

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

PARTICIPATION IN LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTES: WHAT TURNS MEMBERS ON?

by

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Abstract

Research of rank and file members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in Portland, Maine was conducted in order to investigate the perceived benefits of participation in a peer-governed and taught elder learning program. Forty-five long-term members of the program were interviewed by way of six focus groups. Four categories of benefits were reported: Intellectual stimulation, experiencing a nurturing and supportive community, enhancing self-esteem, and having opportunities for spiritual renewal. Implications of the multidimensionality of older learners and the outcomes they seek from participation in lifelong learning institutes are explored.

Participation in Lifelong Learning Institutes: What Turns Members On?

*The older adult, simply by virtue of time-spent-in-living,
is the most complex of all individuals.*

Mary Alice Wolf

In 1983 James Fisher presented a paper entitled *What Turns Older Adults on to Education* (Fisher, 1983). This paper and the doctoral thesis upon which it was based (Fisher, 1979) was one of the initial reports in the literature that addressed the complexities of older adult motivation for participation in formal education programs. As significant as was this research, so too was its title. In using the colloquial “turns on,” Fisher acknowledged the potential life-enhancing impact of educational experiences on older adults. The notion that older adults, with an average age of 71 in Fisher’s study, could be turned on by anything was a refreshing refutation of the stereotype of older adults as being “passed it.” Nonetheless, understanding the motivations of these “most complex of all individuals” (Wolf, 1991, p.5) continues to be a challenge.

An underlying assumption of the research reported in this study is that elder learners who continue long-term participation in an older adult education program such as a lifelong learning institute (LLI) do so because they experience significant rewards that are consistent with their perceived needs. Not only is such participation totally voluntary,

it is also generally not motivated by career or pecuniary interests. The goal of this current study was to gain further understanding of the experience of older learners in one lifelong learning institute and its impact on their sense of well being. What is it about participation in an LLI that keeps people coming back year after year? In other words, what keeps older learners “turned on?”

Literature

The difficulties in understanding what motivates adults to participate in formal education are widely recognized. The adult education scholars, Merriam and Caffarella (1999), in reviewing the participation research concluded that “a comprehensive theory may not be possible given the number of variables” (p.70.), and that “there is no single theory or model to explain or predict participation” (p. 60). Nonetheless, in the more than twenty years since Fisher’s study, the challenge of elaborating on motivations of older learners continues to engage researchers.

Much of the initial literature on older adult educational activities focused on factors influencing participation. These studies, primarily quantitative in nature, sought to identify the variables that differentiate participants from non-participants among active older adults. Enrollment in programs under a variety of auspices, including senior centers, churches, Elderhostel, and Institutes for Learning in Retirement (an earlier name for what is now called Lifelong Learning Institutes) was studied. Implicit in this research was the question, why do some active older adults participate in educational activities and others do not?

Investigators considered educational, situational, psychological and motivational factors that might differentiate participants from non-participants. . Fisher, in summarizing the finding of his 1979 research, found significance in all these areas:

. . . participation [of active older adults] is related to prior educational experiences, confidence in relationships with others, propensity to engage in self-directed learning activities, awareness of the availability of educational programs, and interest in topics for future learning (Fisher, 1983, p. 7).

However, Fisher (1979, p. 149) also recognized the limitations of his findings: “The situational variables employed in this study lack the capability to provide a comprehensive picture of the variables intrinsic to a dynamic learning situation.” In the years that have followed, research, including Fisher’s own, has added to our picture of the older adult learner, but much detail remains sketchy, especially pertaining to issues of motivation.

Demographic variables have proven to be the most consistent predictors. Fisher (1979) found that older participants are primarily white, female, and with income and educational attainment higher than non-participants. More recent research confirms these findings (Fugate & Lamden, 1997; Manheimer and Moskow-McKenzie; 1995, 1997, Martin, 2003). These studies also indicate that the gap in educational attainment is, if anything, widening. This is particularly true when it comes to participation in older adult learning programs. Currently, the mean level for participants in elder education programs is a bachelor’s degree or higher. (Lamden and Fugate, 1997)

However, many authors (Wolf, 1985b, 1991; Fisher 1998, Martin, 2002) warn that demographic data in itself can be misleading when trying to understand the experiences of older adults in the pursuit of learning. For example, although one might assume the association of education, ethnicity and income to be self-evident, it is confounded by the overwhelming preponderance of women involved in learning institutes, ranging between 66 and 75 percent. This is far beyond what might be expected because of women's greater longevity. (Fugate and Lamden, 1997) This under-representation of older men in educational activities is not a phenomena of the United States alone. Williamson (2000) reports a similar pattern in Europe and Australia.

