to make sure the lines of communication and "territory" stay as clear as possible.
3. Don't think that emphasis on good, interesting, liberal arts courses will scare people off. The Lewiston-Auburn group has been very pleased with an increase in enrollments that they attribute to the fact that their courses are more "rigorous" than the ones they previously offered.
4. From the beginning, OLLI has offered quite a few courses with themes in religion and spirituality (OLLI's two major founders were a rabbi and a Christian minister!). Over the years we have found that this is a theme that is definitely interesting to older people: "What has my life meant?" "What is it all about?" And the religion area is particularly interesting now: "Who are those Muslims/Catholics/Buddhists/Jews?"

BUT, we do not offer courses that are attempts to proselytize. And this is an area where you may occasionally make a mistake. This is one reason that course evaluations, and having the curriculum chair or some committee members drop in on the classes occasionally is a good idea. Also talking with the teacher ahead of time about their syllabus is useful if you have any doubts. The vast majority of the faculty approach these topics from an academic perspective...comparative religions, religion and society, ethics, body-mind-spirit, the history of Islam, the history of Christianity, etc. And people love these classes.

5. OLLI does not offer "phys. ed." courses because the LifeLine (fitness for older adults) program at USM takes care of that. Other Senior Colleges in the state do offer tai chi or exercise. The credentials of the instructor are an important consideration because of liability issues. There are also space issues to be dealt with.
6. Art history is an easy choice. Studio art is more difficult, partly because of the facilities needed and expense, and partly because of the topic itself. OLLI usually offers one, sometimes two, courses a semester in Watercolor Painting or Collage Expressionism, or something. But the curriculum committee had an extensive conversation on this topic when there were several proposals that were definitely more "crafts" oriented. Luckily they were withdrawn before we actually had to do anything about them, but we had pretty much decided to weed out the obviously "crafts" as opposed to "art" offerings by using the argument of not wanting to tread on Adult Ed.'s territory. It's a tricky one.
7. Overall, we try to make sure that we have a balance....like a bell curve with a few courses on either end that are the ticklish ones and a big batch in the middle that are traditional Liberal Arts.
8. A huge consideration in curriculum planning is the image that your array of courses portrays about your students. The OLLI curriculum committee worried in Fall 2002 about approving too many Senior-focused courses. "Anti-Aging Medicine," "Medical Ethics," "Enhancing our Senior Years" (bad title), "Telling your Life Story," and "Creating an Ethical Will" were all on the docket. Yes, a Senior College is an organization that offers courses of interest to older people,

- but older people are not just interested in their health, their estates, and their memoirs! But since OLLI offers 30 courses, there were enough “ageless” titles that the balance was maintained.
9. OLLI actually does have a Bridge class sometimes even though it probably doesn’t fit the definition of “liberal arts”, but it is taught by a scientist (who also happens to be a Grand Master at Bridge!) who approaches the game from a mathematical perspective.
  10. And OLLI does offer some computer classes in the University computer lab, even though CyberSeniors is available.

It is our hope that these notes will help you to gain the perspective that designing the curriculum is an art, not a science. It is messy and some parts of it require a lot of discussion. Finally, the curriculum committee's job is to discuss and come up with a curriculum "strategy". A typical committee process in Maine is as follows:

1. The committee chair accepts the proposals, reviews them and does an initial chart of the classes that have been proposed by subject category.
2. The chairperson then takes the list and proposals to the committee for discussion.
3. After that s/he takes the revised chart to the Board for final approval, or for further discussion of the more "flaky" entries.
4. By the time the courses hit the brochure, the leadership has "bought in" to the rationale behind offering those particular topics.
5. In other models, committee members take a more active role earlier in the process. That depends on whether the chairperson is a “delegator” or not.
6. And to be honest, because we are a bunch of humans, sometimes we offer a course because we like the person who is teaching it.

Kali Lightfoot  
Director, Osher Lifelong Learning Institute  
University of Southern Maine  
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