

# Older Adults Speak about Education in Their Lives

Community Forums held to  
gather information

The conveners of the five regional meetings included Anthony Traxler, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville; Carla Gosney, Kathie Clark, and Sandi Plank, RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, John Wood Community College, Quincy; Patricia O'Malley, Renaissance Court, Chicago Department on Aging; Belinda Wholebin; Psychology Department, Rockford College; Mike O'Donnell, East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging, Champaign



A computer class at John Wood Community College that is a part of Senior Sampler, a yearly event that gives older learners the opportunity to discover what courses are available.

## Educational Needs of Older Adults

Like explorers, we are entering new territory in Illinois. Never before have we had such numbers of older learners in higher education. As the numbers continue to increase, questions emerge about the relationship between older learners and higher education. What is higher education's commitment to older adults? What is the commitment of older learners to their campuses?

Older learners in five regional meetings responded to these questions with discussion and thoughtful recommendations. The following themes were consistent throughout the five forums.

### Access to Education

Access to education was a key theme throughout the five forums and in the research. Access means different things to older people such as, being able to get to classes physically, being able to afford any fees, and having classes available. "Older adults would like to learn more about cost-effective models for the delivery of educational programs," (Rockford Forum) and what scholarships, waivers, and economic aid might be available. Of particular interest was technology, the expense associated with computer classes, and the availability of classes.

### Growth

The old adage, "It isn't over 'til it's over," is the basis for the widespread interest of seniors in growth, mentally, socially, and physically. Many try different courses and discover new interests that enrich their lives. Health and independence are important to seniors and many believe that "Health and independence are fostered by continued learning," (Quincy Forum).

### Publicity on Programs

More information at the state and local levels is needed (1) about programs available, (2) to address myths about learning, (3) to reach elders who would benefit from education and don't view themselves as "smart" enough to take courses, and (4) to encourage the development of older learner programs in communities where they do not currently exist.

### Service Opportunities on Campus

A common theme was the relationship between educational programs and volunteerism. "My life has been enlightened by education and has given me a way of helping others," Mildred Patterson, 94, Rantoul. From the Chicago Forum, "My classes at the senior center gave me the knowledge, skills and confidence to begin volunteering with kids as a mentor, something I would not otherwise have done." Elders are interested in getting involved with younger generations, particularly in computer classes. Many older adults believe that they are an excellent resource and want to "give back."

# A Wealth of Comments from Older Citizens

“When an older person dies, it is similar to a library burning down—we lose an abundance of valuable knowledge” (Edwardsville Forum).

Future: “I can see the active adults of the future in their 90’s fully employed and contributing to society especially in a computer “virtual” world,” Leo Pondelisk, 72, Decatur

“Education has opened many doors to me and also given me many possibilities for serving others,” John Nation, Monticello.

“I always encourage teenagers and younger children to become involved in our volunteering program at our nursing home. Get involved with the elderly and learn to love them and learn from them,” Janeen Rowe, Clinton

“I am still learning. My parents insisted on all seven of us to go to school and graduate from high school. Then they helped me by scrape up enough money so I could go into nurses training. When I completed my education. They were so proud.” Alice Hall, Westville

“By volunteering for elderly and young persons, I encourage others to do the same,” Madonna Wright.

“The opportunity to be alert, active involved while providing new vistas,

new friendships—contrary to the old adage—you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

“As we live longer, education strengthens our health; it helps our losses due to retirement and heath of family and friends. It brings fun and excitement to our life. It helps assuage feeling of boredom and loneliness. It puts us in touch with other people,” Erica Weinberg, Chicago

“While formal education stopped, learning still continues and is treasured. I enjoy and can contribute to



An East St. Louis group discusses education for all ages.

conversation with virtually anyone,” Raymond Wentworth, Chicago.

“Older adults are one of our natural resources in Illinois and this is only becoming more so as the older boomers reach 55 in 2001. Continuing education is needed to tap into this vast ocean of talent and experience,” Robert McClellan, Chicago

“Education is the staff of life for the older learner. One’s horizons or broadened. Boredom is eliminated.

