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# Educational Motivation In Older Adults

Nancy B. Olson

*Eastern Illinois University*

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EDUCATIONAL MOTIVATION IN OLDER ADULTS

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Educational Motivation in Older Adults

BY

Nancy B. Olson

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in Gerontology

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2001

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## Abstract

Using a well-established research instrument and a sample of adults over the age of 55, data were collected regarding motivation for participation in formal learning experiences. Participants were drawn from University of Illinois Elderhostel alumni, Parkland College Lifelong Learners, and Eastern Illinois University Board of Trustees program enrollees. Research results verified previous findings that there are multiple motivating factors in older adult learners and that both intrinsic and extrinsic drives are involved. No correlation between educational level and type of motivation was established by this study.

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Anthony and Leotah Badalucco; to Dad for being such a great model of successful aging, and to Mom for passing on her lifelong love of learning.

Leotah Dodge Badalucco 8/17/16 – 6/29/00  
AA: North Central Michigan College, 1996

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The segment of the population of the United States over the age of 65 is currently about 34.7 million, or 13% of the total. This figure is projected to double over the next three decades; Census Bureau estimates are that 69.4 million Americans will be over age 65 in the year 2030. Centenarians are expected to reach 324,000 by the same year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Americans over the age of 55 make up a greater percentage of the U.S. population than ever before in our history. This trend will continue as a whole generation known as the "baby boomers," those born between 1946 and 1964 (Belsky, 1999), reach the age of 55. The leading edge of that generation is presently standing on the threshold of older adulthood. We know that this group will be the healthiest, most educated group of seniors in recent history (Scala, 1996). Besides being more in number, older adults will live longer in the coming years as science and technology find ways to combat disease and augment failing capabilities. Since early in the twentieth century, life expectancy has steadily risen from 57.1 years in 1929 to 77 years in 2000, an increase of approximately 35% or about three months per year across all races and both sexes. Census Bureau projections put the life span at 78.5 years by 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

As life span increases, more time for leisure activities and non-work related activities becomes available. Many adults over the age of 55 use at least part of that increased leisure time taking part in formal learning experiences. For many colleges and universities, older adults who return to or continue various educational activities are a rapidly growing segment of the student population. Between 1985 and 1995, the number

of adult students enrolling in higher education outpaced the number of students of traditional age (Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1998). Older adult students are a valuable source of revenue. Further, programs designed for this segment of the population help keep a college or university in the public eye, keep a potential donor base actively engaged and involved, and function as a good public relations tool. As early as 1982, Romaniuk and Romaniuk (1982) suggested that the prospect of lower enrollment of younger students in colleges and universities would make researching motivation of older learners more critical for maintaining the viability of institutions and academic programs.

### Objectives of Research

The purpose of this study is to investigate what motivates older adults to engage in formal learning experiences and to discover whether education level influences motives. The objectives are:

1. To discover what motivates older adults to participate in formal learning programs.
2. To discover if relationships exist between levels of formal education and motivational factors in older adults.

### Hypotheses

1. Individuals will have more than one important motivating factor for participating in formal educational experiences.
2. Individual's level of formal education will influence whether their motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic.

### Rationale for Objectives

The most significant questions that emerge as people begin to live longer are: What will the quality of those extended years be? Does living longer necessarily mean

living well? What constitutes successful aging? Enhancing the quality of those later years depends on maintaining good physical and mental health for as long as possible.

Part of taking better care of ourselves mentally is engaging in opportunities for learning. Stephen H. Richards, President of Elderhostel said, "Education matters because it keeps our minds sharp and our hearts open"(available at: [www.elderhostel.org](http://www.elderhostel.org), 2001). Older adults, and in fact all of us, are living in a time of phenomenally rapid change. A good and sufficient formal education which ended in the 1970s or before is not necessarily adequate to deal with technological changes which have found their way into our society and even our homes in the subsequent years. In a less pragmatic sense, engaging in learning for the sake of personal enrichment, for the love of learning itself, can be a powerful motivator. This implies that those who are in the business of providing educational opportunities need to focus on two things; developing a wide variety of easily accessible, formal learning experiences, and an understanding of what brings potential students to the classroom. Knowing what motivates older adults to participate in formal learning is essential in designing programs to meet their needs.

Much has been written about successful aging. The topic lends itself to as many interpretations as there are interpreters. Some agreement focuses on issues of quality of life such as physical, mental and spiritual health, independent living capabilities, and enjoyment of life. While many factors influence successful aging, the importance of those experiences that stimulate mental activity cannot be overlooked. Contrary to past thought, it is now known that the adult brain continues to grow, adapt and even improve with age. Kotulak (1997) reported on the work of numerous experts in the field who have discovered the importance of mental activity for older adults. He cited the Seattle

Longitudinal Study, initiated by K. Warner Schaie, which found that mental decline was directly dependent on how much the mind was stimulated. Similarly, Marilyn Albert, a Harvard University neurologist, studied 1,000 people between the ages of 70 and 80 and found that both physical and mental factors determined healthy intellectual ability. Her study found that education is a key element in successful mental aging (Thompson, 2000).

Studies have shown that people who regularly challenge both their bodies and their brains stand a better chance of maintaining good cognitive function later in life (Glass, 1996; Kotulak, 1997; Snowdon, 2001). Current studies find that the human brain continues to grow dendrites throughout life (Belsky, 1999). In response to the natural loss of neurons associated with aging, the remaining neurons sprout new dendrites to help maintain thinking and memory. Belsky (1999) pointed to mental stimulations as “good brain cell medicine” (p. 345). As Bortz (1991) pointed out, the active brain resists deterioration (excluding pathology). In the Seattle study, Schaie found that when he trained people suffering from cardiovascular disease and declining mental abilities in inductive reasoning, they had fewer episodes of illness and fewer clinic visits (Lamndin & Fugate, 1997).

It is never too late to begin, even for those who have not maintained an active physical or mental lifestyle. Lamndin and Fugate (1997) pointed out that age itself is not a barrier to developmental growth and may even present incentives for it. We are challenged to grow at every age as societal expectations, roles, and inner needs change. To the extent that learning activities support or encourage cognitive development, they are growth activities.

Motivation is a concept that explains why people behave the way they do.

Motivation cannot be directly measured and so is a highly subjective topic around which many theories have developed (Wlodkowski, 1985). Included are the theory of need reduction and the theory of positive striving (Kidd, 1973). Education is motivated by need reduction at certain times, particularly early in life when learning is crucial for survival. Positive striving plays a larger part as we age and work toward the goal of what psychologists Rogers (1975) called self-fulfillment and Maslow (1968) named self-actualization. For many older adults, participation in educational programs is motivated in part by this drive for self-fulfillment and positive striving.

Motivation is also made up of intrinsic and extrinsic components. Intrinsic drive is internal and leads to participation in an activity for the sake of the activity itself. External motivation comes into play when participation is associated with some value that the activity provides such as becoming the best at something (Kidd, 1973). Once again, these two components of motivation may play a role at different times. In younger years, extrinsic motivation for learning may be primary as individuals strive to become competent or even expert in a particular field of endeavor. In later years, education may be intrinsically motivated by the joy of learning or simply for the sake of learning itself.

Research and empirical evidence indicate that older adults can and do continue to learn throughout their lives. Their learning styles, coping mechanisms for problems of aging (such as short-term memory loss), interests, and why they engage in learning activities are issues that have been dealt with extensively. Staudinger, Cornelius and Baltes (1989) suggest a model of learning associated with successful aging. Their model of Selective Optimization with Compensation presents strategies for using the full

potential of intelligence despite biological decline and the decrease of reserve capacity that is inherent with aging.

As the older adult population grows, more people will seek out educational experiences for a number of reasons. Knowing those reasons will help planners provide more focused opportunities for socialization, intellectual growth and stimulation, and positive educational experiences. In their work in 1974, Morstain and Smart cited the need for continued study of the topic. They questioned whether over time the participant base would grow more diverse and motivational factors would change. As a result of their study of older learners in higher education, Silverstein, Choi and Bulot (2000) recommended that universities develop standing committees on older learners. They further suggested that these committees function to heighten the awareness of administrators and faculty to the needs and expectations of older learners and to actively work to enhance the learning experience for this growing and significant segment of the population. Going back to college benefits both the seller, colleges in need of students, and buyer, older adults in need of stimulation (Belsky, 1999).

### Definition of Terms

Key terms used in this paper are defined as follows:

Formal learning: learning that takes place in any formal or organized setting: a school, university, Elderhostel course, or other learning program that has a predetermined structure (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997).

Motivations: from the Latin verb *movere*, to move; generally that which spurs us to action (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1987).

Older Adult: those 55 years of age or older. Two of the three programs from which participants were solicited for this study use this as a minimum age requirement for enrollment (Lifelong Learning Institute, Spring 2001 & [www.elderhostel.org](http://www.elderhostel.org), 2001).

