

Articles

The Boomers are Coming: Trends in Older Adult Education

Gordon Thompson, University of Saskatchewan
Dennis Foth, University of Alberta

ABSTRACT

The front edge of the baby-boom generation cohort will reach age 65 in 2011. By 2027, when the trailing edge of this cohort reaches that age, people aged 65 and older will comprise 20% of Canada's population, twice as much as today. Boomers at age 65 will be healthier, wealthier, and better educated than the current 65-and-older cohort. They will also be more demanding, as society has been both shaped by and has had to respond to their needs and wants. In particular, the educational system has accommodated the boomers through K-12 and post-secondary institutions. Looking to the year 2030, the authors speculate that some universities will provide educational programs and support services to meet the needs of the boomers and others will not. They further speculate that boomers

RÉSUMÉ

En l'an 2011, le flanc avant de la génération du baby-boom aura 65 ans. En l'an 2027, l'année où le flanc arrière atteindra cet âge, 20 % de la population canadienne comprendra des personnes âgées de 65 ans et plus, dont deux fois les chiffres actuels.

Les enfants de l'après-guerre à l'âge de 65 ans seront en meilleure santé, mieux nantis et mieux instruits que la cohorte actuelle de personnes âgées de 65 ans et plus. Comme ils ont façonné la société actuelle et que cette dernière a dû répondre à leurs besoins et désirs, ces enfants d'après-guerre seront aussi plus exigeants que la cohorte actuelle. De façon particulière, le système éducatif s'est adapté aux enfants d'après-guerre, allant de la maternelle à la douzième année et jusque dans les établissements

themselves may create their own learning organizations to meet their needs, particularly if universities are unresponsive.

d'enseignement post secondaire. Tout en considérant l'an 2030, les auteurs se disent que certaines universités offriront des programmes de formation et des services de soutien pour répondre aux besoins des enfants d'après-guerre et d'autres ne le feront pas. Ils se demandent aussi si la génération baby-boom ne créera pas elle-même ses propres organisations apprenantes afin de répondre à ses besoins, tout particulièrement si les universités sont insensibles.

INTRODUCTION

The proportion of the Canadian population aged 65 and older is growing at an astonishing rate. In 1901, this age cohort represented just 5% of the total Canadian population; in 2001, it represented over 12% (The Sustainability Report, 2000); and by 2027, it is estimated that it will represent over 21% (Statistics Canada, 2001b). This is a staggering transformation of the country's age profile, and it is primarily a consequence of the "baby-boom" cohort—those persons born during the years 1946 to 1962.¹ The oldest of this cohort will reach age 65 in 2011 and the youngest in 2027.

As Foot (1996) noted, this age cohort has had a dramatic impact on various sectors of society, including all levels of education from primary to post-secondary, as it has grown and developed. Indeed, the baby-boomers are coming to post-secondary institutions in unprecedented numbers. Canadian universities are already experiencing a growing demand for educational programs for older adults, and this demand is expected to grow exponentially over the next several decades, fuelled mainly by the rapidly growing number of older adults. However, there are at least two additional factors to consider: longer, healthier lifespans and older adults' higher levels of educational attainment.

At the start of the 20th century, life expectancy was approximately 47 years. At the close of the century, it had risen to approximately 76 years (Dychtwald, 1999), an increase of more than 60% over a single century. Moreover, we are not just living longer. The Canadian National Advisory Committee on Aging (NACA) reported:

Many studies have pointed out the unprecedented nature of the current aging process: people are not aging now the way they used to. The reality of being a senior has changed, and seniors today bear little resemblance to their counterparts before the Second World War or in the last century: they are not only living longer, but also are in better physical and mental condition and their economic situation has much improved. (p. 4)

This increased longevity, coupled with improved physical, mental, and economic circumstances, means that more and more older adults are seeking educational opportunities. The dramatic expansion in programs such as Elderhostel² and Learning in Retirement Institutes (LRIs) attests to this trend. Examples of the latter include the McGill Institute for Learning in Retirement, Centre for Continuing Education, McGill University, and Learning is Forever (LIFE), a society working in partnership with the Division of Continuing Education at Ryerson Polytechnic University to provide a range of university-level educational opportunities for older adults. Many other Canadian universities also provide educational programs targeted at older-adult learners. All of these programs have contributed to the creation of CATALIST (Canadian Network for Third Age Learning), which fosters and promotes older-adult learning among its members.

