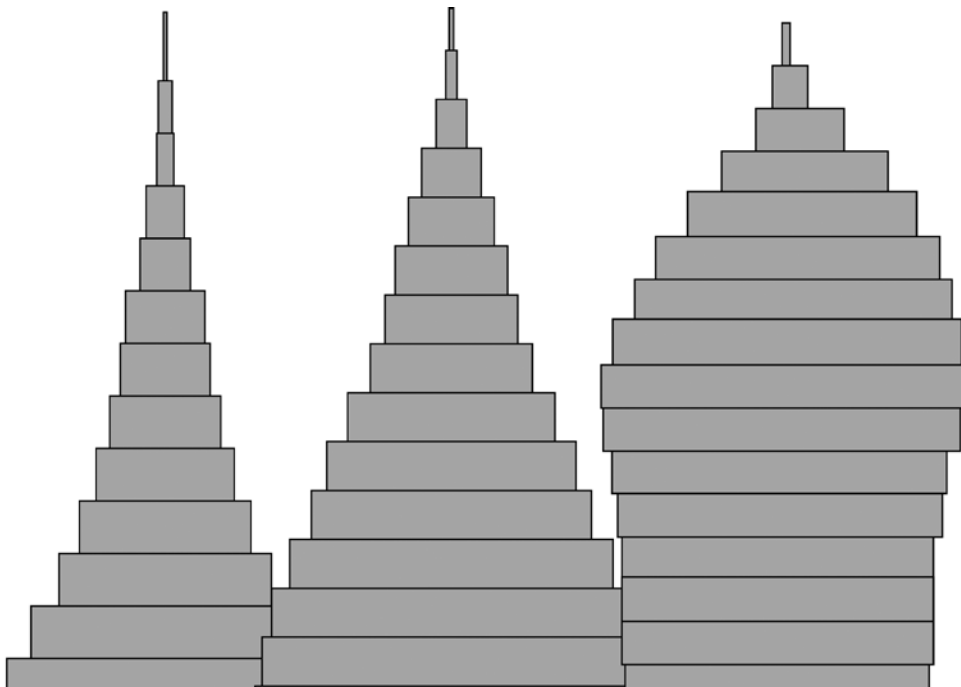


D R A F T

Educational Needs and Volunteer Interests of Older Adults

Preliminary Findings



Participants: Carl Sandburg College, College of Lake County, William Rainey Harper College, Heartland Community College, Highland Community College, Illinois State University, Lincoln Land Community College, John A. Logan College, Oakton Community College, Rend Lake College, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Southwestern Illinois College, Waubensee Community College, John Wood Community College

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Educational Needs and Volunteer Interests 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? The purpose of the study was to gather information about the educational needs and volunteer interests of older adults throughout the state and then compare them to a similar study completed in 1998.

Demographics

The graying world is an event without precedent in the history of humanity. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs predicts that "By 2050 the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history." The Center for International and Strategic Studies (CISS) calls this global aging, which is the result of two sweeping forces: fewer births and longer lives. "Not only has the lifespan gone up," says Richard Jackson, director of the CISS Global Aging Initiative, "but the retirement age has gone down. One of the most crucial responses to the aging challenge is to reintegrate older citizens into the productive mainstream of society. We need to redefine retirement."

The first study on the educational needs of older adults was conducted in 1998 by the Intergenerational Initiative and Lifelong. The results pointed to an increasing interest in education by retirees of all ages, particularly the older old. The median age of those participating in the study was 71 years.

Population Pyramids:

The population pyramids on the cover represent the world population in 1950, 2000, and 2050. The triangle on the left has a wide base, which indicates a large number of children and a high birth rate. The narrowing of the pyramid at the top shows that many people die between each age category, which results in a smaller older population. The middle pyramid shows a continued wide base but an expansion at the top indicating a growing older population. The pyramid on the right has changed to a rectangular shape, which shows an equal population of old and young. The rectangular pyramid indicates a lower birthrate and fewer people dying until older ages.

