

Civic Engagement and Lifelong Learning

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Why consider lifelong learning as a potentially critical aspect of civic engagement for the population over the age of 50?

As the concept of retirement is redefined and shaped by baby boomers' values and a changing economic outlook, a thorough and thoughtful examination of baby boomers' perspectives is essential if their civic engagement is to be initiated and sustained at levels necessary to respond to unmet needs in our communities.

Current research on baby boomers' priorities and predictions concerning their future activities indicates that they have an interest in exploring new options, continuing lifelong learning and personal development, and being engaged in meaningful paid or unpaid work (Wilson and Simson, 2006). Winsten (2004) and the AARP survey (2004a) paint a specific picture of how the current 50-plus group of baby boomers perceives their time and activities in the future. Respondents to the AARP survey indicate that they expect to spend time in personal development, in full- or part-time paid work, in leisure activities, and in volunteer work. Another AARP survey (2004b) indicates that the shift toward expectations of continued work beyond retirement is increasingly strong, with findings indicating that 80 percent of baby boomers expect to continue working either full time or part time.

An important combination.

The baby boomers' stated interest in continuing to learn and continuing to do meaningful paid and unpaid work evolves

naturally out of changing demographics in an aging society, particularly related to education, with higher levels of education associated with higher levels of civic engagement.

In 1995, only 14 percent of individuals between the ages of 65 and 74 were college graduates (Gwynn, 2000). By the year 2025, it is estimated that 33 percent of this age group will hold college degrees. Thirty-seven percent of baby boomers report that continuing their education is an important part of their retirement plan (Hart, 2002). Highly educated baby boomers are already filling the classrooms of colleges and universities seeking additional formal education toward alternative careers. In fact, a Merrill Lynch study (2005) indicates that 56 percent of baby boomers would like to change careers.

These studies underscore the understanding that personal development and lifelong learning play a central role in future plans of the baby boomers. Boomers like to acquire new knowledge and skills, and they say they plan to continue to do so. This interest is driven both by personal preference and by the potential of making a career change into more meaningful and rewarding work. To do either

requires seeking out and participating in avenues for lifelong learning.

The concept of lifelong learning has itself been changing. Initially, lifelong learning was seen as an educational strategy targeted largely to adults ages 20–45 who required retraining or workforce entry credentials that had not been afforded them or in which they had not participated for other reasons as youth and young adults. As a policy strategy, lifelong learning has been seen as a way to optimize employment potential for adults and workers over the age of 40 (Dehmel, 2006). Globally, lifelong learning has been viewed as a way for governments to achieve their social objectives by improving the overall welfare and earning ability of constituents, thus reducing poverty and inequality (Kroukamp, 2004). Concurrently, the pace of technological change has made lifelong learning, whether formal or informal, critical for career progress.

As a result of these views on the role of lifelong learning in strengthening society, lifelong learning has achieved increasing importance (Bork, 2001). The notion of lifelong learning as relevant and important to and for the 50-plus population is a more recent advance, which is supported by the literature that demonstrates the value of maintaining both cognitive capacity and social networking in aging populations. As a result, lifelong learning has emerged as an ideal tool for fulfilling both economic and social imperatives (Leader, 2003). This expanded perspective has led to new lifelong learning venues and opportunities for personal development and social interactions intended for 50-plus learners. To a lesser extent, career development opportunities specifically directed at career shifts for the 50-plus population have begun to develop. As colleges and universities begin to recognize the demographic shifts and seek new ways to respond to community residents and alumni, new university-based opportunities specifically designed for 50-plus learners have emerged.

With eight out of ten baby boomers indicating that they plan to keep working and many boomers indicating an interest in continuing to learn, there certainly will be further changes in both lifelong learning options and pathways to future paid and unpaid work opportunities.

On the other hand, Updegrave (2005) and Regnier (2005) are skeptical about the reality of baby boomers continuing to work into retirement. Updegrave indicates that only 26 percent of current retirees have done any work for pay during their retirement. In addition, Regnier indicates that the types of low-paying, lower prestige jobs that are currently a primary source of employment for retirees may not be attractive to baby boomers, necessitating a reengineering of opportunities and training to realize these ambitions of continuing to work. These arguments and concerns mirror exactly those identified by baby boomers regarding their participation in unpaid work and volunteerism and the need for improved options.

