



Educational Considerations

Volume 8 | Number 1

Article 7

9-1-1980

Educational interest and enrollment among older people

Marshall J. Graney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Graney, Marshall J. (1980) "Educational interest and enrollment among older people," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 8: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1836>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Considerations by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Despite barriers, a pattern of increasing participation among older people is expected.

Educational interest and enrollment among older people

By Marshall J. Graney

Social scientists concerned with aging have often noted that American society does little to develop and support feelings of importance and self-worth among older people. Recognition is growing, however, that older people are a heterogeneous but distinct age category who can profit from further education. Traditionally, and in very broad terms, three phases of life have been recognized: the young, who are being educated; the middle-aged, who work; and the old, who are retired (Timmerman, 1978). In keeping with this stereotype, elementary and secondary education have received substantial and continued support, while at the same time adult education has often been overlooked. Timmerman (1978) has found little

Graney: Educational interest and enrollment among older people commitment in support of adult education programs, but public attitudes toward adult education in general, and education for older people in particular, may be undergoing a process of change. Among evidence of change and increasing public attention are such proposals as the 1976 Mondale Bill of Lifelong Learning, and further changes are likely to be evident if our society succeeds in dismissing the notion that formal education ends at age 21 (Spinetta & Hickey, 1975). Lawton (1976) and Timmerman (1978) have argued that learning should be considered to be a lifelong process, and our present system of education needs changes to accommodate this fact.

Research has established many "facts of aging" which are available to formal education, and it is the purpose of this article to consider what is now known. By collecting and systematically reviewing the established parameters and confirmed correlations related to older people's educational interests and enrollments, we move research closer to understanding and meeting the needs of this segment of the population.

Many factors are involved in recent developments related to the educational needs and interests of older people. Publications concerned with education for older people frequently mention such trends as continuous demographic changes in the American population (an ever-increasing proportion of older people), changes in public attitude and policy regarding education, older people's participation in education programs (or its lack), new programs for older people that colleges and universities are offering, and problems that these new programs are encountering.

Some of the recent developments in education for older people can be traced to demographic changes that have been (and will continue to be) occurring. By the year 2030, one of every six Americans will be age 65 or over, assuming that current trends will continue. The numbers of young people aged 18 to 24 years enrolling in universities and colleges are projected to decline in future decades, so planners for educational institutions may choose to adjust their programs so as to preserve organizational function in the community by being of service to age categories that are older than their traditional constituencies of the past (Timmerman, 1978; Weinstock, 1978). In fact, adult students aged 22 years of age or older now make up 48 percent of the total student enrollment, and projections for 1980 anticipate 11 million adults aged 25 or older enrolled in institutions of higher education (Lenz & Shaevitz, 1977). According to Weinstock (1978), today's universities accommodate 1.7 million students aged 55 years or older, which accounts for three percent of all students.

Thus, for self-preservation (if not for more altruistic reasons) institutions of higher education seem to be faced with a forced choice of either loss of function or seeking increased participation from non-traditional age-category constituencies (Spinetta & Hickey, 1975). One such constituency is older people. More and more people are reaching older age categories, and many retire early, so increasing numbers of older people may have the time and continued interest needed to seek further education.

Interest and Participation

Estimates of the proportion of older populations who express interest in further education have ranged from a low of 1% (Hendrickson & Barnes, 1967) to a high of 75%

(Central Bureau for the Jewish Aged, 1976). Estimates were biased because their samples had unusually low or high average educational attainments, and more recent estimates of 26% (Graney & Hays, 1976) and 22% (Phelps, Endreson, & Peterson, 1976) are more consistent with each other and more likely to be characteristic of general populations of older people. Even so, questionnaire and interview situations may encourage older people to exaggerate their interest in further education, so these results must be interpreted with caution.

Interest that is validly expressed cannot be automatically translated into enrollment and participation, but there are at least two ways in which research on interest can be useful. First, past research has provided the best information we now have about the potential size of the constituency among older people that educational institutions may have; and, second, something has been learned about topics in education which seem to be of most interest to older people in the community (whether or not they are currently enrolled in studies).

