

## **Life Long Learning and Service: Lessons Learned from the Academy of Senior Professionals**

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### **Introduction**

The year was 1727, and the place was Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin organized a small group of 11 people to meet for the purposes of debate on issues such as morals, politics, and philosophy. This discussion group, the Junto, which later became the American Philosophical Society, was the beginning of the adult education movement in the United States. From those early beginnings, the seeds were planted for a myriad of adult education programs and agencies.

One of the first leaders in modern adult education was Eduard Lindeman. Writing in 1926, Lindeman described his vision of adult education.

Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigorous; who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations; who dig down into the reservoirs of their experience...who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom... this constitutes the setting for adult education, the modern quest for life's meaning. (p.11)

From that vision, adult educators focused their attention on a multitude of adult education concerns including understanding what defines adult education, who chooses to participate in adult education activities, what motivates adult learners to participate in adult education activities, and in what specific learning pursuits do adults invest their time and energy. More recently as the demographics begin to show a growth in the numbers of senior adults, more attention is being given to understanding these concerns as they pertain to senior adults.

### **Adult Education and Senior Adults**

#### **Changing demographics**

Opinions about aging and the activities of senior adults are changing. This is due, in part, to the fact that the demographics of America are changing. The United States is becoming a country with a growing population of older adults (Cross, 1981; Dychtwald, 1986; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Where the United States was once a youth-oriented society, it is now seeing two adult generations, which consists of the current senior adults and the adults born since 1946, merging to form the largest segment of the population. The Census Bureau projects that life expectancy in 2040 will be 75 years for men and 83 for women; additionally, the National Health Institute on Aging, a division of the Institutes for Health, projects that life expectancy to be 86 years for men and 91.5 for women (Dychtwald, 1989). "Throughout most of recorded human history, only one in ten people could expect to live to the age of 65. Today, nearly 80 percent of Americans will live to be past that age" (Dychtwald, 1989, p. 6).

This merging population of senior adults represents the best-educated people in American history. The United States veterans returning from World War II were able to take advantage of the educational benefits of the G.I. Bill (Knowles, 1977). Additionally, beginning in the late 1950's, the emergence of the community college systems, "open admissions", and external degree programs provided an even broader opportunity for higher education for people wanting a college education (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982;

Knowles, 1977). The Census Bureau (1989) reported the median years of schooling has risen from just higher than an eighth-grade level for those age 65-and-older in 1950 to more than 12 years of formal education for that same age-group in 1989. In 1989, 11% of those age 65 and older had completed 4 or more years of college; this figure will rise to 20% by the year 2010 (Manheimer, 1998). Studies show that intellectual and creative stimulation promotes longevity and better quality of life (Berkman, 2000; Brockett, 1987; Dychtwald, 1989; Fisher & Speight, 1999; Goff, 1992; Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Snowdon, 2002).

Consequently, for many older adults, opinions concerning leisure and retirement are changing due to the fact that many are experiencing better health, living longer, and having higher levels of education than previous generations. These older adults do not want to sit on the porch in their rocking chairs. They want to remain active and connected with friends, family, and to continue to learn about their world. Therefore, many senior adults choose to continue in lifelong learning that includes specific educational learning experiences. As a result, the demand for lifelong learning activities that involve older adults during their retirement years is increasing.

### Who Participates and Why

Adult educators have long been concerned with identifying who participates and what motivates adults to participate in adult education kinds of experiences. The focus of their investigations has typically been on people in early and middle adulthood within university or industry settings. However, the issue of participation in adult education by senior adult learners is receiving more attention in the literature. One of the most comprehensive studies to date concerning older adult learners was conducted by Lois Lamdin and Mary Fugate (1997). Lamdin and Fugate conducted a survey of senior adult learners in an effort to gain understanding of the kinds of learning activities that are being conducted by what they call "elderlearners". The learners were identified through mailing lists from various senior adult learning organizations such as Elderhostel, Institutes for Learning in Retirement, and OASIS centers. These adult learning organizations provide learning activities in which older adults participate in short-term, educational programs and are usually associated with a learning institution such as a college, university, or museum (Abraham, 1998; Arsenault, Anderson & Swedburg, 1998; Lamdin & Fugate, 1997; Manheimer, 1998). Over 3,000 Elderlearning Surveys were sent out, and 860 responses were received.

