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University Sponsored Adult Community Education: Exploring Motivations to Expand Diversity

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Community education offered by colleges and universities is an underexplored element of higher education. Community education includes non-credit and non-credentialing experiences that are offered by an institution for the benefit of the community. These courses, workshops, seminars, etc. can range from highly formal, such as adult basic education, to the highly informal, such as game nights in a college student center (Fletcher, 1989). The purpose of community education is the development of individuals in a community, whether to an expressed end or for the purpose of building human capital through socialization (Fletcher, 1989; Sole & Wilkins, 1976; Western et al, 2005).

Community education programs are often structured and funded through some agent, such as a foundation or state agency, or they are offered due to an expressed interest in something. This might be a book club that comes about due to the interest in a particular topic or national trend, and individuals in the community want to localize it, making it their own or taking a local perspective on larger state or national issues.

Community education can also be offered by formal institutions as an expression of fulfilling a mission. Institutions can range from those with direct community responsibility such as a public library, or can be coordinated and offered by private organizations, such as senior center or non-profit group supporting a particular cause (Barry, 2014). One major provider of community education is the higher education industry. Their programs can exist as an element of community service by the institution or can be designed as a mechanism for

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revenue generation. As such, these programs are designed similar to other academic programs where offerings are aligned with student demand.

Colleges and universities offer a broad range of community education programs often designed around community needs and interests (D'Amico et al, 2016; Edwards & Usher, 1997). They have been particularly active in offering programs for mature adult populations, noting that leisure community education has the unintended consequences of positively impacting the cognitive and social abilities and capacity of these individuals (Kao & Chang, 2017; Mahon & Searle, 1994; Tett, 2023). As institutions design and offer programs, their motivations are typically aligned with meeting diagnosed community needs, but there is little understanding about why some of these students engage with these classes. This is particularly true for diverse adult populations who may, historically, have not engaged in formal education. Therefore, the purpose of conducting the study was to better understand the motivations of diverse mature adults who engage in a university-sponsored community education program.

Community Education in Higher Education

Higher education institutions have typically engaged in offering community education for the purpose of fulfilling their mission of providing educational access to their communities. These programs are often driven by an expressed demand to an institution for some educational activity. These programs might include historical programs about a region, support for genealogical research, or education about how to use different government documents. Summer athletic camps, art camps, and college preparation test programs are additional examples. Institutions also offer community education in response to external expressions of interest. The Bernard Osher Foundation, for example, provided funding to a number of US

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colleges to create lifelong learning institutes; structured entities aimed at leisure education for mature adult learners (Osher Foundation, 2005).

Community education can also be a form of revenue generation for an institution. Summer athletic, debate, art, and cheerleading camps, for example, create revenue streams that can be used to supplement operating budgets. This revenue can also be linked to different grants where funders provide money to institutions to meet the needs of certain community populations. Examples include college preparation test programs, adult literacy programs, and historical society grants.

These educational programs have multiple direct and indirect benefits. The primary benefits are the fulfillment of a mission and meeting of constituent needs, creating value and appreciation for the institution. Revenue generation is another direct benefit as community education programs often rely on user-fees outside of traditional tuition and fee payments, and this in turns provides an institution with a different source of operating income.

There are also multiple indirect benefits from community education programming, most notably the development, creation, and sustaining of social capital among community citizens. Social capital is created by bringing community members together in a meaningful way to communicate and share experiences, stories, concerns, and hopes. By developing relationships that can be sustained beyond a class session, individuals can create a deeper commitment to their community and to each other (Cotterell at al, 2018; Davisson & Rush, 1981; Mattessich & Monsey, 1997; Sole & Wilkins, 1976; Thoidis & Pnevmatikos, 2014). This type of connection has been a growing concern in American society as technology and self-interest have grown to the point where individuals arguably communicate far less regularly (Postman, 1985; Putnam, 2000).

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Research Methods

The study was situated at a research university in a community of approximately 100,000 people, with an enrolment of 30,000 students. The community education program was housed in a college of education and previously had been part of a college of continuing studies. The unit was founded by an external grant and operates on a revenue-recovery model where funding necessary for operation must be generated through grants and student class registration fees.