To create a new working retirement, a very different idea of what work and retirement mean must be created. The Merrill Lynch *New Retirement Survey* (2005) states that 42 percent of baby boomers plan to combine work and leisure, 17 percent do not plan to work for pay, 16 percent plan to work part time, 13 percent plan to start their own businesses, and 6 percent plan to work full time. These statistics indicate the need for significant rethinking on the part of business, industry, and the nonprofit sector on how best to incorporate this potential resource in both paid and unpaid labor, as well as the need for new knowledge and skills to match newly developing opportunities.

Lifelong learning formats for baby boomers are both formal and informal in nature. Over the past decade, baby boomers represented approximately 56 percent of adult learners in community colleges and almost 20 percent of all students in higher education. The percentage of students over the age of 40 in community colleges has almost doubled (Gwynn, 2000). The growth in informal lifelong learning has been spurred by the Elderhostel Institute Network, which consists of approximately 300 lifelong learning institutes based at or connected to colleges and universities, and the Bernard Osher Foundation, which is funding approximately 75 lifelong learning institutes in the United States. These institutes offer a less structured, more self-directed format for adult learning, for example, peer-led study groups on a

variety of topics of interest for personal development and acquisition of knowledge.

How does the growth in opportunities for lifelong learning and our increased understanding of baby boomers' priorities as they approach the retirement years translate into enhancement of civic engagement? The links between lifelong learning, social capital, and civic engagement have been clearly evident in the literature related to youth. An ongoing concern regarding low levels of civic engagement among younger populations has spurred the service-learning movement both at secondary schools and in higher education. Service learning provides opportunities for students to apply classroom learning to community-based issues through structured fieldwork associated with a particular course of study. Reports of the results of service-learning programs funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service indicate that students who participated in community-based service-learning opportunities have a significantly enhanced belief in their ability to make a difference in their communities, and they are more likely to project an interest in future volunteerism and in other civic activities (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006). Recently, by using the same types of assessment, similar findings have been identified in programs combining lifelong learning and civic engagement for adults over the age of 50 (Manning, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006).

Lifelong learning for adults over the age of 50 has advanced significantly. A new focus on both informal and formal lifelong learning and their role in the future of paid and unpaid work of the baby boomer population is now receiving attention in both literature and in practice. Traditionally, policy makers and others in aging have focused mainly on the transition from work to retirement and ways in which lifelong learning and civic engagement activities might offer paths to meeting both personal and societal needs (Wilson and Simson, 2003). More recently, with more baby boomers planning to combine work with retirement than previous cohorts, more attention has gone to discern ways that lifelong learning and civic engagement could lead to a wider variety of future unpaid, part-time, and full-time work in the

nonprofit sector for older people (Wilson and Simson, 2006).

MODELS FOR COMBINING LIFELONG LEARNING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

As is already clear from the literature cited, baby boomers have an ongoing affinity for lifelong learning. It is equally clear that they have anticipated a need to continue to do meaningful work, either paid or unpaid. What seems less clear both to baby boomers and to agencies and businesses that might use this vast pool of individuals is how to best provide access and roles appropriate to both the desires of the people over 50 and the perceived needs of businesses and nonprofit agencies. Lifelong learning has emerged as a primary means of doing so. A review of some current models can serve as a guide for how programs that combine lifelong learning and civic engagement can lead to opportunities for older people in both paid and unpaid work. Examples of such programs are described below.

Legacy Leadership Institutes. The Legacy Leadership Institute model was designed by the University of Maryland Center on Aging to respond to its findings regarding what boomers anticipated would be necessary if they were to pursue sustained and intensive involvement in volunteer activities. Respondents indicated that they were interested in opportunities that involved personal growth and lifelong learning, participation in a purposeful social network that was working toward a clearly defined goal, and service in a well-designed, meaningful role (Wilson et al., 2006). The University of Maryland used these findings to develop and implement a series of models that would incorporate all three of these elements in order to create service opportunities that would be attractive to baby boomers and young retirees. An assessment of each follows.