Lamdin and Fugate discovered that the majority of the respondents were women, most were married, their ages clustered between 65 and 79, nearly 80% achieved a level of education at the two-year college level and above, 94% of the respondents were Caucasian, and 87% rated their health as excellent or good. Furthermore, these learners tend to focus their self-directed learning projects on a wide range of interests including computers (17%), arts and crafts (19.6%), genealogy or family history (7%), and search for wisdom and spiritual expressions (7%). Learning to play a musical instrument and investigating financial planning comprise other areas of self-directed learning.

Additionally, Lamdin and Fugate found that 72.9% of the respondents are involved in volunteer activities, with 43.1% reporting that they volunteer on either a full-time basis or one to three days each week. Their volunteer activities include work in the social service fields such as serving as mental health clinic aides, working with autistic children, and working as aids in hospitals, nursing homes, and hospices. Many older adults continue in service projects that have direct ties to pre-retirement activities where they are able to use their prior learning and skills. Other older adults become more politically involved with their chosen political parties.

Lamdin and Fugate found that when senior adult learners were asked why they choose to participate in educational activities, the answer “joy of learning is the clearly the hands-down winner. People starred it or circled it, put multiple exclamation points after it” (p. 75). The second most given reason for participation is social, to be connected with older adult learners. Since senior adult learners are no longer in need of educational activities for career or job pursuit or advancement, their learning needs become one of personal enhancement, information for life skill needs, and social connection. Reasons given for participating in volunteer activities include being useful, having something significant to contribute, and that in some way volunteerism helps to take the away the fear of growing old.

Other studies concerning older adult learners also tend to focus on older adult learners who choose to participate in learning opportunities provided by an agency like Elderhostel. However, there is little known about self-directed senior adults who form their own learning organizations for their own self-directed learning needs. One such group is the Academy of Senior Professionals (ASP) in Bethany, Oklahoma

### The Academy of Senior Professionals

#### The organization

In 1990, a group of senior adults formed an organization called “The Academy of Senior Professionals” (ASP). With a published purpose to provide a climate of continuing intellectual stimulation, over 100 senior adults meet monthly on the campus of Southern Nazarene University to explore various forms of intellectual, cultural, spiritual, and service activities. Monthly meetings, small group research teams, monthly newsletters, and service projects represent the kinds of learning activities in which the members participate. At monthly meetings the members have a meal and listen to speakers, but they also share with the group their continuing, self-directed educational pursuits such as writing of memoirs, displaying art work, and providing musical entertainment. In addition to the monthly meetings, small groups of the members meet for research on topics of interest. This group conducts surveys to determine the learning interests of the membership at large, researches the topics, and provides information for the programs at the monthly meetings. Members who have expertise in writing and publication produce a monthly newsletter.

ASP was born out of the desire of a retired Southern Nazarene University professor to continue to grow and learn intellectually, spiritually, and culturally during retirement and to do so with other retirees on a regular basis. Equally important, he saw retirement as a time to be of continued service to Southern Nazarene University.

The idea [ASP] came when I saw an article in the Oklahoman back probably '89 about the Academy of Senior Professionals in Eckhart College in St. Petersburg, Florida. The idea struck me, that sounds like a good idea. That's a lot of potential for the seniors as well as there would be a lot of side benefits for the university. So I went down and visited to see what it was like. Later, they held a seminar for seniors. I went down to learn about their organization. . . . Then later I came back and did a little survey to see who would be interested in this area. We started off with a small group of members, and then from there, I asked certain ones if they would be on the ballot, to a particular office. [A woman member] was our first chairman.

From this beginning, the by-laws were written and a membership drive was started. More importantly, a mission and purpose statement was created and a motto

was developed. Published in handouts, in brochures, and on their home-page on the Southern Nazarene University Website, these read:

Definition:

1. A COMMUNITY of those from various professional backgrounds who, no longer needing to face the pressure of regular professional activities, would like to join with others in comparable circumstances in the realization of personal and shared goals entailing various forms of intellectual, cultural, spiritual and service activities.
2. An ORGANIZATION composed of individuals of all races, religions, and nationalities who have matured in their profession and/or are of expertise and would like to participate with others of common interests. Those who purposes and goals coincide closely with the following are encouraged to join the Academy.