Older adults are better educated today, a trend that is expected to continue. For example, Statistics Canada reported that, in 1996, only 8% of Canadians aged 65 and older had a university degree compared with 17% of those aged 25 to 64 (Novak & Campbell, 2001, p. 230). This trend to greater participation by younger adults in university education is especially important because level of prior education is associated with an increased likelihood of subsequent participation in educational programs. Statistics Canada has recently reported that the odds of participating in a learning activity for Canadians with a university degree were 7.5 times greater than for those without a high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2001a, p. 18).

CURRENT AND EMERGING TRENDS IN OLDER ADULT EDUCATION

Numerous trends and issues have significant implications for older-adult education (Fisher & Wolf, 1998; Manheimer, Snodgrass, & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995). Three trends have been selected as being especially relevant to this discussion:

- changing patterns of retirement
- increased participation of older adults in educational activities
- growing expectations of older adults for the provision of educational programs appropriate to their interests and circumstances.

Changing Patterns of Retirement

When Bismarck introduced Germany's first pension plan in the 1880s, he selected 65 as the age of eligibility. Since then, it has become widely accepted as the traditional age for retirement. Until recently, it has represented a point of major transition for most people from full-time employment to full-time retirement. However, this pattern has begun to change over the past several decades. More and more Canadians have chosen to retire before reaching age 65. Novak and Campbell (2001) reported that, in 1994, only 60% of men aged 55 to 64 remained in the labour force and that, on average, Canadian workers retired at age 62 (p. 183). In addition, there are increasing opportunities for flexible retirement (cutting back on the number of hours worked), part-time work, and second careers. A recent study found that 46% of Canadians expected to work after retirement (Novak & Campbell, 2001, p. 184).

Accordingly, some have suggested that retirement should be viewed as an event, like graduation, rather than as a stage of life. The event is short-lived and new life patterns are established. Like graduation, retirement can occur more than once. These developments allow and, in many cases, promote participation in educational activities. Nonetheless, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) reported that older adults have the lowest levels of participation in adult education, generally, and that older-adult workers receive far less training in the workplace than younger workers (p. 83). Hence, if greater numbers of older adults are going to work after a first or second retirement, they will need more training for the workplace than is presently available to them.

There is a related trend that may have important implications for older adult-education. Recent reports warn that there are enormous labour shortages looming as the baby-boomers begin to retire (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002). These shortages are likely to accelerate the availability of flexible employment opportunities to attract older workers to remain in the workforce. If more people remain in the workforce beyond 65, especially those wanting to pursue second (or third, or fourth) careers, there will be an increased demand for work-related educational opportunities. Implications for post-secondary institutions include answering the following questions. Are the existing learning methods and formats for school-leavers and middle-aged adults appropriate to older adults? Will older-adult students be able to afford the tuition fees for employment-related degree programs (e.g., an MBA degree) or professional development certificate programs offered through continuing education units? Will older adults be able to access the student services they may require, for example, close proximity of parking places to classrooms, amplification of sound to compensate for hearing loss, ease of access to classrooms for those with mobility problems, and adequacy of visual materials for those with vision impairments.

Increased Participation of Older Adults in Educational Activities

Manheimer (1998) reported that opportunities for older adults to participate in formal and informal educational activities have increased dramatically over the past 30 years. Substantial growth in enrolments in non-credit programs such as Elderhostel is especially evident. In 1980, the University of New Brunswick became the first Canadian university to introduce Elderhostel courses. In 1996, these programs and courses were offered by some 300 Canadian universities, colleges, and other institutions and attracted over 20,000 participants (Novak & Campbell, 2001, p. 230).

