

## **Educational opportunities for older adults in the United States**

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Like many developed countries, the population structure in the United States is rapidly changing. Increased life expectancy, a decline in fertility, and migration will cause a population increase from 325 million to 417 million between the years 2017 and 2060. The population aged 65 and older will experience the strongest growth and is expected to increase from 15 percent (2014) to 24 percent (2060) of the total population. By 2030, one out of five Americans will be at or over the retirement age. This demographical scenario creates new tasks and challenges for our society and will also have a strong impact on (older) adult education. Due to increasing overall educational levels, older adults will likely have higher demands on educational offerings. Data emphasize the correlation between formal education and participation in non-formal education in old age. In order to respond to these changes adequately, adult education has to continue to develop new strategies.

Research indicated that participation in organized education has a positive impact on health, wellbeing, civic participation, and social attitudes in old age. It can increase self-confidence, independence, contribute to social inclusion, promote empowerment and tolerance as well as help structuring the daily life in retirement.

### **Terminology**

In the United States a variety of terminologies describing non-formal education in older age exist. Terms like learning in later life, late-life education, education for older adults or older adult education can be found in the literature and educational practice. One of the most commonly used terms in this regard is “lifelong learning”.

### **Institutionalization**

Mature adults in the United States can choose from a rich assortment of educational programs and offerings. However, an exact accounting of the number of existing programs is not easily possible due to the aforementioned variety in naming, the plurality of different providers, as well their different organizational structures. In the following, a short overview of the most well-known older adult education programs will be presented. Characteristic for many of U.S. providers is that they engage and empower the older learners as volunteers inside (e.g., as a peer instructors) and outside (e.g., as administrative help, committee work).

**Higher Education Institutions** Many universities and colleges in the U.S. offer elders the opportunity to audit regular classes as guests. As a model serves the Donovan Fellowship for Academic Scholars at the University of Kentucky, which started in 1964 and provided adults aged 65+ for the first time with the opportunity to take higher education classes on either a credit or guest-auditing basis free of charge. Inspired by this idea, similar programs emerged throughout the country in the following years. Although the guest auditing programs differ from each other, they typically have some characteristics in common. For example, the access to the classrooms mostly depends on the policies of the individual institution or guest-auditing program (e.g., some institutions do not allow guest auditors in writing-intensive courses) or on faculty’s willingness to accept mature adults in their classes. While tuition prices and fees vary among the higher education institutions, guest auditing status does not allow elder learners to accumulate credits or to earn a degree.

One of the most well-known providers of older adult education in the U.S. are the age-homogenous Lifelong Learning Institutes (LLIs), which are typically connected to higher education institutions. The institutes were founded in 1962 at the New School for Social Research, New York by a group of retired educators under the name “Institute for Retired Professionals”. In the following decades, hundreds of new programs were started. In the first wave of LLIs, founded in the 1960s and 1970s, many of these programs were called Institutes for Retired Professionals or Institutes for Learning in Retirement. The first LLI that used “lifelong learning” as part of its name was the Academy of Lifelong Learning at the University of Delaware, which was founded in 1980. In 1991, the U.S. Senate’s Special Committee on Aging published a paper with the title “Lifelong Learning for an Aging Society”. Since then, lifelong learning and learning in retirement became interchangeable terms. One of the most significant developments in the history of the LLIs occurred in 1999 with the involvement of the Bernard Osher Foundation, which provides financial support and helps to grow the so-called Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI)s<sup>1</sup>. Currently, about 450 LLIs exist in North America with 120 of them being OLLIs. LLIs are independently organized and run and typically offer adults aged 50+ an academically-inspired curriculum that is either taught by other LLI members or external faculty (often from the host campus). In addition, emphasis is also put on the volunteer involvement of members in all aspects of the learning and teaching process. Depending on the organizational structure, the institutes are either staff or volunteer driven.

In addition to these age-homogenous programs, older adults can also participate in continuing education/non-credit programs that are designed for the general public and that can be found at most higher education institutions in the U.S.. Strong differences exist in the program names (e.g., Extension, Professional Studies), pricing, and course offerings, which can range from personal enrichment to professional development, programs.

**Road Scholar**<sup>2</sup> Another important provider of older adult education is Road Scholar, formerly known as Elderhostel. The non-profit organization was founded in 1975 at five colleges and universities in New Hampshire. The founders Marty Knowlton and David Bianco were inspired by both the European Youth Hostel-movement and its possibility to meet other travelers in inexpensive lodgings, as well as by the Scandinavian “folk schools” where older adults teach younger people in the arts, dance, and music. Today, the organization offers more than 8,000 educational trips to over 150 countries and counts more than 100,000 participants annually. Since its founding, more than five million participants joined Road Scholar’s educational travel programs. Prices and course lengths depend on the type of program, the destination, and the type of accommodation. Included in the prices are travel expenses, lodging, all tips and taxes, excursions, most meals, presentations by experts and, depending on the offering, seminars or workshops. To accommodate older adults of every fitness level, Road Scholar provides comprehensive information on the required activity level for each of their programs.

