Conference Report

Resourceful Aging: Today and Tomorrow

by Wendy A. Heil and Lori N. Marks*

Older Americans possess the wisdom that blossoms from the experience of a lifetime, the education of a lifetime. Older people have something to contribute, and America needs it.

Robert A. Maxwell, President, AARP

Resourceful Aging was the theme of a national conference co-sponsored by the New Roles in Society Program of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and Cornell University in Washington, D.C., last October. The conference explored the opportunities and potential for expanded roles for older adults in four major areas: lifelong education, family/caregiving, work/second careers, and volunteerism. Rather than focusing on the needs of an older population, the conference emphasized the contributions older Americans make to their families, communities, and nation. Experts, practitioners, and older role models presented data and innovative programs illustrating how older people contribute their experience, knowledge, historical perspective, and vision to meet today's needs and to help lead the way to a promising future.

Lifelong Education: Cornerstone for Resourceful Roles

Education has traditionally been viewed as a lock-step process of formal learning in childhood, virtually complete by the early adult years. However, in recent years, society has come to understand that education is a lifelong process. Lifelong education encompasses not only formal learning in the early years, but continued learning throughout life as well.

Lifelong learning does not suggest a lifetime in the classroom, although many adults are returning to school for a variety of reasons. Lifelong learning means continuing to stay involved in a changing world, enhancing one's knowledge of and pleasure in life, and striving for a better understanding of the complex issues that confront us each day.

In this lifespan context, learning is the cornerstone upon which various life roles, activities, and contributions are built. Lifelong education empowers individuals both to enhance their own capabilities and knowledge and to reach out to others in a variety of milieus. Lifelong education is the key to unlocking the resourcefulness of older Americans to help meet the needs of an ever-changing society.

Like any group of learners, older adults should be viewed as heterogeneous and multidimensional in terms of learning needs and abilities. Research on cognitive development has shown that, barring physical problems, older adults can perform quite well intellectually into their 70s and 80s. Learning can be enhanced dramatically if the education process and environment are designed to address certain physiological aspects of aging, such as decrements in hearing and eyesight, slower information-processing times, and a lessened ability to get around as easily as in earlier years.

One of the most pervasive obstacles to participation in lifelong education by today's older adults is their lower level of educational experience compared with younger adults, and the notion that lifelong education is not really connected to the mainstream of life. But even this barrier is giving way

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to a renewed interest by many adults in lifelong learnings of all kinds, and this trend is expected to continue.

Midlife and older adults pursue learning activities for a variety of reasons. Retirees may want to pursue interests left unexplored during their careers or develop social networks while learning new subjects. Many older adults are faced with life transitions that require them to learn new skills and acquire new competencies. Such transitions may include divorce, death of a spouse, children leaving home, loss of a job, a new financial situation, or pursuit of a second, third, or even fourth career. For many, education is the key to adapting to life changes. In addition, older workers and their employers benefit from training and retraining to respond to fast-changing technology and vast amounts of new information.

But not all older persons are fortunate enough to be able to choose additional learning for leisure or personal growth. Many older people are rich in life experiences but poor in the skills necessary to survive in today's world. The problem of illiteracy has received much national attention recently, and the challenge of relatively high rates of illiteracy among older people must not be overlooked.

In recent years, older adult learners have embraced a variety of opportunities to learn, both in traditional and nontraditional ways. Colleges and universities are logical sites for older adult educational programs. The intensive one- or two-week learning experiences of Elderhostel programs and the semester-long courses at Institutes for Learning in Retirement have drawn large numbers of older learners to college campuses to pursue personal growth learning. Community colleges may be ideal providers of lifelong education for midlife and older learners in the future. A community college is located within commuting distance of nearly 95% of the American population, and many have developed cable television and satellite technologies that enable them to reach even home-bound students.

Senior centers, libraries, hospitals, literacy organizations and a wide variety of other providers have all embraced lifelong education by tailoring their courses and materials to meet the needs of a growing older population. Learning opportunities abound in subjects ranging from practical issues, such as health and financial management, to basic skills, like literacy, to leisure and personal interests, such as travel, hobbies and humanities.

Still others have experimented with nontraditional modes of learning. SeniorNet is an example of a widely popular computer network that teaches older adults to use computers and then encourages them to share their knowledge with others. A nationwide, on-line computer network fosters long-distance information-sharing among members, and local sites provide opportunities for SeniorNet graduates to teach others how to enjoy computers. SeniorNet's philosophy, like that of many programs involving older adults, is to use the resources and expertise of its members to reach out to others.

Sharing knowledge, expertise and a vision for the future enables midlife and older adults to fill their need for "generativity," or guiding the next generation by becoming teachers and mentors for all generations and strengthening the institutions that support generativity.

Increasingly, school systems are acknowledging the valuable expertise that retired professionals can bring to the classroom. These opportunities have often been limited by various institutional barriers, such as overly restrictive teacher certification requirements or the lack of vehicles for promoting volunteerism in schools. Recently, alternative teacher certification programs, which acknowledge the skills and expertise gained over a lifetime, have enabled older adults to return to the classroom as instructors while taking courses to acquire additional teaching skills.

At the university level, retired professors possess a wealth of knowledge not only about their own subject areas but also about the academic community. Emeritus colleges (volunteer organizations of retired professors) use their members' skills to assist the university with activities such as fundraising, tutoring, and organizing special events. Likewise, many college and university programs for older adults use their own participants as instructors and administrators.

In the community setting, tutoring and mentoring programs often pair older adults with adolescents, some of whom are at risk of dropping out of school or becoming involved in drugs, alcohol or crime. Interacting with and learning from an older role model helps to strengthen the youth's resolve to stay in school and to make positive life decisions. These intergenerational relationships serve as educational experiences for both teenagers and older adults. Young people can see for themselves what it means to age resourcefully, and older people can better appreciate the stresses and choices that students face today.

Family/Caregiving

Demographic and social changes have had an impact on family relationships in the United States. Increased longevity of the population means that more people have the opportunity to be grandparents and great-grandparents, and family relationships can exist for long periods of time. Members of several generations are alive at the same time. These factors, along with delayed childbearing, higher divorce and remarriage rates, the growing proportion of working mothers, and the geographic dispersion of families, contribute to the growing complexity of family relationships.

With the increased complexity of family structure, older family members have had to learn new roles as grandparents and caregivers. The learning process is an ongoing one. Grandparents have adapted to geographical separations by using technological advances in travel and long-distance communication to establish and maintain relationships with their grandchildren. Although low incomes remain a problem for some older people, the improved financial well-