Universities of the Third Age: Learning in Retirement

Universities of the Third Age (U3As) provide learning opportunities for older adults who are largely free of work and family responsibilities. Worldwide, they typically take one of two forms (Swindell 1997): the French model (based on the first U3A founded in 1973) is university based and offers mostly formal courses; the British model, arising in Cambridge in 1981, emphasizes informal, autonomous self-help groups in which the instructors are usually third-agers themselves, not college professors. In the United States and Canada, the term U 3 A is virtually unknown, but the form exists as Institutes of Learning in Retirement (ILRs), begun in 1962. Of the more than 200 ILRs are linked by the Elderhostel Learning Network (Young 1996). Like the British model, ILRs are community based and often member conducted; like the French model, many are affiliated with colleges and universities (Swindell 1995).

That U3A/ILRs are a growing phenomenon reflects the demographic trend of more people living longer, healthier lives. They also reflect several educational trends: participation is strongly linked to prior education (ibid.); they are communities of learners without distinctions between teachers and learners (Cairns 1995; W illiamson 1995); and the global networking made possible by the Internet is enabling the participation of homebound, frail, or geographically isolated elders (Swindell and Vassella 1997).

U3A/ILRs are at the intersection of educational funding and policy debates. The current rhetoric of lifelong learning and the "Learning Society" too often means a narrower emphasis on learning to improve work skills and economic productivity (W illiamson 1997). This vocational emphasis is less appropriate and overly constraining for third-age learners at the same time, competition for limited educational and social services monies fuels stereotypes of an aging population as a drain on society (Swindell 1997). However, learning-in-retirement programs can demonstrate how they improve and prolong quality of life, making the case for funding programs that support self-sufficiency and increased well-being, thus freeing social services money for the neediest individuals (Swindell 1991, 1997).

Issues that U3A/ILRs must address to sustain their momentum into the 21st century include (1) broadening participation to more diverse groups of elders (Swindell 1997); (2) exploiting the networking possibilities of the World Wide Web (ibid.); (3) addressing the intergenerational imperative by encouraging reflection on life experiences and integration of self (W illiamson 1997); and (4) fostering research on aging by third-age participants themselves (Bynum and Seaman 1993; Lemieux 1995).

Print Resources


A profile of 452 older adults enrolled in Learning-in-Retirement institutes showed they had relatively high economic status and extensive educational background. They were motivated by self-actualization, perceived cognitive gaps, intellectual curiosity, and social contact. An intellectually stimulating curriculum is a pivotal factor in predicting program success and appeal.


Describes the structure of U3A in Britain and their umbrella organization, the Third A ge Trust. Emphasizes the self-help, informal nature of the study groups.


A survey of participants in an Institute for Learning in Retirement revealed the strengths of peer learning. The Internet has the potential to expand participation to those with limited mobility.


Describes the Australian College for Seniors, in which Elderhostel members from the United States participate.


This handbook presents the history of Learning-in-Retirement programs and explains how to start and operate a member-driven ILR.

Lemieux, A. “The University of the Third Age: Role of Senior Citizens.” Educational Gerontology 21, no. 4 (June 1995): 337-344. (EJ 507 725)

Universities of the Third Age are developing the research facet of their mission. In this model, the senior citizen is both the object and the agent of research, being involved in action research that transforms their subjective impressions and intuitions into objective knowledge with which to transform their environment.


Makes the case for higher education institutions’ involvement in education for older adults on various levels: economic, social, and institutional.


Reviews data on the rapid growth of the older population in Australia. Describes the aims and content of gerontological education, highlighting the importance of destroying myths. Describes the educa-
University of the Third Age (U3A) contribute both to individual well-being and national economies. One new direction is electronic networking and the World Wide Web. Although expensive to implement, this would have the potential of reaching even greater numbers of the aging population.


Universities of the Third Age contribute to both individual well-being and national economies. One new direction is electronic networking and the World Wide Web. Although expensive to implement, this would have the potential of reaching even greater numbers of the aging population.


Using data collected from 146 U3A in Australia and New Zealand, researchers estimated the economic value of the U3A movement to exceed $4 million in the region.

Swindell, R.; James, C.; and Mann, M. A Study of Teleconferencing as a Medium for Improving the Quality of Life of the Frail Elderly. Nathan, Australia: Griffith University, 1992. (ED 346 310)

Research findings revealing improved quality of life for frail homebound older adults support the use of teleconferencing and Internet-based activities in U3A.