



The Age of Learning

Fulkerson says her fellow attendees were much like the older adults she regularly counsels on encore careers. “These were very energized people trying to figure out what to do next with their lives.”

There are a lot of gray heads in online and brick-and-mortar classrooms these days, and a lot of adults over the age of 50 are asking the same question: What’s next?

Some are seeking new career skills. Many others are pursuing learning for learning’s sake—for intellectual stimulation, a sense of purpose, and, often, social connection.

And educators are responding by throwing out the welcome mat for mature learners in a bigger way than ever before. There are courses online, including the massive open online courses (MOOCs) that some major universities now offer to anyone with an internet connection. There are also plenty of traditional classrooms in colleges, universities, community centers, and elsewhere that welcome older learners.

Want to get a master’s or doctoral degree decades after you last set foot on a campus? Some universities now have support services just for you. Maybe you want to study the history or literature you missed as an undergrad focused on other things. You can find a no-pressure class for that. Or maybe you want to polish your tech skills, prepare for a new leadership role, or unleash your inner entrepreneur. Opportunities abound—in everything from on-campus fellowships to online micro-credential courses.

Still, “We have so much mind-shifting to do,” says Nancy Morrow-Howell, a professor of social policy who directs the Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging at Washington University in St. Louis. “When



we created all our educational institutions, life expectancy was half as long. Now that we live much longer, we can't stop our formal education at age 22."

While not all later learning is career-focused, economic forces are driving the change. "We want to work longer, and the workforce needs us longer," says Morrow-Howell. "But the shift to multigenerational learning is just getting started."

University for Life

At age 57, Lynne Johnson, of Dallas, Texas, is a proud recent graduate of Washington University's master's degree program in social work. She hopes her degree will help her find a job with an organization that assists older adults and their caregivers.

She started her graduate studies at the university's Brown School in 2015, a couple years after completing a long-delayed bachelor's degree at another university. In between degrees, she was the primary caregiver for her mother, who has since passed away. Previously, she had a long career in film production and a shorter stint as an English teacher in Taiwan.

Despite her many life experiences and her clear career goals, Johnson says she did not feel entirely welcome when she showed up at graduate school in her early 50s. "I could tell early on—even in the orientation—that the younger students didn't want anything to do with the older students," she says. "It was very awkward, and I had a hard time making friends and fitting in." Some faculty members were unwelcoming as well, she says.

Eventually, she gained confidence and felt more at home, Johnson says. But she saw a need for more support for students like herself. In fall of 2018, shortly after her graduation, she worked with Morrow-Howell to launch a group for students entering the Brown School at age 30 and over. The student group is part of a support program called Next Move.

The university, like many others, is taking broader steps to nurture learners of all ages. In late 2018, it joined the Age-Friendly University Global Network, a group that includes more than 50 universities in the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Asia.

The network is focused, Morrow-Howell says, on helping universities figure out ways to serve people of all ages and promote multigenerational connections.

"Older and younger students will figure out that they are all just people," she says. "That could go a long way toward reducing ageism—by the young and old, toward the young and old, in workplaces and elsewhere."

It's no coincidence that universities are making these changes as alumni and other older adults, including retirees who move to university towns, are asking for more ways to partake in university life, says Holden Thorp, a former Washington University professor of chemistry and medicine, who was the university's provost and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs for four years. Thorp is



now editor-in-chief of the *Science* family of journals.

“We are definitely seeing some folks wanting to put together their encore careers, but we also are seeing folks who realize that maybe they could have gotten more out of college the first go-around, and they are coming back to do some of the things they wish they had done,” he says.

Traditional college students in their teens and early 20s “do not always think about how rich the intellectual experience in front of them can be,” says Thorp. “But if we can plant the seeds and they come back 30 years later, we’ve done our job.”

Learning for Learning’s Sake

While career and degree-granting programs are welcoming more older learners, some of the most popular courses for mature adults remain those that offer learning for learning’s sake—with no grades or other expectations attached.

