INDIANA UNIVERSITY’S MINI UNIVERSITY: A MODEL IN LIFELONG LEARNING

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The population of the United States is aging. Older generations are increasingly more educated, in better health, and more financially advantaged than previous generations. As a result, these older adults are showing interest in continued educational opportunities. Mini University is a 40 year tradition at Indiana University, taking place on the flagship campus in Bloomington, Indiana, every summer. Using Caffarella's planning model as a framework, this qualitative case study illustrates the success of the program through interviews with the faculty, staff, and learners involved and through the authors’ observations of the program. Recurring themes that contribute to the long-standing success of the program were observed and are shared in this study in order to help other institutions replicate the Mini University model.

Keywords: Lifelong learning, Learning vacation, Senior adults, Elder learning, Learning in retirement.

Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), by the year 2030, there will be 40 million people in the country over the age of 65 (as quoted in Truluck, Kim & Valentine, 2010). This is good news for adult educators, because today’s older adults are better educated, in relatively better health and economically more advantaged than previous generations. Most importantly, they continue to seek educational opportunities beyond formal education and often well beyond retirement (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007). Adult educators across the globe are being challenged to design, develop and implement learning programs that continuously tempt, attract and satisfy the thirst these experienced learners have for new learning prospects.

Using Caffarella’s (2002) interactive model of program planning as a framework, this qualitative study conducted a case analysis of Indiana University’s Mini University learning vacation to determine what makes the program successful.

The purpose of the study is to discern the elements that make the program a long-term success and to discover if those elements are replicable. The study is an effort to add to the growing body of knowledge on lifelong learning by senior adults, and it hopes to aid program planners seeking to design programs geared for senior learners. Implications of the findings for future research will be discussed.
The available literature on senior adult learners paints a portrait of lifelong learners that continuously seek opportunity through formal and informal educational programs. Arsenault and Swedburg (1998) said, “The stereotype of the decrepit senior citizen is changing, as they can be described as vibrant, active and engaged” (p. 112). No more can senior adults be packaged into a single, homogenous group labeled “old people.” Instead, senior adults are now actively participating in everything from extreme physical challenges to complex mental competitions. Simone and Cesana (2010) reported “Cognitive stimulation appears to be one of the key components to healthy aging, and lifelong learning opportunities, such as noncredit classes, may provide this cognitive stimulation” (p. 433).

There are certain demographic characteristics, however, that have been identified as typical of most senior learners. And while much of the literature on senior learners pertains to those identifying characteristics, Arsenault and Swedburg (1998) found it is “a complex and monumental challenge to attempt to understand the motivational forces or factors influencing a participant’s choice of educational venue or specific course” (p. 112). The diversity of life experience brought to the lifelong learning classroom by senior learners broadens, enriches and offers unique learning opportunities for each classroom. Field (2003) identifies three groups of potential lifelong learners: “skeptics who are unwilling to participate; those willing to participate if they can see something concrete as a potentially achievable result; and those who actively embrace and participate in lifelong learning” (p. 154). He found that, overall, the adult population had a positive view of lifelong learning, but that certain groups of individuals had higher potential to participate in lifelong learning, including those who were more actively involved in civic participation (Field, 2003).

Salter (2011) describes a profile of today’s senior lifelong learners as those “who have prior positive learning experiences, learning that continued through their adulthood, positive self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control” (p. 36). Russell (2008) found later life learners “used reflection to reconfigure and reconstitute time, to maintain integrity and to have a sense of who they are” (p. 221). The author studied the inter-relatedness of time, later life and learning and found “With an awareness of time as in the finitude of corporeality they [learners] make the best of it and continue to be themselves using new measures of time” (p. 221). Older learners are, in many ways, freed from the constraints imposed upon them by working hours, family needs, and social obligations, allowing them to devote themselves to “learning in a way not previously experienced” (Russell, 2008, p. 206).