The community of the study was predominantly white (75%) with 18% of the population over the age of 55. The average household income was $78,000, suggesting a largely middle-class community with a suburban setting. The community education organization (CEO) studied primarily targets those over the age of 55 in their leisure education programming. They require an annual membership for the right to enroll in classes. Many activities targeting community building are offered free-of-charge to those who pay the annual membership, such as luncheons with local authors, book clubs, meetings for breakfasts, end of day social hours, and Friday afternoon movie groups. The CEO offers approximately 200 courses that require a payment over the calendar year. These courses range in price from nominal charges to more expensive offerings, dependent upon the topic.

In the CEO's 15 years of existence, membership has grown slowly and steadily to its current size of approximately 500. Within the 500, under 10% of the total membership is from an underrepresented background.

As a descriptive study, phenomenological qualitative research methods were employed. This qualitative research provides an opportunity for participants to share their lived experiences and reflect on them in a personal manner. They use the opportunity to tell their stories as they perceived to have lived them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through repeated

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interviews, the similarities across personal stories can then result in the identification of themes which can be used to respond to the purpose of the study.

In the data collection, 11 interviews were completed. The participants were from underrepresented populations who were recruited into the CEO, were provided a complimentary membership, and took at least two classes over the course of one year. These participants were recruited to join the CEO with the incentives of the free membership and two free classes. A total of 56 individuals were recruited through a variety of community outreach efforts and were provided these incentives. All 56 were invited to participate in the interviews, and a total of 23 volunteered to be interviewed. The study made use of the first 12 who volunteered to participate in the interviews, and ultimately one of the interview participant's data was determined to be not-usable as it was identified that the participant did not actually meet the selection criteria.

The interviews included seven semi-structured interview questions that delved into the adult learning and community education participation of the participants. The interview protocol was developed based on literature pertaining to community adult education, and the interviews were conducted by an individual who volunteered for the CEO who identified as being from an under-represented group. This interview decision was made based on the assumption that participants might be more willing to disclose their experiences and speak more directly to an individual who they might perceive to have more in common with. Through transcriptions and field notes, data were then analyzed through open-coding.

Findings

Of the eleven interviews, four identified as Black women between the ages of 65-75, three were internationally born women between 62-68, and four self-identified as Black men

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over the age of 65. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed, with technical editing completed on the initial transcripts to remove verbal tics and pauses. These edited transcripts were then returned to each participant for review, correction, and completeness. The approved transcripts were then used in the data analysis.

The open-coding used a constant-comparison process to identify major ideas, repetitions, and ultimately, themes. Three of the completed transcript reviews were then coded by an external evaluator to assure consistency and accuracy of analysis. Ultimately, for the purpose of the current study, three major themes were identified relating to the rationale for participating in a university-sponsored community education program: exploration, occupation, and providing assistance.

Exploring Motivations

Nine of the eleven interview participants talked about how they saw community education classes as a mechanism to 'explore' their community in more depth and to learn about their personal interests. The concept of 'exploration' was closely tied to the idea of 'curiosity,' and as one participant said, "I just want to find out more about where I've been living. I've been here a long time and I want to understand the history of this place. Just call me curious." Another participant said

> I moved here almost 15 years ago from Africa. I left my home. I came here because my husband wanted to go to grad school and we stayed. I thought we might go home, but I knew once he got a job here [on campus] that we wouldn't. I've raised our kids here, they went to school and have all graduated. Now I want to learn about this place, this state. I've been curious, but I've never had the time. The classes I've taken have all been local history, and it's been wonderful. I've learned where the first cat house was. Did you know that a cat

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> house is what they called brothels? For prostitutes. Right down the street from here. And, there was a civil war battle right up the street. That was a good class. Great teacher. And there was even a stagecoach that ran right down this street like in old movies. All of it, you know. It's been great. Once I took that first class, I didn't stop.

Several respondents also focused on wanting to learn more about the minority communities that are present in the larger community, and the treatment and history of Black Americans in particular. One of the men commented "There aren't a lot of Black people around here and I wanted to learn a little bit more about our community here. Where we came from, how we got here, that kind of thing." Three of those interviewed particularly spoke of attending courses offered around the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday in January and the courses that were offered about Black history in the community. One participant even reported that she had taken the same course twice, saying "I really liked it and there was this great teacher. I think I learned more the second time I took the class than the first!"

Occupying Motivations

Three of the four men stressed very openly that they were unsure what to do with themselves in retirement, and that taking classes was a way to occupy their time. The same idea, however, was also conveyed by five women who found themselves at home after their children had graduated from secondary school. One of the men said "I just didn't know what to do with myself. My wife said I was driving her crazy. Well, there was a class on this old Black neighborhood over here. A history class. And it was just kind of this coming together of me being bored and me being interested." The other man said directly, "I spent my career going to work everyday and I just didn't have anything else to do."