Older people are a heterogeneous category in many respects, and when they are offered a wide variety of choices, their selections represent diverse interests ranging from the practical to the metaphysical (Hendrickson & Barnes, 1967). Program developers and service providers might prefer that the topics in education of greatest interest to older people would be practical and directly useful, but Sarvis (1973) found little evidence of interest in basic education and coping skills. However, this finding may not be generally valid. For example, Uphaus (1972) has found evidence of strong interest among older people in special problems of aging such as finances (e.g.: social security, pensions, insurance, wills, and taxes) and health concerns (e.g.: keeping fit, diet). Of special interest to programs of colleges and universities, almost one out of every two older people have expressed some degree of interest in courses in the traditional liberal arts curriculum, and approximately one of three would like to improve crafts skills (Graney & Hays, 1976). Academic courses are the most important part of educational programs for older people in less than half of the institutions that have such programs, and a variety of other kinds of courses are presently available (DeCrow, 1978).

In translating interest into enrollment we can expect to observe an historical trend toward increasing participation in further education among older people. Percent enrollment is a decreasing function of age (Grabowski & Mason, 1974), and no special sex or race differences are evidently related to this difference. When recent enrollments among older people have been considered it has been found that eight percent had been enrolled within the past two years (Racine, 1978) and fifteen percent within the past five years (Michigan, 1975). Peterson (1974) reviewed data that showed only one and six-tenths percent of people aged 65 years or older were involved in some form of further education in the 1960s, but later data estimated this percent as two percent (Harris, 1975). The likelihood of increased future enrollments among better-educated new cohorts of older people is suggested by evidence that 71 percent of a sample of college-educated people aged 60 years old or older had been active in some form of further education since retirement. Another reason why increased enrollment among older people is expected is that educational programs newly-developed for this constituency are ex-

are attractive to them than past offerings (Calhoun, 1978). Recruitment of older people to help in planning education programs may boost participation, because if older people feel that they have more control of their learning experiences they may be more likely to become involved (Grabowski & Mason, 1974; DeCrow, 1978).

By 1977 one-third of the nation's universities and colleges offered some form of education program for older people (Timmerman, 1978). Because older people have a variety of interests, a mixture of kinds of programs and classes is needed to serve their educational needs (Weinstock, 1978). The somewhat self-serving effort of colleges and universities to recruit older students into the classroom has encouraged other organizations such as churches, libraries, and museums to turn their attention to older students also; and data collected by Louis Harris and Associates (1975) show that three-fourths of older people's participation in education is at levels below the college or university—with the most common site being a church (these have the advantage of dispersed location and ease of access by automobile without long walks). It can be expected that community colleges will also have enrollment advantages in comparison to universities and metropolitan-based colleges because, like churches, they have the advantage of being better dispersed into residential locations.

Once education programs for older people have been developed and implemented they are seldom trouble-free. Program problems such as financial burdens, lack of organizational support, staff shortages, and lack of interest are often encountered (DeCrow, 1978). DeCrow's analysis of an Adult Education Association National Inventory of 350 colleges and universities found the following problem incidence reports: 71 percent listed finances as a major hindrance to further development of education programs to benefit older people; 23 percent listed lack of interest among older people; 37 percent listed staff shortages; nine percent listed inadequacy of facilities; 28 percent listed inadequacy of supportive services; 41 percent felt that potential participants could not afford the costs of program participation; 15 percent mentioned inadequacy of educational materials for older people; and 25 percent listed location of, or communication with, older people as potential participants as a major problem hindering educational programs developed to serve older people.

Many traditional sociological factors have been studied to determine their effects on older people's interest and participation in further education, including age, sex, race, prior educational attainment, rural/urban residence, health, and financial status. Declining interest and participation in association with increasing age has been documented by Uphaus (1972); Carp et al., (1974); Harris and Associates (1975); Graney & Hays (1976); and Graney (1980). However, age itself is much less important than prior education attainment as an explanation for low levels of participation among older people, according to statistics presented by Graney (1980).

