Programs for Older Adults in California Community Colleges:

Overview of the Older Adult programs and the value of older adult classes

Part 1: Overview of Older Adult programs

Introduction
For decades, California Community Colleges have offered noncredit courses specifically tailored for older adults. Funded through state appropriations derived from tax dollars, these programs are designed to foster lifelong learning, enhance community engagement, and promote the personal and professional development of older adults. For more background on the Adult Education programs in California, you can review a document from the California Department of Education on the History of Adult Education in California.

Background
These educational initiatives, supported by the California Education Code section 41976(a), have become integral to the community college system. They cater to an aging population’s desire for continuous personal growth and community involvement. These institutions provide diverse course offerings ranging from arts to technology, largely without any fees.

The state apportionment funding comes from California’s adult education fund and is allocated to community college districts based on their enrollment and course offerings which meet the criteria for older adult classes.

Lifelong Learning is a key component of the California Community College system. In addition, it is part of the California’s Master Plan for Aging which addresses the need for inclusion and equity for older adults.

Some of the successful programs in California Community College includes San Diego Community College District, Santa Monica, Pasadena City College, and North Orange Continuing Education. Each of these programs offer a wide range of classes designed specifically for the older adult student.

What is working
The success of these programs is evident in their broad and flexible curricula. They offer a range of subjects like health and wellness, arts and crafts, and digital literacy, crucial for the cognitive and social well-being of older adults. These programs provide tailored classes that promote independence and mental agility, which have been shown to significantly reduce healthcare costs related to aging, such as those from dementia.

Classes are successful because they are designed with the older learner in mind, including such features as improved accessibility, personalized goals, student-centered content, positive reinforcement and more.

The classes provide benefits to the physical and mental health of the older student. They offer benefits to the student including motivation for a healthier lifestyle, stress management, decreasing the risk of
age-related cognitive decline, management techniques for chronic diseases, techniques for managing technology and the possibility of remaining independent in their homes.

The social engagement associated with taking classes can improve cognition fitness, combat depression and isolation, decrease the risk of serious falls, manage chronic diseases, and provide nutrition education.

They promote empowerment of the older adult with tools and resources to help them navigate their changing landscape. They offer information on self-advocacy and provide a road map of independence.

Program Gaps

There is a lack of data on the Older Adults program. Evidence of efficacy and learning needs to be researched and documented. Because these classes do not qualify as certificate programs, their academic integrity is not recognized. Unlike other departments which track job skills and advancement to four-year colleges, the older adult has no similar quality to track.

In addition, older adult programs lack recognition as vital to the community college. Ageist issues assume old age is linked to a poorer ability to function effectively, as suggested by a McKinsey Health Institute analysis.

Within the institution, the older adult faces barriers in registration, digital access, and digital literacy. As everything becomes linked to technology, the digital divide between the older adults and their younger peers is especially visible. They are challenged to receive support services from campuses, and often feel disconnected as a result.

Strategies for success

Older Adult programs empower students with educational opportunities in a holistic approach. By offering a wide range of classes, they can meet the needs of a diverse student population. They target the entire student, from improving physical well-being, targeting mental health, and engaging and informing on matters important to the older student.

Enhancing digital literacy and access can significantly improve the reach and effectiveness of these programs. Educational content that tackles modern issues like AI ethics, scam awareness, and media literacy can empower older adults to stay informed and safe in a digital world.

These programs can also function as a source of reliable information for the older adult. They can inform the student of resources which are unbiased and trustworthy, providing them with the tools to advocate for themselves. They can be promoted as ways to inform and educate the older adult in health literacy, mental health interventions and living a brain healthy lifestyle.

These classes also promote healthy mental health. Topics are discussed in a safe environment, and students receive valuable insights and information to improve their own state of mind. In this way, they serve to destigmatize mental health among older adults.

Aligning these programs with California’s Master Plan for Aging could be a viable pathway for growth. The third goal of this initiative is inclusion and equity, not isolation. This goal speaks to the essential roles of older adults in California communities and the outcome of having a sense of purpose. It discusses the digital divide which exists among the older students, and the importance of volunteering.
It also addresses the issue of elder abuse, estimated to impact 10% of older adults living in a home, resulting in losses of billions of dollars.

In addition, these programs can also align with the Attorney General’s report, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, which associates loneliness and isolation with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety and premature death. Consequences of this can be felt in communities, workplaces, and civic organizations where performance, productivity and engagement are diminished. These programs should be discussed in terms of the value of reducing isolation and loneliness and the benefits seen.

These programs support the well-being of older adults. By remaining independent in their home and having improved physical and mental health as a result of these classes, they can have a substantial effect on the economy, as suggested in a report by CalPERS. Recognizing this benefit can improve the visibility of these programs and promote their importance.

