

Learning for Life: Extending University Level Education to Older Adults in Rural Saskatchewan

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ABSTRACT

About 55 percent of Saskatchewan's seniors live outside the province's 12 cities, in towns, villages, and rural municipalities, and are therefore at a distance from the two provincial universities. In order to assess the University of Saskatchewan's Extension Division's outreach development process, the author interviewed 11 individuals. The sample group had participated in at least one outreach course delivering university-level subject matter. The returns from the structured interview indicate very positive evaluations and high satisfaction levels. In contrast, earlier needs identification studies in Saskatchewan indicated that seniors, in general, are not strongly motivated to participate in university-level programs. Closer examination of the data from such studies indicate that this general response pattern may be misleading.

RÉSUMÉ

Environ 55 pour cent des personnes âgées en Saskatchewan habitent à l'extérieur des 12 villes provinciales, dans des villages et des municipalités rurales et elles sont donc éloignées des 2 universités provinciales. Afin d'évaluer le processus de développement en enseignement hors université de la Division en enseignement postsecondaire de The University of Saskatchewan, l'auteur a interviewé 11 individus. Ce groupe-échantillon avait déjà participé à un cours d'enseignement hors université où une matière de niveau universitaire fut offerte. Les résultats de l'interview structurée comprennent des évaluations très positives et des niveaux de satisfaction très élevés. Par compte, précédemment, des études d'identification de besoins faites en Saskatchewan indiquaient que les personnes âgées, en général, n'étaient pas fortement motivées à assister aux programmes de niveau

universitaire. Une exploration des données de telles études indique que cette sorte de réponse générale peut être trompeuse.

INTRODUCTION

Saskatchewan is a sparsely populated province. Mollard (1987) notes that about 45 percent of individuals over 65 years live in the province's 12 cities (including the 2 major ones), while the remaining 55 percent of seniors live in towns, villages, and rural municipalities. Although there may be variations in self-perception as to how people view themselves along a rural-urban continuum, the fact remains that those who reside outside the two major cities, each of which has a university, are certainly at a distance from university-level educational opportunities.

According to Statistics Canada (as cited in National Advisory Council on Aging, 1993), the demographics of Canadian society indicate clearly that the percentage of seniors in the Canadian population will be escalating from about 12 percent in 1991 to about 24 percent by the year 2031. Saskatchewan as a subset of the national population has the highest proportion of older adults in Canada. Currently, Saskatchewan seniors make up 14.1 percent of the national population, projected to increase to 18 percent by the year 2015.

Several factors in the demographic picture are strengthening this shift: Canada has a falling birth rate; "Baby Boomers" are getting older and will soon start to swell the ranks of the older population; people are living longer. The most recent available data from Health and Welfare Canada (as cited in National Advisory Council on Aging, 1993) indicate that life expectancy at age 65 is now 79.9 years for men and 84.1 years for women. Since seniors are enjoying better health (64 percent of seniors rate their health as good, very good, or excellent), they are remaining active until a much older age. People are "retiring" (or being displaced from the active work force) earlier, and with longer life expectancy and better physical health are increasingly looking for intellectual pursuits to maintain that "quality of life" that is increasingly recognized as important to overall health and well-being.

Successful self-funded urban programs delivering university-level subject matters in not-for-degree-credit programs directed specifically to older adults have been operating in the two major Saskatchewan cities for over 15 years. Budgetary constraint in the university sector has precluded the pursuit of delivery techniques to extend this type of educational opportunity to rural areas.

However, the *Saskatchewan Seniors Education Corporation* (SSEC), of which the University of Saskatchewan Extension Division is a founding member, through its ability to access Saskatchewan Lotteries' funds, has been able to create opportunities to do some face-to-face pilot programming in rural Saskatchewan. The problems remain significant, however. Difficulties such as distance, transportation, climate, and low population concentrations are obvious. Less well understood is the apparent lack of interest in this form of educational opportunity as expressed by rural seniors.

The purpose of this article is to briefly describe the University of Saskatchewan's outreach experience in providing university-level educational experience to older adults living outside Saskatoon and Regina; to report the outcome of structured interviews with participants in selected outreach locations; to interpret this information in the context of related studies; and to reflect on the outlook for rural outreach programming for older adults.