One of the explanations most often given for educational participation among older adults is the mantra, "Education begets education; the more one has the more one seeks." This suggests that people who presumably have had positive early experiences with education are motivated to seek more of the same. However, once again this relationship may be more complex. As will be seen in the findings of this study, many adults reported that their educational experience in a senior learning institute was very different from previous ones, even those in college or graduate school. Nor does this explain the gender gap. The cohort of men born before 1940 reflect a higher level of educational attainment than women in the same age range (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), yet women's participation far exceeds men's, even when controlling for their greater longevity.

Other situational variables that have been studied include awareness of educational opportunities, accessibility (including such issues as transportation and cost), and the variety and type of course offerings. Fisher found that "the number of available

educational activities identified, number of topics identified for future learning, and involvement in self-directed learning [were] the most strongly related” (Fisher, 1979, pp.141-142).

In considering psychological factors that might influence the decision to participate in adult education Fisher (1979) used a standardized test (Srole, 1956) to measure for anomie or social isolation This instrument evaluated individuals in terms of a continuum ranging from social “belongingness” to social “distance,” (p.148). Fisher concluded that, although statistically significant, the results described only a small part of the difference between participants and non-participants. Fisher also used a measure of psychological well being to compare the two groups, but found the differences were not significant These findings illustrate the difficulties in attempting to differentiate between psychological, motivational and situational factors. Recent literature puts more emphasis on identifying older adults’ motivations for participation, regardless of underlying psychological states, or situational barriers. This may be is based on the assumption that situational and psychological barriers can be overcome by the countervailing force of motivation.

In an outcome study of older adult participation in Elderhostel programs, Brady and Fowler (1988) found that while sociodemographic, educational and situational variables may be helpful in predicting initial participation., “they can not explain who benefits from such programs. . . . once older people find their way to educational programs, outcomes appear to be more democratic” (p. 54). In their study, motivational factors were found to be “strong predictors” of learning outcomes.

In Fisher's initial study the primary reasons given for participation were "being with people," "the challenge of learning" and "the usefulness of the subject matter" (1979, p.151). In a later review of the literature (Fisher 1998, pp.32-34), he recognized the significance of such motivations as "intellectual curiosity, learning for its own sake, self-actualization, increased individual power, enjoyment of learning and social interaction," thus expanding beyond situational factors. Brady and Fowler (1988) note that studies going back to 1971 are generally consistent in finding that cognitive interests (desire to know) are the most often cited reasons for participation in adult education. In their own study, they refined this concept further by citing survey results showing their older learners were most interested in the humanities or traditional liberal arts. More recent studies serve to reinforce this view, but with a shift in emphasis, describing the motivation as the search for meaning or the joy of learning. (Fugate & Lamden, 1998) Much of the literature also cites the social aspects of participation in formal education a close second as a motivational force. (Fisher, 1998) However, with a few exceptions to be cited below, there has been less examination of the nuances of the anticipated social experiences beyond "being with people."

Overall, the qualitative research on older adult participation in adult learning presents a picture of a demographically homogeneous population coming together to meet developmental needs. However, as Fisher (1998) suggests, such research can not explain the entirety of the experience of the elder learner. Like all good research, quantitative studies that focus on participation raise many new questions. With regard to participation in Lifelong Learning Institutes and similar programs, they can not sufficiently address the nature and quality of the individual experience, including the

extent to which expectations were met, new discoveries made, and how people feel about themselves as participants. Commenting on recent participation research Martin found that most of it:

. . . tends to rely on large sample surveys to determine broad demographic profiles and the motivation of older learners . . . However, they lack the ability to provide a deeper understanding of who these learners are and how the educational programs in which they choose to participate impact their lives. There is a need for qualitative research that will go beyond mere categorization by seeking answers to questions about the meaning of education in the lives of older people (2003, p. 2).

There is an emerging body of qualitative research that helps to fill in some of the gaps in our understanding of the experience of elder learning. These studies generally do not contradict the quantitative research cited, but rather expand and elaborate on it.