Past Experience

The single most important factor in explaining further participation in educational endeavors is, without doubt, past accomplishment. Graney (1980); Graney & Hays (1976); Harris and Associates (1975); Hiemstra (1972); and Uphaus (1971) all provide documentation in support of the

importance of past educational attainment, and Harris and Associates find that older college graduates are more than twice as likely to pursue further education than older high school graduates.

Race

Findings with regard to race are unclear: Jackson & Wood (1976) found greater interest and participation among older blacks in comparison to older whites, but Graney's (1980) analysis of national random sample data does not support the finding of any significant racial difference. However, Graney (1980) does find evidence in support of the finding that older urban residents are more likely to be participants than older rural residents, established earlier by Carp et al. (1974). The rural-urban difference is probably spurious, however, because it is likely that it can be explained by differences in past educational attainments, different availability of educational institutions, and transportation problems.

Health

Health status has been established as a correlate of enrollments among older people by Graney (1980) and Racine (1978). It is this factor of health, in combination with age-cohort differences in educational attainments and limited financial resources among people living on fixed incomes that may explain much of the age-related differences in enrollments after age fifty-five. Even with free or reduced tuition that is offered by many programs, financial ability is consistently found to be a significant correlate of interest and participation in further education (Graney, 1980; Graney & Hays, 1976; Hiemstra, 1972; Phelps et al., 1976; Racine, 1978). This problem is due to the costs of additional clothing, transportation, textbooks, notebooks, and other material needs that represent real costs even when tuition is free.

Barriers to Participation

Many things can be barriers to interest in further education or to enrollments and actual participation in educational endeavors among older people. For example, many educational organizations offer programs for older people that are restricted on a "space available" basis. Although the intent of encouraging participation is good, it is unfortunate that this restriction implies a kind of "second-class citizens" status for older people (Weinstock, 1978). Older people often feel out of place in academic settings, and one in four mentions this is a problem and a barrier to interest and participation (Graney & Hays, 1976). The average older person has less formal educational attainment than the national norm, amounting to less than nine years among persons aged 65 or older (Timmerman, 1978). Often the classroom experience of older people is a distant memory, so both lack of experience and lack of recent contact are factors which may increase anxiety and lower enrollments among older people. Thus, the conventional classroom style of teaching, with lectures, term papers, and written examinations discourages participation because older people are often unfamiliar and uncomfortable with this format. DeCrow (1978) found that the prevalent formats used in existing programs for older people tend to be short courses offered as lecture classes or seminars. Although most older people prefer at-home courses (Weinstock, 1978), only 17 percent of the programs for

older people made this kind of format available to them (DeCrow, 1978).

The stereotypic concept of the life of an older person as normally being one of retirement or social disengagement is a view that is sometimes held by older people themselves. A result can be the prejudice that any new endeavors or activities on their part are inappropriate and perhaps doomed to failure. Fear of failure, either expressed directly or through the indirect statement that one is "too old to learn" has consistently been found to be a major barrier to interest in education—and hence to enrollment and participation also—among older people. No fewer than one in four, and sometimes almost one of every two older persons surveyed have cited this factor as a personal barrier (Graney & Hays, 1976; Phelps et al., 1976).

Uses and Gratifications

The reason that most older people give for non-participation in further education is simple lack of interest (Graney & Hays, 1976; National Council on Aging, 1978; Racine, 1978). This may be a factor that is relatively independent of fear of failure or negative self-concept—reflecting, instead, the older person's perception that the content of course offerings is irrelevant to his or her personal interests and/or experience. Because such a wide variety of course offerings is already available it is likely that either problems in communication have prevented educational institutions from creating broader public awareness of what is available or else there are some among those surveyed who cannot find much of interest in anything that could be offered by an educational institution.

Lack of interest may also signal psychological disengagement among some older people, and improved communication efforts on the part of educational institutions are unlikely to affect this pattern.

Havighurst (1964) conceptualized "basic kinds of competence areas as instrumental," and Londoner (1971) introduced an instrumental/expressive dichotomy into the literature on aging and education. Hiemstra (1973, 1976) has explored this dichotomy in depth, establishing that among older people as well as younger ones it is instrumental motives that are prevalent in the pursuit of further education. Graney (1980) has studied life cycle differences in motive and found that although instrumental motives are prevalent overall, it is among the younger (age 18-24) and older (age 55 or older) people that mixed motives are especially important.

