

## **Factors Related to Recruiting and Retaining OLLI Students**

*Jung Min Lee*

### **Abstract**

This study was designed to assess continuing and potential students' perceptions regarding factors affecting the overall quality of one Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) program in the southeastern United States. The study also sought to assess program participants' perceptions of the impact of hypothesized situational, institutional, and dispositional deterrents to program participation. The resulting data indicated that factors such as program location, availability of parking, and variety of course topics and events influenced the attractiveness of the program to both potential and continuing students. The results also indicated that institutional barriers such as course scheduling were among the most influential perceived barriers affecting program participation from continuing students and from potential students.

Keywords: Adult Education, Adult Learners, Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, Participation Barriers

### **Factors Related to Recruiting and Retaining OLLI Students**

The mission of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) is to provide a curriculum of intellectually stimulating learning opportunities and special activities for people 50 years of age or older (Lamb & Brady, 2005). There are 119 individual OLLIs in the United States (Lee, 2016). The OLLI in this study is one of six Florida OLLI programs; it began in 1993 as Elderhostel and SeniorNet. It emerged in its current form in 2005 as a result of combining two institutes: Learning in Retirement (LIR) and SeniorNet Tampa (A. Rogers, personal communication, October 3, 2014). The goals for the OLLI programs under study were to: value all members; provide opportunities for participants to pursue intellectual stimulation, social interaction, and aging successfully; encourage sharing life experiences, provide convenience of program costs and easy location; serve as an agent of change against forms of discrimination such as ageism, and provide structure and purpose in life (The OLLI-USF website, 2014).

This study was designed to gather information that could be used to improve program structure and operations by soliciting opinions regarding the program's strategic direction for the next five years from continuing and potential students. It also sought to determine ways to increase OLLI name recognition among non-members in order to promote student recruiting and retention. In addition, this study represented the program's first systematic attempt to help to examine the impact of perceived barriers to program participation among continuing and potential students during the course of a program evaluation.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Program Evaluation***

Program evaluation is a systematic form of inquiry used to inform program administrators and staff members regarding the effectiveness of program policies and procedures in achieving program goals and objectives. Formative or process-oriented approaches allow program

administrators great flexibility in achieving program goals by providing feedback on program effectiveness at predetermined points in the program's operation. They also allow programs to quickly investigate the feasibility and potential effectiveness of new directions in program operations or structure. Regardless of the format or when they are conducted, all forms of program evaluation share the common goal of program improvement.

### ***Barriers to Program Participation***

Identifying and understanding deterrents to program participation in adult, lifelong and continuing education programs has been an area of special interest to researchers and policymakers in adult education. Early researchers (e.g., Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974; Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965) all proposed from two to four different barriers to program participation among adult learners. Scanlan and Darkenwald (1984) reviewed the literature on deterrents to participation and concluded that there were six categories that emerged in most settings and with most populations: individual, family, and home-related problems; cost concerns; questionable worth or relevance of educational opportunities; negative perceptions of the value of education; lack of motivation or indifference to learning; and lack of self-confidence. Subsequently, they developed the Deterrents to Participation Scale (DPS)—the first systematic means of assessing barriers.

More recent studies conducted by Hayes (1988) and Manning and Vickery (2000) have supported the existence of up to six deterring factors including personal disengagement, lack of program quality, work and family constraints, and professional disengagement. Although there are relatively few international studies regarding this topic, Villa and Celdrán (2014) completed a study with 4,559 individuals between the ages of 60-74 years old who were Hispanic men and women. Participants completed a survey on adult's involvement in learning activities in non-degree educational program settings, which revealed that situational barriers (40%) and institutional barriers (20%) had the greatest impact on their ability to participate. Different studies have addressed deterrents and barriers related to student participation in adult education programs through a variety of research methods and have yielded different results. Yet, there seems to be a general consensus that quantifiable situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers do exist and that they do have an impact on student participation (Cross, 1981).

## **Methods**

### ***Setting***

The program under study was located on the campus of a large metropolitan research-extensive university serving over 46,000 students. There were approximately 1,200 OLLI program participants at the time of the study. Among the participants, 73% identified as female, 93% were White, and 38% indicated that their highest education level was graduate school (OLLI-USF 2016 annual survey).

### ***Participants***

There were 57 participants recruited as volunteers for the study at the program's open house. There were two focus groups of volunteer participants: 13 non-OLLI members (potential participants) and 44 currently enrolled, continuing students. The study also identified program improvement and future direction suggestions from both groups.