Significant growth can also be seen in the expansion of the LRIs offered by Canadian universities. For example, McGill University has one of the largest and most active LRIs in the country (Novak & Campbell, 2001, pp. 230–231). It began in 1989 with 15 study groups comprising 180 members and has grown to 45 study groups comprising 580 members (Clark & Heller, 1997). Only non-credit courses are offered.

Enrolments in degree-credit courses by older adults have tended to be much more modest (Lamdin, 1997; Manheimer et al., 1995; Novak & Campbell, 2001). This situation may be due, at least in part, to the lower levels of educational attainment of today's older adults as compared with tomorrow's. If so, that suggests a growing demand from older adults for degree-credit courses in the future. However, Novak and Campbell suggest that older learners may be less interested than younger learners in earning educational credentials (p. 226).

Some older-adult learners may wish to finish an undergraduate degree begun earlier in life or fulfill a life's dream by earning a graduate degree. However, the majority appear to be most interested in satisfying their intellectual curiosity on a broad range of topics or in developing skills to express their creativity through, for example, drawing and painting, ceramics, creative writing, or acting. Currently, the majority of these programs are available to them, at least in urban areas, on an affordable, non-credit basis. This situation could change if the country's productivity and prosperity become dependent, in part, on the skills of older workers in knowledge-based occupations and if incentives are provided to assist older adults in earning degrees (e.g., employer-sponsored tuition). In particular, older adults seeking to remain in the workforce may look to universities to meet their professional development needs.

Growing Expectations of Older Adults

Some older adults audit degree-credit courses or enrol in tuition-waiver programs. In most cases, registration is only available if places remain after all

degree-seeking (typically younger) students have registered. Lamdin (1997) argued that these "space available" restrictions make older learners into "... de facto second class citizens" (p. 93). Manheimer et al. (1995) proposed that today's older adults prefer not to think they are competing with other generations for scarce educational resources. But is this same orientation likely to apply to the baby-boomers? Are they likely to agree that younger adults should have higher priority? As Owram states:

Generalizations must be made with care but, on balance, the baby boom grew up believing more than their parents had that personal emotional and psychic satisfaction was central to life. If society didn't meet the needs, then society should adjust. (1996, p. 315)

How will the baby-boomers expect universities to respond to their needs later in life? The growth in LRIs, many of which are associated with universities, suggests that older adults want their universities to be partners in their late-life learning. A number of authors, such as Manheimer et al. (1995), have described the introduction of non-credit educational programs that develop the leadership skills of older adults. Based on these types of programs, continuing education units may wish to consider developing specific non-credit programs that provide older adults with the skills they may need in their later life. Examples include caring for the very elderly (e.g., parents who may be 85 years of age or older) or for a partner or another family member suffering from a chronic disease, communication and advocacy skills, working with organizations that rely heavily on volunteers, responsibilities of executors of estates, and so on.

One unknown is the extent to which older adults will develop a voice in advocating for more programs and services from universities. Their numbers are increasing, both absolutely and proportionately, and over the years, they have often spoken eloquently and forcefully, in the media and at the ballot box, to politicians on such matters as Old Age Security benefits, the Canada Pension Plan, and the Canada Health Act. As well, older adults are increasingly banding together in organizations formed to represent the needs of the retired and the semi-retired. Groups such as the Raging Grannies, with chapters throughout Canada, advocate for the rights of the retired on issues such as the provision of health care. To further the lifelong learning objectives of older adults, LRIs are beginning to provide an effective voice with deans and directors of continuing education and with the senior administrators and members of the Boards of Governors of our post-secondary institutions. Since many senior administrators and Board members are boomers themselves, or nearly so, an argument can be made that the needs of the boomers for educational programs and services will find sympathetic ears.

CHANGES IN OUR UNIVERSITIES

The needs and desires of the boomers notwithstanding, will universities have an interest in serving them? The following factors will likely contribute to the answer to this question:

- increasing differentiation of universities
- a shift from institution-based control to greater student influence
- enrolment trends
- use of technology, especially in terms of student access
- fundraising and friends.