Discussion

Although there is always risk of somehow reinforcing stereotypes about older people, some generalizations from the literature on aging and education can be proposed. I offer these generalizations in the form of a classification of older people's responses on the question of further education into three types of positive response and two types of negative response.

Core Participant

The older Core Participant in further education tends to have above-average resources of vigor and health, financial ability, and educational attainment. As a result, this person is mobile, socially active, and strongly motivated by either expressive or instrumental needs. The Core Participant chooses either courses in the traditional liberal arts curriculum, for expressive reasons of self-

fulfillment and the pleasure of the pursuit of knowledge in the company of other, like-minded people, or is interested in arts and crafts courses primarily for the instrumental purpose of building and maintaining useful skills.

Marginal (Potential) Participant

The older Marginal Participant is, at present, a potential participant who tends to have average resources of health, finances, and education for a member of his or her age cohort. This person's educational activity is often bound by age-related restrictions of time (daylight classes only), place (conveniently near home in community learning centers), curriculum (age-relevant) and format (brief presentations—trigger films, etc.—followed by class discussion moderated by the instructor). Failure of meeting any one of these qualifications may be sufficient sooner or later to alienate the older person from the educational system. The potential Marginal Participant is not singularly motivated by either salient instrumental or expressive needs, as would be necessary to overcome these restrictions, but does have a mixture of both instrumental and expressive needs that could motivate participation in further education when the restrictive qualifications regarding time, place, curriculum, and format have been met satisfactorily. The Marginal Participant is most likely to be recruited to participation through expressive relationships with older friends, neighbors, or relatives who are Core Participants.

Non-Traditional (Potential) Participant

The Non-Traditional Participant is, at present, usually a person with instrumental needs that could potentially be served by educational institutions. Although mentally alert, better-educated than average, and possessing health and activity levels sufficient for independent living, the Non-Traditional Participant tends to be advanced in years ("old-old") and socially disengaged due to the effects of declining vigor, limited financial resources, vision or hearing losses, or transportation problems. Although virtually unreachable through the traditional teaching medium of the classroom, the Non-Traditional Participant's extensive use of television, radio, and newspaper presentations to satisfy instrumental information-seeking needs could potentially be mobilized, rationalized, and implemented in a public service education program in a manner parallel to the Children's Television Workshop contributions to education among younger people. People in this category may often pursue self-education programs outside traditional auspices.

Uninterested Non-Participant

The Uninterested Non-Participant tends to have below-average formal educational attainments for his or her age cohort, and has always placed little value on education (beyond the minimum conventional lip service required for social acceptability in our society) for people of any age. The Uninterested Non-Participant attributes his or her non-participation to the irrelevance on contemporary curriculum, or lack of meaningful or interesting courses currently offered. However, because this person is fundamentally disinterested in education, both hard-won knowledge and difficult-to-attain skills are written-off as miraculous gifts or else as mere "technical details" unworthy of serious consideration: efforts expended on educational endeavors are hard to justify from this point

of view. It is easy to understand why no course or curriculum is likely to appeal to the Uninterested Non-Participant of any age category.

Disengaged Non-Participant

The Disengaged Non-Participant could be, at heart, any of the four types already described. He or she has, however, accepted the stereotype that older people are "too old to learn," and has disengaged from the world of intellect and skills. The psychological disengagement of the Disengaged Non-Participant is significantly different from the social disengagement of the Non-Traditional Participant in that the Non-Traditional Participant recognizes some expressive and/or instrumental needs that could, potentially, be satisfied through educational materials presented through the appropriate format/medium, whereas the Disengaged Non-Participant lacks this inner motivation and is psychologically disengaged from concern with new experiences and personal growth.

"Socialization" in the sociological sense is normally an activity that occupies a lifetime from birth to death. Effectively coping with changing community, home, and inner-personal environments requires information acquisition, processing, and organization so that mastery of one's status as a fully functioning member of society can be preserved, and so that competence in personal affairs and planning for future contingencies can be maintained at an optimum level.