A follow up survey was conducted in 2004-5 with a similar instrument. The survey was initiated through an invitation sent via the LifeLong listserve at ICCB. Two universities and 12 community colleges participated. (In 1998, 5 universities, 14 community colleges, and two aging organizations participated.) Older learner program directors gave the survey to their students during classes and events. The final analysis included 822 surveys.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Like the 1998 survey, those who completed the questionnaire were predominately white females (only 1/4 of the respondents were male). The median age was 68.6 and most lived in single-family dwellings in urban and suburban settings (23.8% lived in rural settings--an increase of 11.4% from 1998). Their educational attainment is high. A bachelor's degree or higher is held by 51.6% up from the 1998 survey by 5.6%. Most of the respondents are retired (77.9%) for an average of 5 years. Only 7.91% are members of the local Annuitants Association on campus.

Motivation for Taking a Course

The old adage, "It isn't over 'til it's over," is the basis for the widespread interest of seniors in education as a way of growing, mentally, socially, and physically. Many try different courses and discover new interests that enrich their lives. The majority of the survey participants were from community colleges, so it isn't surprising that 59.8% had taken course at community colleges, while only 7.17 had taken courses at universities. The reasons for taking courses were curiosity/in-

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terest (45.8%), learning a new skill (15.7%), enrichment (9%), healthy living (7.4%), job training (5%).

Educational and Informational Interests

In light of the health-conscious society, it shouldn't be surprising that health issues was the top rated recommendation for future courses. The second-rated course was multicultural issues and then much lower were responses for craft/hobby, spiritual issues, computers, and educational field trips. Travel topped informational interests (43%) and much lower were spiritual growth, medications, leisure activities, politics, and living alone.

Barriers to Taking Courses

When this question was originally constructed, the committee was curious about how comfortable older adults feel about taking courses, particularly on college and university campuses. Only 3.95% said that was a barrier. We hear the refrain of retirees, I am busier now than when I was employed. Nearly 28% responded that being busy was the greatest barrier to taking courses. Next were cost, inertia, lack of interest, health and transportation. Respondents also preferred afternoon classes (40%), morning classes (31%), and evening classes (23%).

Volunteering

A common theme was the relationship between educational programs and volunteerism. Of those responding to this question, 56% said they volunteered and nearly 29% said they didn't. Those who volunteer give 2-5 hours a week (31%), 6-10 hours a week (8%), 11-20 hours (8%), and 1 hour a week (7%). Volunteering takes place helping friends or neighbors (13.9%), church or religious organizations (13.3%), senior centers (9%), Childcare/preschool (7%), hospital (6%), library (5%), other agency (4%), City government (2%), Nursing home (1%), grade school (1%), youth group (1%), college (.98%), high school (.16%). It is noteworthy that grade school, high school, and college were almost non-existent responses.

When asked how did you learn about volunteer opportunities, the most common way was "someone asked me." Other sources were the newspaper, through a religious organization, through a senior citizen organization, through a community organization. Those who might volunteer in educational settings preferred preschool/kindergarten, grades 1-4, and community colleges or universities (19.4%). Least favored were middle school (9%) or high school (2%).

When asked, "Would you be interested in joining a group to read with children on hour each week?", 11% said yes, 26% said no, and 20% said maybe. Forty-three percent didn't answer the question.

Given the option of volunteering in a variety of ways, gardening came in first with (25.5%), followed by something of interest, Great Books, and then much lower, the environment, getting involved on campus, and computers. The reasons that would motivate respondents to volunteer included social opportunities, to feel needed, use talents and skills, give back, and stay involved. The barriers to volunteering were similar to the barriers for taking courses – too busy, scheduling, and health among the top responses—and followed by lack of interest, lack of information and transportation.

Summary

These preliminary findings give us a snapshot of the perceptions of retirees regarding education needs and volunteer interests. More information is needed at the local level to update the views of older adults about volunteering and provosts, deans, and superintendents about involving them.

Acknowledgments

Great appreciation is extended to those who supported this survey (IBHE and ICCB), developed the instrument, conducted the piloting, and participated in the study.

Education Needs and Volunteer Interests of Older Adults Survey

N = 822

In order to keep the samples from each university and community college similar for the analysis, the research team took random samples from those who sent more than 80 surveys.