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN OUTREACH PROGRAM FOR OLDER ADULTS

Since 1992, the Extension Division has been able to establish four outreach pilot programs in Saskatchewan, each controlled by its own local committee.

The first of these programs was established in Biggar in 1992; the local committee ran two courses, then ceased to operate in 1994 due to the loss of a key committee member. The second committee began at Watrous in the fall of 1993, and has held seven courses. The third committee was located at Leask in the spring of 1994, and has run seven courses, with several of these held at Marcelin, a neighbouring community. The fourth committee was established at Craik in May 1997, with one course held to date.

The subject matters requested, and subsequently presented as a course, included: drawing; exploring art media, including charcoal, water colour, acrylics, oils, and others; water colour painting; a writing course focused on

Saskatchewan humour; an archeology course focused on a Middle East dig; a comparative religion course, dealing with four major religious groupings; a “great historical figures” course which explored how those figures were impacted by their personal religious beliefs; and a creative writing course focused on memoir writing and archival research. Several of these courses were held in more than one location.

Participation rates averaged about 12 persons per course, with participants usually drawn from more than one community.

ASSESSING THE OUTREACH

It is relatively simple to document quantifiable levels of participation of rural seniors in outreach programs and their general feelings about their experience through “end of class” evaluations. However, it is much more difficult to achieve a sense of understanding about how they actually feel about the experience.

In order to assess the outreach development process, the delivery of courses, and the affective feelings about participation, the author interviewed 11 individuals. The sample group had participated in at least one outreach course in Watrous, Leask, or Marcelin.¹ A structured interview with some 20 topics was used, and the interviews were carried out face-to-face in 1996. The respondents had participated in outreach courses that were, with one exception, 12 contact hours, run once per week for 2 hours over six weeks. The exception was an art course in which the subject matter dictated an eight-week course.

The Extension Division’s experience in developing several local rural, education committees, together with the results of the 1996 structured interview group, suggest a significant number of rural older adults are interested in university-level programming. For many of these limited rural populations of interested older adults, the option to participate has usually not been present. The challenge for extension programmers is to find these populations and raise awareness about opportunities. Low levels of recognition even for established national programs such as “Elderhostel” reflect the low levels of awareness. Programming initiatives can lead rural seniors to become interested in participating in university-level courses, in turn raising potential for a viable program. As the 1996 structured interview group results show, once the interest is generated and the program is underway, there are real possibilities that through word-of-mouth communication at least some additional individuals will participate,

individuals who otherwise would not have responded.

The critical mass in the urban programs in relation to total population, when translated to the small town rural setting, means marginal numbers. However, it has been demonstrated that by drawing from several small centres, viable numbers are possible. Local education committees usually draw interest, and often members, from surrounding communities. The committee located in Leask, which was one of the sources for the 1996 interview group, consistently drew participation from three and occasionally four communities, with courses being delivered in either Leask or Marcelin.

The practical development experience of establishing local education committees suggests the technique of locating one or two people with some interest in the concept of university-level educational opportunities for rural seniors is a sound one. Corroboration of the success of this process is demonstrated by the 1996 structured interview group results, which show that word-of-mouth communication is the most effective means for establishing a local committee and a program in which feelings of ownership are vested.

The structured interview attempted to elicit information relating to how the respondents felt about the idea of university-related courses both before and after participation. Points raised in the interview were: awareness of the course; motivation factors; feelings after course completion; positive or negative experience; comfort levels in participation; academic level of course material; rates of attendance; education committee function; linkages of the respondents to either provincial university; participation rates in educational events in the last 12 months; travel time; and demographic characteristics.

Awareness

All respondents indicated that when they first heard about university-level outreach program possibilities for rural seniors they had felt strong interest. No respondents felt intimidated by the university-level subject matter.

Motivation

Motivation to try a course, for 10 out of 11 respondents, was based equally on interest in the actual subject matter and interest in learning in general; 6 out of 11 also saw the course having potential for enjoyment.