Successful aging: the ideal outcome of the aging process including such dimensions as happiness, subjective well-being, and the optimal relationship between the individual and his/her environment (Ryff, 1982).

### Preview

A review of literature relevant to successful aging and educational motivation in older adults follows in Chapter 2. A description of the research method is given in Chapter 3, including information about the selection and composition of the sample, and an explanation of the instrument used, as well as how the data were interpreted. Chapter 4 offers a detailed presentation of the results of the survey including numerous data tables, followed by a discussion of the limitations of the research, implications for future research, and conclusions in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

As the segment of the American population ages 55 and older grows, the need for formal educational opportunities also grows. Those engaged in delivering education in various forms, both formal and informal, must continue to meet those needs. This necessarily begins with an understanding of what motivates older adults to return to the classroom. Current literature presents an abundance of information on the subject of educational motivation in adults. A review of successful aging theories provides a foundation for the discussion of strategies and motivation in adult learners.

### Successful Aging

Successful aging is a subject that attracts a great deal of interest, but somewhat defies definition. Consequently, no literature exists in which researchers can say with certainty what constitutes successful aging. However, as life span increases, so does the desire for optimization of the added years. As a result, researchers are trying to uncover as much information as possible to support the concept of successful aging in terms of definition, what can be achieved, and how it is achieved. Elements of successful aging may include survival, health, and life satisfaction. Rowe and Kahn (1998) define successful aging in terms of maintaining three key elements: low risk of disease and disease-related disability, high mental and physical function, and active engagement with life. Other terms that may apply are "adjustment" or "adaptation." Ultimately, successful aging may be in the eye of the beholder (Bearon, 1996).

Aging is a developmental process. Studies of the concept of successful aging generally include a discussion of its developmental elements. The goal of work in this

area is to help individuals encounter future life events in ways that facilitate self-enhancement. In the Kansas City Study of Adult Life, life satisfaction was described in terms of five clearly defined developmental components: zest vs. apathy, resolution and fortitude, goodness of fit between desired and achieved goals, positive self-concept, and mood tone (Ryff, 1982). Sullivan and Fisher (1994) agreed and suggested that life satisfaction may be based on a strengths-based developmental model. Rather than dwelling on those abilities that fade with age, they suggested maximizing the strengths that remain by devoting attention to the competence and particular strengths of older adults. Fisher (1995) also found that five features of successful aging emerged in a study of 40 employees between the ages of 61 and 92 of the Ozarks Area Foster Grandparent Program. Those features included interactions with others, a sense of purpose, self-acceptance, personal growth, and autonomy. In a 1989 study, Ryff also found interactions with others to be a necessary part of successful aging. Rowe and Kahn (1998) stressed that each person is ultimately in control of his/her own success or failure in aging.

It has been suggested that the practical purpose of the science of gerontology is adding life to the years (Havighurst, 1961). Life satisfaction has become a widely studied component of the successful aging discussion (Bearon, 1996; Havighurst, 1961). Two theories of successful aging surface in the discussion. The first is Activity Theory and the second is Cummings and Henry's earlier Disengagement Theory.

Activity Theory, as the name suggests, holds that successful aging means maintaining the activities and attitudes of middle age for as long as possible. The theory suggests that people maintain a positive attitude toward work, activity, and social

interactions as they age. Activity theorists consider any behaviors that are appropriate in middle age to also be appropriate in old age, and that the same criteria for success should be used to judge older people as are used with the middle aged (Cox, 1993).

The main premise of Disengagement Theory is that it is a process of giving up the individual's main role in life and is characterized by a diminishing interaction between the individual and their social system. Those who take a developmental view of successful aging reject the disengagement theory, since it presumes that disengagement is inevitable. Behaviorists point out that those who have dealt with stress throughout their life by withdrawing and insulating themselves from the world may continue to do so in later life, but that those who remain engaged in life until its end have likely been engaged throughout their lives, belying its universality (Cox, 1993).

A third theory has surfaced in recent years known as the Continuity Theory. This theory proposes that successful aging depends on the ability to carry habits, preferences, life-style and relationships into old age from mid-life (Bearon, 1996).

Staudinger, Cornelius and Baltes (1989) added to the discussion of successful aging through their research into the aging of intelligence. While acknowledging the decline of the mechanical aspects of intelligence, they emphasized the potential of pragmatic intelligence and suggested Selective Optimization with Compensation as a model of successful intellectual aging. This model describes a process of narrowed focus, practice, and finding new ways of dealing with deficiencies such as memory loss or loss of mechanical speed. Realistic readjustment and adaptation are key when cognitive losses occur.

Because cognitive strength in later life is a part of successful aging, predictors of late life cognitive ability are important. In 1995, Plassman, Welch, Helms, Brandt, Page and Breitner studied the connection between intelligence and education and late-life cognition. Using the Army General Classification Test (AGCT), they discovered that both intelligence and years of education contributed significantly to cognitive status. Their theory has a basis in biology, as they predicted that those with more education and higher intelligence have more synapses in the brain, providing for more reserve capacity to be used to compensate for injury and natural decline. When their research was published in 1995, they believed that the basis of prolonged cognitive function was educational attainment in early adulthood.

A current longitudinal study adding greatly to the body of knowledge on cognition and successful aging is the so-called "nun study" being done by Snowdon, Ostwald and Kane (2001) at the University of Kentucky's Chandler Medical Center. The study follows 678 members of a congregation of Roman Catholic nuns who participate in all aspects of the study of aging including donation of their brains after death. A significant connection has been found between level of education and longevity and the ability to perform self-care activities (Snowdon, 2001). Early results suggested the connection so strongly that many sisters in the study signed up for courses and increased their level of informal educational activity on the strength of the report alone. (Information about the ongoing study can be followed at the "nun study" web site at [www.coa.uky.edu/nunnet](http://www.coa.uky.edu/nunnet))

Rowe and Kahn (1998) in their work on successful aging found that cognitive function in older adults can be significantly improved with practice. They suggested that

with appropriate training approximately two decades of memory loss can be offset.

Further they supported the importance of close relationships for healthy aging.

Lamdin and Fugate (1997) considered continual growth and development as not only possible but also essential for the health and well being of older adults, helping them to stay physically healthy and lead an independent lifestyle. Learning activities may become a way of coping with life events and, reciprocally, real learning comes from coping with these events. Learning related to life events is highly significant. They reported that “. . . continued growth and development are not only possible but critical for the health and well being of older men and women” (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997, p. 37). The participants in their study often volunteered responses letting the researchers know that they were doing everything they could to hold on to their intellectual abilities, evidencing an underlying factor of desiring to age successfully and with a full measure of satisfaction with life. The researchers also pointed out that the more one is involved in learning exercises, the more the ability to learn expands, suggesting that cognitive skills improve with training and exercise.

In his discussion of intellectual development in later life, Schaie (1994) credited utilization of cultural and educational resources throughout adulthood as one of five key factors, along with exposure to stimulating environments, high levels of education, high workplace complexity, and long marriage to an intelligent spouse, which influence this development. Schaie suggested that a routine job, mindless leisure time and an undemanding social environment are some of the enemies of successful aging.

## Education and Motivation in Adult Learners

Motivation is another construct that has no clear definition. Behaviorists believe that motivation for growth is inherent in all humans (Wlodkowski, 1985). The level of motivation is a predictor of success, particularly in learning situations (Schensted, 1997).

Houle (1961) was one of the first to enter the discussion of educational motivation with his three-pronged theory of motivation for learning that has become known as Houle's Typology. Although it has been greatly expanded in the years since it was first introduced, it still forms a basis for studying motivation and can be used in the current discussion related to education. According to Houle, there are three definite motivational orientations. The first is goal-oriented, in which learning is used as a tool to gain specific objectives. The second is activity-oriented, in which learning is engaged in for the sake of activity, to relieve boredom, to make new friends, etc. Finally, there is learning-oriented activity, in which learning is pursued for its own sake. All three of Houle's motivations can be found in older adult learners, as evidenced by several studies done in the forty years since the typology was first postulated.

Almost every learner has more than one motive (Cross, 1981; Boshier, 1991). Houle's student, Burgess (1971), stated that "Adults participate in educational activities for various and complex reasons" (p. 3). Similarly, in his 1971 work, Boshier noted that, ". . . it is obvious that students enroll in adult education classes for a plethora of reasons. . ." (p. 26). Although reasons for participating may be varied and complex, research establishes that those reasons tend to fall into general categories or clusters, just as Houle suggested. Subsequent research has expanded Houle's three main motivations, but they still form the basis for the study of educational motivation.