**OASIS**<sup>3</sup> The non-profit organization was founded in 1982 with the goal to provide adults aged 50+ with opportunities to stay healthy and active in their communities. OASIS partners with over 700 other community programs and institutions, such as schools, libraries and health providers, to provide older adults with educational and community

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.osherfoundation.org/index.php?olli>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.road scholar.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oasisnet.org/>

service opportunities. Lifelong learning opportunities are either offered through OASIS education centers or partner organizations and cover a wide range of subjects, such as politics, history, literature, science, technology, and health and wellness. Typically, OASIS classes are taught by external experts and are moderately priced. In addition to class offerings, OASIS provides a variety of intergenerational volunteer options for its members. For example, mature adults have the option to tutor children for one year (Intergenerational Tutoring) or help them develop healthy lifestyles (CATCH Healthy Habits). In 2015, OASIS was active in 50 cities, offered 24,600 classes, counted 6,500 volunteers, and impacted the lives of 53,000 people.

**Shepherd's Centers of America (SCA)**<sup>4</sup> In 1975, the Shepherd's Centers of America (SCA) were founded in Kansas City, Missouri, as a network of interfaith organizations that provide educational, social, and community-based services for older adults. Besides various health programs and assistance services such as in-home visitors, adult day care, shopping and transportation help, older adults can choose from a variety of educational classes and workshops. The subjects range from health education, technology, personal finance, arts, and intergenerational learning, and are taught by peer instructors. The network is mainly funded by donations, grants, and corporate support, as well as by center affiliation fees. In 2016, a total of 100,000 elders participated in the network's lifelong learning programs and more than 54,000 older adults were supported through free informal caregiving services.

**Senior Centers** One of the most widely used lifelong learning resources for older adults are the senior centers. The center's history goes back to 1943 when a group of public sector workers who were concerned about the living situation and needs of the older population they worked with, started the William Hodson Center in the Bronx, New York City. Today, about 11,400 centers that serve more than one million elders every day exist throughout the country. Strong differences between the centers exist regarding their size, membership, and program offerings, which typically depend on the need of the individual community and available funding. However, all centers can be described as aging-in-place resources that share the mission to provide opportunities for healthy aging and to keep older adults engaged through, e.g., health programs, meal and in-home visiting services, transportation assistance, counseling, social, and educational programs. Since the participants are primarily at-risk older adults who have a lower socio-economic and educational background, the services are either free or are offered on a low-cost basis.

#### **American Society on Aging<sup>5</sup>/LEARN Council<sup>6</sup>**

To provide practitioners and researchers in the field of older adult education a platform to discuss, network, learn, and exchange best practices, different conferences in the United States (partially) focus on lifelong learning, e.g., the annual Aging in America Conference<sup>7</sup> of the American Society on Aging.

Founded in 1954, the San Francisco-based American Society on Aging (ASA) is a multidisciplinary association dedicated to enhance the quality of life of older adults by supporting and increasing the skills of those who work with the elderly. The diverse

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.shepherdcenters.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.asaging.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.asaging.org/learn>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.asaging.org/aging-in-america>

membership consists of about 5,000 professionals from a wide variety of aging-related disciplines, such as healthcare, spirituality, social services, business, and education. In addition to the annual Aging in America conference, ASA provides opportunities for professional development through ongoing web seminars as well as publishes a peer-reviewed scholarly journal (*Generations*), a bi-monthly newspaper (*Aging Today*), and a blog (*AgeBlog*). As a networking and professional development opportunity, members are encouraged to join one or multiple of ASA's ten Constituent Groups. These networks provide in-depth and focused information on specific aging-related topics, such as multicultural aging, LGBT aging issues, health care, and lifelong learning, and promote the exchange of information and ideas in this field.

One of these Constituent Groups is LEARN (Lifetime Education and Renewal Network) consisting of about 640 ASA members who are involved in different aspects of education for and with older adults, either as researchers or practitioners. For example, LEARN members represent the previously discussed organizations, higher education institutions, creativity, wellness, and recreation programs as well as all other forms of (older) adult education. LEARN is led by a council, which contributes talks and sessions to the Aging in America Conference, hosts web seminars, updates the LEARN membership with lifelong learning resources, and contributes to the *AgeBlog*. The current council consists of a chair person (the author of this article is the acting LEARN chair since 2013), and seven members.

The next Aging in America Conference will take place from April 15-18, 2019 in New Orleans, LA. LEARN organizes a full day of lifelong learning-related sessions and talks under the sobriquet "Lifelong Learning: Do You Know It When You See It?". The LEARN day will take place on Tuesday, April 16.

#### **About the Author:**

Sandra von Doetinchem, Dipl. Päd, is a passionate lifelong learning researcher and advocate for learning in older and oldest-old age since many years. Sandra is a Program Specialist for continuing education at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and previously worked at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to her work, she is currently completing her external PhD in educational sciences at the University of Tuebingen, Germany (thesis focus: international comparative lifelong learning and learning of the oldest-old adults). Furthermore, she is an active member of various national and international aging and adult learning societies and serves as the chair of the Lifetime Education and Renewal (LEARN) Council within the American Society on Aging since 2013.

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