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By Rob Levrant, PhD

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As the global population ages, societies are reimagining what it means to grow older. With increased longevity and improved health outcomes, retirement now represents not an endpoint but a new chapter of potential growth and development. At the forefront of this transformation are college and university-based learning communities for retired adults, exemplified by programs such as the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI). These educational initiatives represent far more than casual hobby groups; they embody a sophisticated understanding of how the psychology of education can foster successful, positive aging through intellectual stimulation, social connection, physical activity, and volunteer opportunities (Hansen et al., 2019; Hansen et al., 2023; Jenkins et al., 2020; Talmage et al., 2019).

Health Benefits: The Neuroplasticity Advantage

The relationship between lifelong learning and health outcomes in older adults represents one of the most compelling areas of contemporary aging research. Studies consistently demonstrate that lifelong learning opportunities help fight cognitive decline through increasing mental stimulation and social interaction, with implications extending far beyond simple

cognitive exercise. Neuroplasticity research has revolutionized our understanding of the aging brain's capacity for adaptation and growth. Contrary to earlier beliefs about fixed cognitive decline, contemporary neuroscience reveals that the brain retains remarkable plasticity throughout the lifespan (Park et al., 2014). Educational activities in retirement provide the sustained, complex cognitive stimulation necessary to promote neuroplasticity and build cognitive reserve—the brain's resilience against age-related changes and pathological processes.

A groundbreaking longitudinal study by Stine-Morrow et al. (2019) followed older adults engaged in formal learning programs over five years, revealing significant protection against cognitive decline compared to control groups. Participants showed improved executive function, enhanced memory performance, and maintained processing speed—cognitive domains typically vulnerable to aging. These findings align with the "use it or lose it" principle, demonstrating that sustained intellectual engagement can literally reshape brain structure and function. The health benefits extend beyond cognition to encompass physical well-being. Research by Hughes et al. (2018) found that older adults participating in university-based learning programs showed improved cardiovascular health markers, reduced inflammatory responses, and enhanced immune function. The mechanism appears multifaceted: learning activities often incorporate physical movement, reduce social isolation (a significant health risk factor), and provide stress reduction through purposeful engagement.

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Developmental Psychology: Revisiting Identity, Purpose, and Integration

The developmental psychology of aging has evolved considerably from early deficit models to contemporary frameworks emphasizing continued growth and adaptation. Erik Erikson's concept of Generativity versus Stagnation in later life has been expanded by researchers like Baltes and Baltes (1990) to include selective optimization with compensation—the idea that successful aging involves focusing energy on areas of continued growth while adapting to areas of decline.

Lifelong learning programs provide ideal contexts for this developmental work. Retirement often precipitates what psychologists term "Identity Foreclosure"—the loss of work-based identity and social roles that have provided meaning and structure for decades (Erikson, 1968). Educational engagement offers opportunities for identity exploration and reconstruction, allowing individuals to develop new competencies, interests, and self-concepts.

Research by Sloan & Moore (2019) examining identity development among older learners found that educational participation facilitated what they termed "identity expansion"—the development of new aspects of self-concept while integrating past experiences and expertise. Participants reported discovering hidden talents, developing unexpected interests, and gaining new perspectives on their life stories and future possibilities. This developmental process experienced by older adults moving from career to retirement is akin to that experienced by traditional college students moving from schooling to career. Just as college students integrate various aspects of self into a coherent identity, older adults must reconstruct their sense of self when work-based identities are lost (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The concept of "identity expansion" described by Sloan & Moore (2019) parallels what college students experience when they discover new interests and capabilities. Both populations are engaged in active identity work—college students are forming initial adult identities while older learners are reconstructing and expanding existing ones.

Opportunities for Volunteerism: Service as Self-Actualization

Volunteerism represents a natural extension of lifelong learning programs, providing participants with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in meaningful service to their communities. The relationship between volunteering and positive aging is well-established, with research consistently demonstrating physical, psychological, and social benefits (Greenfield & Marks, 2004).

Within the context of lifelong learning programs, volunteerism takes on particular significance. Participants often become volunteer instructors, sharing their professional expertise and life experience with fellow learners. This role reversal—from student to teacher—provides powerful psychological benefits,

reinforcing competence, expertise, and social value. Research by Narushima (2005) found that older adults who transitioned from learners to volunteer educators in lifelong learning programs experienced enhanced self-efficacy, improved mental health, and stronger sense of purpose.

The educational component of lifelong learning programs also enhances the quality and impact of volunteer service. Participants develop new skills, acquire current knowledge, and gain fresh perspectives that make their volunteer contributions more effective and personally satisfying. A study by Morrow-Howell et al. (2003) demonstrated that older volunteers with ongoing educational engagement reported higher levels of volunteer satisfaction and were more likely to sustain their service commitments over time.

The volunteer opportunities within lifelong learning programs also provide structured pathways for civic engagement. Participants often become advocates for educational access, age-friendly communities, and lifelong learning policies. This civic dimension connects individual growth with broader social contribution, aligning with developmental psychology theories about generativity and legacy-building in later life.