Feelings About the Course(s)

Once involved in the program, all respondents were "satisfied," 10 out of 11

felt “challenged,” while others were “interested” and “excited.” The significant factor here is that no one was bored. In fact, several respondents went out of their way to stress that they were *never* bored.

Positive or Negative Feelings

All respondents indicated a strongly positive experience in participating in outreach courses.

Comfort Levels

All respondents indicated that they felt able to contribute to, and were comfortable participating in, class discussion, that the experience had been enjoyable, that it stimulated and extended their intellectual capacity, and that it provided valuable social interaction. The majority, 9 out of 11, felt that participation had improved their quality of life. No one felt ill at ease.

Academic Level

All respondents found the academic level of the courses “appropriate” (easily understandable), while 8 out of 11 also found it “a little challenging.” All of the latter group qualified their response by stressing that “challenging” was good, since they found their course stimulating. No respondents found the level to be too high. This response is congruent with anecdotal and regular course evaluations from the urban seniors and program in Saskatoon, where the participants were able to absorb relatively sophisticated content quite easily.

Attendance

Eight out of 11 respondents attended all classes; 3 missed a class or two for personal reasons. The reasons included personal bereavement, weather, and occasional meeting conflicts for one respondent who sits on a Regional Health Board. Once committed, the respondents showed consistently high rates of attendance.

Committee Function

When asked about the effectiveness of local seniors’ education committees for organizing interest and seeking courses, 10 out of 11 respondents felt that the committee process was effective. The committees generally meet on an irregular basis to discuss course subject matters, to spread the word to surrounding communities, and to fix preferred course schedules. Responses were mixed about committee operation, with some feeling that the committees did not meet often enough, although active committee members felt it was difficult to get all members to meetings when they were called. There was total recognition, however, that the committees were

crucial to programming. As one respondent, also a key committee member, noted: "If I get hit by a truck, everything will stop."

University Experience

Seven respondents indicated they had not taken courses from either provincial university prior to their participation in the rural outreach program. No one had participated in any university-sponsored program in the 12 months prior to their current activity, and only one had participated in any local program. Ten out of the 11 members of the structured interview group had no educational experience with either provincial university.

Travel Time

The time to reach the class location was less than 15 minutes for six respondents and 15 to 30 minutes for the other five. Respondents either used their own automobiles for travel or were driven by a friend.

Demographics

The structured interview group was overwhelmingly female, with only two male respondents. The largest single age group was 71–75 years (four respondents), the remainder broadly scattered from less than 55 years to 76–80 years. Secondary school was the most common educational level (seven respondents), while three respondents had completed some regional college or vocational course. Only one respondent had completed a university degree. Six respondents were fully retired; three were self-employed, five engaged in volunteer work; two were homemakers, and three described themselves as caregivers. Obviously, many filled more than one role.

INTERVIEW SUMMARY

A number of salient points emerged from the interview data:

- Word of mouth was the most effective publicity medium.
- At least for a certain percentage of older adults, interest in learning for the sake of learning or an interest in specific subject matters will produce a positive response to university-level educational opportunities.
- Participant satisfaction, enjoyment, social interaction, quality of life improvement, and intellectual stimulation all rated highly positive.
- Subject matter choices tended to be eclectic, for example, comparative religion, water colour, and history.

- The vast majority of participants felt comfortable participating in course discussion.
- Academic level was not a concern or a problem.
- Maintaining adequate local committee membership and keeping committees active were major concerns.
- Most participants readily saw the connections between learning, quality of life, and wellness.
- Even interested seniors were not typically active in university-level programs prior to an outreach initiative.
- Most interested participants would travel up to 40 km to go to class.
- Men were under-represented as participants, as a percentage of population.
- Use of an automobile was critical to meet transportation needs, since there is usually no alternative. Typically, small centres have no bus service, and many have no taxi-cab service.
- A majority of participants were likely to have only a high school education, and no prior university experience.
- Ethnic and linguistic diversity did not appear to be deterrents to activity. For example eight respondents reported a mother tongue other than English, including French, German, Croatian, and Chinese (Cantonese). All respondents reported English as a language of daily use, two also reported French in this category.