Among the earliest explorations of the experiences and impact of participation in educational activities by older adults were those initiated by Mary Alice Wolf (1982, 1985a, 1987). She described a longitudinal study of 12 older adults enrolled in a variety of educational programs, and in which data were collected through a series of open-ended face-to-face interviews. The focus of these interviews was the impact of the educational experience on “life satisfaction” and “self-fulfillment” (1985a, p.8). At an early point in the study she noted that the reasons for choosing education were complex, and arose from personal needs, reminiscence, ambitions and attitude. Later, she concluded that one consistent theme was that “the act of partaking of education was often an empowering gesture” (Wolf, 1987, p.7).

Wolf expanded on these themes in a later work (Wolf, 1991). She again based her findings on in-depth interviews conducted with older learners, a process she characterized as looking at learning *from inside* the learner's world. She found that older learners are often led into adult education by a quest for self-development and the wish to make meaning of the human experience. The goal of her research was to "articulate" this process in analyzing the "stories" of the older learners; she distinguishes between three different processes:

Learning and meaning-making, [in which] older adults study philosophy, literature and history as they reflect on their own personal development (p.6).

Learning and the shadow self, moving into new roles, experimenting with parts of their personalities which were quiescent. . . (p.8) Learning and cognitive reordering, in which the older learner experiences him or herself in a new and vital way (p. 5).

Throughout her work, Wolf has also paid particular attention to gender issues and the learning experiences of older women. In this she has followed some of the lines suggested by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule (1986), especially in terms of women's quest for "voice," recognition and empowerment. In her study she reports on the gains in self-esteem, respect and validation described by the women she interviewed. However, also like Belenky, et al, Wolf comments that such experiences are not exclusively reserved to women, noting that "interests based on gender may merge or reverse in later life." (1998, p.17) She is even more specific when, in reviewing the literature on gender roles of older learners she cites Guttman (1987) on the significance of the lessening of the 'parental imperative' giving both men and women opportunities

to pursue other roles.

Martin's (2003) research is also significant in this area, describing the importance that older women placed on pursuing education as a way to progress beyond their role as caretakers. Martin suggests that later age for many of these women "is a time to start something for themselves – a sort of 'my turn' experience that offers a new life" (p. 5). This observation was in the context of a broader study to determine the meaning older adults took from their LLI experience. Martin conducted in-depth and multiple interviews with four adults who belonged to an institute for two years or more. Both the demographic profile of the participants, and their stated motivation for participation, was consistent with the literature already discussed. Expanding on this, however, was the identification of what Martin called the "hidden benefits" of participating in a learning institute, which became apparent from the "recurring themes of personal growth, self-esteem, contribution and empowerment" (p. 1).

Brown, Rachelle, Maria & Acker-Hocevar (2002) conducted a large-scale study of the experiences of senior institute students in a program that had 19,000 enrolled learners. The study included responses to a questionnaire from 424 students, and follow-up interviews with 44 of them. Three questions guided the study: How do the students describe themselves? Which descriptors are the strongest predictors of "persistent participation?" And "How do students describe the program?" (p. 6). The strongest predictor of persistent participation was an affirmative response to, "I like the instructors." Data on the participants description of the program were elicited through face-to-face interviews. These interviews generated three themes addressing their continuing participation in the program: "personal enrichment," which included gaining

new knowledge and intellectual stimulation; “building connections,” which included learning together, and appreciation of instructors; “institutional and logistical aspects,” such as administrative processes, the variety of courses, and parking availability (p. 13).

Chene and Sigouin (1995) studied the reciprocal relationship between older learners and their instructors. They analyzed statements extracted from interviews with small groups of class members and their instructor from a variety of educational settings. Chene and Sigouin’s focus was derived from “the value” adult education places on “participants as a group, and between them and their teachers,” and teachers’ comments that “they received more from the learners” than they have given them. Of special relevance to the present research were the benefits of reciprocal relationship as reported by the students. These included: “improved self-image,” “healing of the self damaged by personal loss,” “an opportunity to discover one’s potential,” a more positive image of aging, and “the establishment of a friendly climate that was conducive to learning” (p. 253).