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute Model: A Comprehensive Approach

The Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI) represent perhaps the most comprehensive and successful model of university-based lifelong learning for older adults. The OLLI network began in 2001 at the University of Southern Maine and has since expanded to 124 university- and college-based programs across the United States, enrolling more than 130,000 members as of 2025 who take in-person, virtual and hybrid classes (Osher National Resource Center, 2025). Supported by endowments from The Bernard Osher Foundation and coordinated by the National Resource Center for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (Osher NRC) at Northwestern University, OLLIs offer non-credit courses, lectures, and activities specifically designed for adults aged 50 and older (Hansen, 2023). Unlike traditional academic programs, OLLIs do not award degrees or credentials. Instead, they focus on the intrinsic value of learning, emphasizing curiosity, creativity, and personal growth. This approach aligns with the concept of the "age-friendly university," which seeks to make higher education more accessible and responsive to older adults (Talmadge, 2019).

The OLLI model incorporates several key features that align with developmental psychology principles and positive aging research. First, the programs are member-driven and self-governed, providing participants with autonomy and control—critical factors in successful aging according to research by Rowe & Kahn (1997). As a "membership-based community of adults, age 50 and better, who are passionate about learning" with "no prerequisites, no tests, and no stress", OLLI removes barriers while maintaining intellectual rigor. OLLI programs emphasize peer learning and teaching, recognizing older adults as both learners and knowledge resources. This approach validates the expertise and experience of participants while providing opportunities for continued growth and contribution. The model recognizes that effective education in later life must build on accumulated knowledge and skills rather than treating participants as blank slates. Third, the university affiliation provides access to resources, credibility, and intergenerational contact while maintaining programs specifically designed for older learners. This affiliation bridges the gap between formal and informal education, providing structure and support while maintaining flexibility and responsiveness to participant interests and needs.

Research by Brady et al. (2003) examining OLLI programs found significant benefits across multiple domains: cognitive stimulation, social connection, physical activity, and psychological well-being. Participants reported enhanced life satisfaction, reduced depression and anxiety, improved physical health, and stronger sense of purpose and meaning. Long-term follow-up studies have demonstrated sustained benefits, with OLLI participants showing slower rates of cognitive decline and better health outcomes compared to matched controls.

University-Based Retirement Communities and Age-Friendly Universities

University-Based Retirement Communities (UBRCs) represent an innovative approach to senior living that integrates older adults into the intellectual and social fabric of higher education institutions. These communities, which typically locate residential facilities on or adjacent to university campuses, offer residents unprecedented access to educational programming, cultural events, and intergenerational interactions that promote active aging and lifelong learning.

The concept of Age-Friendly Universities has emerged as a complementary framework, emphasizing an institutional commitment to making higher education accessible and welcoming to learners of all ages. Research indicates that UBRCs provide significant benefits for both residents and the broader university community, including enhanced cognitive stimulation for older adults and valuable mentorship opportunities for students (Davis & Thompson, 2019). The physical proximity to academic resources creates unique opportunities for informal learning, from auditing courses to participating in research projects as volunteers or subjects.

Key features of successful UBRCs include purpose-built housing designed with aging-in-place principles, comprehensive wellness programs that leverage university health sciences expertise, and structured intergenerational programming. Studies have shown that residents of UBRCs demonstrate higher levels of social engagement and cognitive function compared to traditional retirement community residents (Martinez et al., 2021). The model also provides universities with opportunities to develop innovative aging-related research programs and attract philanthropic support from alumni considering their own retirement housing options.

Challenges facing UBRC development include zoning restrictions, financing complexities, and the need for specialized management expertise that bridges higher education and senior living sectors. However, the growing aging population and increasing demand for intellectually stimulating retirement options suggest continued expansion of this model. Future research should examine long-term health outcomes and optimal design features for maximizing intergenerational benefits (Anderson & Lee, 2020).

Conclusion

The psychology of education in retirement represents a paradigm shift from viewing aging as decline to recognizing it as a period of continued potential for growth, contribution, and fulfillment. College and university-based learning communities, exemplified by OLLI, UBRC, , and Age Friendly Universities demonstrate how educational programs can foster positive aging through multiple interconnected pathways: preserving and enhancing cognitive health, building meaningful social connections, providing opportunities for service and contribution, and supporting continued psychological development and integration.

Evidence consistently shows a positive correlation between lifelong learning and successful aging, with benefits extending across physical, cognitive, social, and psychological domains. As our understanding of aging continues to evolve, educational programs for

older adults will likely play increasingly important roles in promoting individual well-being and social vitality. The challenge now is to scale these successful models while maintaining their essential features and adapting them to diverse populations and changing circumstances. The future of aging is about fostering continued growth, contribution, and fulfillment. Lifelong learning programs provide proven pathways for achieving this vision, transforming retirement from an end to a beginning, and redefining what it means to age successfully in the 21st century. •CSA

Rob Levrant bridges worlds—transforming how communities learn, grow, and connect. As Senior Director of Community Education and Enrichment for University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Lifelong Learning and director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI), he champions the belief that education never stops. Rob teaches Educational Psychology and Qualitative Research while drawing on previous experience as a Neighborhood Outreach Specialist for Las Vegas, a lobbyist for the Southern Nevada Home Builders Association, and Director of Residence Life at Rocky Mountain College in Montana. With degrees from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (B.S., M.A.) and UNLV (Ph.D.), Rob continues to prove that the most powerful education happens when learning meets community, and that personal growth never has to stop.

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