RELATED STUDIES

The highly positive results of the 1996 structured interview are worth comparing with conclusions derived from an earlier needs identification survey of Saskatchewan seniors conducted by the author (James, 1992). In many ways the conclusions from the structured interview are predictable based on the 1992 survey, but in several other important ways, the results of the structured interview are strikingly more positive.

Using a written questionnaire, the 1992 survey sampled the opinion of older adults in the broadly developed network of 430 seniors' clubs, centres, and associations throughout Saskatchewan, including a small subset of 59 individuals. The survey focused on the possible delivery of

program material by distance education techniques, particularly the use of live or cable television, as a potentially cost-effective way to achieve widespread rural programming originating at a university.

The overall response rate was disappointing, with just 131 (30 percent) organizations responding. The expressed rates of educational activity were even weaker. Only about 12 percent of responding organizations indicated educational activity of any type within the last 12 months. Organizations responded very strongly (96 percent) that distances under 40 km were acceptable in travelling to an educational event.

Open-ended comments produced several major themes. The largest single cluster (42 percent) indicated no interest in educational activities. The second largest cluster (38 percent) indicated no interest, but added one or more qualifiers. These qualifiers indicated that members of the organization were “too old,” “too busy,” or that the club was “too small.” The salient fact emerging from all these comments (James, 1992) was that the overwhelming majority, (81 percent), were not interested in educational activity as defined.

Fortunately, many of the open-ended comments helped to explain this lack of interest. The commentaries provided some insights into the “mind set” with which education in general, and university-level education in particular, was viewed. It was apparent that many seniors saw “education” as a highly formalized, sitting-at-a-desk kind of activity, with the strong implication that they had “already done that” and really didn’t care to do any more. In addition, university-level educational opportunity tends to be regarded as “unattainable” by many who lacked the formal educational requirement they imagined was necessary to participate. In addition there was a tendency to assume that university level means “degree credit.” The university “ivory tower myth” was alive and well in the minds of rural seniors.

It is instructive to compare the results of the 1992 and the 1996 studies. As noted earlier, most respondents in the 1992 survey showed little or no interest in educational activities. Almost all respondents in the 1996 structured interview had not participated in any university-sponsored program within 12 months prior to taking at least one of the rural outreach courses.

Had the respondents in the 1996 study been interviewed before they were provided with an opportunity, and then encouraged, to take the outreach courses, they likely would have shown the same low level of

interest in university-level courses as the respondents in the 1992 survey. Instead the 1996 structured interview respondents showed high levels of interest and motivation, including a striking willingness to pursue "learning for the love of learning." The interview group was interested and never bored, they felt that the academic level of the courses was easily understandable, and they were quite comfortable participating in class discussion.

The difference between the results of the two studies reinforces the importance of providing rural seniors with an opportunity to kindle their interest in education, by offering appropriate courses in their communities and encouraging them to participate through word-of-mouth marketing. Without such opportunities being made available, the interest is likely to remain latent, as was the case with the 1992 survey results, which indicated little or no motivation to take such courses.

Although a large percentage of rural seniors is unlikely to participate in outreach programs, given appropriate opportunities and encouragement, many more seniors than might be predicted on the basis of the 1992 survey can be expected to participate. The challenge in attracting rural seniors to learning is in finding ways to identify potential learners and to motivate them sufficiently.

The 1992 survey should be interpreted in the light of relevant studies in the literature. Courtenay (1989), in a literature review of the field, analyzed an array of research studies and information sources relating to education of older adults, covering some 52 authors and institutions. Even here, although the general commentary relating to attitudes of seniors to educational opportunities is useful, there was very little research relating to rural outreach. However, in the broader sense of education for older adults, the Saskatchewan response from the 1992 survey fits well with the literature.