Many studies of limited scope and generalizability have explored age differences in interest and enrollment in further education, and these findings have generally been supported in analysis of large-scale national random sample data. Time and again the strongest single predictor of participation in further education has been found to be past educational attainment, although among older people this activity is diminished because of declines in health and wealth associated with aging. Increased enrollments of older people in future years may be experienced due to improved health and financial resources, but the chief factor in increased participation is likely to be the greater educational attainments of new cohorts of older people.

REFERENCES

- Calhoun, R.B. *In Search of the New Old*. New York: Elsevier North-Holland, Inc., 1978.
- Carp, A., R. Peterson, and P. Roelfs. *Adult learning interests and experiences*. In K.P. Cross, J.R. Valley, & Associates (eds.), *Planning Non-Traditional Programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1974.
- Central Bureau for the Jewish Aged. *Extending Educational and Cultural Opportunities for Older People*. New York: Author, 1971.
- DeCrow, R. *Older Americans: New Uses of Mature Ability*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1978.
- Grabowski, S.M., and W.D. Mason. *Education for the Aging*. New York: Syracuse University, 1974.
- Graney, M.J. *Participation in education among older people*. *Alternative Higher Education*, 1980, 5 (in press).
- Graney, M.J. and W.C. Hays. *Senior students: Higher education after age 62*. *Educational Gerontology*, 1976, 1, 343-359.
- Harris, L., and Associates. *The Myth and Reality of Aging in America*. Washington, D.C. The National Council on Aging, Inc., 1975.

- Havighurst, R.J. **Changing status and roles during the aging cycle: Significance for adult educators.** In R. Burns (ed.), *Sociological Backgrounds of Adult Education*. Chicago: Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults, 1964.
- Hendrickson, A., and R.F. Barnes. **Educational needs of older people.** *Adult Leadership*, 1967, 16, 2-4.
- Hiemstra, R.P. **Continuing education for the aged.** *Adult Education*, 1972, 22, 100-109.
- Hiemstra, R.P. **Educational planning for older adults: A survey of "expressive" vs "instrumental" preferences.** *Aging and Human Development*, 1973, 4, 147-156.
- Hiemstra, R.P. **Instrumental and expressive learning: Some comparisons.** *Aging and Human Development*, 1977, 8, 161-168.
- Jackson, M., and J.L. Wood. **Aging in America.** Washington, D.C.: National Council on the Aging, 1976.
- Lawton, M.P. **Community Planning for an Aging Society: Designing Services and Facilities.** Stroudsburg, Pa.: Dowden, Hutchinson & Ross, 1976.
- Lenz, E., and M.H. Shaevitz. **So You Want to go Back to School: Facing the Realities of Re-Entry.** New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1977.
- Londoner, C.A. **Survival needs of the aged.** *Aging and Human Development*, 1971, 2, 113-117.
- Program Analysis Division. **The Michigan Comprehensive Plan on Aging.** Lansing: Michigan Office of Services to the Aging, 1975.
- Peterson, D.A. **The role of gerontology in adult education.** In S.M. Grabowski and W.D. Mason (eds.), *Education for the Aging.* Washington, D.C.: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A. and ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Education, 1974.
- Phelps, L.W., F.E. Endreson, and W.A. Peterson. **Educational Gerontology in Missouri.** Kansas City, Mo.: Institute for Community Studies, 1976.
- Racine County Planning Council. **Racine County Older Adult Comprehensive Needs Assessment.** Racine, Wi.: Author, 1978.
- Sarvis, R.E. **Educational Needs of the Elderly.** Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973.
- Spinetta, J.J., and T. Hickey. **Aging and higher education: The institutional response.** *Gerontologist*, 1975, 15, 431-435.
- Timmerman, S. **Lifelong learning and the older adult.** *Journal of the Institute for Socioeconomic Studies*, 1978, 3, 1927.
- Uphaus, R.M. **Educating retirees.** *Adult Leadership*, 1971, 16, 17-19.
- Weinstock, R. **The Graying of the Campus.** New York: Educational Research Laboratories, 1978.