Increasing Differentiation of Universities

Although Canadian universities are differentiated easily in terms of size and the presence or absence of professional schools, they have, until recently, been fairly homogenous in terms of their mission and the quality of their teaching and research efforts. This situation is rapidly changing, and it is illustrated by the impact of the Canada Research Chairs program on research. A small number of Canadian universities have claimed the lion's share of the funds provided by this program, making them more research oriented. A similar differentiation is developing in research-related funding sources such as the Canadian Foundation for Innovation. These developments may presage a growing differentiation of Canadian universities, especially where their research efforts and accomplishments are concerned, but possibly in other areas as well.

The efforts by *Maclean's* magazine over the past 12 years to rank order Canadian universities on their excellence also suggest that differentiation is occurring. The 2003 edition categorizes universities as: medical doctoral, that is, research-based with large undergraduate and graduate programs and medical schools (e.g., University of Toronto); comprehensive, that is, providing a variety of undergraduate and graduate programs and areas of special research emphasis (e.g., Simon Fraser University); and primarily undergraduate universities with selected areas of scholarship (e.g., Mount Saint Vincent University).

Manicas (2000) noted that a new taxonomy of higher education has been proposed by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement in the United States. This could replace the more familiar 1973 Carnegie system of classification (see Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2000) that is often used to describe diversity in American colleges and universities. The new taxonomy identifies three types of institutions: "brand name," "mass provider," and "convenience." Brand-name institutions, such as the private, heavily endowed Ivy League universities (e.g., Harvard, Yale, Princeton), would cater to mostly full-time students from traditional

age groups and be limited to only the most able students. Mass-provider institutions would represent those universities that are heavily reliant on government funding (e.g., Oklahoma State University, the universities in the California State University System). They would attempt to be all things to all people, with far fewer resources than they need to fulfill their mandates. In these institutions, research and publication would be preserved at the expense of undergraduate teaching. Convenience universities would be characterized by institutions such as the University of Phoenix—user friendly, responsive to the educational marketplace, and deriving the bulk of their operating funds from student tuition fees.

It seems inevitable that some form of increased differentiation will take place among Canadian universities over the next several decades, and support for older-adult education may well depend on the nature of this differentiation. Presently, most Canadian universities offer some level of support for older-adult education, such as tuition-waiver programs and non-credit programs including Elderhostel and LRIs. Using the *Maclean's* categorization, medical-doctoral, research-intensive universities and those that are primarily undergraduate universities would not appear to have much reason to provide programs for older adults. This would leave the comprehensive universities as providers of programs and services to middle-aged and older adults, a role they may embrace as they attempt to differentiate themselves.

Shift from Institution-based Control to Greater Student Influence

Levine (2000) argued that the traditional functions of higher education—teaching, research, and service—could become “unbundled.” He proposed that since teaching is the only profitable function, it becomes more competitive when for-profit institutions offer alternatives to traditional institutions. He also proposed that future financial support from government will flow directly to students rather than to institutions. Similarly, Skolnik (2000) proposed that one major consequence of the emergence of the virtual university concept is the transition from a “campus-centric” to a “consumer-centric” model. He concluded:

The shift to a consumer-centric model reflects not just a change in the balance of power over the content and processes of education between institutions and their students, but a fundamental change in the idea of education ... In the consumer-centric model, the driving force in the design of learning experiences is not a particular educational theory or philosophy, but simply what satisfies the consumer. (p. 57)

Experimentation with government funding going directly to students, or the student voucher system as it is sometimes called, has begun in Ontario

in the K–12 system. If successful, it is likely only a matter of time before that province considers applying it to the post-secondary system. In that case, adults who do not use their vouchers early in life, and are allowed to use them later, will be consumers with “money” to spend on education.

Even if the voucher system does not come to pass, those universities that evolve towards a more consumer-centric model may well regard older adults as a market. Relative to today’s older-adult learners, the boomers will have more wealth and, therefore, greater discretionary resources.