Merriam and Caffarella (1991) took Houle's typology a step further and identified clusters of reasons for adult learning, leaving more room for multiple motives for participation. They found that reasons for participating in adult education are "many, complex, and subject to change" (p. 86). Grouping motivation into two major components, they approached the subject from both the sociological and psychological perspective. Social participation is a strong motivator for many adults, while from a psychological perspective, an individual's motives may be impacted by their position in the life cycle as well as their attitude toward learning and self-improvement. Smart and Morstain (1974) likewise grouped responses from a survey of 611 adult learners into six major groups including social relationships, external expectations, social welfare, professional advancement, escape and stimulation, and cognitive interest.

Romaniuk and Romaniuk (1982) in their study dealing with motivation specifically in Elderhostel participants, synthesized earlier findings into general categories. These included: gaining new knowledge, working toward professional advancement, seeking stimulation/change from everyday activities, desiring opportunities for social interaction, and developing opportunities to contribute to societal goals. Boshier and Riddell (1978) synthesized factors into six factor categories: escape/stimulation, social welfare, social contact, professional advancement, cognitive interest, and external expectations. They found professional advancement most often not relevant to the needs and motives of older adults.

Hiemstra (1976) added to the discussion of motivation by citing two further categories of educational motivation, instrumental and expressive. Instrumental activities are those designed for education on topics such as health, income, legal affairs, and

physical adjustment to aging. These may be seen as correlative with extrinsic motivations. Expressive activities are those that expand horizons, increase the enjoyment of life, or facilitate opportunities for self-expression. These correlate with intrinsic motivation. Havighurst (1976) suggested that both expressive and instrumental learning are essential to adult participation in educational activities. Hiemstra (1976) found that adult learners who are college graduates are less likely to report a preference for courses that satisfy instrumental needs, but are more expressive learners.

Romaniuk and Romaniuk (1982) extracted six main reasons for participation from their survey of 498 Elderhostel participants. They were: change – the opportunity to go somewhere different or do something different; time – a one week time frame for learning; cost – low fixed cost for this program; suitable course content; absence of tests or evaluations; and the opportunity to develop new interests and re-explore old ones (learning). It should be noted that Elderhostel is a unique program that brings older adults to specific locations, such as college campuses, for weeklong intensive learning experiences. The participants of the Romaniuk research were typical; their average age was 66.8 years and they had an average of 15.7 years of formal education. Also typical were the percentages for women respondents and married respondents, 64 percent and 68 percent respectively. In this study, learning something new, visiting new places, and meeting new people ranked highest as motives to attend.

Adults are active agents in their own educational experiences. They tend to be achievement oriented and highly motivated (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). Particularly for older adults, being required to attend educational programs by an employer or in pursuit of a career goal is seldom the reason for participating (Schenstead, 1997). The more

frequently people have had motivating learning experiences, the more likely it is that they will become lifelong learners. It is also reasonable to assume that the motives people bring to the learning experience and their desire to learn will greatly affect how and what they learn (Wlodkowski, 1985). In a classroom setting, it is important that older adults perceive that the course content is relevant to them in a worthwhile way, that they can relate the content to themselves, and that the classroom experience is enjoyable (Schenstead, 1997; Wlodkowski, 1985).

One of the earliest and most influential studies in the area of adult educational motivation was done by Roger Boshier in 1961, using the Educational Participation Scale (EPS), which he designed and subsequently refined. Its validity has since been studied (Fujita-Starck, 1996), and alternate forms developed (Boshier, 1991). It is clear from the use of the EPS and other research that most adults have more than one strong motive when engaging in some type of educational experience (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992). Some of the most frequently cited are the desire to learn, to seek intellectual stimulation, to learn for the sake of learning, and to enrich their lives (Fujita-Starck, 1996; Kim & Creighton, 2000; Scala, 1996). Many nontraditional students also return to school to complete interrupted educational pursuits begun earlier in their lives (Benshoff, J. and Lewis, H., 1992).

The intrinsic, expressive motivation of the joy of learning surfaced again and again in the research literature. Lambdin and Fugate (1997) found that 79.7% of the respondents in their survey gave the joy of learning their highest rating. At 57.9%, pursuing a long-standing hobby or interest came in a distant second. Silverstein, et al (2000), found that a review of literature from the 1970s and 1980s showed that

expressive motivations represent the larger reason for enrolling. They cited the work of Daniel, Templin, and Shearon (1977) who found overwhelming evidence that the most common motivations for formal learning in older adults are cognitive interest and desire to learn.

In a University of Massachusetts at Boston research study (Silverstein, et al, 2000), motivation differed significantly between respondents age 50-59 and those 60 years old and older. The younger respondents more often cited extrinsic, instrumental reasons for participating in classroom activities, viewing classroom learning as helpful in achieving career goals. The older participants cited reasons such as becoming a more informed person, the joy of learning, and keeping the mind active. It should be noted that the participants in this survey were all enrolled as full- or part-time students in courses or programs on the UMB campus, where "non-traditional" students make up nearly one quarter of the total student population. As might be expected, respondents in this study were already highly educated; 86% had completed at least some college and 60% had at least a four-year degree. The study also found that there was a positive correlation between self-reported good health and continued learning.

In 2000, the American Association of Retired Persons, AARP, commissioned a survey by Harris Interactive, Inc. in which 1,019 adults over 50 years old were surveyed; 508 by telephone and 511 through participation in an on-line survey. Expressive motivations rated high among participants. In the survey, 91% of respondents cited the simple joy of learning something new as a strong motivating factor. A majority (92%) cited their own spiritual or personal growth as a factor for learning. These results held true across demographic groups. A modest majority (55%) participated in learning

that was related to a hobby or pastime, to advance skills, or to learn something that would help get more enjoyment out of life. The survey showed that participants were most interested in learning about things that enriched their lives, helped them stay healthy, and brought them enjoyment.

Further, the AARP study showed that those who had some college education were twice as likely to say they had attended a class, seminar or workshop, twice as likely to have enrolled in a college or community college, but only slightly more likely to have used the Internet for learning. This group also preferred formal settings for learning. Those with less education more frequently cited being able to talk with children and grandchildren as a motivating factor. Over half of the respondents reported that they had never enrolled in a class, showing the predominance of informal learning in many older people's lives. This relates to Lambdin and Fugate's (1997) assessment that many older adults avoid formal educational experiences because of the old myths that they are too old or too absent minded to learn. They fail to realize that learning takes place each time they read a newspaper or listen to a news report on television or radio.

Adults are highly pragmatic learners. While some aspects of intelligence may wane with age, adults bring a wealth of pragmatic knowledge gained over the course of a lifetime to learning situations. They may learn differently, but they are equally capable of learning and often perform better than younger counterparts in a classroom (Staudinger, et al, 1989; Schenstead, 1997; Wlodkowski, 1985). According to Moody, (1986) "... there is no longer any question about the ability of older adults to learn and to benefit from education . . ." (p. 208).

Instructors must take the time to understand and adapt to the learning styles of older adults if they are to be successful teachers of adult learners. This is key to a positive learning experience for the student. Instruction that is too fast-paced or complex may interfere with learning (Zemke, R. & S., 1984). The simple act of speaking slowly and in a loud voice improves the classroom experience for older adults. It is also important to remember that the speed at which learning takes place is considerably slower and that more time may be needed for the subject to be presented (Glass, 1996; Scala, 1996).

Older adult learners may bring some negative feelings to the learning experience. They may wonder whether they can handle the work, whether they will understand, or whether others will think they are slow. They may also bring some fear and apprehension to the situation. Some may need to prove to themselves that they are still vital, competent, and able to remain independent (Ellis, 1996). Keeping these factors in mind will enable instructors to help older adult students make the most of their educational experiences (Glass, 1996; Scala, 1996; Schenstead, 1997).

### Summary

For most of the last century, the subject of the motives for adult participation in education has been discussed, speculated about, and researched. From J.D. Hoy's investigation of adult evening students in England in 1933, to Cecil Houle's groundbreaking work in 1961, to the work of the University of Massachusetts Boston survey in August of 2000, educational motivation has been studied extensively. It is clear that a wide spectrum of motivating factors are at work when older adults make the decision to participate in formal educational programs.

The investigation continues as researchers strive to determine how successful aging can be achieved and what part lifelong learning plays in it. While some of the research is conducted for purely scholarly or academic purposes, much of it is pragmatic. Silverstein, et al (2000) suggest that institutions of higher learning should give serious consideration to the older adult as student, as lifelong learning is it has been discovered to be an important component of successful aging.

Older adults definitely can and do learn well and to neglect the educational needs and desires of this growing segment of the population is dangerously short-sighted.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Selection and Description of the Sample

The subjects in this study were adults over the age of 55 who had participated in one of the following educational activities; a) Elderhostels sponsored by the University of Illinois, b) Lifelong Learning courses at Parkland College, or c) the Board of Trustees degree program at Eastern Illinois University. A minimum age of 55 was chosen because it is the youngest age at which persons may participate in Elderhostel and Senior Scholars programs.

