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Age-segregated programs perpetuate artificial separation from the general citizenry.

Intermill: Education programs for older adults: A critique

Education programs for older adults: A critique

By Nancy Lerner Intermill

In recent years the literature has suggested the value of increasing educational opportunities for older adults. Covey (1980) points out that older people constitute a viable pool of potential students at a time when many colleges are faced with declining enrollments as well as severe financial cutbacks. Furthermore, institutions of higher education—particularly public institutions and community colleges—recognize the growing numbers of older persons in our society and are looking to serve the educational needs of this population (Chelsvig & Timmerman, 1979). The literature also suggests that education can be of value to the older adult in a variety of ways. This paper will explore the potential benefits that

provided by college institutions. The paper will also explore the value of special programming for this population versus "mainstreaming" them into the regular student body. Finally, it will address the utilization of education programs by senior adults—who actually participates? While advocates tout the advantages to both student and institution of drawing more older people into institutions of higher education, it does not appear that the great majority of older persons are availing themselves of the educational opportunities offered to them.

The Benefit of Education to The Older Adult

It is generally acknowledged that people encounter a series of social and physical changes as they age. Death of spouse and friends, retirement, and relocation are developmental events which are likely to be experienced by the older person. These changes may be viewed as potentially stressful, leaving the older person vulnerable to stress-related diseases and disabilities. These same events, however, can lead to a period of personal growth and fulfillment, marked by new relationships and social roles (Boren et al., 1979). Regardless of the point of view with which one chooses to view the aging process, there is agreement among psychologists that individuals in their later years often review their lives, acknowledging successes and failures in an effort to reconcile their life experiences (Butler & Lewis 1973; Erickson, 1959; Neugarter, 1968). While education cannot be viewed as an antidote to the stresses of late life, it can be used as a vehicle for encouraging personal growth and productivity. Alpaugh et al. (1976) note that "an educational system involving these [older] people in creative thinking, new interests, and novel projects would lead to leisure-time accomplishments that would enhance their self concept and increase life satisfaction." In fact, in a 1979 study, Boren et al. reported that participants in a career transition program experienced a lessening of depression, a growing sense of independence, and a heightening sense of their potential for undertaking new ventures.

Some researchers have taken this argument one step further: the notion is that education not only provides a pastime for the older adult faced with a greater number of leisure hours—it can actually contribute to mental and physical well-being. Cross & Florio (1978) claim that continued education, mental stimulation, and cultural pursuits not only keep older people happy, but they also enhance a sense of well-being and, perhaps, even contribute to increased longevity. Furthermore they cite a study of some 900 adults conducted in 1958 by the Duke University Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development which reported that better educated people live longer than others.

It is a large and far too tenuous step to argue, much less conclude, that continued participation in educational activities in later years is directly related to increased life expectancy. Educational participation tends to be selective—involving those with higher socioeconomic status and better health, and those whose past life experiences have facilitated the knowledge to use the available services systems, including education. Any apparent direct relationship between educational participation and life expectancy actually reflects the complex interaction of a number of variables such as these. Although it is undoubtedly true that education can increase a sense of meaning and provide a mechanism for coping with life ex-

periences, regardless of age, it is yet unclear to what degree and in what specific ways education is of benefit to the older adult. That it is a valuable activity is acknowledged by educators and older people alike. Whether education can become of greater value to a broader range of older people remains to be seen. In this paper, several issues related to this broader question are addressed.

How to Best Serve The Older Student: Mainstreaming or Special Programming?

Currently program planners for the aging are grappling with the question of generic versus categorical services. Generic services imply a sense of equality and universality whereby older people are served by a system simply by virtue of their being citizens or adults—not because they are old or poor or vulnerable. Categorical services, on the other hand, are specially designed with one interest group in mind, and the assumption is made that needs can best be met in these “special programs.” The educational opportunities available to older adults today reflect this dilemma of generic versus categorical programs.

A number of categorical educational programs have been created over the last several years in order to appeal to the older student. Some institutions of higher education offer programs on campus while others invite the older student to attend college courses in vacation-like settings away from home. Course offerings vary, but they typically include the liberal arts, self-awareness courses, and arts and crafts. Courses such as these are generally offered on a no-credit basis. Probably the best-known program of this type is the Elderhostel program. Formed in the summer of 1975, the intent of the program was to provide a residential educational experience for older persons. Three one-week courses were offered at each of five institutions; special activities and events were promoted as part of the program. The institutionalization and universal spread of the Elderhostel concept indicates its success. In the summer of 1980, all 50 states will have programs; some 300 colleges will be offering courses and it's expected that 25,000 older persons will participate. Another categorical program of a slightly different nature is described by Boren et al. (1979) in which a second career program was designed to help older adults cope constructively with midlife and midcareer changes. Proponents of specialized programs such as these note that they lessen the “culture shock” of the educational system and may provide an entry for the older person into mainstream programs.