One is motivated to maintain good health and to participate in life,” Fern Brodie, Chicago.

“Education keeps me from staying in and being alone.”.

“The study of language was extremely important in shaping my attitudes toward other cultures and even directing me to my life work in South America. Today I teach English as a Second Language on a volunteer basis—a great source of satisfaction,” Jane Miller, Quincy

“I can’t think of any area of life that has not been affected by education. But formal education prepares one for better dealing with the complexities, sharing the experience and reflection of thousands of other learners, profiting by the experiments and debates of the ages. In senior years the glorious joy of education is the freedom to

choose what one studies, reads, discusses,” Herbert Crede, Quincy

“We want to sit in a rocking chair, once in awhile! Otherwise, keep the opportunities for learning for older adults coming. If we don’t use it, we lose it! We have lots to offer—and lots to learn,” Nadine Bent, Quincy

“I believe education should be a lifelong adventure. An active mind (by  
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# Forever Young Teaching Never Loses Its Rewards

by Jean Alberg, Springfield

Retired Teacher



Older volunteers in Rockford use puppets to help children understand the dangers that may lurk in their lives. L-R front: Muriel Breuer, Marj Price, Betty Cleary; Back: Marion Liewinko, Helen Freutel, Mel Sparlin, and Jean Streit. From Cornerstone and the RSVP Program

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more education) makes an active body with less sickness and depression.”  
Rockford Forum

“I am able to volunteer to help both adults and children to read and do math.”

“Education has helped me keep up with my children and grandchildren. It helps me keep up with the times.”  
Edwardsville Forum

“As my father told me, ‘I can’t give you money, but I will give you your education.’ Dear Dad (died 1974): There could have never been a better gift,” Barbara Bate, Rockford.

Teaching makes you beautiful! Probably not, but it does keep you young! Since your young charges have no idea of your age because to them you’re just another “grown-up,” you can be any age you choose and teaching is the only venue where you can be forever young. Where else but in teaching, would an angelic little girl come up to you and say “My mom is having a baby, when are you?” as you stand there knowing that you will never see 55 again!

Or where else would you be asked to moderate a dispute between two students who want you to state unequivocally whether “Puff Daddy” is better than “LLKool J”, or viceversa, when you have never heard of either. After you stammer a bit and do not commit yourself to either one, you decide that as soon as you arrive home, you’ll turn to the VH1 channel to familiarize yourself with at least some of the popular singers and groups so that next time you’ll be able to make an informed choice.

Where else would a student stare at you wide-eyed, and exclaim during a history lesson, “You mean you were

alive during the Vietnam War?” when you could also add “And during the Korean Conflict, and a bit of WWII, too!” Where else would a little boy shake his head at you unbelievably and marvel “You didn’t have any videotapes when you were little? What did you watch when there was nothing good on T.V.?” and because you don’t want to test his credulity even more, you don’t mention that there was no T.V. back then, let alone videotapes!

Where else would 3 or 4 little girls come up to you and ask you how you liked “Buffy, the Vampire Slayer” last night on a network that you didn’t even know existed. You just reply “Awesome!” and walk away hoping to avoid any questions that might make it apparent that you watch M\*A\*S\*H re-runs instead.

And how young does it make you feel when your handsome, gray haired husband comes to the classroom door to get your keys to the van and a multitude of voices shouts out “Is that your Daddy, teacher?” And you blissfully agree “Yes, it is!” Indeed, teaching keeps you young!

“In 1980 the proportion of individuals aged eighty-five to eighty-nine with 7 or few years of education was over 60%. By 2015 it will fall to as low as 10-15%.” Samuel Preston from *The Oldest Old*

# Successful Aging

Successful Aging has been a hallmark of the 20th century. Life expectancy has increased from an average of 47 in 1900 to 76 in 2000. The following section describes some of the specifics of successful aging, with attention to the myth about older learners, the growing number of centenarians, the difference in life expectancy between men and women, and services offered to help elders stay independent.

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