#### Description of the Instrument

A total of 671 surveys were mailed to participants in the three programs. Surveys were sent to 500 alumni of the University of Illinois Elderhostel program, 135 went to Parkland College Lifelong Learners and 32 were sent to EIU enrollees. Four surveys were also sent to adults with whom the researcher was acquainted who had participated in some formal educational program in the recent past.

This sample was chosen because of its proximity to the researcher, the ease of obtaining mailing lists from participating institutions, and the researcher's familiarity with the programs from which participants were drawn. The sample was made up of individuals who were currently, or had recently been, actively engaged in a formal educational program. This pointed to their interest in the subject area and the likelihood that at least some of them would be willing to participate in the research.

The surveys were color coded to enable the responses from various groups to be tracked. The survey form was designed to be self-mailing and each form included return

postage to encourage participation. Surveys sent to Elderhostel alumni were included with a cover letter (see Appendix A) in a catalog mailing. Lifelong Learners received the survey and cover letter (see Appendix B) independent of any other mailing as did the EIU participants (see Appendix C). An envelope with the Eastern Illinois University Board of Trustees Program return address was used (with permission) in the mailings to Lifelong Learners and BOT students to lend credibility to these mailings and to strengthen the chances of the mail being opened.

The survey instrument was a modified version of the Educational Participation Scale introduced by Roger Boshier in 1971 and subsequently used by other researchers in the field (see Appendix D). The survey contained 35 items which were rated for degree of importance in making the decision to participate in a formal educational program. Respondents were also given the opportunity to name and rank responses that did not appear on the survey by using an "other" option. A modified Likert scale was used for ranking which included the following options; 1 = does not apply, 2 = not important, 3 = somewhat important, and 4 = very important. Since the same instrument was used for subjects in both degree and non-degree programs, a rating of 1 was included to be used if the item did not apply as in those pertaining to career decisions, and a rating of 2 was included to be used if the item was simply not important in the decision process. Many respondents used the 1 and 2 ratings interchangeably, and since both suggested that an item was unimportant, data from those surveys were included.

The survey also included information about the gender, age, and education level of the participants. The education level was of particular interest since the study sought

to discover whether a relationship existed between education level and motivational factors.

#### Data Analysis and Interpretation

The resulting data were analyzed for demographic information. Statistical analysis was limited to an examination of frequency of answers and averages pertaining to demographics. Relationships were also explored between the level of education indicated by the respondent and the ranking of various items in the survey.

#### Summary

Using a modified version of an existing survey instrument, data were solicited from 671 older adults regarding their reasons for participating in formal educational programs. Members of the sample group had taken part (at some time) in programs offered in East Central Illinois by the University of Illinois, Eastern Illinois University, and Parkland College. Each received a self-mailing survey form and 253 chose to participate in the research by completing and returning the survey. Results were analyzed for demographic information, frequencies, and to discover whether relationships existed between level of education and the answers provided. A discussion of those findings follows.

## Chapter 4

### Results and Discussion

#### Survey Response

Of 671 surveys mailed, 253 (37%) were returned, 233 of which were usable. A total of 58 % of responses were from Elderhostel participants, 35 % were from Parkland College's Lifelong Learners, and 7% were Eastern Illinois University students. Sixty percent of the Lifelong Learners responded to the survey, an unusually high number. This indicated a strong interest in learning activities among this group, as well as the desire to be part of the research. The local nature of the request may have also had an impact. Twenty percent of the Elderhostel participants surveyed responded. This group, however, was made up of people not local to the area as evidenced by the fact that 19 states were represented by postmark in their responses. Of the 32 surveys sent to the EIU students, 44%, or 14 surveys were returned.

The average age of participants in the survey was 71.6 years with a standard deviation of 7.3 years. Forty-nine of the participants were between the ages of 55 and 65 while 181 were older than 65. Three respondents failed to include their age. As stated earlier, women respondents outnumbered men; 174 women and 58 men responded, while one respondent did not include gender information. Of the 233 responses, 58 were from Parkland College Lifelong Learners, 174 from Elderhostel alumni, ten were from Eastern Illinois University, and four were non-affiliated. The typical respondent (using majority responses) was a 71 year old female with a master's degree. (See Table 1).

Table 1  
Demographics

Age of respondents

Average: 71.4 years

Oldest: 90 years

Youngest: 56 years

Gender of respondents	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent of Sample</u>
Males:	58	24.8%
Females:	174	74.6%
No information:	1	0.6%

Affiliation of respondents	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent of Sample</u>
Parkland College Lifelong Learners	81	34.7%
University of Illinois Elderhostel Alumni	138	59.3%
Eastern Illinois University Continuing Education	14	6.0%

The unusable surveys fell into three main categories. Two respondents were under 55 year of age, three surveys were too badly damaged by the post office to be completely readable, and nine did not follow the Likert protocol and used either X or √ on some lines and left those remaining blank. Although it might be reasonable to assume that answers marked X or √ were important motivational factors, surveys in which they were used were not included because it was not possible to determine whether they were "somewhat" or "very" important, or whether the respondent clearly understood the directions. Six surveys were returned more than a month past the requested return date and were not included since data was already being analyzed at that time.

Although racial/ethnic information and information regarding marital status were not collected, other information collected was similar to that collected by earlier studies.

Female respondents outnumbered males by 3 to 1 (75% vs 25%), and 90% of the respondents had some education beyond a high school diploma. All of the respondents had finished high school and 7.7% reported having a high school diploma only.

Eighteen persons reported having completed high school, 50 had completed some college work, 48 held bachelor's degrees, 31 had completed some post-graduate courses, 59 held master's degrees, 15 had completed some work toward a doctorate and 11 held a doctoral degree (see Table 2).

Table 2  
Educational Attainment

<u>Highest Level of Education Completed</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>
Did not complete high school	0	0.0
High school diploma or GED	18	7.7
Completed some college courses	50	21.4
Have a bachelor's degree	48	20.0
Completed some post-graduate courses	31	13.3
Have a master's degree	59	25.3
Completed some doctoral work	15	6.4
Have a doctorate	11	4.7
Did not complete this portion of the survey	1	0.4

One hundred nine respondents (46%) used the "other" option to enter and rate a motivating factor not listed on the survey instrument. Eighteen respondents (7.7%) used a blank portion of the survey form to include some information not requested, or to simply wish the researcher well. One sent a letter asking that the results of the survey be made available to Elderhostel participants in the summer 2001 programs at the University of Illinois.

## Results

Objective 1. To discover what motivates older adults to participate in formal learning programs.

Hypothesis 1. Individuals will have more than one important motivating factor for participating in formal educational experiences.

As was anticipated from the work of previous researchers, and in support of the first component of the hypothesis, all subjects in this study indicated multiple strong motives for participation as evidenced by use of answers 4, "very important" and 3, "somewhat important" on the survey instrument. All participants in this study used the answer "very important" more than once. On average, respondents rated motivating factors "very important" 6.6 times per survey, and "somewhat important" 7.8 times per survey.

This study supports Boshier and Riddell's (1978) finding that professional advancement was the least important factor for older adults. Only 36 respondents rated professional advancement factors as very important and 37 rated them somewhat important (0.5%; n = 699). It is pertinent to recall at this point that the majority of respondents were from Elderhostel and Lifelong Learners programs. Of the respondents who were EIU students or alums, or non-affiliated, seven respondents (50%; n = 14) rated "achieve an occupational goal" as very important. The other 50% used the "does not apply" rating. Six of the EIU respondents (42%) gave a very important or somewhat important rating to the factor "get a better job." Others said that this category did not apply. The factor "prepare for a job" rated very important or somewhat important with 50% of these respondents and did not apply to the other 50%. Age did not seem to be a factor as the average age of those rating these items very or somewhat important was 66.7

years; the youngest was 55 and oldest was 90. This group rated cognitive interest factors as very important but generally rated social factors as not important. (See Table 3.)

Table 3  
Response Frequencies

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Rating:</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Not rated</u>
Meet new people		27	129	51	18	8
Make new friends		19	98	84	20	12
Meet different people		34	129	43	17	10
Meet friendly people		46	109	46	19	13
Have fun with friends		38	76	57	46	16
Make up for narrow education		16	28	40	128	21
Always wanted to go to college		14	19	20	158	22
Prepare for further education		13	15	24	159	22
Get a better job		14	19	20	158	22
Achieve an occupational goal		17	10	13	171	22
Prepare for a job		15	8	15	172	23
Increase competence		59	67	27	64	16
Improve language skills		19	46	47	98	23
Write better		16	50	48	97	22
Enrichment/love of learning		162	48	3	9	11
Mental stimulation		157	59	3	7	7
Understand what others say		47	81	40	43	22
Help me talk with children		10	42	55	103	23
Keep up with children		11	38	51	109	24
Answer children's questions		12	47	38	113	23
Keep up with family members		15	43	52	102	21
Share common interest		52	125	25	21	10
Prepare for family changes		12	24	55	120	22
Get relief from boredom		24	54	53	89	13
Take a break from routine		36	93	38	53	13
Overcome frustration		11	19	58	123	22
Get away from loneliness		11	36	58	114	14
Satisfy curiosity		99	96	11	18	9
Expand my mind		175	43	2	6	7
Seek knowledge		170	44	4	6	9
Gain something meaningful		144	66	5	9	9
Fill void after life changes		32	46	52	88	15

Note: 4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important, 2 = Not important, 1 = Does not apply; Not rated = respondent did not rate this item

Survey data revealed that strong motivation in participants tended to cluster in specific areas. Groups of answers fell into particular categories. Survey results were sorted using Boshier and Riddell's (1978) six factor categories; escape/stimulation, social welfare, social contact, professional advancement, cognitive interest, and external expectations. All categories except social welfare were included in the survey form used. (See Table 4 for category distribution.) Cognitive interest and social contact were the two most highly rated categories. Cognitive factors were cited as very important 1,044 times (37%: n = 2796) and as somewhat important 581 times (20%). Likewise, social contact was rated as very important 175 times (12.5%: n = 1398) and as somewhat important 577 times (41.2%).

