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Institute for Public Administration | IPA

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

The Current Role and Future Opportunities for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

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INTRODUCTION

Older adults are the fastest growing demographic in Delaware—one of three states to experience a 50 percent increase in its 65 and older population during the last decade.[1] This demographic shift underscores the growing need for resources that support aging in place and foster community engagement. The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at the University of Delaware provides a vital space for older adults to pursue intellectual stimulation and connect with like-minded peers. This brief examines OLLI's role in Delaware's aging landscape, highlighting both the current limitations in educational resources for seniors and the opportunities for OLLI to expand its reach. This brief also explores strategies to enhance OLLI's impact by improving accessibility, fostering inclusion, and strengthening its community-building efforts across the state.

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HISTORY OF OLLI

Founded in 1980 as the University of Delaware's Academy of Lifelong Learning, the institute became part of the national Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) network in 2010 with support from the Bernard Osher Foundation. Today, OLLI at UD stands as one of the oldest and largest lifelong learning programs in the country, offering a diverse range of non-credit academic courses and educational activities tailored for adults aged 50 and older.[2] Beyond its courses, OLLI provides enriching opportunities such as travel programs, social events, extracurricular activities, and community outreach initiatives, fostering lifelong intellectual engagement and social connection.

DELAWARE DEMOGRAPHICS AND PROJECTIONS

Over the past 40 years, Delaware's population has undergone a significant age shift driven by two key trends: the aging of native baby boomers (born 1946–1964) and a steady influx of retirees from neighboring states.[3] From 2000 to 2020, nearly half of the state's total population growth came from individuals aged 65 and older, outpacing all other age groups. Much of this growth is concentrated in Sussex County's coastal communities, where roughly 70 percent of Delaware's population growth occurred during this period. Lower taxes and access to coastal amenities have made the state increasingly attractive to retirees. From 2020 to 2030, the Delaware Population Consortium predicted an increase of 21,910 adults between the ages of 65 and 84.[4] Other areas with high concentrations of older adults include Middletown, Hockessin, and North Wilmington.

As baby boomers continue to age, the 85+ population is projected to rise sharply by 2050, posing new challenges and opportunities for services and infrastructure across the state. The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at the University of Delaware plays a crucial role in serving this demographic, with over 90 percent of its members belonging to the 65+ age group.[5] With in-person class locations in Wilmington, Dover, Lewes, Newark, and Ocean View, OLLI at UD serves members in the areas where they are aging.

Community-Based Resources to Support Delaware's Aging Population

Older adults in Delaware can access a variety of resources and programs through senior centers and public libraries. Senior centers across the state offer valuable programs that foster engagement, including creative and/or recreational activities, trips, fitness classes, guest speakers, and health/wellness programs. Libraries also provide occasional learning opportunities, such as seminars on historical and current events, writing and reading workshops, and technology classes. While educational programs can be found within these organizations, some are occasional or short-term.

HOW OLLI SERVES DELAWARE

What sets OLLI apart is its structured, long-form course curriculum that mirrors the depth and rigor of university classes. Unlike the one-time lectures or brief workshops found elsewhere, OLLI courses allow participants to engage in sustained learning, develop new skills, and explore subjects in greater depth.

Whether mastering a new language, studying art history, or diving into the sciences, OLLI provides a strong educational component and a distinctive set of resources from its affiliation to an institute of higher education. Through the University of Delaware, members have access to UD course auditing, events, and athletics along with a UD email address and ID card, Zoom workplace, and library use. Moreover, OLLI creates a community of life-long learners to cultivate a sense of belonging within Delaware, contributing to improving the overall health and well-being of the state.

Expanding Opportunities for Intellectual Development

In a poll asking members "In your current stage of life, what are your primary sources of a sense of significance or self-worth?", over 70 percent replied, "continued intellectual growth", a further 93 percent responded that OLLI contributed to their intellectual development.

When asked about the value that OLLI has in their lives, members specifically highlight the benefit of continuing educational support:

- "OLLI is a wonderful place to interact, learn, and be inspired by those you meet in classes. It is also very inspiring to see our older generation having the will to continue learning."
- "It's a happy place! Everyone who attends the classes wants to be here and learn something new or practice their skills. The administration encourages and facilitates our growth both personally and with the class curriculum."
- "Terrific group of people, interested in the world, in the community, supporting one another, and learning new things."[6]

Cultivating a Sense of Belonging

Along with the benefit of intellectual development, members highlight the sense of community they feel at OLLI. When polled in the OLLI National Survey, 78 percent of OLLI at UD members reported feeling a sense of belonging at their OLLI location.