### ***Data Collection***

Annual program survey data were made available through the Survey Monkey account of the OLLI under study. Interviews were conducted during January and February in 2017, allotting two hours for each session. Four retention groups and two recruiting groups participated in the study. Four separate sessions were held for each group, and the interview questions were created by the program's committee for strategic planning. The data were collected by an OLLI program staff member who volunteered for this study. She did not receive any training for interviewing before this study and did not have a background in adult education. Participation was anonymous, voluntary, and uncompensated.

This study employed two sets of interview questions. The first four questions were for potential students (new recruits) not currently enrolled in OLLI classes. Questions 5-8 were for continuing students (retention groups) currently enrolled in OLLI classes. These questions were as follows:

1. What program factors should we consider in order to attract people such as you?
2. What are some reasons you might hesitate to attend OLLI classes and programs?
3. What could OLLI do to alleviate these obstacles?
4. What else do you think is important to know as we tailor classes or programs for people like you?
5. What do you like most about OLLI?
6. What improvements would you like to see in OLLI?
7. What are the barriers to your attending OLLI classes or programs?
8. What classes, programs, or services would you like to see OLLI focusing on for the future?

The interview questions also represented four program elements: attraction, deterrence, solutions, and future directions. *Attraction* (Questions 1 and 5) includes program elements that attract participants to OLLI program and also helps to retain those already enrolled. *Deterrents* (Questions 2 and 7) includes institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers that prevent new participants from enrolling in OLLI programs and also discourage or prevent continuing students from participating fully. *Improvements* (Questions 3 and 6) presents comments from continuing students on how to improve OLLI programs and comments from potential students on what OLLI programs could do to remove barriers to their participation. *Future directions* (Questions 4 and 8) includes suggestions from continuing and potential students related to new courses, procedures, and events that would enhance OLLI programs.

The results from the interviews of both continuing currently enrolled OLLI students and prospective OLLI students who were being recruited revealed a number of themes or factors that were common to both groups and some that were more characteristic of one group than the other. The resulting factors as well as their alignment with program elements are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Focus Group Interview Results*

Elements	Potential/Recruiting		Participant Groups			
	1	2	1	2	3	4
			Factors			
Attraction	Parking	Parking	Social asp	Parking	Social asp	Location
	Location	Location	C. variety	Location	C. variety	Social asp
	C. times	C. times	S. enrich	Social asp	S. enrich	C. variety
	C. variety	C. variety		C. variety		S. enrich
	F. aid			S. enrich		
Deterrence	Location	Location	Location	Location	Location	Location
	C. times	C. times	C. times	C. times	C. times	C. times
	P. info.	P. info.	C. mode	C. mode	C. mode	C. mode
		Low drive	Parking	Parking	Parking	Parking
		Committing	Instructor	Instructor	Instructor	Instructor
			P. access & mobility	P. access & mobility		P. access & mobility
			P. web	P. web	P. web	P. web
			Marketing	Marketing		
Improvements	Marketing	Marketing	Location	Location	Location	Location
	C. variety	C. times	C. times	C. times	C. times	
	Online R.	Online R.	C. mode	C. mode	C. mode	
	P. info	P. info.	Parking	Parking	Diversity	
	Personal	Sports	P. fees	P. fees	Feedback	P. fees
	Cnt	Personal Cnt			Instructor	
Future Directions	Marketing	F. aid	Instructor	Instructor	Instructor	Instructor
	P. variety	Adjust fees	P. travel	P. travel	P. travel	P. travel
	Social asp		Day trips	Day trips	Day trips	Day trips
			Parking	parking	Parking	Parking
					Social asp	Social asp
					C. variety	
					F. aid	
				Location		
				Marketing		

C. = Class, F. = Financial, S. = Self, asp = aspect, P. = program, R. = Registration, Cnt = contact

**Attraction.** As indicated in Table 1, both groups found program location and availability of parking to be important factors in terms of deciding whether to enroll in OLLI courses or to continue in the OLLI program. Both groups also considered joining or continuing an OLLI program based upon the variety of courses (C. variety) and events that OLLI offers. This finding was one of several that were expected. Notably, prospective students did not emphasize the importance of the social aspects of the program or the opportunities for self-enrichment (S. enrichment) that the program affords, while continuing OLLI students found these to be

important. This finding illustrates how different the perceptions of an OLLI program may be between those who are currently participating in the program and those who are considering joining.

