

the elderly: a priority clientele

Curtis Trent

The United States is rapidly becoming one of the world's older populations. Even a cursory look at the statistics on aging indicates the tremendous growth that can be anticipated during the next 20 years. In 1970, about 20 million U.S. citizens were 65 years of age or older. By the year 2000, this figure is predicted to reach 30.6 million (Table 1). Every day, about 4,000 Americans turn 65. Every day about 3,000 Americans die. The net increase amounts to 365,000 per year.¹

Table 1. Population projections through the year 2000 (in thousands).

	Years			
	1970	1980	1990	2000
Totals	204,879	222,769	245,075	262,494
Median age	27.9	29.9	32.2	34.8
Under 5 years	17,156	17,259	20,096	18,364
5-13	36,636	30,245	34,643	35,963
14-17	15,910	15,753	12,941	16,751
18-21	14,705	17,097	14,519	16,002
22-24	9,978	12,344	10,644	10,325
25-34	25,293	36,157	41,062	34,494
35-44	23,142	25,702	36,545	41,315
45-54	23,310	22,640	25,213	35,742
55-64	18,664	21,047	20,469	22,937
65 and over	20,085	24,523	28,933	30,600

Projections are "middle" figures of three varying assumptions. Replacement level fertility is assumed plus an annual net immigration of 400,000. All population figures are in thousands.

Source: 1976 U.S. *Statistical Abstract* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976).

Curtis Trent: Associate Director-Program, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Arkansas—Little Rock. Accepted for publication: October, 1980.

Need for Education

Throughout history, American society has chosen to ignore the educational needs of the elderly. Extension is no exception. The question that immediately arises is why? Why is a significant segment of the population denied the basic rights to education afforded all other segments? Don't the elderly have educational needs?

The answer isn't an easy one. However, the core of the problem can be traced to a basic philosophical attitude of society itself. "Education is for the young." Why expend valuable resources on education for the elderly who have only a few years, at most, to live?

The need for education doesn't end at 65 or 70. The elderly continue to face developmental challenges throughout their lives—challenges that sound educational programs could help them face with confidence. Unfortunately, most current educational programs provided by Extension aren't designed specifically to meet the needs of older adults. What are some of the educational needs of these older adults?

The 1971 White House Conference on Aging identified four crucial educational needs of the elderly:

1. *Coping needs*: needs that must be met to continue adequate social adjustment, psychological health, and physical well-being.
2. *Expressive needs*: need to engage in activity for its own sake, activity that has intensive meaning and pleasure.
3. *Contributive needs*: need of older people to repay society in some way for some of its past generosity. Many older people feel that they need to serve in some way to help others less fortunate than themselves or to repay a past debt.
4. *Influence needs*: desire of older people to be able to affect the direction and quality of their lives.²

Obstacles to Program Growth

Apart from, but related to, society's attitude about education for the elderly, many obstacles to the growth of educational programs for older adults exist. A recent study of universities and colleges revealed the following obstacles:

1. Shortage of financial resources.
2. Cost of program to potential participants.
3. Shortage of trained staff.
4. Inadequate supportive staff.
5. Locating or contacting audiences.
6. Lack of interest on part of older people.

7. Inadequate educational materials for age group.
8. Inadequate facilities.³

Another obstacle that inhibits the growth of educational programs for older adults is the myth: "You can't teach old dogs new tricks." This myth pervades our youth-centered culture, which includes the aged themselves.⁴ It simply isn't true. Laboratory studies show that the individual's primary ability to learn changes little with age. Older people possess the same inherent capacity as young people to acquire new knowledge and skills through practice and experience.

The differences between old and young learners are mainly behavioral. Older learners have more difficulty in disposing of habitual patterns of response and they must work harder and longer to achieve the same level of performance on some learning tasks. These differences can be attributed to such factors as health (which affects eyesight, hearing, and physical stamina) and the cautiousness of age.⁵

As long as an older person remains in good health, his/her ability to learn new skills and respond to changing situations remains unaffected. Older adults can and will learn when given meaningful opportunities.⁶

It has been suggested that perhaps the greatest obstacle to education for older adults lies in the minds of adult educators themselves. If adult educators (Extension workers) hold negative attitudes toward the elderly, it may follow that little effort will be made to plan and implement educational programs to meet the needs of the elderly. If these negative attitudes do exist (and research indicates they do), then efforts must be made to change them.