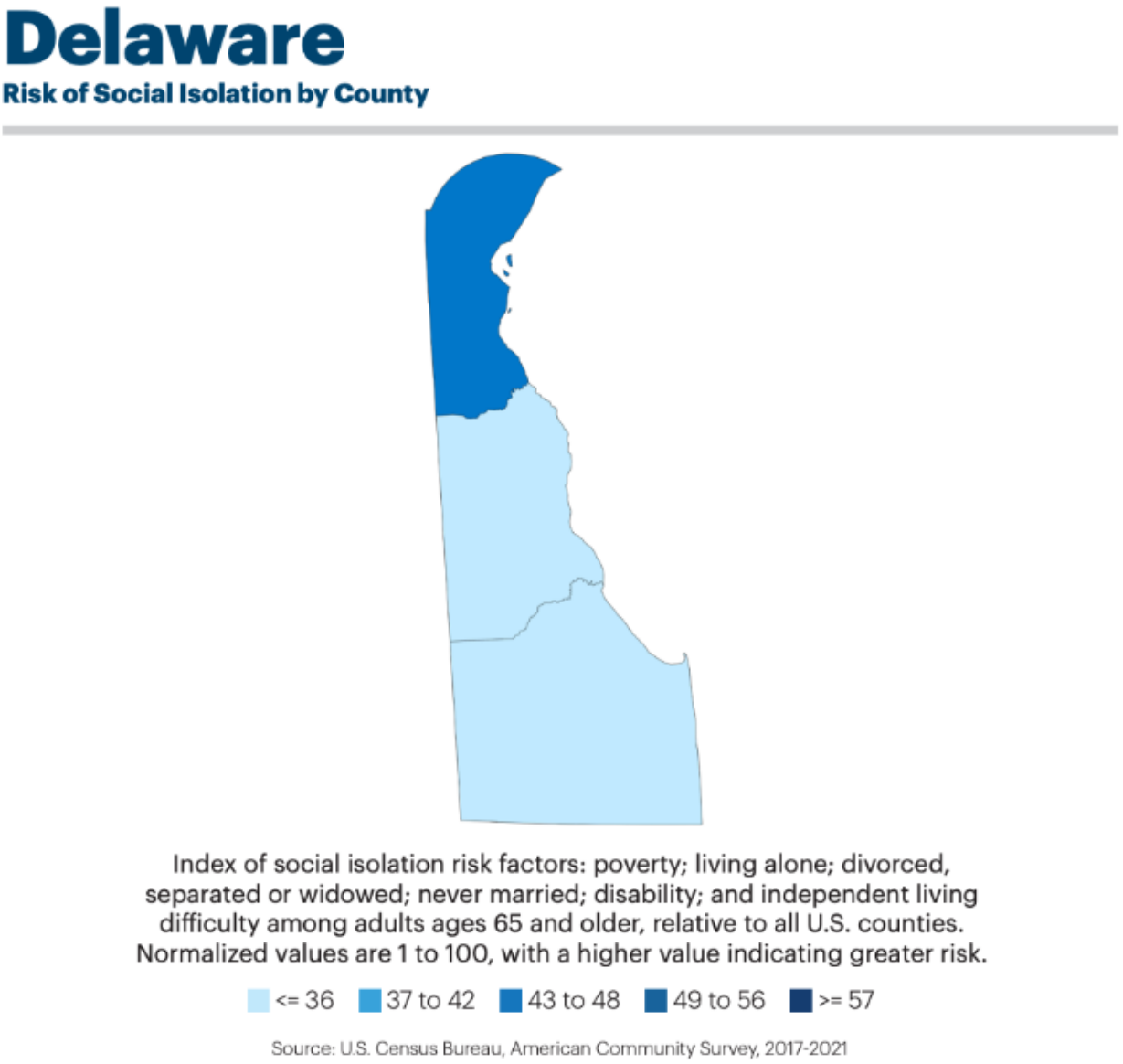
- "I enjoy the opportunity to socialize with others near my age with similar interests. There is a sense of community."
- "People are friendly and kind. I feel welcomed and accepted."
- "I enjoy meeting my friends I have made at OLLI each week. We learn, laugh, and share together."
- "It's such a happy place. I have made many close friends, learned new skills, had loads of fun, and have had opportunities for volunteerism and leadership. It's given me a sense of purpose in my retirement.[6]

Addressing Social Isolation

OLLI plays a key role in aiding those impacted by social isolation. This index accounts for individuals living alone, divorced, disabled, widowed, and with independent living difficulty among those 65+. By providing a "third place" for older adults who may fall into these categories, OLLI works as a community builder throughout the state to support these individuals.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Given OLLI's significant impact in Delaware, it is essential that it continues to evolve to meet the needs of the state's growing older population. To further its mission of providing educational enrichment and fostering a sense of belonging,



Source: Delaware Risk of Social Isolation by County. (2023). America's Health Rankings. United Health Foundation. https://assets.americashealthrankings.org/app/uploads/rosi2023-delaware.pdf

three key policy recommendations have been identified based on data from the OLLI National Survey.[6]

Many members highlight the value that in-person learning has for both their intellectual development and sense of belonging within OLLI. When members were asked what they would change about the OLLI program, the most common responses were a desire for a greater variety of course topics, more opportunities for in-person socialization, and courses offered in different parts of the state.

1: Increasing Variety

OLLI members consistently express a desire for greater variety in course offerings, particularly in high-interest subject areas. When asked, "If you could design a new Osher Institute learning

experience of significance to you, what would it look like?" 53 percent of respondents indicated they would like more courses in specific subjects. The most requested topics were fine arts, history, languages, and health and wellness.