Enrolment Trends

Currently, most Canadian universities face substantial levels of demand for access to degree-credit programs from young adults, and this demand is expected to remain high based on Canada’s productivity goals that will require more and more highly skilled workers (Human Resource Development Canada, 2002). In general terms, if capacity does not increase, universities may not actively recruit older adults to degree programs because they will have no ability to serve them.

It has been argued that the rapid and dramatic increase in tuition fees over the past decade may significantly restrict access to university study.³ Moreover, Statistics Canada predicted that the percentage of the Canadian population aged 15–64 will actually decrease from 68.3% in 2000 to 61.5% in 2036, although the actual number of people in that age cohort will increase modestly (Statistics Canada, 2001b).

Will these two factors significantly reduce the number of 15–64 year olds attending university? We think not. First, despite increasing tuition fees over the last 10 years at all universities except those in Quebec and, until recently, in British Columbia, demand for university access for full-time students has increased. As student fees have increased, there has been an accompanying increase in the number and size of scholarships and bursaries available to support students. In addition, the amount of money that students can borrow through the Canada Student Loans Program has increased. Many students take on substantial debt in order to complete university degrees; the Canadian Federation of Students (2002) reported that average student debt has grown to \$25,000. Second, the public has become increasingly aware, thanks to the public relations campaigns of many universities and the federal government, that the more years of education one has, the greater one’s earning power. Thus, many Canadian parents appear willing to invest in their children’s education if they believe a good return on that investment is likely. According to Human Resources Development Canada (2002), more than 1.5 million Canadians have opened a Registered Education Savings Plan.

Demographic projections are a notoriously hazardous undertaking. However, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) recently projected a 20% increase in full-time university enrolment between 1999 and 2009 (Giroux, 1999). The AUCC also expects that this increase will be distributed unevenly across the country. For example, Newfoundland and Labrador's Memorial University was singled out as one institution that would be "... strongly challenged to maintain its current enrolment."

The authors believe that the demand for university education by young adults, the traditional student population of universities, will remain at current levels and perhaps even increase somewhat over the next 25 years. In a static system operating at capacity, this is not good news for boomers who may wish to return to university to complete degrees.

However, most systems do not remain static for long. If labour market projections are correct, older workers will be needed simply to support current levels of productivity and prosperity. This alone will create pressure to expand the system. If older adults develop a more effective voice in requesting educational programs and services, government policies may change to provide support for them, again creating pressure to expand the system. As well, older adults may be more interested in targeted university education for specific jobs than they are in degree programs. If this is true, university continuing education units, with their expertise in providing non-degree, professional-development programs, may well be the agents to provide these learning opportunities.

The growth in the number of LRIs also suggests that universities may be entering a new era in which partnerships with community-based organizations to provide non-credit learning opportunities may take their place alongside the more familiar university-industry research partnerships. Most university continuing education units are well positioned to foster the creation of these partnerships and to provide a university "home" for them.

Use of Technology

What are the implications of current and emerging technologies for older-adult education? One obvious implication is greatly increased access—especially for older adults who find it difficult or impossible to attend "regular" classes. But will older adults be attracted to learning environments characterized by electronically mediated interaction? Manheimer et al. (1995) reported that "... use of technology is inversely proportional to age but directly proportional to education and income" (p. 161). In other words, those with higher levels of education and income are likely to be receptive to technology regardless of age. They also emphasized that older adults are a highly heterogeneous population. Some will welcome technology-mediated interaction, while others will not.

Use of the Internet by Canadian adults 65 and older is increasing: 10.1% reported using the Internet in 1999 as compared with 5.5% in 1997 (Brink, 1999, p. 24). In addition, many boomers, particularly the trailing-edge boomers (those who are currently about 40 years of age and will reach 65 in 2027), are well accustomed to technologically mediated interaction as a result of paying bills and doing their banking and shopping on the Web and using it as a research tool for information. Brink (1999) reported that 54.9% of Canadians aged 35–54 use the Internet (p. 24). Using technologically mediated interaction for learning will not be an obstacle for them, particularly as there is likely to be much more sophisticated and much more user friendly computer-mediated learning systems than are currently available. These tools not only have the potential to increase access to university education overall, but also to meet many specific learning needs and interests of the older-adult learner.

