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# Rules of Engagement: Builders and Barriers to Developing and Delivering Intellectually Stimulating, Non-credit Learning Experiences Offered through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes on University and College Campuses in the United States

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# **Rules of Engagement: Builders and Barriers to Developing and Delivering Intellectually Stimulating, Non-credit Learning Experiences Offered through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes on University and College Campuses in the United States**

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**Abstract:** Program administration within higher education can be especially challenging for those who are unfamiliar with academia's bureaucratic processes and constraints. This discussion explores viable avenues for identifying the challenges that directors of non-credit adult learning programs face when associated with degree granting academic institutions.

## **Background**

In 2001, the Bernard Osher Foundation endowed the first Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). Through OLLI, the Osher Foundation provides lifelong learning communities for adult learners who wish to affiliate with academic institutions to pursue the joy of learning without regard for grades or degrees. To date, 116 lifelong learning programs across the country receive the Osher Foundation support. While there is much variation among the Osher Institutes, the Bernard Osher Foundation's website (2005) reports that commonalities include: "non-credit educational programs specifically developed for seasoned adults who are aged 50 and older; university connection and university support; robust volunteer leadership and sound organizational structure; and a diverse repertoire of intellectually stimulating courses" (para. 6). While each OLLI is affiliated with a university or college, the degree to which the academic partner is involved with the institutes' administration varies significantly. For example, some institutes are managed independently and operate out of their own physical space, while others are administered by academic personnel and are housed within university property. In some cases, institutes report to the academic provost, while some report to the deans of various colleges. Though all Osher institutes are member driven, the function of members differs widely among the 116 institutes. Some have established bylaws and boards of directors that provide governance and ensure compliance with Osher Foundation guidelines, while others operate with less formal governance structures.

### *OLLI Directors*

*In* addition to program and administrative diversity, varied university support and sponsorship, Directors of Osher Lifelong Institutes are equally diverse in experience managing programs within higher education. While many directors have extensive non-profit experience, many assume the directorship of Osher Institutes with little or limited experience with administration within higher education.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The proposed study explores the builders and barriers that OLLI directors perceive impact program development and institute success. Specifically, the study will examine OLLI's relationship with their partner academic institution and the director's experience with higher education to ascertain how the two factors constrain and disrupt or support and enable OLLI aspirations.

## **Research Questions**

Questions that guide the study include:

1. What are the administrative challenges of delivering non-credit courses within degree-granting academic institutions?
2. How does director familiarity with higher education's bureaucratic processes and constraints impact program administration?

### **Roundtable Discussion Questions**

Questions that guide the roundtable discussion include:

1. Having found no previous study that examines this issue, what research design would be appropriate for this study?
2. Having found no previous study that examines this issue, what data collection techniques would be appropriate for this research?

### **Significance of Study and Roundtable Goal**

This study will shed light on how various Osher Institutes are configured and managed. The researchers view this study as providing baseline information from which to launch future studies regarding best practices among OLLI Institutes. The AERC roundtable discussion would serve as a forum to examine the feasibility of the study and to exchange ideas regarding the design and data collection techniques that would be appropriate.

### **References**

The Bernard Osher Foundation. (2005). *The programs: Current programs*. Retrieved from <http://www.osherfoundation.org/index.php?olli>