Context, Method and Sample

Data for this study were collected from the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI), a self-governing, self-sustaining college for older adults at the University of Southern Maine. OLLI is housed on the university’s Portland campus. Its mission is to *provide a curriculum of intellectually stimulating learning opportunities and special activities for persons 55 years of age or older*. OLLI is a membership organization governed by an elected board. All students are members. Teaching faculty are both members and unpaid volunteers. Many of these teachers are professors emeriti from the university or retired

teachers from other colleges and public schools. Tuition and fees are modest (\$25 annual membership fee; \$25 to \$50 per course). Operating in its eighth year OLLI currently has approximately 800 members and is part of a statewide network of 15 autonomous senior colleges in Maine.

Forty-five experienced members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute were interviewed by way of six focus groups. The focus group method was chosen because of its special appropriateness in gathering information from people participating in the same program. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), the commonality of experience facilitates communication and encourages reflective discussion as participants share differing perspectives on similar situations. He explains that the dynamics of this interaction also tends to lower inhibitions and generate a broader range of affective responses, verbal and non-verbal.

The sampling frame was constituted by a list of all members of OLLI who were “rank and file” participants (e.g., not being on the board of directors, program faculty, or having another leadership role in the organization) and who had registered in at least one OLLI course each semester over the past three years. Individuals were randomly selected from this list and invited to join one focus group. Both authors co-facilitated all six focus groups and all sessions were tape recorded with the narratives later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. Prior to recruiting participants into the study the entire research protocol was reviewed and approved by the university’s Human Subjects/Institutional Review Board.

Seven questions were asked during the focus group discussions. These included an ice-breaker/personal introduction, two questions that asked for critical incident reports

related to academic experiences in OLLI classes, two questions that asked about social experiences and two final questions that invited summary reflections on the overall OLLI experience. With only minor variation the length of the focus groups was 90 minutes.

At the beginning of each focus group, in addition to describing the goals of the research project and reviewing and signing informed consent documents, a short demographic survey was administered. This paper and pencil instrument had two purposes: to describe the socio-demographic characteristics of this research sample and to compare those characteristics with the general OLLI population. The average age of the research sample was 73.4 years compared with an average in the general OLLI community of 71.3 years. The gender distribution in the focus groups was 78% women as compared with 72% in the general OLLI community. And both the sample and the overall community consisted of highly educated people: 49% of the focus group participants had a bachelor's degree and another 30% at least one graduate degree as compared with 35% and 39% for the general OLLI membership.

Results

As might be expected, the focus group participants, all long-time OLLI members, were generally positive about their experiences and eager to talk about them. This attitude was reflected throughout all group sessions by the high level of participation in the discussion, the sharing of insider jokes, their attention and non-verbal confirmation, and the often-repeated comment that they welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback about OLLI. There was little reluctance to cite negative experiences at OLLI, but they

were always presented as exceptions to the rule. Individuals were also willing to go against the majority opinion about instructors, courses or administrative details.

There was a high level of inter-group consistency with regard to themes, concerns and range of opinions. This allowed the authors to identify four major categories of perceived benefits of OLLI participation: *intellectual stimulation*, participation in a *supportive community*, opportunities for enhancing *self-esteem*, and opportunities for *spiritual renewal*. These benefit categories emerged in all six groups, although with varying degrees of emphasis or attention.

Intellectual Stimulation

Almost all participants related experiences reflecting the importance of intellectual stimulation as being critical to their continued participation in OLLI. Indeed, the desire for intellectual stimulation was frequently cited as an initial motive for joining and for continuing to participate in OLLI. However, there were significant differences in how this was experienced. Almost all, in words and/or accompanying affect, emphasized the “joy of learning.” At the beginning of each group, participants were asked to describe what it was like to participate in this lifelong learning institute. Nearly all of the initial reactions to this question generated affirmations about the excitement and joy that accompanies learning new things in a nurturing and supportive educational environment. Among the most intriguing descriptions were those of a man in his late sixties who called the program “an aphrodisiac of the mind” and a woman in her late seventies who said, “the first word that comes to mind is fun.”