Fundraising and Friends

Over the past several decades, Canadian universities have placed growing importance on fundraising to offset the federal and provincial governments' apparent reluctance to provide sufficient funding to support their increasing capital and operating requirements. Most have well-established endowment funds, with at least one, the University of Toronto, of the order of one billion dollars. Five-year capital campaigns targeting a half-billion dollars are becoming common (e.g., University of Alberta). One obvious target group for fundraising campaigns is older alumni and affluent older adults associated with the community in which the university resides. A recent study examined feelings of loyalty that LRI program participants can develop toward the university that hosts such programs. The authors of the study concluded that "... older adults in learning-in-retirement institutes tend to hold feelings of loyalty for the higher education institutions sponsoring the institutes. This loyalty can be cultivated and nurtured if conscious efforts are made to build relationships between the institutions of higher learning and the older adults" (Martin & Lyday, 1997, p. 326).

We believe that universities will continue to obtain an increasing proportion of their income from sources other than government allocations. We also believe that their alumni and others such as older-adult learners in LRIs, who in many cases are alumni, will become of increasing interest to the universities as a source of funds. It would, therefore, serve the universities' financial interests to build this base of "friends" through the provision of educational programs and support services for them.

UNIVERSITY SERVICE TO OLDER ADULT LEARNERS

As noted previously, an increasing degree of differentiation is expected to develop among Canadian universities over the next several decades. One consequence of this is likely to be variation in the level of priority accorded to older learners. Some, but not all, Canadian universities are likely to identify older learners as a target audience for their programs and services. In this section, we explore the ways in which those universities may serve older-adult learners through programs and support services for them.

Programs for Older Adult Learners

Fundamentally different orientations apply to degree-credit programs accessed by older learners and to non-credit programs such as LRIs. "Student accommodation" is associated with degree-credit courses, especially where tuition-waiver and auditor status are concerned. In other words, the student is expected to accommodate, or conform, to the expectations and practices of the institution. As noted previously, in general, older learners are provided access only where a surplus of places exists. First priority is given to degree-seeking students (who typically are not older learners). In addition, until fairly recently, Canadian universities were not noted for introducing degree-credit programs in response to market demand. This situation is changing, however, and the Humanities Diploma program offered by the University of Victoria is an example that is especially relevant to this discussion. Made up of degree-credit courses, it is explicitly designed for "... people who do not fit the traditional student mold (18 to 24 years old, coming directly from high school)" About one-third of the participants in the program are retired.

If universities decide that providing programs and services to older-adult learners can help to fulfill their mandate, they will devote resources to the enterprise. It follows, then, that those universities will design programs that will appeal to older-adult learners in particular. Examples would be leadership and caring skills programs to train the increasing number of older adults who work on a voluntary basis and, perhaps, in the future on a paid basis, given the projected labour shortages in our long-term-care facilities for the elderly.

In contrast to the student-accommodation orientation associated with degree-credit programs, non-credit programs such as LRIs demonstrate "institutional accommodation." In general, these programs are designed to accommodate the needs and circumstances of the participants. They are characterized by peer teaching and by self-governance. The topics to be studied are selected by program participants. There are no tests or grades. Classes are scheduled at times and locations convenient for participants (which may or may not be on campus).

One recent trend in older-adult learning is the growing competition among post-secondary institutions for travel-study programs, especially the very profitable "high-end" programs, such as the luxury cruises and safari-type expeditions sponsored by major travel companies and the alumni associations of many colleges and universities. Not every older adult can afford high-end, travel-study programs, however. As a result, LRIs may want to expand their services to incorporate travel-study programs for their members. Because of their volunteerism, their staffing costs are low. As well, travel companies that organize such tours would likely be delighted to access their mailing lists and, in turn, interested in providing very attractive costing in a collaborative relationship with the LRI.