Similarly, when asked, "What is one thing you would change about OLLI?" 22 percent of members said they would like either more in-person courses or a broader range of subject matter.

In a separate survey question, members were asked to select their primary areas of interest. The most popular responses included history (57%), fine arts (46%), current affairs and public policy (39%), health and wellness (27%), and literature (27%).

These findings suggest a clear opportunity for OLLI to expand its offerings by recruiting additional instructors—particularly for in-demand subjects—and increasing the availability of in-person classes to meet member interest.

2: Opportunities for Socialization

To better serve its growing membership, OLLI should expand opportunities for social interaction beyond traditional classroom settings. In addition to offering more in-person courses, members have expressed strong interest in academic and non-academic activities such as travel programs, day trips, and book clubs.

When asked what educational experience they would most like to design for OLLI, the second most common response was incorporating travel and cultural outings. Members specifically suggested trips to venues like the Wilmington Opera House, University of Delaware Theater, Mt. Cuba Observatory, the Air Mobility Command Museum, Longwood Gardens, and local museums across Delaware. Additionally, many members expressed a desire for increased class discussion and guest speakers to enhance engagement.

Beyond academic enrichment, members also voiced interest in more informal opportunities to connect, including social hours, end-of-semester gatherings, game nights, and movie nights.[6] These activities would support stronger community ties and reduce social isolation, particularly among older adults who may live alone or have limited social outlets.

3: Adding OLLI Locations

In addition to requesting more course options, many OLLI members emphasized the need for expanded physical locations—particularly establishing in-person classes in Middletown, as well as creating a permanent, dedicated facility in Sussex County.

The following quotes from members highlight the interest in expanded class locations:

- "I know there may not be the critical mass needed to have classes on the Middletown-Newark axis, but it would be so nice not to have to drive to Wilmington. (On-line is poor substitute)"
- "Have in-person classes in Middletown, DE"
- "Location of classes - need Middletown"
- "More options for in-person venues... various locations within Sussex County that are closer to my home. Also, way more options in class offerings, if I can provide two things I would change."
- "A permanent building designed by Osher on the UD Marine Campus!"

- "A permanent campus with modern facilities in Lewes"
- "We need a permanent facility with sufficient space in Sussex County"[6]

Given that much of Delaware's 65+ population growth is concentrated in the Middletown-Odessa-Townsend (MOT) area and throughout Sussex County, prioritizing the development of in-person locations in these regions would help OLLI meet growing demand and improve accessibility for members in these areas.

Overall, members reported feeling the strongest sense of belonging when they could participate in on-site classes and interact directly with fellow learners. Expanding in-person offerings in these three ways would not only meet member preferences but also reinforce the community-centered values that define the OLLI experience.

The following quotes from participants illustrate the value of in-person learning:

- "With on demand classes, there is no sense of belonging. With my online / ZOOM class, not really feeling a connection as much as I had hoped."
- "I feel less sense of belonging when I find so few choices available for in-person classes."
- "I felt more strongly attached to OLLI when classes were in-person and I could join other members for meals (before COVID)."[6]

Increasing Accessibility Through Virtual Course Options

To better serve older adults who face barriers related to accessibility, transportation, or scheduling, OLLI should also expand its offerings of hybrid and online courses. According to the OLLI National Survey, 42 percent of members expressed a preference for class formats that are either live online, hybrid, or recorded for later viewing. Among those respondents, 50 percent cited scheduling flexibility as the primary reason, while 22 percent pointed to transportation challenges, 5 percent referenced hearing, vision, or mobility limitations, and 3 percent cited caregiving responsibilities.

Expanding the availability of online and hybrid courses would not only make OLLI more accessible to potential members with logistical or physical constraints but would also offer greater flexibility to existing participants. By embracing more flexible learning models, OLLI can ensure it remains inclusive and responsive to the evolving needs of Delaware's older adult population.

The following quotes from participant discuss the value of online accessibility:

- "Zoom classes are key to my participation."
- "I take more classes on Zoom than in person because of the time it takes me to drive to campus and back."
- "The commute is tedious and time consuming—Zoom allows me to take more classes."
- "Having Zoom classes plus hybrid classes have greatly improved and expanded the richness and depth of our learning!"
- "Please continue to have a large selection of courses that are available via Zoom for OLLI members who no longer live in the Delaware area."[6]

COMMUNITY BUILDING

To reach older individuals who may be interested in OLLI but face barriers such as transportation or cost—and to engage current members who seek deeper community involvement—OLLI should continue

strengthening its community-building efforts by expanding partnerships with libraries, senior centers, and local organizations across the state. Special attention should be given to the Middletown area, a rapidly growing region with limited access to senior-focused educational opportunities. Partnerships could take the form of satellite programming, expanding the OLLI Speakers Bureau or co-hosting events at senior centers. This way, OLLI can extend its reach, reduce participation barriers, and foster a stronger sense of connection among older adults throughout Delaware.

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