While different in intent these programs are similar in that, by virtue of their categorical nature, they are age-segregated. There are disadvantages to age-segregated programs of all types which cannot be ignored. In our ageist society, categorical programs perpetuate the artificial separation of older people from the general citizenry. This is particularly ironic in educational settings where gerontology centers advocate for the rights of elders to participate fully in our society. On a more pragmatic level it should be noted that federal funding of categorical programs is beginning to decline, and it is likely that this trend will continue in view of our faltering economy. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of these programs is that with the separation of generations, a great deal of wisdom and tradition disappears over time. Older people carry with them the personal experiences of

their lifetimes. In total, these experiences create a context for the history of our nation. As we continue to support programs (from social service to education) which promote age segregation, we are inadvertently losing an invaluable resource. In his recent study of older college students, Covey (1980) concludes “... that specialized college curricula and programs may, in the long run, be a disservice to older people because it isolates them from standardized college course work and the general student population.”

If it is the responsibility of gerontological program planners to encourage a realistic presentation of the aging process in our society, it may be argued that age-integrated programs provide an opportunity for the practice of this precept. Through age-integrated programs in which persons of various ages work and play together, the mutual contact of these age groups are more likely to foster their viewing each other realistically rather than stereotypically. There are educational programs available to older persons which are of an age-integrated nature. For the most part these programs take the form of policies in colleges and universities which offer older people the opportunity to audit regular courses on a free or reduced tuition basis. As of 1979 one out of three institutions of higher education offered such programs for older persons (Chelsvig & Timmerman, 1979). Free and reduced-fee audit programs not only provide an opportunity for intergenerational exchange, but they have another advantage over categorical programs as well: they offer a range of courses to the older person which are not available through special programs. Self-actualization and arts and crafts classes have traditionally been offered by special program planners to meet the assumed needs of this population. Current evidence shows that planners may have misread the educational concerns of the elderly; older people are also interested in pursuing courses related to second or late entry career interests (Boren et al., 1979; Jones, 1979). Through the “mainstreaming” approach, the older student can choose to participate in virtually any course offered by the institution; thus he or she can fulfill individual educational desires and needs.

Utilization of Educational Programs by Older Adults

It has been shown that education is a valuable tool in assisting the older person to adjust to the aging process. Nationwide, institutions of higher education are offering a variety of programs such as those described above to meet the diverse educational needs of this population. It appears likely, however, that the vast majority of these programs are not reaching the older persons in greatest need (Chelsvig & Timmerman, 1979). While documentation of the numbers of older persons participating in educational programs is scant (Chelsvig & Timmerman, 1979; Covey, 1980), a study conducted by the National Center for Education Studies indicated that as of May 1975, only 4 percent of those 55 years and over were participating in educational opportunities. Furthermore, this group comprised only 9 percent of the total number of adult participants in educational activities.

It has been suggested that those elders who do participate in college programs are actually a select group, well-educated, and of relatively secure financial means (Chelsvig & Timmerman, 1979; Covey, 1980). A brief analysis of demographic profiles in the Elderhostel program indicates that this program serves senior adults who have been involved with the educational system

throughout their lifespans (Elderhostel Education Programs for older adults: A critique 1978). In 1978, 83 percent of all Elderhostel participants had previously attended some college; 30 percent of the participants had completed graduate school. Covey (1980) surveyed participants in age-integrated free and reduced-fee tuition programs; he reports that "... every older student had been involved in formal or informal education throughout their lives and were cognizant of this ongoing relationship with education." Furthermore the Elderhostel literature shows that fully 50 percent of all their participants have an annual family income of at least \$12,000, yet 84 percent of these same participants indicated that they were retired (Elderhostel Annual Report, 1978). Again, Covey (1980) concurs: "... older students reported significantly higher incomes than nonstudents." Given the current cohort of older persons in our society today, these student populations appear to be a very select group, indeed.

Conclusion

All older people can benefit from the advantages of continuing education including productivity, increased self-esteem, a sense of well-being and additional knowledge. It appears, furthermore, that educational institutions are attempting to attract older students. There are gaps in this process, however, which need to be addressed. At a minimum, further research and understanding is needed in the following areas:

- Motivational studies to identify ways in which educational planners can successfully and widely appeal to all persons in the older generation;
- Evaluation research to look at the appropriateness and effectiveness of age-segregated versus age-integrated educational programs;
- Accurate demographic tracking systems to identify the types and numbers of older students in various educational settings.

It is the responsibility of our higher education system not only to make programs available to older people, but also to encourage and facilitate their participation. If the colleges and universities are truly going to be responsive to the communities they serve, we can look forward to seeing the gray heads of all types of older people on our

campuses. Regardless of previous education level or socioeconomic status. The older student is here to stay—what remains is the challenge to provide him or her with the education that best suits his or her needs.

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