Table 4  
Motivating Factors by Category

---

Extrinsic Factors involving Escape/Stimulation

Get relief from boredom  
Take a break from routine  
Fill a void after life changes

Extrinsic Factors involving Social Contact

Meet new people  
Make new friends  
Meet different people  
Meet friendly people  
Have fun with friends  
Get away from loneliness

Intrinsic Factors involving Cognitive Interest

Write better  
Enrichment/love of learning  
Mental stimulation  
Satisfy curiosity  
Expand my mind  
Seek knowledge  
Gain something meaningful

### Extrinsic Factors involving Professional Advancement

- Get a better job
- Achieve an occupational goal
- Prepare for a job
- Make up for a narrow education
- Always wanted to go to college
- Prepare for further education
- Increase competence
- Improve language skills

### Extrinsic Factors involving External Expectations

- Understand what others say
- Help me talk with children
- Keep up with children
- Answer children's questions
- Keep up with family members
- Share common interest
- Prepare for family changes

Elderhostel respondents rated both social contact and cognitive interest as very important or somewhat important. This is not surprising since the Elderhostel organization promotes its courses as a "way . . . to share new ideas, explore new places and make new friends" (Elderhostel web site available at: [www.elderhostel.org](http://www.elderhostel.org), 2001). Overall, 71% of the Elderhostel respondents rated social contact factors and 93% rated cognitive interest factors as very important or somewhat important. As is noted later in the discussion related to voluntary answers, the Elderhostel cohort also rated travel as a very important motivation.

Parkland College Lifelong Learners also rated both social contact and cognitive interest as very important or somewhat important. Of this group, 51% (n = 81) of

respondents rated social contact factors and 84% rated cognitive interest factors as very important or somewhat important.

In most cases both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were given high ratings on the same survey. While it is clear that intrinsic motivation is strong in the majority of the subject group, many also gave the rating "somewhat important" to motivations involving interpersonal relationships such as meeting new, different, and friendly people.

Havighurst (1976) noted this same mix of the expressive and instrumental as essential in adult participation in formal learning.

The single most frequently noted important motivation in this study was "expand my mind". Seventy-five percent of the respondents rated it very important (n = 175). This intrinsic motivation was followed closely by seeking knowledge (n = 170), mental stimulation (n = 157), and enrichment/love of learning (n = 162). When combined with those who rated these items as "somewhat important" the rank order remains the same.

The survey items associated with extrinsic motivation involving meeting other people were also ranked very important or somewhat important by a majority of respondents. Sixty-six percent rated meeting new people and meeting friendly people in one of these categories, while 69% rated meeting different people in one of the important categories. Of the extrinsic factors in the category "External Expectations," sharing a common interest rated very or somewhat important with 37% of the respondents. Other factors in the category were rated very or somewhat important by less than 30% of respondents.

Voluntary answers fell into several categories, some of which were covered in a general way on the questionnaire and dealt with more specifically in the "other" category.

Broad topics included travel and travel-related reasons (23), cognitive interest/desire to learn (31), improvement or maintenance of physical and mental health (15), and enjoyment and fun (9). Other voluntary answers confirmed items on the survey such as mental stimulation, enrichment/love or learning, taking a break from routine, and having fun with friends. Other topics were covered in these responses ranging from motivations dealing with the accessibility, price, and ease of the educational experience, to building memories for the future (See Table 5). The voluntary answers in Table 5 have been sorted by the researcher into intrinsically and extrinsically motivated categories. Some answers clearly indicated whether motivation was intrinsic or extrinsic. Others were more difficult to classify due to the brevity of the answer or because it was impossible to know the intent of the respondent. Answers which were not related to motivation are listed separately at the end of the table.

Many of those who cited travel as a motivating factor were Elderhostel participants. As noted earlier, the Elderhostel organization promotes its educational programs as a way to explore new places, accounting for the emphasis on travel as motivation among this cohort. It was clear from voluntary answers that the respondents were a group of active and engaged adults who would most likely agree with the participant who emphatically wrote, "I am not bored!"

Table 5  
Voluntary Answers –Responses to "Other"

---

<u>Value</u>	<u>Intrinsic Motivating Factor</u>
4	Creativity
4	Like research
4	You start dying when you quit learning
4	Reconfirm being a success

(table continues)

Table 5  
 Voluntary Answers –Responses to “Other”

<u>Value</u>	<u>Intrinsic Motivating Factor</u>
4	Makes life more interesting
4	Developing and furthering a religious faith
4	Maintain a positive attitude towards life
4	To learn about myself
4	Enjoy and learn more from today’s faculty members than I did in the ‘30’s – appreciate their skills more fully
4	Knowledge of self
4	More enjoyment of art and literature through knowledge
3	Have fun learning just to be learning
4	Always wanted a master’s degree
4	I love learning!
3*	Sample variety of subjects
4*	Sample variety of subjects
3 (2)*	Building memories for the future
4 (2)*	Stay mentally and physically active
4	I can learn for the fun of it (no exams and papers to write).
4	The love of learning and meeting people who feel as I do.
4	Enjoy singing
3	Sample a different activity
4	Have a good time
4	I have taken courses I was really interested in.
4	Have fun
4	Learn something new

<u>Value</u>	<u>Extrinsic Motivating Factor</u>
4	Learn task, e.g. computing
4	Always wanted to teach
4	Leave farm
4	Gain enough information to do independent study/reading efficiently
4	Service to others
4	Learn new skills
4	Improve skills
4	Participate in activities I didn’t have time for while pursuing a career
4	Improve my singing voice
4	Learn more about music
4+	Improve physical well-being
4	Be with people who are supportive
3	Maintaining good health
4	Learn things I did not learn in school because of being so young
3	See how classes are run
3	Equate with other classmates

(table continues)

Table 5  
 Voluntary Answers –Responses to “Other”

<u>Value</u>	<u>Extrinsic Motivating Factor</u>
4	To tell the story of a 19-year-old in Viet Nam
3	Courses easily available
4	I want to write my biography soon before it's too late
4	Exercise
4	Improve mobility
4	Strength
4	Keep moving physically (water aerobics, yoga)
4	To meet a genealogy interest
4	To improve computer skills
4	To develop artistic skills (painting, photography)
4	Expand understanding of other nations and cultures
4	Coping with environmental problems
4	Attaining wellness
4	See my sister
4	To travel
no rating	Travel – see new places
4	Get to know an area of the country
3	Travel – see the country
4	Join long-time friends
3	Good food – someone else prepares
4	Family reunion at Elderhostel
4	Keep abreast
4	Change of pace
4	Varied formats
4	Share with granddaughter (intergenerational Elderhostel)
4	Knowledge of other cultures through travelogues
4	Learn how to do something specifically interested in (i.e. computer classes . . .)
4	Fitness/yoga/tai chi
4	Enjoy different geographical area
4	Need to improve singing
4	Need to improve group singing
4	I connect Elderhostel program with enjoyable travel
4	Visit new (or old favorite) locations
4	Needed credentials to offer what I had learned as a teacher's aide to children in my own classroom
4	To live past experiences after death of spouse
4	Get hassle free experience
3	Get hassle free experience
4	Add to my registered nurse educ.
3	Combine with visits to grown children (out of my area)

(table continues)

Table 5  
 Voluntary Answers –Responses to “Other”

<u>Value</u>	<u>Extrinsic Motivating Factor</u>
4 (2)*	Get reasonably priced education
3*	Go to E.H. Program close to family 4*
	Go to E.H. Program close to family
4 (2)*	Visit various areas
4	Visit friends in the area on the way to and coming back from Elderhostel programs
4	See plays, attend concerts, etc. at the Elderhostel locations
4	Meet positive thinking seniors
4	See reaction of professors to senior feedback
4	Cultural knowledge
3	Travel to new places
4	Travel to new areas
4	Visit with family and friends in area
4	Physical activity
4	Way to travel and visit places I've never been to.
3	I can go to warmer climates in the winter and still learn.
4	It has been an economical way to travel, learn and have enriching experiences.
4	Understanding the relationship of U.S.A. with the world.
4	Improve Health
<u>Value</u>	<u>Answers Not Indicating Motivating Factor</u>
4	I am happy with my life
4	I am the middle of 5 children. My parents wanted us to go to college. Two of us graduated, I was 35, my sister was 40.