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For the women who were interviewed and suggested that taking class was designed to occupy their time, one of the international women, from Puerto Rico, said

> I have two kids and both finished high school and went to college. That first year
>
> I baked cookies and mailed them off. I went to visit them. I wrote letters and followed everything they did on social media. But after about a year, I felt like I needed to move on. A friend gave me a class catalog and I just flipped through it one day and saw a class about Latin cooking. Some of the description sounded like my home, and I signed up and went. One thing led to another and I started taking classes on a regular basis. The classes don't fill all of my time, but I've made some friends and we'll take classes together or just go out to lunch. Stuff like that.

Helping Motivations

All participants talked about their evolution in taking community education courses. One of the men noted that he began taking courses to occupy his time, and that they evolved into helping set up the classrooms and even serving as an 'ambassador' for the classes. In this role, he introduced the teacher, distributed end-of-class surveys, and managed the technical aspects of the course, such as making certain technology worked, that the water and iced tea were ready, etc. He commented modestly, "Well, I'm there. I figured I might as well help out a little bit. Doesn't take me too much effort and I liked being involved." Other participants confirmed similar thoughts about being engaged and helping the program be successful. One of the international women said "there's not too many people like me taking classes, so when

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I see someone else who is from someplace else [foreign country], I introduce myself, call them if I can, and help them get signed up for classes. I like it. It's like finding friends."

For one of the other women, the process of helping with classes was personally important to her for family reasons. She said

> My son was diagnosed with Autism. For me, learning about it and how it affects your child and your whole family is important. For a while it really became my life because I didn't know how to handle it. How to manage it. But, I learned. We learned. And as I found myself with more free time, I found classes like these that helped other people understand these kinds of challenges and I made it my mission to not only take classes and recruit for these classes, but to even teach classes. There are so many people who just need to talk to somebody about what's going on with their kids or their life. If I can help by taking or teaching classes, that's something I want to give back.

Discussion

Community education can be offered by colleges and universities for many different reasons and with many different results. Some of these can be simply building goodwill within a college town, and in other instances, these courses can generate revenue or work to build life skills that are important for society. Community education courses can also be an important element in community development and enrichment. By bringing individuals from different backgrounds and socio-economic strata together, community education has the potential to make for a more civil and civic minded society. Individuals with differences have the potential in these types of classes to come together as they would nowhere else in society, and in the

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process of learning together, to learn about each other and how differences do not have to define and segment society.

If community education has a role in community building, then it is important for providers of this education to understand the motivations of participating in these classes. Providers need to use the same marketing sophistication that they have with their undergraduate recruitment with the recruitment and enrolment of society members into community education classes. This enrolment management for community education must begin with an understanding of who is taking classes and their reasons for enrolling in them.

The findings of the study offer some important insights into why individuals from different backgrounds enroll in community education classes designed for mature adults, and as a qualitative study, begin to offer an insight that must be built upon in future research. These findings provide three basic levels of motivation for enrolment, including the occupation of time, which is a common theme among the recently retired. This type of motivation is reliant on the alignment of opportunity with interest, meaning that timing is critically important and that recruitment efforts must have a sense of potential learner markets.

Similarly, community education programs that highlight either local or timely interests may find a strong enrolment from those who are curious and seeking to explore something specific. Local history, current events, and programs that correspond to a 'sense of place,' were of interest to those in the study, and providers might also find that programs highlighting what is unique about their communities have great interest. Also, providers may have an interest in building programming around local, national, or even international events. Courses around presidential elections, for example, might pique the interests of mature adult learners, but also programs that address timed events and activities, ranging from Black History Month to the World Cup, and Italian Heritage Month and the history of Valentine's Day.

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And finally, respondents noted their interest in helping other people, whether as a mechanism to give back to their communities or simply to help others benefit from what they have enjoyed. This theme is suggestive of building communities within the community education program, and taking advantage of those who are seeking some involvement or looking to give back in some way. Not all philanthropic support must be financial, and these individuals seemed to be giving of their time and talents; a resource that program administrators may wish to accentuate as they look to expand or reinforce their program efforts.

Overall, the findings were not surprising, but they way that these individuals articulated their interests in community education were unique. Participants spoke plainly about how and why they decided to become involved in community education courses offered by this university, and the three themes identified provide a strong foundation for further study and exploration of how and why individuals engage in this type of learning.

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