Purpose:

1. To create an environment of exploration, sharing, and learning that will attract members with a history of distinguished achievement.
2. To provide a climate of continuing intellectual stimulation.

The Motto: Sharing a Continuous Flight

When asked how the mission statement and the motto were conceived, the founder of ASP replied,

It was just kind of an idea, that when you retire, you don't want to sit around and do nothing. You want to be actively involved with your fellow professionals and be of service to others. I just thought, well, we'll continue on with this total process of learning together and sharing with each other. . . .It's not only the knowledge and all; it's the process of learning and continuing on with what you have learned and what you will continue to learn. You don't stop doing that if you're an alive person.

For over 10 years, ASP has provided an informal learning structure for senior adult learners to remain alive intellectually, to grow culturally and spiritually, to be of service to Southern Nazarene University, and to connect with one another in an adult education learning environment.

The research project

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of the learning patterns of the senior adult learners in the Academy of Senior Professionals (ASP) in Bethany, Oklahoma. The study used the following research questions: (a) what do the learning projects of ASP look like; (b) how do ASP members understand themselves as learners; (c) how do ASP members acquire the knowledge and skill to learn effectively in specific learning situations; (d) what role does learning play in the lives of ASP members; (f) what are the life learning experiences that brought the members into ASP, and (g) how does the community of faith of ASP members influence their learning.

This case study used a naturalistic design in order to collect and analyze qualitative data in order to describe the learning perceptions and projects of the senior adult learners from the ASP. Data was gathered through interviewing 30 members of

ASP, observations of the activities of ASP, and reviewing documents produced by the members of ASP.

## Findings

### The participants

.All the participants are Caucasians. Their ages range from 62 years of age to 89 years of age. Fourteen of the participants are male and 16 are female. Eighteen of the participants are married couples who both attend ASP. Sixteen of these couples have been married for at least 40 years, while there are two couples who have a slightly different profile due to marrying later in life. Seven participants, five females and two males, are single as a result of the death of a spouse or divorce. Five participants, although married, attend ASP without their partners. All the participants have some college hours, five have bachelor degrees, three have seminary degrees, ten have master degrees, and seven have doctorates. Nineteen of the participants have lived in the Bethany/Oklahoma City, Oklahoma area for most of their adult lives while 11 of the participants retired to that area.

In sum, the profile of the participants is fairly consistent with other studies concerning older adult learners in informal learning situations. The unique qualities of this group are that there tend to be nearly as many men as women in the organization and all but one are connected through a long history based on their religious and educational backgrounds.

### Religious and educational background

The religious background for 28 of the participants is in the Church of the Nazarene. Many of the participants have been a part of the Church of the Nazarene since childhood. In deed, some of the parents of the participants were the early pioneers in the church.

The participants grew up in various places such as California, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Norway, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Texas. They were raised on farms and in cities. However, it was when they went to a small Nazarene college on the prairie of Oklahoma that their paths began to meet. Except for one participant, all others either attended Bethany Peniel College (now known as Southern Nazarene College), graduated from Bethany Peniel College, or taught there. Many of the participants met their spouses there, and many established lifelong friendships as a result of their affiliation with Bethany Peniel College. Because of the importance that was placed on education by the church, by their families, and by other significant people in their lives, all the participants have some college hours and most earned bachelor degrees while 20 of the participants went on to graduate school in institutions like Harvard Divinity School, Kansas State University, Nazarene Theological Seminary, Oklahoma State University, Salem State University, Southern Nazarene University, University of Central Oklahoma, University of Illinois, University of Oklahoma, and Vanderbilt University. Consequently, as retired people, their common bond of both religious and educational interests provides motivation to remain connected on both a spiritual and an intellectual basis.

### Learning through Informal Learning Groups

Although the Academy of Senior Professionals was the organization that was used in this study in order to identify the participants, ASP is but one of many learning organizations where they are members. They are actively involved in their Sunday Schools, missionary organizations, other senior learning organizations, reading groups, community service groups, and professional organizations.