Note: \* denotes answers appearing on one survey form used by two members of the same household

Objective 2. To discover if a relationship exists between levels of formal education and motivational factors in older adults.

Hypothesis 2. Individuals' level of formal education will influence whether their motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic.

The most surprising group of respondents were the 18 who reported having no education past high school. Although they might have been expected to rate extrinsic motivations highest, they too rated mental stimulation, expanding their minds, and gaining something meaningful as very important an average of 60% of the time. All had

been involved at some time or were currently involved in college or university affiliated formal educational programs. None of this group rated any motivations involving professional advancement as very or even somewhat important. Of the group of external expectation motivations, only "sharing a common interest" was rated as important by half of the respondents. Other motivations in this category were rated as not important or as not applicable. Answers in other categories were evenly spread for this group. While they might be expected to be involved in educational programs to overcome frustration or relieve boredom, this was not the case. Only two reported overcoming frustration as somewhat important and less than half rated relieving boredom as having any degree of importance.

No noteworthy difference in motivation was seen across educational levels in the sample. Regardless of the level of formal education, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were rated "very important" or "somewhat important" by respondents. Those who reported having a high school diploma or GED were as likely to report strong intrinsic motivations as those with a doctorate. The second component of the hypothesis, that education level would influence motivation, was not supported by these responses.

It is significant to note, however, that less than 10% ( $n = 18$ ) of the entire sample ( $n = 235$ ) reported having only a high school education and none of the respondents lacked a high school education. To give a great deal of weight to their answers would not be appropriate since they represent such a small percentage of the total sample. Differences in motivation might be expected to appear if these respondents made up a more significant part of the sample (20-25%). Tables 6 through 12 contain response frequencies broken down by educational level.

Table 6  
Responses from Participants with a High School Diploma or GED

Average age: 73.7  
 Number of males: 3  
 Number of females: 15  
 Lifelong Learners: 11  
 Elderhostel Alumni: 6  
 EIU/Other: 1

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Rating:</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Not rated</u>
Meet new people	3	11	3	0	1	
Make new friends	2	7	6	0	3	
Meet different people	5	6	5	0	2	
Meet friendly people	5	8	1	0	4	
Have fun with friends	6	5	3	1	3	
Make up for narrow education	3	4	4	4	3	
Always wanted to go to college	2	5	2	6	3	
Prepare for further education	0	0	0	14	4	
Get a better job	0	0	0	14	4	
Achieve an occupational goal	0	0	0	14	4	
Prepare for a job	0	0	0	14	4	
Increase competence	4	3	1	6	4	
Improve language skills	2	2	2	8	4	
Write better	0	5	1	8	4	
Enrichment/love of learning	9	4	0	2	3	
Mental stimulation	11	3	0	2	2	
Understand what others say	3	7	1	3	4	
Help me talk with children	0	4	1	9	4	
Keep up with children	0	4	1	9	4	
Answer children's questions	0	3	1	9	5	
Keep up with family members	0	7	3	4	4	
Share common interest	7	7	2	1	1	
Prepare for family changes	1	3	2	8	4	
Get relief from boredom	3	4	5	5	1	
Take a break from routine	4	6	4	1	3	
Overcome frustration	0	2	4	8	4	
Get away from loneliness	1	4	3	7	3	
Satisfy curiosity	6	4	2	3	3	
Expand my mind	11	4	2	0	1	
Seek knowledge	8	4	2	1	3	
Gain something meaningful	10	3	1	1	3	
Fill void after life changes	3	5	4	3	3	

Note: 4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important, 2 = Not important, 1 = Does not apply; Not rated = respondent did not rate this item

Table 7  
 Responses from Participants with Some College (No Degree)

Average age: 70.8  
 Number of males: 4  
 Number of females: 45  
 Gender not specified: 1  
 Lifelong Learners: 26  
 Elderhostel Alumni: 20  
 EIU/Other: 4

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Rating:</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Not rated</u>
Meet new people		5	30	7	6	2
Make new friends		4	20	18	5	3
Meet different people		4	31	6	7	2
Meet friendly people		7	25	11	5	2
Have fun with friends		6	15	11	13	5
Make up for narrow education		7	14	10	12	7
Always wanted to go to college		7	10	8	18	7
Prepare for further education		4	5	7	27	7
Get a better job		6	3	3	32	6
Achieve an occupational goal		6	3	1	32	8
Prepare for a job		5	3	4	31	7
Increase competence		16	16	5	7	6
Improve language skills		5	14	7	17	7
Write better		6	14	6	17	7
Enrichment/love of learning		26	17	0	3	4
Mental stimulation		30	16	0	2	2
Understand what others say		13	16	8	7	6
Help me talk with children		3	9	11	20	7
Keep up with children		4	8	13	19	6
Answer children's questions		3	16	7	17	7
Keep up with family members		7	14	6	18	5
Share common interest		13	26	3	6	2
Prepare for family changes		5	10	9	19	7
Get relief from boredom		6	10	10	19	5
Take a break from routine		7	18	9	13	3
Overcome frustration		4	9	11	19	7
Get away from loneliness		4	13	10	20	3
Satisfy curiosity		17	24	2	6	2
Expand my mind		35	13	0	0	2
Seek knowledge		39	7	0	1	3
Gain something meaningful		35	12	0	1	2
Fill void after life changes		10	12	9	14	5

Note: 4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important, 2 = Not important, 1 = Does not apply; Not rated = respondent did not rate this item

Table 8  
Responses from Participants with a Bachelor's Degree

Average age: 71.5  
 Number of males: 11  
 Number of females: 37  
 Lifelong Learners: 11  
 Elderhostel Alumni: 34  
 EIU/Other: 3

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Rating:</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Not rated</u>
Meet new people	5	28	8	7	0	
Make new friends	5	19	16	8	0	
Meet different people	5	27	12	4	0	
Meet friendly people	10	23	9	6	0	
Have fun with friends	11	12	13	11	1	
Make up for narrow education	1	1	10	34	2	
Always wanted to go to college	2	2	2	40	2	
Prepare for further education	2	5	4	35	2	
Get a better job	2	2	0	42	2	
Achieve an occupational goal	3	0	2	41	2	
Prepare for a job	2	2	0	42	2	
Increase competence	10	11	5	22	0	
Improve language skills	3	8	9	26	2	
Write better	1	8	9	28	2	
Enrichment/love of learning	38	8	1	1	0	
Mental stimulation	34	14	0	0	0	
Understand what others say	11	16	6	12	3	
Help me talk with children	3	10	9	24	2	
Keep up with children	3	7	10	24	4	
Answer children's questions	3	9	5	30	1	
Keep up with family members	3	8	9	27	1	
Share common interest	14	26	3	4	1	
Prepare for family changes	4	3	12	28	1	
Get relief from boredom	4	11	9	23	1	
Take a break from routine	7	20	6	15	0	
Overcome frustration	1	4	9	32	2	
Get away from loneliness	0	6	9	31	2	
Satisfy curiosity	20	21	3	3	1	
Expand my mind	38	9	0	1	0	
Seek knowledge	37	10	0	1	0	
Gain something meaningful	26	19	0	3	0	
Fill void after life changes	5	10	10	22	1	

Note: 4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important, 2 = Not important, 1 = Does not apply; Not rated = respondent did not rate this item

Table 9  
Responses from Participants with Some Post-Graduate Course Work

Average age: 72.3  
 Number of males: 8  
 Number of females: 23  
 Lifelong Learners: 12  
 Elderhostel Alumni: 18  
 EIU/Other: 1

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Rating:</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Not rated</u>
Meet new people		2	12	12	2	3
Make new friends		2	9	14	1	4
Meet different people		6	16	5	1	3
Meet friendly people		5	12	9	2	3
Have fun with friends		1	10	10	7	3
Make up for narrow education		2	4	4	17	4
Always wanted to go to college		2	1	2	21	5
Prepare for further education		4	1	5	17	4
Get a better job		2	1	3	19	6
Achieve an occupational goal		3	3	4	18	3
Prepare for a job		3	1	4	18	5
Increase competence		11	8	3	7	2
Improve language skills		3	9	8	8	3
Write better		3	7	8	9	4
Enrichment/love of learning		23	6	1	0	1
Mental stimulation		22	7	0	1	1
Understand what others say		4	13	4	6	4
Help me talk with children		1	6	7	12	5
Keep up with children		1	6	7	12	5
Answer children's questions		1	7	6	12	5
Keep up with family members		2	3	9	12	5
Share common interest		5	20	4	0	2
Prepare for family changes		0	3	7	16	5
Get relief from boredom		2	5	11	9	4
Take a break from routine		3	11	9	5	3
Overcome frustration		2	1	10	14	4
Get away from loneliness		3	3	7	15	3
Satisfy curiosity		16	9	2	2	2
Expand my mind		23	3	0	3	2
Seek knowledge		20	8	1	1	1
Gain something meaningful		19	7	0	2	3
Fill void after life changes		5	5	8	11	2