For many, the excitement of the learning experience was enhanced by the program's non-traditional structure. A retired teacher commented that throughout her professional career she took courses to enhance her credentials, but it wasn't until she came to the LLI that she could experience "the sheer joy of taking a course and just being able to listen." Some people commented that many elders probably avoided LLI's because that thought that going a "college" means taking tests, getting homework, and earning grades. Additionally, it was suggested that the high level of educational achievement among members may be an intimidating factor to those who have not tried an LLI for themselves. Several focus group members who did not have college experience prior to OLLI insisted that they did not feel out of their depth in this learning environment. One individual acknowledged that he had not been a good student when he was younger and did not go beyond high school, but that he had "learned to work on the same level" as the other OLLI students

Several people emphasized that despite the absence of the usual academic demands and controls, they found themselves taking responsibility for their own learning: A woman with advanced professional degrees, commented that, "It's interesting in that not being required to do something; you tend to do more work on your own." Others emphasized that being at OLLI was not just "a way to pass the time." As if to emphasize this interest in pursuing learning even further, suggestions were made in every group that the OLLI courses should be extended by several weeks, and that introductory classes in some subjects should be followed up by more advanced classes.

Another sub-category of intellectual stimulation was the pursuit of earlier interests or the desire to catch up educationally. For those with higher education background, OLLI

provided the opportunity to pursue specific interests, especially in the liberal arts, that had not been possible because of more specialized curricula in fields like engineering or nursing. However especially for women who had been unable to pursue higher education because of their parental and caretaker roles, participation in OLLI was particularly gratifying. One woman who raised four children, and then cared for elderly parents, found that when she finally had time to come to OLLI, it was “a wonderful outlet . . . to learn about things I had only heard about before.” Another person, in similar circumstances, agreed: “I’m so excited by the ideas I get from what [the teachers] have to say.”

Another aspect of *intellectual stimulation* that emerged from the data, was “being stretched” by the multiple stimuli in an LLI. Participants related examples, often told with pride, about ways they were challenged to think beyond their usual frames of reference. The oldest woman in the focus groups, who is also among the oldest in the entire LLI community (in her 90’s), explained that she eagerly sought courses that were “mind stretching.” “I learn new things. I think new things.” Several others talked about OLLI “not being for the timid.”

Community Support

A second major theme that emerged in the focus groups was the experience of OLLI as a supportive community. Although some members had enrolled initially to meet other people, once they began attending they found that it was safe place to take intellectual and emotional risks. People who felt insecure about their capacity to function in a higher educational setting said they found both other students and instructors

respectful, accepting and welcoming of their input. Especially among women who had not been able to attend college at an earlier age, this sense of being accepted and not belittled or ignored was critical. One woman explained that because not having gone to college, she did not know what to expect, and that it was “scary,” but by “sharing with others” she got to “trust.” Another woman with a similar educational background commented that “that there were no dumb questions,” and that “you could ask anything.” This level of trust extended to being able to deal with controversial subjects like morals, religion and politics. Students who had been participating in the Great Books seminar were particularly vocal about this. They agreed that although class discussion can get “quite passionate,” and the differences between points of view strong, “people really listen to each other.”

Many focus group participants commented about the extent to which their fellow learners were open about their own lives and feelings. One woman in her early sixties said she joined OLLI when she was still “reeling” from the recent unexpected death of her husband. She found herself talking to a woman who has been recently divorced, and “we could talk about being alone. It was a safe way to get introduced to the world . . . a safe way to practice telling my story.” Others noted that they could talk about usually taboo subjects such as the impact of aging and its eventual outcome: “You don’t have to be afraid. You can let your guard down. We are all facing the same thing, and the alternative stinks.” This comment was met with knowing laughter.

Members who had significant physical disabilities were particularly appreciative of how the community responded to their limitations – helpful but not overly solicitous. One woman shared that when she was recovering from surgery, “people older than me

were escorting me.” Another commented that people have handicaps “but they get here, and we don’t dwell on it.”

Another significant aspect of the OLLI community is the extent to which students contribute to everyone’s learning by sharing their own experiences and knowledge. Group members talked glowingly about the knowledge, wisdom and intelligence of the other students, and about classes where they “learned as much from the other students as the teachers.” Some group members said they especially appreciated teachers who were good at promoting class participation because the other students had so much to offer. This did not seem to be intimidating for the less vocal students, and the idea that you could “just listen” was cited by many. Some, however, preferred a good lecture to extensive class discussion. As might be expected, the group discussion revealed that both students and teachers had a wide range of preferred teaching and learning styles.