Extension is in a position to help the elderly create new roles and options for their lives and help them develop their potential as resources for society rather than wards of society. Which will it be?

Extension's Imperative

During the 80s, Extension has an opportunity and an obligation to lead the way in reaching out to the elderly population. We have a moral obligation to serve all people and we can no longer afford to ignore the educational needs of such a large and expanding segment of society. We can no longer hide behind the cliché that "our educational programs are open to all people." We must begin immediately to "target" educational efforts to meet the needs of older adults.

The question that immediately arises in the Extension worker's mind is: Do we have the knowledge, skills, and resources to mount an "all-out" educational effort with the elderly? The answer is: *most assuredly*.

Extension is one of the most qualified agencies in the United States to meet the educational needs of older adults. We certainly possess the skills necessary to involve people in self-determined programs. We have the subject-matter knowledge necessary to speak to the major educational needs of the elderly. We know enough about the developmental needs of older adults to ensure that programs focus on real needs. We possess the mastery of the methods and techniques of adult education appropriate for work with older adults and our resources, though limited, are traditionally allocated to programs of high priority. Education for the elderly should certainly be a high priority for the 1980s.

What Kind of Programs?

Extension has the capability of speaking to all 4 educational needs identified by the 1971 White House Conference on Aging. Some suggested programs are outlined below under the four categories of educational needs:

1. Programs to meet *coping needs*: health, housing, nutrition, clothing, inflation, energy conservation, physical fitness, financial planning, home safety, money management, stress management, life-span development, pre-retirement planning.
2. Programs to meet *expressive needs*: use of leisure time, home decorating, flower arranging, creative cooking, sewing, gardening, painting, woodwork, crafts, hobbies.
3. Programs to meet *contributive needs*: community planning and development, volunteerism (4-H), new careers, working with groups, growing vegetables for family meals.
4. Programs to meet *influence needs*: civic and public affairs participation, the political process, public issues, leadership, social action, problem solving.

The above-suggested educational programs for older adults aren't all-inclusive, but represent some of the areas in which Extension personnel already possess knowledge and skills. The elderly can help us identify other areas of educational need if we actively involve them in the programming process.

Summary

In summary, the following arguments have been advanced in behalf of a strengthened Extension educational program for the elderly in the next decade:

1. The United States is rapidly becoming a nation heavily populated by older citizens.
2. Extension has a moral obligation to provide educational opportunities for all citizens, including the elderly.
3. Older citizens have the need and the right to educational opportunities to help them cope with the new problems they encounter as they grow older and to adjust to a rapidly changing world.
4. There are obstacles to the growth of educational programs for the elderly, but the greatest obstacle perhaps lies in the attitudes of professional staff and the elderly themselves. These attitudes need to be changed.
5. Older adults can learn. Research shows that the ability to learn changes little with age.
6. Extension workers possess much knowledge and skills necessary to develop sound educational programs for/with older adults.
7. The elderly will help in need identification if they're actively involved in the programming process.

Extension is in a position to help the elderly create new roles and options for their lives and help them develop their potential as resources for society rather than wards of society. Which will it be?

Footnotes

1. Isabelle Buckley, "Program Guide for Later Years" (Raleigh, North Carolina: Agricultural Extension Service, 1975), p. 1.
2. 1971 White House Conference on Aging, "Toward a National Policy on Aging" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 6.
3. Curtis Trent and Melody Trent, "Education for Aging—Imperative for the Future," *Adult Leadership*, VIII (April, 1977), 231-33.
4. J. R. Kidd, *How Adults Learn* (New York: Association Press, 1975), p. 18.
5. James D. Manney, *Aging in American Society* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1975), p. 53.
6. Roger DeCrow, *New Learning for Older Americans* (Washington, D.C.: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1975), p. 83.