Note: 4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important, 2 = Not important, 1 = Does not apply; Not rated = respondent did not rate this item

Table 10  
 Responses from Participants with a Master's Degree

Average age: 74.3  
 Number of males: 17  
 Number of females: 42  
 Lifelong Learners: 16  
 Elderhostel Alumni: 42  
 EIU/Other: 1

Survey Question	Rating: 4	3	2	1	Not rated
Meet new people	7	36	14	0	2
Make new friends	2	32	21	2	2
Meet different people	9	36	9	2	3
Meet friendly people	11	32	9	3	4
Have fun with friends	8	27	14	6	4
Make up for narrow education	0	4	8	42	5
Always wanted to go to college	0	1	4	49	5
Prepare for further education	1	1	5	46	5
Get a better job	1	2	5	46	5
Achieve an occupational goal	3	2	5	44	5
Prepare for a job	3	0	6	45	5
Increase competence	14	18	8	15	4
Improve language skills	4	7	14	28	6
Write better	5	10	14	26	4
Enrichment/love of learning	46	9	1	1	2
Mental stimulation	42	13	2	0	2
Understand what others say	11	20	13	10	5
Help me talk with children	3	7	16	28	5
Keep up with children	2	9	12	31	5
Answer children's questions	4	5	14	36	5
Keep up with family members	2	8	16	28	5
Share common interest	14	28	9	5	3
Prepare for family changes	2	2	18	32	5
Get relief from boredom	6	20	12	19	2
Take a break from routine	11	28	5	11	4
Overcome frustration	2	3	15	34	5
Get away from loneliness	2	8	20	26	3
Satisfy curiosity	30	23	2	3	1
Expand my mind	47	8	0	2	2
Seek knowledge	43	11	1	2	2
Gain something meaningful	36	19	2	1	1
Fill void after life changes	7	12	13	23	4

Note: 4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important, 2 = Not important, 1 = Does not apply; Not rated = respondent did not rate this item

Table 11  
Responses from Participants with Some Doctoral Course Work

Average age: 70.8  
 Number of males: 6  
 Number of females: 9  
 Lifelong Learners: 3  
 Elderhostel Alumni: 11  
 EIU/Other: 1

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Rating:</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Not rated</u>
Meet new people		4	7	4	0	0
Make new friends		3	6	6	0	0
Meet different people		4	8	3	0	0
Meet friendly people		7	4	4	0	0
Have fun with friends		5	4	3	3	0
Make up for narrow education		1	0	3	11	0
Always wanted to go to college		1	0	0	14	0
Prepare for further education		2	1	1	11	0
Get a better job		1	2	0	12	0
Achieve an occupational goal		1	2	0	12	0
Prepare for a job		1	2	0	12	0
Increase competence		2	7	2	4	0
Improve language skills		2	3	3	7	0
Write better		1	3	5	6	0
Enrichment/love of learning		10	3	0	2	0
Mental stimulation		10	3	0	2	0
Understand what others say		5	4	3	3	0
Help me talk with children		1	4	5	5	0
Keep up with children		1	2	4	8	0
Answer children's questions		1	3	2	9	0
Keep up with family members		1	1	5	8	0
Share common interest		1	10	2	2	0
Prepare for family changes		0	2	4	9	0
Get relief from boredom		2	3	3	7	0
Take a break from routine		2	8	2	3	0
Overcome frustration		2	0	5	8	0
Get away from loneliness		1	2	4	8	0
Satisfy curiosity		5	9	1	0	0
Expand my mind		11	4	0	0	0
Seek knowledge		12	3	0	0	0
Gain something meaningful		11	3	0	1	0
Fill void after life changes		2	1	5	7	0

Note: 4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important, 2 = Not important, 1 = Does not apply; Not rated = respondent did not rate this item

Table 12  
 Responses from Participants with a Doctorate

Average age: 72.5  
 Number of males: 8  
 Number of females: 3  
 Lifelong Learners: 2  
 Elderhostel Alumni: 6  
 EIU/Other: 3

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Rating:</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>Not rated</u>
Meet new people		1	4	3	3	0
Make new friends		1	4	3	3	0
Meet different people		1	4	3	3	0
Meet friendly people		1	4	3	3	0
Have fun with friends		1	2	3	5	0
Make up for narrow education		2	1	1	7	0
Always wanted to go to college		0	0	2	9	0
Prepare for further education		0	1	1	9	0
Get a better job		1	0	1	9	0
Achieve an occupational goal		1	0	1	9	0
Prepare for a job		1	0	1	9	0
Increase competence		2	3	3	3	0
Improve language skills		0	2	4	4	1
Write better		0	2	5	3	1
Enrichment/love of learning		10	1	0	0	0
Mental stimulation		7	3	1	0	0
Understand what others say		0	4	5	2	0
Help me talk with children		0	2	5	4	0
Keep up with children		0	2	3	6	0
Answer children's questions		0	3	2	6	0
Keep up with family members		0	1	4	6	0
Share common interest		0	6	2	3	0
Prepare for family changes		0	0	3	8	0
Get relief from boredom		1	1	2	7	0
Take a break from routine		2	2	2	5	0
Overcome frustration		0	0	3	8	0
Get away from loneliness		0	0	4	7	0
Satisfy curiosity		5	5	0	1	0
Expand my mind		9	2	0	0	0
Seek knowledge		10	1	0	0	0
Gain something meaningful		6	3	2	0	0
Fill void after life changes		1	0	3	7	0

Note: 4 = Very important; 3 = Somewhat important, 2 = Not important, 1 = Does not apply; Not rated = respondent did not rate this item

## Discussion

It is reasonable to assert from the literature and from the current survey that love of learning is a lifelong pursuit. The majority (90%) of participants in the current study had some formal education beyond high school and for them, cognitive factors scored high on the list of motivators. Those with only a high school education also rated cognitive factors high. The fact that the answer most frequently rated "very important" across the spectrum of respondents was "expand my mind" points to the significance of lifelong learning among older adults.

The importance of this information for educators is clear. First, it signals the importance of getting young people interested in learning early in order to set them on the road of lifelong learning. Secondly, members of the growing older adult population are seeking continuing educational opportunities both within and outside of their own communities. Offering a variety of formal educational experiences and encouraging informal learning among older adults are important aspects of the continuing education and community service roles of institutions of higher learning.

No clear case can be made that the current survey respondents are active, energetic and vital older adults as a result of their participation in educational activities since a variety of other factors including health, wealth, and opportunity play a part. However, it is clear that education is a value in these people's lives and that they are engaged in lifelong learning regardless of their age.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Summary

This study supports previous research with regard to educational motivation in adult learners 55 years of age and older. The participants in this study were actively engaged in formal learning experiences for a number of reasons, both intrinsic and extrinsic, which they rated as very important. They were motivated most frequently by factors involving cognitive interest and social engagement.

Study participants' education level ranged from high school diplomas to doctorates. Although the researcher expected motivation to differ across education levels, this was not the case. The likelihood that those with lower education levels would be more extrinsically motivated and those with more education would be more intrinsically motivated did not prove to be the case. Across the sample, participants were motivated by a range of factors, clustered in both expressive (intrinsic) and instrumental (extrinsic) categories.

As was evident from many of the voluntary answers and comments returned on the surveys, the sample group was one of physically and mentally active and engaged older adults. They appeared to confirm the theory that education is a key to successful aging.

#### Review of the Findings

The current study substantiated previous studies of the motivation of older adult participants in formal learning experiences. All respondents reported multiple strong

motives, both intrinsic and extrinsic, for participation. These findings are consistent with numerous previous studies in the area.

Educational level of the participant had no bearing on whether motivation was intrinsic or extrinsic, however the sample size of participants with only a high school diploma was not large enough to be able to draw anything but the most basic conclusions from related data.

### Limitations

One of the limiting factors in using a survey which asks respondents to rate a given set of items is that answers can be constrained by the available choices, forcing the participant to respond in a pre-determined or predictable fashion. In this situation the researcher tends to lead the respondents' answers. Some of this tendency is mitigated by the write-in category "other," but it is not entirely compensated for. Using a modified form of the Educational Participation Scale which has been used and validated for the past 40 years allowed a comparison of current data to data from previous studies, despite this constraint.