**Deterrents.** Table 1 indicates that program location and course scheduling (C. times), also known as institutional barriers, were significant factors in determining whether to join or to continue to participate in an OLLI program. Beyond these two factors, however, the reasons that potential students identify for not joining an OLLI program are relatively few when compared to the program participation barriers described by the current students, which tended to be consistent across all groups. Parking remained important, as did course modality (C. mode), instructor quality, the quality of the program, web services and presence (P. web) and program accessibility and mobility (P. access and mobility). Although these factors may also have been important to potential students, they may not have voiced them due to limited exposure to the actual OLLI program. Another factor that was particularly important to potential students in determining whether they would join an OLLI program was the availability and quality of information about the program (P. info.). This suggests that widely dispersed information about OLLI programs is an essential aspect of any OLLI recruitment strategy.

It is notable that only prospective students indicated any personal or dispositional barriers to program participation. They indicated that their own motivation to attend classes or events, as well as their unwillingness to commit to attend courses scheduled for eight weeks were potential barriers to their participation. In contrast, the continuing students were much more influenced by the quality of the instructors as well as by having the opportunity to evaluate them.

**Improvements.** As indicated in Table 1, the continuing students consistently indicated that program location, course scheduling (C. times), course format and modalities (C. mode), as well as membership fees and other program costs were all areas in need of improvement. Potential students, on the other hand, indicated the importance of direct marketing, which also included high quality program information as well as more personal contact elements (Personal Cnt) such as phone calls from OLLI staff members encouraging them to join the program. The importance of personal contact was also demonstrated among the majority (54%) of continuing students who indicated that they learned about OLLI from a friend or family member (OLLI annual survey 2016).

The prospective students also indicated that online registration would be an important factor in increasing program participation. This is somewhat consistent with the current continuing students' noting that the current status of the program's web services was a barrier to program participation. Finally, it was interesting to note that only one group among the continuing students indicated that student diversity needed to be improved. The type of diversity was not indicated. Accordingly, this seems to be an area that should be revisited.

**Future directions.** The data in Table 1 related to future directions reflects primarily the responses of continuing students who indicate their preference for more day trips and other program travel added to the OLLI calendar of events. This interest in the social aspects (social asp.) of the program is shared by both potential and continuing students. Potential students retain their concerns regarding program fees, fee schedules, and financial aid. The issue of financial aid

was also indicated by one group of continuing students. The most consistent theme for continuing students seemed to be finding more high-quality instructors who could present interesting topics in a variety of modalities including hybrid classes.

### **Discussion**

One of the assumptions of this program evaluation study was that in addition to answering questions about the overall quality of the program, the focus groups would be able to reveal the presence of one or more of the three barriers (e.g., institutional, situational, and dispositional) to program participation first delineated by Cross (1981). The results of this study suggest that the majority of obstacles facing potential and continuing students were institutional barriers such as program location, course scheduling, course topics, and program fees. The only situational or dispositional barriers represented among the data came from prospective students who were not certain they possessed the personal motivation and commitment required to complete a course that lasted more than a few weeks.

One reason that the other types of barriers may not have been reported is that the OLLI student population is comprised of students who have already experienced academic success and are not intimidated by the prospect of learning something new. In fact, they report feeling invigorated by the opportunity for new learning. Also, the majority of OLLI members are retired or only work part-time, which likely enhances their ability to manage their time. Accordingly, one would not expect to find dispositional barriers among OLLI students and would seldom expect to find situational barriers.

### **Conclusion**

Program evaluation plays a significant role in the daily operation and strategic planning functions of the OLLI program. It represents an effective and cost-effective method of acquiring the information program directors need to maintain the high quality of their programs while also increasing the sense of community and ownership among program participants. The findings from this study suggest a few conclusions. First, OLLI directors and administrators should consider increasing accessibility for members with physical disabilities that broaden the range of course disciplines offered. Second, they should experiment with course scheduling, including length of classes and the frequency of class meetings to ascertain member preferences at the local levels.

Furthermore, findings suggest that OLLI curriculum committees should increase annual social/intellectual events that meet at least twice each academic year and plan a minimum of one discussion class in order for students to have the opportunity to get to know more of their classmates. Discussion can be a tool not only to allow students to learn more about each other's thoughts, but also may increase one of the social aspects of OLLI that both continuing and potential students seem to desire. Finally, OLLI directors and administrators should encourage community partnerships as well as cultivate new and broader collaborations with programs and departments within the university, given that every OLLI program is already affiliated with a university.

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**Dr. Jung Min Lee** earned a doctorate degree in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Adult Education at University of South Florida in 2017. Ms. Lee entered the University of South Florida's graduate program in 2007 in Second Language Acquisition/Instruction and Technology, before transferring to Adult Education in 2008. Her research interests include lifelong learning, continuing education, and teaching English as a Second Language.