The primary reason members give for participation in ASP and other learning groups is for social reasons. Although they enjoy the speakers and the participation in the small learning groups, the chance to be with their friends and acquaintances is their first voiced motivation for attending. Other studies suggest that the first reason senior adults give for participation is for learning while social reasons is the second reason for participation (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997).

### Learning through Self-Directed Activities

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the ASP members is the self-directed learning that occurs outside an informally structured learning environment. All of the participants actively engage in a wide variety of self-directed learning projects. While all have learning interests and projects that are unique to them, there are some learning projects that are common to most of the participants. These learning projects fall within three categories: intellectual, personal, and service.

Within the intellectual category are reading, writing, and computer usage. All of the participants indicated that they are readers with 26 reporting that they are avid readers. They read a variety of magazines, newspapers, and journals. Furthermore, they read both fiction and non-fiction. However, all of the members indicate that religious or spiritual kind of literature is a significant part of their reading and study.

Most of the participants engage in some kind of writing project. These include journals, memoirs, minutes from organizations, novels, religious articles, and books. The themes of their writing projects include a variety of topics from childhood memories to philosophy and religion. The women participants tend to write on personal topics such as family while the men participants tend to write on topics such as religion, philosophy, and health.

Another learning activity of most of the participants is using technology through their home computers. Of the 30 participants, 27 have home computers. They use their computers for many different kinds of applications: record keeping, word processing, and information gathering from the World Wide Web. However, the most common use of the computer is for electronic mail (e-mail). In addition to sending letters, announcements, and memos through e-mail, many of the participants have learned how to send attachments, download pictures, and print the pictures.

All of the participants engage in learning projects that enhance personal development in at least one of the following: arts and crafts, fine arts and music, genealogy, health and physical activities, and travel. Of these, travel, health and physical activities, and the fine arts and music are most common. Many of the members are seasoned world travelers, and the learning experiences from their travels have made them more aware of different cultures and customs. The participants enjoy various physical activities such as walking, running, and playing sports. Furthermore, they attend musical concerts, both gospel and non-sacred, and enjoy art and art museums.

### Learning through Service

Service to their community of faith has been so thoroughly woven into their life structures that continuing in service as senior adults is done almost without thought. All 30 of the participants indicate that they are faithful members of their churches with 26 of the participants involved in service projects that are directly related to the church and to the university.

Within the church arena, 17 participants engage in learning projects that involve counseling, providing compassionate ministries to the needy, consulting, music performance, preaching, and teaching. Preaching and teaching were occupations of 10 of the male participants before retirement; consequently, these men are often called

upon to fill in the pulpit for various churches and to teach Sunday School classes. A 78-year-old man reflects on his preaching as a retired person and the learning involved.

One of the things I am doing is that I am asked to speak at mid-week service once a quarter. . . .I have had in retirement four interim pastorates, all the way from about three months to two months. . . . There's self-satisfaction. Every time I say, "Why in the world did I ever agree to do this?" But after I do it, and after it's over, and like this last time, I got an e-mail from a lady who said, "That's just what I needed." Well, that kind of makes you feel good, like you are still accomplishing. It's probably not because I am not as smart as I once was, but I think I am doing better than I ever did at preaching, in speaking. I think my communicating is better because the pressure is off. There is no pressure to perform. If they don't like it, they can't fire me. You do want to be liked. You do want them to feel good. It makes me feel like you are not totally over the hill. That you still are needed. Every one wants to be needed.

One 81-year-old man has taught Sunday School for senior adults for 20 years, only missing a few Sundays for vacations and two Sundays when he had cancer surgery. He reflects

I think I do that [exhort the people in the class to continue to grow spiritually] because I recognize that I have a long way to go yet, and if I have a long way to go yet, so do you, too! I encourage them to continue to mature and grow. I don't know where I ever got it, but I've always had the concept that you never arrive at a given point when you say, "I am now mature, I can quit." I think that goes on until death, unless you just give up and do nothing, you know. I think it's possible to keep on developing throughout your life. Many in our class are very active. Calling all the time. I call on my class and have done other calling. Some of them are chaplains at the college here, and they're in their 70's, go every day, calling because they want to keep active and not deteriorate, not shrivel up just because of age.