I. Demographics

- Median age 68.6
- Gender: Female 73.7% Male 24.3%
- Race/ethnicity: African American 8.64% Hispanic 0.24%
Caucasian 86.4% Asian 1.09 Other 2.31%
- Residence(a): Rural 23.84% Urban 39.74% Suburban 36.42%
Residence(b): Single family dwelling/house 83.06%
Apartment 7.13% Retirement Community 3.06%
Assisted Living .51% Nursing Home/Veterans Home .38%
- Education (highest level completed): Grade School 4.44%
High School/ GED 20.84% Vocational School 2.1%
Associate Degree 3.33% Attended College 17.63%
BA or BS 19.61% Masters 21.09%
Professional Degree 6.54% Ph.D. 4.44%
- Retired: No 15.09% Yes 77.86% How many years? 5 yrs. ave.
Retired and work part-time 11.19%
Member of a local Annuity Association 7.91%

II. Education and Information Needs

- During the past 5 years have you taken a course through: a
university 7.17% community college 59.76% other 18.53%
- Check any of the following as reasons for taking courses:
curiosity/interest 45.78% healthy living 7.44%
learning a new skill 15.74% haven't taken any courses 6.44%
enrichment 9.01% job training 5.01%
- Which courses might interest you in the future?
Health Issues 18.78%
Multicultural Issues 17.82%
Craft or Hobby 9.94%
International Issues 8.43%
Current Events 7.04%
Spiritual Issues 5.52%
Computers 4.42%
Educational field trips 4.42%
- Check the topics listed below that were important information
needs for you during the past year.
Travel 43.4%
Spiritual Growth 11.2%
Medications 6.33%
Leisure Activities 6.04%
Politics 3.60%
Living Alone 3.45%
Service Opportunities 2.88%
Self Esteem 2.59%
Sports 2.30%
Increasing hearing 2.16%
- Are there barriers that prevent you from pursuing educational
programs or courses at a university or community college? Check
any that apply.
Too Busy 27.63%
Cost 13.16%
Inertia 11.05%
Lack of Interest 10.79%
Health 10.26%
Transportation 9.21%
Physical Accessibility 4.74%
Feeling out of place 3.95%
Parking 3.42%

Scheduling Classes: Prefer morning 30.56% Prefer afternoon
40.06% Prefer evening 22.85%

III. Volunteering

- Do you volunteer an hour or more each week?
No 28.47% Yes 56.33%
• If yes, mark the approximate number of hours:
1 hr 7.18% 2-5hrs 30.66% 6-10hrs 10.71%
11-20hrs 7.66% More than 20 hrs 2.07%
- Where do you volunteer?
Helping Friends or Neighbors 13.91% City government 2.13%
Church 13.26% Nursing home 1.47%
Senior Center 8.67% Grade school 1.08%
Childcare/preschool 7.04% Youth group 1.15%
Hospital 5.56% College 0.98%
Library 5.07% High School 0.16%
Other Agency 4.26%
- How did you learn about volunteer opportunities?
Someone asked me 35.81%
Read about it in the paper 19.38%
Through a religious organization 14.36%
Through a senior citizen organization 7.79%
Through a community organization 5.02%
Through a school or college 3.46%
- If you are volunteering in education, would you be interested in
helping students in:
Literacy 22.73%
Preschool or Kindergarten 21.49%
First Grade through Grade Four 20.25%
Community College or University 19.42%
Middle School 8.68%
High School 2.07%
- Would you be interested in joining a group to read with children
one hour each week?
Yes 10.83% No 26.03% Maybe 20.32%
- Would you prefer other ways of volunteering?
Gardening 25.5% Computers 4.49%
Something that interests you 18.59% Careers 3.21%
Great books 16.69% Gifted 2.56%
Environment 7.69% Science 1.92%
Getting involved on campus 6.41% Math 1.92%
- What are the reasons that would motivate you to volunteer?
Check any that apply. Make a difference 7.96%
Social opportunity 21.59% To stay involved 7.08%
Feel needed 19.65% If someone asked me
To use my talents/skills 18.41% 5.66%
Give back 9.38% Civic engagement 5.13%
- Are there barriers that prevent you from volunteering ? Check
any that apply to you.
Too Busy 22.75%
Scheduling 15.61%
Health 13.76%
Lack of interest 7.94%
Lack of information 7.14%
Transportation 6.88%
Physical Accessibility 5.03%

Thank you to those who gave generously of their time to
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