Truluck, Kim and Valentine (2010) found the majority of lifelong learners in their study have higher educational levels and had “always participated in educational activities” (p. 35). They found these learners continued to participate and place more value on participating in learning activities than others who did not participate in formal education when they were at a traditional higher education age or
middle-aged (Truluck, et al., 2010). Simone and Cesena (2010) also found formal education, socioeconomic status and life satisfaction are among demographic influences in determining whether senior adults participate in learning in retirement programs and which programs they choose. Hodkinson, Ford, Hodkinson and Hawthorn (2008) had similar findings, and reported “Learning through retirement is integral to the interrelationships between the changing person and his or her changing situation” (p. 179). They explained that learning is facilitated and often triggered by changes in peoples’ horizons for learning. “Those horizons depend on social, economic and geographical factors that include family, culture and work” (Hodkinson, et al., 2008, p. 179). Simone and Cesena (2010) said, “Regardless of which program is chosen, lifelong learning programs improve mood of adults and may provide longer term benefits to overall health and well-being.” Their study found that participation was thought to be “uplifting,” which made it more likely the participants would continue to pursue other learning opportunities. (p. 433). Narushima (2008) is another researcher who found that higher education levels predicted participation in senior adult education programs later in life, but also acknowledged “gaps in educational attainment widen in later life” (p. 675). The author found “programs that address needs and interests of senior learners are viable, long-term social and economic investment” (p. 688); therefore, adult educators, policy makers and program planners should be aware of the implications of this issue. Su-Chuan and Humphrey (2006) offered a similar stance and said, “It is necessary for educators to understand what retirees want to learn. This could help educators design proper curriculum and activities to facilitate retirees learning” (p. 17). Martin and Lyday (1997) said, “demographic realities, including an increase in older students, an increase older adults, an increase in financial obligations for aging, tenured faculty, and an increase in knowledge about the aging process, have significant impacts for higher and adult educators” (p. 316).

Learner needs, not only in curriculum choices, but in a variety of contexts, have also been found to be crucial determinants in senior adult programming. Martin and Lyday (1997) found loyalty, both that of an individual to an organization or institution, and that of an organization or institution to individuals, played a large factor in senior adults’ choice in which program to participate. They found, “Older adults identify with positive images of the institution” (p. 320). Senior adults will be more likely to participate when organizations have worked to build relationships through programs and activities. If this is the case, then alumni associations are ideal environments in which to foster that two-way loyalty.

Lamb and Brady (2005) found the feeling of belonging to a community and having a safe and nurturing environment in which to learn were important to senior adult learners. They said, “In the final analysis, perhaps what ‘turns on’ older adults most to learning in retirement experiences may well be a kind of hidden wholeness--a unity, fecundity and integrity in their educational experience that welcomes and treats these individuals like the complete and complex human beings they are” (p. 223).

Mini University takes place every summer on the flagship campus of Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. First offered in 1972, Mini University was conceived by two Indiana University alumni, Frank Jones and Jim Hertling, as a “family learning vacation” for fellow alumni. Participants brought their families for the weeklong Mini University event that included day camps for the children, family picnics, non-credit courses and family activities. The family atmosphere of the first few decades eventually evolved into the current learning vacation that today attracts mostly senior adults. The event has continued for the past few years to be sold out early with a waiting list, and participants include not only Indiana University alumni, but lifelong learners from across the globe, as well. Each year, the majority of learning vacationers at Mini University are returnees, hoping to experience another unique learning opportunity. In June 2011, on the 40th anniversary of Mini University, more than 500 participants gathered in the Indiana Memorial Union on the Bloomington campus for more than 100 courses. The context of the larger learning organization of Indiana University and its broad network of dedicated alumni, played a key role in its creation and development, and continuing success of Mini University.
Methods

Our research sample included administrators, staff, and faculty directly involved in organizing and/or delivering courses at Mini-University, as well as a convenience sample of participant learners who attended Mini-U. We relied on qualitative interviews and surveys to collect data. Interviews with administrators and faculty were conducted before the event; during our week at Mini University in June 2011, we interviewed 36 participants who answered our sample survey with 19 specific program planning questions to help us with our discussion about replicating Mini University elsewhere. Those questions are and their relationship to Caffarella’s (2002) model, in parentheses, are:

Q1. I love the course topics available at Mini University. (Discerning the context).
Q2. I feel Mini University courses fulfill my need for continuous learning. (Building a solid base of support).
Q3. I learn more at Mini University than what I bargain for. (Sorting and prioritizing program ideas).
Q4. I choose course topics that relate to my professional life. (Identifying program ideas).
Q5. I choose topics that relate to my personal life. (Identifying program ideas).
Q6. I choose course topics at Mini University that I’ve always wanted to learn more about but never had a chance. (Identifying program ideas).
Q7. I plan on attending Mini University again. (Preparing budgets and marketing plans).
Q8. I have attended Mini University for multiple years. (Making recommendations and communicating results).
Q9. The instructional techniques at Mini University are geared for all types of learners. (Designing instructional plans).
Q10. The technology at Mini University is up-to-date. (Designing instructional plans).
Q11. I was disappointed in a course at Mini University. (Making recommendations and communicating results, Caffarella, 2002).
Q12. Mini University is popular because the curriculum is centered on current social trends. (Developing program objectives).
Q13. Multiculturalism and diversity are welcomed at Mini University. (Developing program objectives).
Q14. Mini University is successful because the planning and development of the program is well thought out. (Selecting formats, schedules, and staff needs).
Q15. Changes in the curriculum offered at Mini University help keep my interest in coming back. (Making recommendations and communicating results).
Q16. I like to attend the same class every year I attend. (Identifying program ideas).
Q17. I choose a variety of topics at Mini University. (Designing instructional plans).
Q18. I only come to Mini University for one specific topic. (Formulating evaluation plans).
Q19. Learner interests and needs are considered at Mini University. (Making recommendations and communicating results).

Data Collection

We found a main location on the second floor of the Indiana Memorial Union building to promote and conduct our interviews, provided hand-outs of a survey with 19 questions created by our research team of
four Indiana University graduate students in adult education, to as many participants as we could during our time at Mini University. We used consent forms to acquire permission to interview participants. We also brought recording and video devices to capture the conversations and faces of the participants we interviewed. Transcripts of several interviews are available online at https://oncourse.iu.edu/portal/page/09779ae3-f677-4138-b1fb-537c11dff873

On Sunday, June 10th 2011, during the opening celebration, Indiana University Bloomington Continuing Studies Director Ron White announced the research project to the participants and encouraged participants to be interviewed between classes. Thereafter, Monday through Friday, researchers sought out participants at peak times, often during transfer periods between sessions, to complete interviews and surveys.

Results

It is very clear from the sample survey results that Mini University is learner friendly, takes into significant account the feelings and comments from learner input to improve and maintain a quality academic program. The Alumni Association team and the Continuing Studies Director must continue open communication with participants and preserve the personalization of Mini University to maintain the program’s longevity and popularity.

Table 1. Compilation of Research Results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. I love the course topics available at Mini University (Mini U).</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. I feel Mini U courses fulfill my need for continuous learning.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. I learn more at Mini U than what I bargain for.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. I choose course topics that relate to my professional life.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5. I choose topics that relate to my personal life.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6. I choose course topics at Mini U that I’ve always wanted to learn more about but never had a chance.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7. I plan on attending Mini U again</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8. I have attended Mini U for multiple years.</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. The instructional techniques at Mini U are geared for all types of learners.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. The technology at Mini U is up-to-date.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11. I was disappointed in a course at Mini U.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12. Mini U is popular because the curriculum is centered on current social trends.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In connection with the 1–5 and 36–40 year participants, 38% of the participants spoke favorably about the Mini University program offerings to friends, relatives and spouses. Word of mouth conversations played a large part in recruiting more students to participate at Mini University. The IU Alumni Association has created a quality program where participants share positive feedback with others. This is an important link to maintaining a long-term program. The IU Alumni Association magazine, IUAA, is a crucial publication to recruiting participants each year, according to 26% of the participants we interviewed. It also promotes the outstanding reputation of the program. Therefore, it is worth the cost and time to advertise in the alumni magazine. One area of improvement we recommend is in the use of technology. We believe older aged students in the coming years will be more tech savvy and the program must remain current in technology. Therefore, using the internet will become the standard way to disseminate information about the program and gain future participants.