With the exception of these kinds of travel-study programs, most university-sponsored non-credit programs for older adults are probably cost-recovery, at best, or even subsidized, at least in terms of staff and facilities provided by the institution. This situation raises the broader question of what kinds of non-credit programs for older adults will universities support, for example, indirectly subsidized, cost recovery, or profit making? The answer will have an impact on both the kinds and the quality of programs they will make available to the older-adult learner, if at all. Universities that include service to older adults within their mandates may be prepared to indirectly subsidize non-credit programs for them. Those that don't will certainly require at least cost recovery.

Services for Older Adult Learners

If universities are to attract older adults as participants in degree or non-credit programs, they must do more than just offer programs of interest. They must also provide support services appropriate to the needs of older adults. A number of studies carried out during the 1970s and 1980s, when efforts to serve older-adult learners at universities were more fashionable than they are today, sought to determine these needs. Graney and Hays (1976) surveyed a group of people aged 62 and older who identified informational barriers as being of greatest concern. The researchers proposed that increased public information and outreach programs were needed, especially ones that provided information about how to (re)enter the educational system, as were reports describing the successful experiences of older learners in higher education.

Heisel, Darkenwald, and Anderson (1981) observed that older-adult learners were underrepresented in continuing education programs. They argued that educators who want to recruit greater numbers of older learners must abandon the "... conventional marketing approach that focuses on the individual consumer of services and must employ more personal 'social linkage' strategies to overcome the psychosocial and situational barriers that are so

formidable for this group" (p. 239). They proposed that this would require working with community groups and organizations with which older adults are affiliated.

Other studies have proposed that special advisory and support services are needed to attract older learners and to promote their success and retention. Chelsvig and Timmermann (1982) surveyed higher education institutions that provided tuition-waiver programs for older adults to determine the adequacy of their support services; they found a general lack of services such as simplified registration, counselling, special programs, organized older-student groups, and outreach activities. They argued that programs lacking such supports are likely to be "radically underutilized" (p. 274). Moyer and Lago (1987) proposed that access to academic counsellors, as well as alternative modes of delivery that reduce the barriers to access such programs, should be regarded as integral to older-adult programs. They warned that existing programs risk being seen as "window dressing" if they fail to provide appropriate services for the older learner.

More recently, Scala (1996) studied the experiences of older learners and identified several issues that could guide higher education planners and administrators in making their programs more accessible to them. She observed that a number of students experienced some academic difficulties and proposed workshops for older learners that would improve their study skills. She also noted that a number faced challenges in adjusting to campus life and in integrating their studies with family and time pressures. She proposed a separate orientation for older learners, including workshops on time and stress management to reduce adjustment problems. She also noted it would be desirable to have a gathering place or lounge for seniors to help them meet each other.

A final institutional barrier for older-adult learners concerns problems associated with transportation, parking, and classroom access. Educational programs seeking to attract these learners must be readily accessible (Moore & Piland, 1994; Scala, 1996). Moore and Piland also recommended the creation of a seniors' advisory committee to assist college administrators with educational and physical environmental planning (p. 137). Most of these proposals involve a commitment of institutional resources. Such a commitment will not be made unless older-adult learners are seen as a priority.

CONCLUSION

The boomers are coming—in unprecedented numbers. The leading edge of the baby-boom cohort will reach age 65 within the next decade. Indeed, the growing numbers of participants in Elderhostel and LRIs (typical participants are aged 55 and older) suggest that they are already making their presence felt. But will universities roll out the welcome mat for them?