Beside the atmosphere in the classroom, many students found that the OLLI practice of having lunch together greatly enhanced the sense of community. These lunches were cafeteria style in a makeshift setting where the buffet is in the hall. Lunch usually attracts some 130 students during the break between morning and afternoon classes. It is a lively and noisy scene, but also, according focus group participants, a welcoming one where “if a new person sits down, we include them right in. Much of the lunch discussion seems to be a follow up to what has gone on in class. Everyone is so enthusiastic that it carries over.”

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute does provide opportunities for other kinds of social activities such as a theater group and a walking club, but these groups tend to be small (albeit enthusiastic). Approximately 20 percent of the long-term members

interviewed had participated in these activities. The LLI also conducts occasional bus trips to museums and other points of educational interest within driving distance of Portland. In addition, the institute has sponsored longer travel-learning adventures to places such as England, Prague, and Civil War battle grounds. Numerous people in the focus groups had participated in one or more these activities over the years. Overall, while these kinds of activities engendered favorable reactions, none, with the possible exception of the theater group, were presented as primary reasons for participation in OLLI.

Self-Esteem

A focus group question that evoked some of the most interesting responses was the following: “How has participation in OLLI affected the way you feel about yourself?” Even before this question was explicitly asked, many participants were talking about the gains in self-esteem that came from attending the LLI. As one retired teacher reported, she was proud to be able to say that she was continuing her education instead of “going to seed.” The focus of this discussion was not just about impressing others. Almost with a sense of discovery, participants revealed changes in their own perceptions of self. Again however, within the group there were distinct differences on how this was experienced. Four areas for heightened self-esteem were referenced in the discussion: intellectual capacity, social roles, social status (voice) and self-perceptions about aging.

Both men and women in the groups reported feeling smarter and more intellectually competent. One woman said, with a degree of hesitation in her voice and

affect, that by taking classes she was “more interesting.” Immediately another member of the focus group responded to her saying, “you shouldn’t be embarrassed to say that – you are more interesting!” A man who had not gone to college said he had been afraid to speak up or “make a fool of myself” but that since being at OLLI he was more comfortable in expressing his views although it “isn’t my favorite thing.” However, only the women in the group went beyond gains in intellectual confidence to discuss other aspects of self-esteem.

Many women felt that by participating in educational activities they were finally able to get beyond the role of family caretaker. One woman described how her husband pursued further education to advance his career, while she was the “mommy” taking care of her children. Now she said, “if you saw me in class [contributing and speaking up] you would say [admiringly] who is this person!” Another woman said her attendance at OLLI “provided validation for who I am. Now she can choose not “to serve others without being considered selfish or going to hell.”

The women in the group contrasted their experiences at OLLI with previous educational experiences where they were devalued or ignored. Sometimes this began at an early age. One woman recounted attending a grammar school where only the boys were taught science. Others described being intimidated or ignored in high school and college. Some found the repression continued at home. One member described her struggle to go beyond the “typical” women of her generation who “stood behind their husband, just smiling and not saying a thing.” These and other women reported finding their “voice” at OLLI. Some described being influenced by the example set by others. “You suddenly realize that women have so much to say. We have a voice!” However,

even at OLLI there were some complaints of inequality: As one woman observed, “I’m “tired of reading these books by dead white males . . . where women don’t even count.”

The final area where participants reported an enhanced self-image was in their rejection of previously accepted stereotypes about aging, which they no longer applied to themselves or others. Often this was in response to the examples set by their peers. Many reported feeling some initial reluctance to participate in an LLI because they did not want to be with “a bunch of old people.” But once in the program, they began seeing it’s aging population, and by implication themselves, somewhat differently. One person found the participation of people with significant health problems to be “inspirational.” Another conceded that she had “stereotyped older women as just sitting around playing bridge.” One of the oldest members of the group said that seeing the energy of the other members “was really a turn on. I became less concerned about my body – how I looked.” A nurse in the group, who continues to work part time, commented that “if half of [her patients] were in OLLI, they wouldn’t be in hospital beds.”

Spiritual Renewal

The authors had not anticipated that participants would cite the opportunity to deal with spiritual issues as a important part of their LLI education. Nonetheless, the topic came up spontaneously in five of the six focus groups, usually in discussing classes that focused on religion, ethics, and/or philosophical issues. While the majority of the participants had not taken these kinds of courses, the experience was significant for those who did. Typically this subject arose during conversations about people’s willingness to share their own personal life stories. This desire to explore spiritual issues seemed to be

prompted by two underlying motivations – a need to go beyond their own formal religious training, and a desire to understand other spiritual traditions. People reported that they had gained an expanded, if less sectarian, interest in spiritual matters, and a greater tolerance for other belief systems.

