

Who are We? And Where are We Going?

Kali Lightfoot

In 2004, the Osher Foundation endowed the National Resource Center for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes at the University of Southern Maine. The proposal we submitted to the Foundation was based on the activities of the Elderhostel Institute Network, the only existing model of a network of lifelong learning institutes (LLI), and on my experience managing national and international networks of education providers. Below is a selection of text from the initial proposal. This describes our vision at the time:

Vision:

A center to provide leadership in creating resources, education, and communication opportunities for Osher Institute staff and volunteers nationwide. The work of the center will mature and evolve in response to the maturation and evolution of the Osher Institutes themselves and their needs. At its most basic, the center is a central location for information and resources about Osher Institutes and older adult education in general. The Center is not a governance or policy body so much as a center for excellence and dissemination of "best practice" models and information.

The Osher Institute staff and volunteers do not need "training" per se, but they do need orientation to the work of Lifelong Learning Institutes and to managing an educational organization within a university bureaucracy which in many cases boasts a mixture of paid staff and volunteers. The leaders need forums to share their LLI organizations' accomplishments and talk about their struggles. The very structure of the Osher Institute movement has created many pathways to success as the Foundation funds a whole array of different and exciting models.

When you create an LLI, you create a group of empowered, experienced older adults coming together on a common project. You create pride and community. The national Osher Institute Resource Center is intended to be a way for these groups to share their experience with each other and with the wider world.

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Here is a list of basic features and activities of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes' National Resource Center:

1. Create and manage Web site, www.osher.net
2. Materials bank
3. Professional development workshops
4. Biennial national conference of Osher Institutes
5. Osher Institute pre- and post-conference meetings at selected national conferences (e.g., American Society on Aging, National University Continuing Education Association)
6. Web-based and distance education courses
7. Visiting Scholar program and other possible exchanges among Osher Institutes. Also demonstration programs.
8. Domestic and international travel
9. A national journal to share research, best practices, and other explorations by and about older learners

Although we have been in existence as a National Resource Center for less than three years, we have researched, initiated, or accomplished all of the activities on our list. And probably more to the point, we have learned that we aimed too low. We underestimated the power of a network of university-based lifelong learning institutes and the thirst for connection that existed among them.

We have learned in our three years that the biennial conferences need to be annual. And that for the time being anyway, the conference is one of the most important and effective things that we can do. Thanks to the incredible generosity of the Osher Foundation, we have been able to bring together two representatives from each institute once a year to share ideas, achievements, and challenges with each other. One of our conference attendees this year said it best:

It was very different from the academic conferences we typically attend: 'experts' presenting papers and the other experts in the audience trying to find weaknesses in the research, thereby proving who is the more expert 'expert.' The OLLI sessions seemed to be quite the opposite: knowledgeable individuals sharing information with equally knowledgeable individuals followed by a sincere exchange resulting in more knowledgeable individuals.

Our vision for the near-term future of the OLLI network includes an exploration of online learning and its possible role in OLLIs; instituting some form of collaboration among OLLIs around the management and marketing of travel programs; an e-newsletter and other exchanges of information on a regular basis, and perhaps a nationwide designation of OLLI membership. And of particular interest and excitement are a few special projects that are evolving. A small group of OLLI directors has been meeting to think about science education for older adults. And another group is talking about "civic engagement" programs.

It is always exciting to be part of a new initiative, especially one that has the

support to succeed. And being part of the national OLLI network is an opportunity to participate in an organization that is brand new in the field of aging. There is nothing else like it and its potential to innovate on behalf of its membership is mind-boggling.

Kali Lightfoot is the executive director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes' National Resource Center located at the University of Southern Maine. Kali has over 30 years of experience planning and managing programs for older learners.

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