We suspect that most universities will not. According to Moody (1993):

... the most important observation about education for older adults in America is that the enterprise is not serious. Unless we get serious about late-life learning, we will fail to adopt appropriate means to promote productive aging in the years to come. The lack of seriousness in older-adult education is shown by almost any measure we adopt: numbers of students enrolled, money and other resources committed to the enterprise, level of sophistication in the delivery systems deployed. (p. 221)

Although written 10 years ago, we believe that Moody's conclusion applies equally well today. Our universities are currently under pressure to meet the needs of younger adults for degree programs, as well as to meet the infrastructure requirements to support growing research programs. Given these pressures, we do not believe that many universities will direct the required resources to meet older-adult learning needs unless it can be demonstrated that they can make a significant contribution to the income of the university through tuition fees, government grants, and/or donations.

Non-credit programs, which traditionally operate on a cost-recovery or at a moderately subsidized level, may have greater prospects for institutional acceptance, particularly as new models develop, such as the LRIs, in which older adults themselves provide much of the teaching and infrastructure support on a voluntary basis. These kinds of partnerships can result in universities responding, and being seen to respond, to the learning needs and interests of older adults. The payoff to the university is in relevance to the community and, potentially, an increase in charitable donations to support the work of the university generally. This is where university continuing education units can make a significant contribution. These units specialize in the provision of cost-recovery educational programs that are tailored to the needs of specific target audiences. Accordingly, this could be a promising area of growth, but one in which other providers, both public and private, are likely to compete for affluent older-adult learners.

The continuing education units of a number of Canadian universities have been instrumental in fostering and supporting LRIs. Although formal assessment remains to be done, anecdotal evidence appears to suggest that these collaborative ventures are satisfying to both the older adults who

organize and contribute their time and talents to them and to the universities. If universities fail to respond to initiatives such as LRIs, or if they do not otherwise support older-adult learning in a meaningful way, we believe that these learners will go elsewhere, taking their money and loyalties with them. They will go to institutions that are more receptive (e.g., community colleges or consumer-oriented universities that are yet to evolve in Canada) or they will create their own institutions to serve their needs. With their education, knowledge, experience, contacts, and money, the boomers are quite capable of creating organizations to serve their ends. Elderhostel, which is now more than 20 years old and thriving, should serve to remind us that universities are not the only organization that can meet the learning needs of older adults.

ENDNOTES

1. The years that define the “baby-boom” cohort are in some dispute. For example, David Foot defines this cohort as those born between the years 1947 and 1966 in his book *Boom, Bust & Echo*. Doug Owram defines it as those born between the years 1946 and 1962 in his book *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation*.
2. Elderhostel Canada is now known as Routes to Learning Canada.
3. See, for example, “Government Funding Cuts Hamper Access” at www.caut.ca/english/bulletin/2000_sep/access.htm and “Education Moving Out of reach” at www.caut.ca/English/Bulletin/2000_mar/edreview.htm

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BIOGRAPHIES

Gordon Thompson is Professor and Director of Adult and Continuing Education Programs in the Extension Division at the University of Saskatchewan. He has an extensive background as an educational administrator in university continuing education at the Universities of Manitoba, Victoria, and Saskatchewan. His PhD in Adult and Continuing Education is from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Gordon Thompson est professeur et directeur de programmes de formation des adultes et d'éducation permanente à la Division de formation permanente de The University of Saskatchewan. Il possède une vaste expérience en tant qu'administrateur de l'enseignement en éducation permanente universitaire aux Universités du Manitoba, de Victoria et de la Saskatchewan. Il a fait son doctorat en formation des adultes et en éducation permanente à The University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Dennis Foth is Professor and Director of Applied Arts in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta. He has a PhD in Psychology and has served in academic and academic-administrative positions at the universities of British Columbia, Simon Fraser, and Alberta for over 30 years. His current research interest is continuing professional education for people who provide services to older adults.

Dennis Foth est professeur et directeur des arts appliqués à la Faculté de formation permanente à The University of Alberta. Il possède un Ph.D. en psychologie et a occupé des postes académiques et administratifs aux Universités de British Columbia, de Simon Fraser, et d'Alberta pendant plus de 30 ans. Ses intérêts de recherche actuels sont en formation professionnelle continue pour les personnes offrant des services aux personnes âgées.