

Governor's Summit on Aging

Five Illinois Forums

Older Adults Speak about Education in Their Lives

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 held in preparation for the Governor's Summit on Aging (October 19-20, 1999).

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 in-

dependence 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."

Comments from Retirees

"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 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 *Comments from page 14* 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.

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; and Mike O'Donnell, East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging, Champaign.