For 13 of the participants, service to missions and compassionate ministries to the needy are focal in their service projects. For five of the participants, their travels are directly related to church "work and witness" trips where they help to build churches and hospitals. For example, since 1990 one 75-year-old man has been on 86 trips to Spanish speaking countries as an interpreter. He describes his motivation for service.

It's a human need to matter to people, to matter to someone. Many people that I've known who have personal trouble have got to the place whether they felt they didn't matter to anyone, and they either grew sick and died or they took their lives. That's not good. When you feel that you are contributing to someone else's life, that makes you feel like, well, I'm worthwhile in some way.

Other participants engage in service projects that involve helping with inner city missions, compassionate ministries, and counseling. One 80-year-old woman, who volunteers as a counselor, described her training. "We were lay pastors up here at the church for a long time. We took a course for paraprofessional counseling. Of course, we had done quite a bit of counseling before we had taken that course, but we took it."

For 24 of the participants, service to the university is important to them. They volunteer in alumnae activities, they participate in fundraising auctions, and they are special speakers in some of the classes. One 89-year-old man helps to take care of the

horses that are part of the horsemanship program at the university. One 72-year-old woman has established several scholarships because she feels, "I need to be giving back." One couple conducts workshops on multi-cultural awareness for the traditional-aged students at the university. Another 68-year-old man helps with the archives of the university. He explains his motivation.

I have pitched the archives, in fact, very heavily. I have worked [very hard] on this thing. I feel that archives, the history of our church, will be invaluable to the learning and understanding processes of the groups that are coming on, like my daughter and granddaughters.

Whether the service projects are focused on the church or the university, the participants understand the importance of service to the institutions and to them personally. As one 79-year-old woman said with great emotion, "I guess if there's one thing that impresses me more than ever right now, is that we are here as Christians to be servants."

### Conclusions: Lessons Learned through Lifelong Learning and Service

#### Learning is Seeking

The participants are active learners who engage in a wide variety of self-directed learning opportunities both through informal avenues and through independent learning projects, and they use many different resources. Through the years of being active learners, the participants have come to understand that they are responsible for their learning. Often this responsibility is described as a curiosity, a thirst for learning, and a realization of how much there is still to learn, as explained by one 89-year old participant.

You have to have a little bit of intellectual curiosity that keeps stimulating yourself. I don't think it's automatic. You have to keep on working at it. You have to deliberately decide that you want to keep on. And as you do, one thing leads to another, keeps stimulating. Learning stimulates learning. It keeps you alive. Keep on living. That's the way it is with my interest in watching young people. It kind of prolongs my long-drawn youth to watch how kids react and compare them to past generations. I've known a lot of generations of kids. Learning stimulates learning.

#### Learning is Spiritual

For many of the participants, they understand that a long life is a God-given gift; therefore, they are compelled to be in continuous spiritual learning in order to be of further service to their community of faith. As one 73-year-old participant simply said, "The purpose of learning is to serve God better." Others support this pragmatic concept of learning in order to serve.

The person without purpose is just existing. Biblically that's not a good idea. I think its very parallel or it coincides with Biblical teachings. The Psalmist David was a person who learned all his life, the apostle Paul is a great example of a lifelong learner, and he used circumstances in which to learn. Jesus, himself, gave examples of being a learner in that he learned things, then he taught people. So this has influenced me a great deal. Always being ready to teach, if someone asks, or to learn if there is an opportunity. (75-year-old man)

God has placed us here for a purpose, and that is primarily to help others. If we sit there on the job and just think, "Well, I'm over the hill", sit down and don't do anything or think we cannot do anything, we are going dry up and blow away and miss many opportunities we could have otherwise. (80-year-old woman)

Learning new spiritual insights is a continual quest, as expressed by one 68-year-old woman, "You are never mature, you are always learning something. I am amazed at times as something dawns on me that I hadn't recognized before, it just skipped by me." One 73-year-old man describes his lifelong learning for the meaning of truth and spiritual understanding.