The specific instrument used in the current research was not pilot tested and as a consequence had some other limitations which were not discovered until surveys were returned. In particular, no category was available for those who did not have a college degree but who had post-secondary education leading to a specific professional career such as registered nurses. Participant marital status information was not requested. The response categories "does not apply" and "not important" were not defined clearly enough and were frequently used interchangeably. While in some instances the use of either response was acceptable, in the case of the survey item "seek knowledge" the

answer "does not apply" does not accurately describe the fact that this may not have been an important factor in decision making. Clearly, anyone participating in an educational program of any kind is seeking knowledge, yet six respondents indicated that this did not apply in their case. Should we conclude from this that they were forced into a learning situation or that they simply participated for the enjoyment alone? It is impossible to know. Also, some survey items such as "prepare for family changes" would have been easier to answer if more explanation had been provided. Respondents may have inferred different meanings from the same survey question. Finally, the entire sample is, in fact, somewhat biased by the fact that it was drawn only from people who had at some time participated in a formal continuing education experience.

A small percentage of the sample (7.7%) did not have any college experience. Clearly the size of the sample limits the ability to draw conclusions about the relationship between formal education and educational motivation for this group of participants. It is not possible to generalize the information gained from the non-college sample in this survey to all non-college educated older adults. In a 1981 Louis Harris survey cited by Scala (1996), only 2% of those who didn't have a diploma were attending some educational program. In the Harris Interactive research done in 2000 for the AARP, over half of all respondents reported that they never learned by enrolling in a class, while those who had some college education were twice as likely to take a class, seminar or workshop, or to enroll in a college or university.

### Implications

Lifelong learning has become a catchphrase in the past two decades. With the rapid aging of the American population, it is not likely to become passé anytime soon.

Building strong adult and continuing education programs now will bear fruit in the years to come. Knowing what motivates older adults to participate in formal educational experiences is essential in building vital and sustainable programs for universities, colleges, park districts, libraries, museums, and other institutions involved in continuing education activities.

If educational institutions are to offer learning opportunities of any description to older adults, they must first understand what brings participants to them, and then what keeps them coming back. An increasing number of colleges and universities are turning to adults to fill seats and increase revenue. For these programs to continue successfully, they must meet the needs of the target population. Discerning the needs of the group is an important step in providing timely, relevant, and interesting offerings.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

A majority of respondents rated mental stimulation as a very important factor in their decision to participate in continuing education. There has been much of discussion in the popular media about the importance of mental activity in delaying or preventing mental deficits as we age. There is a great deal of fear among the well-elderly of becoming victims of dementias such as Alzheimer's Disease. Given these two factors, it may be true that the media are influencing people's desire to find circumstances and activities that will be mentally stimulating. The extent to which the popular media (books, magazines, newspapers, television, the Internet) influence or motivate older adults to pursue formal educational experiences in a quest for successful aging is a subject worth more investigation.

Another area for further exploration involves those adults over 55 who do not have a college education. They were in the minority in the current study and so did not have a strong influence on its outcome. If, as this study implies, those with only a high school education or less are not pursuing continuing educational opportunities, the need to ascertain why they are not is important. The possibility of attracting this cohort should be of equal importance to providers as is attracting the more well-educated segment of the population. If keeping mentally fit is part of successful aging and, if the numbers of older Americans continues to grow over the next 20 to 30 years, there is an obligation to make sure that as many people as possible have the opportunity for successful aging. Successful aging should not be the province of the well-educated alone.

Some of the studies cited in the Literature Review section of this work included research on barriers to participation as well as motivation for participation. The problem of barriers is often institution-specific and so is difficult to explore on a generalized basis with any degree of accuracy. While one campus might present physical barriers having to do with inaccessible older buildings and difficult parking, a barrier on another campus might be the cost of classes or scheduling. However, there is value in knowing what keeps people from participating when we know that participation can be a powerful influence on successful aging.

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Appendix A

Nancy Olson  
1804 Augusta Drive  
Champaign, Illinois 61821  
(217) 359-6424  
nancybolson@yahoo.com

January 15, 2001

Dear U of I Elderhostel Alumni:

This letter is an invitation to participate in an significant research effort studying senior adult learners. I am an intern in Senior Programs in the Office of Continuing Education at the University of Illinois and a master's degree candidate in gerontology at Eastern Illinois University. This research will form the basis of my master's thesis. It is my hope that the results of the survey will help in planning and providing exceptional educational opportunities to adult learners in the future.

If you would like to be a part of this research, please take a few moments to fill out the attached survey and return it by February 15, 2001. To ensure that your responses will be completely anonymous do not put your name on the form. When you have completed the survey, fold the paper in half with your responses on the inside, tape it shut, and drop it in the mail.

Thank you for participating in this important research.

Sincerely,

Nancy B. Olson

Appendix B

Nancy Olson  
1804 Augusta Drive  
Champaign, Illinois 61821  
(217) 359-6424

January 24, 2001

Dear Lifelong Learner:

This letter is an invitation to participate in a research project studying senior adult learners in East Central Illinois. I am a master's degree candidate at Eastern Illinois University and this research will form the basis of my master's thesis. It is my hope that it will help Parkland College, and other colleges and universities in the area, in the effort to plan and provide exceptional educational opportunities to citizens over the age of 55.

If you would like to be a part of this research, please take just a few moments to fill out and return the enclosed survey by February 15, 2001. To ensure that your responses will be completely anonymous please do not put your name on the form. To make your participation as easy as possible the form is designed with my name and address on the outside along with a first class postage stamp. All you need to do when you have completed the survey is to fold the paper in half with your responses on the inside, tape it shut, and drop it in the mail.

Your participation in this research is important. Should you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to contact me at (217) 359-6424 after 5:00 p.m.. You may also contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Loretta Prater, at Eastern Illinois University (217) 581-6076 during the working day. There is no need to identify yourself if you call.

Thank you for participating in this important research.

Sincerely,

Nancy B. Olson

Appendix C

Nancy Olson  
1804 Augusta Drive  
Champaign, Illinois 61821  
(217) 359-6424

January 24, 2001

Dear Fellow Adult Learner:

I am a 1996 graduate of the Board of Governors Degree Program at Eastern Illinois University and am currently a master's degree candidate at EIU. As part of my master's thesis, I am conducting research into what motivates adults to return to college. In this regard I am enclosing a survey which I invite you to complete and return as part of the research. The project is strongly supported by Dr. Kay Woodward, Director of the BOT program at Eastern. Research results should help EIU and other participating colleges to continue to provide the best possible educational opportunities for adult students.

If you would like to be a part of this research, please take a few moments to fill out and return the enclosed survey by February 15, 2001. To ensure that your responses will be completely anonymous please do not put your name on the form. To make your participation as easy as possible the form is designed with my name and address on the outside along with a first class postage stamp. All you need to do when you have completed the survey is to fold the paper in half with your responses on the inside, tape it shut, and drop it in the mail.

Thank you for participating in this important research.

Sincerely,

Nancy B. Olson  
B.A. Eastern Illinois University, 1996

Appendix D

Thank you for taking a moment to complete the following survey.  
All answers are anonymous, so please be frank. Thank you!

Your age: \_\_\_\_\_

Male \_\_\_\_\_

Female \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of education completed (please mark the one that best fits your situation):

- |  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
| _____ Did not complete high school         | _____ High school diploma or GED |
| _____ Completed some college courses       | _____ Have a bachelor's degree   |
| _____ Completed some post-graduate courses | _____ Have a master's degree     |
| _____ Completed some doctoral work         | _____ Have a doctorate           |

Please use the following scale to rate the importance of each of the factors listed in your decision to attend college classes or other educational programs:

1	2	3	4
Does not apply	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important

I attend classes or programs to:

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| _____ Meet new people                | _____ Answer children's questions                 |
| _____ Make new friends               | _____ Keep up with family members                 |
| _____ Meet different people          | _____ Share common interest                       |
| _____ Meet friendly people           | _____ Prepare for family changes                  |
| _____ Have fun with friends          | _____ Get relief from boredom                     |
| _____ Make up for narrow education   | _____ Take a break from routine                   |
| _____ Always wanted to go to college | _____ Overcome frustration                        |
| _____ Prepare for further education  | _____ Get away from loneliness                    |
| _____ Get a better job               | _____ Satisfy curiosity                           |
| _____ Achieve an occupational goal   | _____ Expand my mind                              |
| _____ Prepare for a job              | _____ Seek knowledge                              |
| _____ Increase competence            | _____ Gain something meaningful                   |
| _____ Improve language skills        | _____ Fill void after life changes                |
| _____ Write better                   | _____ Other (please list and rate for importance) |
| _____ Enrichment/love of learning    | _____ _____                                       |
| _____ Mental stimulation             | _____ _____                                       |
| _____ Understand what others say     | _____ _____                                       |
| _____ Help me talk with children     | _____ _____                                       |
| _____ Keep up with children          | _____ _____                                       |