Courtenay (1989) cites studies that indicate that the major barrier to participation by older adults is lack of interest. Other significant barriers cited in the literature include: being too old, poor health, lack of time, cost, lack of transportation, and being tired of school. Certainly the results of the 1992 survey of Saskatchewan seniors' organizations seem to fit this profile very closely. Courtenay also notes psychological barriers, such as "fear of competition with younger students, fear of exposure of their inadequate backgrounds, and fear of the unknown," as reasons for little or no participation(p. 528). These issues constitute considerable evidence that the problem lies largely in the attitudes of individuals; they effectively convince

themselves that they are not interested in learning. These attitudes have potential for change, however, and failure to consider this possibility is to miss the potential for enthusiastic participation that was apparent in the results of the 1996 interviews. The 1996 interview group results suggested that lack of interest for university-level learning for a certain percentage of the population was quickly overcome when opportunity and encouragement for this type of learning were made available.

The results of the 1996 structured interview also implied a weak correlation between formal levels of education and interest. As noted earlier, most of the participants in the 1996 structured interview group had relatively low levels of formal education. In contrast, higher levels of formal education as a significant predictor of participation in adult learning activity is well documented in the literature.

Courtenay (1989) notes that the educational gap between older and younger learners is narrowing and cites a study that elaborates the significance of this: "succeeding cohorts of older people will have more years of formal schooling . . . and because amount of formal education is a significant predictor of participation in adult education, future generations of older persons will be more likely to engage in educational activities" (pp. 525–526).

In *Leisure and Aging in Saskatchewan*, Nilson, Mazur, and Weaver (1990), also note that certain areas of activity, including taking classes or lessons, tend to rise with the educational level of the participant.

Although it is true that this correlation exists, the Extension Division's experience in Saskatchewan is that persons with relatively low levels of formal education can be motivated to learn as adults. The 1996 structured interview group responses clearly show that lack of post-secondary education was not a deterrent to participation in a university-level course. Other surveys conducted in Saskatchewan supported this finding. In 1988, the University of Regina found that 69 percent of the 165 respondents in courses offered for seniors by the University of Regina had never before participated in any university-level courses or program. A lower, but still significant, percentage of seniors taking courses sponsored by the University of Saskatchewan in 1988 (29 percent of 126 respondents) had no post-secondary education.

OUTLOOK

Rural outreach programming has enjoyed some limited success, but genuine barriers do exist. Delivery problems result from lack of access to satellite television, difficulty in arranging transport, winter road conditions, sparse population, and inadequate funding. Once an education committee is established, problems still remain. The continuity of committee activities may be threatened by the uncertain physical health of the members, competing and often challenging community issues demanding high levels of attention or participation, and the risk of burn-out in small committees carrying too much of a load.

Information derived from the 1996 interview data supports the practical development experience of seeking individual interest at the grass-roots level and of encouraging local education committees to assume ownership of their programs. This appears to be the best long-term strategy for initiating, developing, and institutionalizing this type of programming within the rural community.

Despite difficulties, there are a number of worthwhile reasons to pursue university-level educational opportunities for older adults in rural Saskatchewan. In addition there are some reasons for optimism that such efforts will produce lasting success.

First, there is clear demographic evidence that the older adult cohort will increase dramatically over the next 30 years. Coupled with this fact is the powerful philosophic rationale for right of access to educational opportunities for older adults, backed by the clear and increasing political power of this age cohort.

Second, the field-tested technique of development based on the interest of individuals, as distinct from organized groups, appears to be the most effective way to develop independent seniors education committees. The Extension Division found through the development process in Biggar that although organizations expressed little interest in outreach courses, interested individuals were able to be identified. In addition, the experience to date with the rural education committees or groups suggests that they are not elites, but groups based on the desire for intellectual stimulation, which once experienced becomes a very positive motivation to continue the learning process.

It is perhaps from the willingness and the ability of these groups to control and shape their own program that the highest level of intellectual

stimulation flows. It is this intellectual stimulation, this “learning for the love of learning,” that is most effective in improving the quality of life for participants and, in turn, enhancing all levels of their community activity.

ENDNOTES

1. The three communities covered were: Watrous and District 50 Plus Seniors Education Committee, interviews at Watrous (pop. 1,872); The Parkland, Leask and District Seniors Education Committee, interviews at Leask (pop 442); and Marcelin (pop. 193). (Population data is from *Saskatchewan Municipal Directory*, 1991 figures.)

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BIOGRAPHY

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