Lifelong learning is a calling. I think truth is a calling to us. I like what my favorite philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, said. He said, "Truth is a lighted place where we can continue to learn and to grow." I use that because that is really where I am. I think, too, it takes an attitude of realizing that this is our Father's world, and truth can come to us many, many places. Beauty and holiness can be communicated to us in many, many places. There's only one source of that beauty and that holiness, and that is, of course, God, who is everywhere.

### Learning is Life

The participants understand that continuous learning in some way contributes to living longer by keeping the mind alive. In essence, they firmly believe that quality living and active learning are inseparable links.

I am not about to stop learning. There was a story about a [church leader], and he was . . . 84 years old. He had his books out, and he was studying. Someone walked in on him, and they said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm learning the computer." He was going to class to learn computers. He was 84 years old! They said, "Why are you doing that? You're 84 years old." He said, "Because I haven't stopped learning yet. That's why I'm doing it." That's the way I feel. If we stop learning, we are done for. (68-year-old man)

If you are not [continuously learning], you are going to die, mentally at least. I really think you would fade away. I can't imagine not continuing to try to learn, being interested in something all the time. Some people aren't. I really think you are going to die. Mentally and maybe physically. I think it is vital. (76 year-old woman)

Lifelong learning and service not only helps to promote length of life, but more importantly it helps to bring a quality of life that enables the participants to remain busy and rarely being bored. Being active is critical in the well-being of older adults. One 80-year-old woman explains why it is important for senior adults to continue to grow and mature through lifelong learning and service.

You are not getting stale just because you are getting old. Learning means an opportunity to learn things to help other people as well as myself. It keeps you from drying up and dying in your shell. So many people will give up when they reach retirement age. They think they can't do anything anymore. When I see somebody. . . who has potential and just decides he doesn't want to do anything or she doesn't want to do anything because "I'm too old now" or "I'm just going to

sit down now and take it easy for the rest of the time”, then I feel like those people are missing so much by not using the abilities God has given them through the years and the experience that we have.

Most importantly, the participants realize that not only are they continually growing and maturing through lifelong learning and service, but they also can continue to do so with a realistic optimism. As one 73-year-old man enthusiastically said about the meaning of his own learning and service projects:

I hope I can continue to grow and to learn. A doctor told me to keep yourself mentally active, and I’ve tried to do that. I think it works. I’m looking forward. I’m looking forward. I hear people talking about the good old days. Hey, I lived in those so-called good old days, and I don’t want to go back to them. I want to keep on going forward. Oh, it keeps me alive! It keeps me alive! I drove by [a nursing home] today and I thought, “Not yet! Not yet!” It keeps me alive!

### Recommendations

#### Recommendations for Adult Education

The success of ASP demonstrates that older adult learners can be trusted to be creative enough and skilled enough to identify, to address, and to solve their own learning needs. Older adults begin their senior adulthood years not as novices about the world and how the world functions; rather, they are armed with a wealth of knowledge and experience. In a society that values youth and being young, the aging person is often not recognized for their abundance of experience, knowledge, and skills. Furthermore, not only are older people not recognized for their experience, they are often not valued as people. These negative and destructive attitudes are referred to as ageism. Senior adults have the talent, the desire, the ability, and the knowledge to form self-directed learning groups; however, a formal organization that supports and encourages their efforts as they address and solve their own learning needs can play an important role in their empowerment.

#### Recommendations for Christian Higher Education

As the adult population ages, a new opportunity will be presented for the colleges and universities affiliated with the Church of the Nazarene. These universities and colleges can continue to be the church in action through education by encouraging the church’s growing numbers of older members to continue to learn, to grow, and to mature. The success of ASP shows that a Christian college can help to enable older adults to solve their own learning needs. Therefore, Christian colleges and universities should encourage and provide opportunities for dialogue with senior adults in their local communities to start self-directed learning organizations. Furthermore, Christian colleges and universities should utilize the wealth of experience and knowledge of the older adult learners within their traditional framework. The experience and knowledge of these learners can lend itself well to guest lecturing in the classroom, consulting on administration, providing clerical assistance, and participating in alumnae activities and fund raising. Together, the older adults and the college community can thrive in a healthy relationship where each is enriched by the other.

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