That’s the niche served by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, a network of 124 programs hosted by colleges and universities serving 390 towns and cities in all 50 states, says Steve Thaxton, executive director of Osher’s national resource center at Northwestern University, Chicago. He notes that several hundred additional lifelong learning programs, unaffiliated with Osher, operate in other communities. A comprehensive list can be found at osher.net.

While each institute chooses its own offerings, the most popular courses nationwide fall into a few consistent categories year after year, Thaxton says. The list includes history, fine and creative arts, current affairs, literature, religion, philosophy, spirituality, and health and wellness.

The institutes, launched in 2001, “have grown and grown,” Thaxton says. They now serve about 200,000 members nationwide.

One of the largest programs is at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. The greatest challenge for the program is finding enough classroom space, across four counties, for all the courses attended by its 2,600 members, says Institute Director Chris McLeod. For some popular classes, “we practically have to shoo people out of the classroom, because if we don’t, there will be gridlock in the parking lot” when students arrive for the next session, she says.

McLeod is seeking a new central classroom facility. At the same time, her institute and others like it are weighing the pros and cons of online access to some classes. Such access could expand participation but could also limit the social opportunities that are an important part of the experience, McLeod says. A happy medium might be to set up satellite classrooms—at assisted living centers, for example—where rooms full of people could interact with one another and with an instructor and students in another locale.



In a world where many people want to keep learning longer than they can keep driving, those kinds of accommodations make sense, Thaxton says.

McLeod says there's also a demand for "more classes around rethinking and reimagining retirement because of longer life spans." In fact, one of those classes was taught this fall by Fulkerson, the psychologist and career counselor studying online marketing to expand her own options.

According to Fulkerson, "there is a huge unmet need" for helping people past traditional retirement age realize and achieve their full potential. That's why lifelong learning, for credit or not, for credentials or not, is a growth industry. McLeod agrees. Her members, she says, are "some of the most energetic, highly educated people I've met in my life, and they are saying, 'I'm not done.'"

THE ENCORE FELLOWSHIP

The idea of an encore career can sound like a fantasy: At midlife or beyond, you will do something totally new—ideally something that will give you a new sense of purpose and maybe even a paycheck.

So, how do you turn that fantasy into reality? For some people, the answer is an intense educational reboot at an encore career institute. These programs remain few and far between—and some are quite small, selective, and expensive—but more are popping up all the time. Many of the programs are yearlong fellowships at major universities.

This is how some of the best-known programs describe themselves:

- **The Stanford Distinguished Careers Institute** offers people in midlife with major career accomplishments the opportunity to renew their purpose, develop new communities and recalibrate wellness, and transform themselves for new roles with social impact.
- **The Advanced Leadership Initiative at Harvard University** is a new third stage in higher education designed to prepare experienced leaders to take on new challenges in the social sector, where they can potentially make an even greater societal impact than they did during their careers.
- **University of Minnesota Advanced Careers (UMAC)** is a gap year for grown-ups as they transition from career jobs into what's next. UMAC offers the time, space, and insights for fellows to reimagine the arc of their lives, which may include a new career, part-time work, entrepreneurship, or unpaid community participation.
- **The Inspired Leadership Initiative (ILI) at the University of Notre Dame** is a program for individuals from all disciplines—business, nonprofit, and academic, just to name a few—who have completed their chosen careers and wish to spend an academic year at Notre Dame experiencing intellectual immersion, local and global community engagement, and many of the rich resources the university has to offer to pivot to the next stage in their lives.
- **The TOWER Fellows Program at The University of Texas at Austin** is an innovative initiative that provides individuals an opportunity to be at one of our nation's outstanding research universities for nine months to enhance their knowledge by participating in intellectually stimulating classes and seminars, interact and engage with a community of peers, and prepare themselves for future opportunities.