Some found that selected classroom experiences directly related to their own journey of understanding. In describing a course on meditation, one woman said it was “really about searching.” Another responded that she had been “searching all her life,” and that the class she took helped in “filling a need.” Several people indicated that they had been raised in faiths with a more fundamentalist orientation, but found that that they welcomed expanding their spiritual perspectives. One person described the “vindication” she felt when introduced to a less orthodox belief system.

Participants repeatedly emphasized such personal explorations were only possible because of the open and trusting atmosphere within the classroom. One member commented that such discussion and sharing “was [usually] a very rare thing. It’s because you trust people.” Others said that both their instructors and classmates created an atmosphere that permitted differences of opinion while insuring mutual respect: “No one tried to force their private beliefs onto anyone else.”

Discussion

One of the compelling overall findings from this study is that the reasons for persistence in an elder adult education program are complex and multifaceted. Despite the quest on the part of scholars to seek simple and parsimonious explanations for both the phenomena of participation and persistence in organized educational programs – be

these “answers” key demographic, social, or psychological variables – this research investigation supports the tradition in adult education and gerontology scholarship that suggests any simple, one-dimensional explanation cannot suffice. Just as “there is no single theory or model to explain or predict participation” (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 70), a similar statement may be made about older learners who choose to remain active participants in educational programs such as lifelong learning institutes. Older learners persist in programs for intricate and multivariate reasons.

Belonging to a community is a core component in the successful LLI experience. It was evident that much of the reason why older persons sang the praises of their program and expressed passion for the myriad ways their LLI has enriched their lives is that their experience was situated in a safe and nurturing community. A community in which teachers and students work together as equals and co-learners. A community in which enough trust is established, in a reasonably short period of time, such that people feel comfortable sharing deep and personal communications with each other. A community in which both wealthy and working-class persons, people with Ph.D.’s and G.E.D.’s, men and women, people 55 and 95 years of age, and individuals with a wide variance of religious and ethnic backgrounds can sit side-by-side in classrooms working happily and productively together.

We also learned from these focus group discussions that layers of communities exist within the institute. Classes themselves become smaller communities within the larger community of the LLI. Members of some of these classes feel so connected to one another that when the semester ends that they have chosen to meet together and continue their learning agenda outside of the formal boundaries of the institute. (This has happened

specifically in the case of writing and a theater class.) Yet, even with these closely-knit bonds, we were told by the 45 long-term members of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute who comprised this research sample that cliques or other exclusionary groupings do not exist. Boundaries, even in groups that have been long-established, appear to remain permeable enough to welcome new people.

Four elements constitute the principal gains derived from participation in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute – intellectual stimulation, belonging to a supportive community, enhanced self-esteem, and spiritual renewal. This speaks eloquently to the multidimensionality of both human beings and the high quality education they seek in later life. Learning well means learning whole. People do not just learn by way of memory and cognition. The wholeness and fullness of robust older adult education reaches mind, body, psyche, and spirit. Sometimes the richness and intricacy of holistic learning remains hidden beneath the surface until we stop to look more closely, to ask questions, to let people critically reflect upon and express themselves about the manifold dimensions of their educational experience. An opportunity to make this reflection and expression was presented to these 45 LLI members and they happily responded to our invitation.

The renowned monastic, peace activist, and writer Thomas Merton once expressed something of the phenomenon of a “hidden wholeness” in one of his poems. (A concept about which, years later, the well-known educator and author Parker J. Palmer has written eloquently. See Palmer 1999 and 2004.) In the late priest’s words: “There is in all visible things / an invisible fecundity, / a dimmer light, / a meek namelessness, / a hidden wholeness./ This mysterious Unity and Integrity / is Wisdom, the Mother of all.”

(McDonnell, 1989, p. 506). In the final analysis perhaps what “turns on” older adults most to their Lifelong Learning Institute experiences may well be a kind of hidden wholeness – a unity, fecundity, and integrity in their educational experience that welcomes and treats these individuals like the complete and complex human beings that they are.

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