The Legacy Leadership Institute model evolved with the following goals: (1) integration and utilization of the expertise of colleges and universities in order to create a visible, centralized base for recruitment, education, and retention of 50-plus volunteers; (2) expansion of community capacity to respond to unmet needs by creating a university-based corps of well-

trained 50-plus volunteers to engage in community service; (3) prior to beginning the volunteer service, provision of lifelong learning and service learning to the older adults to equip them to understand the specific community issues and needs to be addressed in their volunteer roles; (4) development of a replicable university-based infrastructure to attract a continuous pool of volunteers who would increase their levels of civic engagement and sustain their involvement with their communities over extended periods of time; and (5) preparation and training of community-based organizations to design and implement new roles and approaches attractive to current and future volunteers over the age of 50.

The Legacy Leadership Institute is designed with 60–80 hours of classroom time, which includes curricula on leadership, civic engagement, teamwork, nonprofit organization and infrastructure, and the policies and practices relevant to the specific nonprofit sector (e.g., environment, government, health, schools) in which volunteers will be serving. Participants also learn specific skills and knowledge associated with a defined volunteer role (e.g., environmental educator, fundraiser) and have an opportunity to practice their skills and work with paid staff from those agencies to further refine the role before undertaking their field experience. Program participants, called Legacy Leaders, commit themselves to between 200 and 450 hours of service, with the partner agencies helping to design these new roles.

Assessments to date indicate that Legacy Leadership Institutes significantly increase the Legacy Leaders' sense of attachment to the community and their belief that they can make a difference there as a result of their participation in the Legacy Leadership Institutes. They are engaged in multiple civic activities following participation and 45 percent report being involved in full- or part-time paid employment directly as a result of their institute field experience in the institute. Currently, twelve variations of Legacy Leadership Institutes are in operation or in development in nine states in the U.S. and Europe.

Legacy Corps for Health and Independent Living. While the Legacy Leadership Institute

model was developed as a transition from work to lifelong learning and civic engagement, its potential to serve as an avenue to return to work evolved unintentionally. The University of Maryland has been developing another lifelong learning and civic engagement model that has a more intentional approach to moving from lifelong learning and civic engagement to work. Legacy Corps for Health and Independent Living provides respite service in fifteen low- and moderate-income communities in the U.S. by preparing teams of people over age 50 in partnership with people ages 16–49 to serve together in their own communities in order to assist caregivers through respite care. The education and the volunteer respite-service experience of 450 hours are designed to link to work and career opportunities for both the younger and older volunteer team members. Such linkages include investigating how Legacy Corps lifelong learning can be counted toward a formal education certificate or credential such as healthcare assistant; assessing the needs in healthcare employment in a geographic area and providing career ladders from service to work; and encouraging the potential for future healthcare careers through lifelong learning and reflection sessions (Harlow-Rosentraub, Wilson, and Steele, 2006).

Lifelong Learning Institutes. Lifelong Learning Institutes have grown rapidly under the auspices of over 300 colleges and universities nationwide. While informal education has been the primary mission of these institutes, there is increasing evidence that these institutes are looking at how to engage their members not only in the internal activities of their institute and university but also in the needs of the external community. Currently, about 30 percent of Lifelong Learning Institutes report that they are engaged in community-based volunteer service as a part of their mission and functions (Simson, Wilson, and Harlow-Rosentraub, 2006). The predominant activity to date is through posting of community volunteer opportunities, forming partnerships with community-based organizations to offer volunteer service opportunities, and forming partnerships with their college or university to offer volunteer opportunities. Less than 10 percent reported undertaking service

learning or conducting their own lifelong learning and civic engagement programs.

Active adult communities. A rapidly growing type of housing development is the active adult community for people over the age of 55. Increasingly, these communities are providing their own lifelong learning opportunities or linking to local colleges and universities. Arizona State University West, the University of Maryland, College Park, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, have created partnerships with Pulte Del Webb Homebuilders and UPS Foundation to test new models combining lifelong learning and civic engagement in five active adult communities in Arizona and Nevada (Blake, Knopf, and Wilson, 2006).

As these models show, combining lifelong learning with civic engagement can be an effective and replicable method of attracting and retaining 50-plus volunteers, enhancing non-profit capacity, and meeting defined community need. ♡

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