Our survey sample shows a broad spectrum of participant participation from the 1–5 year to the 36–40 year areas. The 1–5 years has the highest amount of participants (53%) involved in Mini University. This is a target group for the program. It is our recommendation to continue to seek out newcomers to the program. The newer participants are an asset to the program because they advertise the program through word of mouth to their friends and relatives. It is also apparent that there are a fair, steady number of participants who come every year. This certainly supports the idea of “tradition” - it is important to the older age student. Many participants in this area have formed long-term friendships and look forward to the social aspect of Mini University.

The most significant aspect of curriculum at Mini University is to continue its diverse offerings of classes. It scored the highest with 38%. The Alumni Association team does an excellent job to recruit the next year’s professors, who create intriguing titles and courses for their Mini University sessions. The results speak highly of the quality of professors at Indiana University. Therefore, it is not a surprise to see that the lecture style of teaching, with 21%, is popular during Mini University and offers a comfortable learning environment for this generation of learners. Older age learners also find continuous learning intellectually stimulating, as 18% of the participants find this a very important part of their life. Self-directed learning and respect for the professor as the authority figure are held in high regard. The personal area of 6% is low because I believe participants want to diversify and take courses that provoke intellectual thinking that they may not normally do during their daily or weekly routine. Mini University is a specific and special time to branch out and grow intellectually.

The results of the survey sample show most of the participants, 56%, have not attended other programs, whereas, 38% of the participants have travelled elsewhere to a different university or to an Elderhostel program to learn something new. Overall, this solidifies our belief that such programs for
retirees and older aged learners must continue locally and nationally. There is a large and growing audience for such programs.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

It quickly became obvious to project members -- through interviews with administrators, participants, and faculty members and background research -- that causation of continued success of the program could not be attributed to a single individual or group over the years. However, when reviewing the transcripts of interviews, certain themes quickly rose to the surface. Based on this study, we recommend that anyone implementing an elder learning program attend carefully to the following themes.

**Dedication of faculty:** All interviewees mentioned the donation of faculty time as a reason for Mini U's success. A secondary theme to this is the array of interesting topics and related, rare expertise brought by faculty. Mini University faculty is chosen each year and a great degree of honor is associated with being asked to present.

**Engagement of learners:** Faculty repeatedly mentioned that the Mini U participants attend because they want to be present, as opposed to the average degree seeking students who may be attending a class only to fulfill a requirement. Secondarily, the active teaching style of faculty members was frequently noted as a reason for high learner engagement and participation. All participants were eager to share the names of their favorite classes and memories.

**Attention to detail (preparation):** Participants in particular often cited the meticulous preparation for the event. The attentiveness of Jeanne Madison, co-director of *Mini University* at the Bloomington Division of Continuing Studies, was repeatedly mentioned. The sessions were described as being well planned. In addition to being described as well-planned, participants noted that due to the number of high quality sessions, if a participant does not enjoy one session, they may easily leave and likely enter another concurrent session as a replacement. To this end, the diversity of topics was repeatedly mentioned as a source of excitement.

**Tradition:** Participants often noted that they spent the better part of their year planning and looking forward to Mini University not only as a learning vacation, but as a chance to reconnect with old friends and celebrate their connection to Indiana University. Every participant interviewed answered that they planned on coming back the next year. This simple fact was quite telling in that it solidified a gelling hypothesis that returning participants, administrators, and faculty members are crucial to the success of Mini University.

**Feedback:** Analysis has been woven throughout Mini University for many years. Blue book evaluations are examined, measured, analyzed and utilized to consider improvements for future Mini U experiences. Popular, highly-rated courses and faculty members are closely considered for repetition in future years. In addition to post-event analysis, Mini University planners solicit real time feedback regarding learner needs. These needs are quickly addressed: hearing impairments, elderly physical challenges including wheelchair accessibility, lighting, and comfort.

This case study illustrates the success of Indiana University’s Mini-University program through interviews with the faculty, staff, and learners involved and through the authors’ observations of the program. Therefore, we suggest that elder learning programs similar to Mini University could be replicated at other educational institutions, and that using Caffarella’s (2002) interactive model of program planning provides a useful and effective model to organize and implement such programs.

**References**