Campuses can improve the experience of the older student by providing a welcoming campus. They can provide support on the processes involved in becoming a student, and direct them towards resources which may benefit them.

**What is at stake?**

Funding. The Older Adult Program is supported by apportionment, which is related to the state budget and lawmakers. Since the program is currently considered “enrichment”, some lawmakers feel it should not be a free program. If there were fees associated with these classes, the enrollment would be directly impacted.

By losing funding, we are rescinding the California Ed Code which currently supports funding education programs for older adults (EDC § 84757). We would also be guilty of inequity when we remove programs offerings for older adults.

**What would be the outcome of losing the Older Adult Programs?**

For one, there would be a loss of reskilling, career preparation, volunteer training and more. These are the roles that older adults fill. Without programs to support them, this will drop off, directly affecting the community. According to census data, an estimated 23.2% of Americans formally volunteered with organizations between September 2020 and 2021. In total, these volunteers served an estimated 4.1 billion hours with an economic value of 122.9 billion.

Without these programs, older adults will be less active, something that has been associated with increased medical costs and medical care. This also affects the community by losing the economic benefits associated with volunteering, traveling, shopping and family event.

Losing the potential health benefits of lifelong learning can affect the population as a whole. The Centre for Economic Policy Research looked at the impact of longevity related to healthy aging. This report associated healthy living with longevity, and the importance of healthy aging, suggesting the ripple effect of slowing aging in the improvements in health and mortality.

In a study on the economic value of targeting aging, it found that a slowdown in aging that increases life expectancy by one year is worth $38 trillion and by 10 years, that becomes $367 trillion. With more
progress in improving how we age, the greater the economic improvements. This study suggests that improving how we age includes removing the policy barriers related to age and enacting policies that support longer working lives. This would benefit not only the individual but society as a whole.

**Advocating for the Older Adult program**

We have seen the benefits to the individual and the community in providing programs that connect, educate, and inform older adults. There are things that we can do to keep these programs active and vibrant.

First, raise the visibility of the Older Adult Programs at your institution. Promote the classes in the college and the community. Create marketing and promotional events which focus on these programs.

Remove the barriers: Provide assistance in registration procedures and assistance for other institution related tasks like setting up student emails and finding class offerings on the school sites.

Build internal and external partnerships to raise awareness in your institution and the community. Consider cross promotion to other departments.

Include marketing for older adult classes. Target the community and existing students within the institution. Bring the program to the forefront of your college.

Advocate for funding at your campus and through the Board of Trustees. Speak in committees, write letters, learn more. All of these can help continue this important conversation.

**Conclusion**

The programs for older adults at California Community Colleges serve as a critical model for addressing the educational and community engagement needs of an aging population. By confronting current challenges and capitalizing on opportunities for improvement, these programs can better support older adults in living fulfilling, engaged, and productive lives, thus benefiting the broader community both economically and socially.

**Part II: The value of classes to the individual and the community**

There is a significant amount of research that supports the idea that art, music, and health instruction can have positive effects on the health and independence of older adults, as well as potentially decreasing depression and cognitive decline.

1. **Value of Art and Music:** Participatory arts programs, including art, music, dance, and theater, have been found to improve the health, well-being, and independence of older adults. These activities can enhance cognitive function, memory, self-esteem, and well-being, and can also reduce behavioral symptoms of dementia, such as stress, aggression, agitation, and apathy. Our department has a number of classes which are participatory art programs. They include a variety of art and music classes, as well as drama. Some research supporting this include:

   a. A study on creative arts interventions for older adults experiencing depression found that these activities can lead to significant improvements in mental health, particularly for interventions led by creative arts therapists. [You can view the report on “Staying Engaged” here.](#)
b. An additional literature review of 11 studies suggested the physical and mental health benefits from participating in creative arts.

2. **Value of Health Instruction:** Health promotion and wellness interventions for older adults have been promoted by aging advocacy agencies. These interventions, which are based on evidence-based practices for health promotion and disease prevention, include programs designed to prevent falls, reduce depression, improve nutrition, foster physical activity, and exercise, and promote self-management of chronic conditions. Health classes offered by SDCCE include lessons on these topics (preventing falls, mental health, nutrition, physical activity, and chronic conditions). Some research supporting this includes:

   a. Engagement in Health Promotion: A systematic review highlighted the importance of engaging older adults in health promotion research, particularly those who are ‘hard to reach’, such as the oldest old, those from minority ethnic groups, and those living in deprived areas. The review found that health promotion interventions can improve physical and cognitive function, reducing the risks of disease and loss of independence.

   b. Health and Wellness Programs: Evidence-based health and wellness programs that focus on physical activity and nutrition are crucial for older adults. These programs can improve health outcomes and offer practical solutions to enhance the programs’ effectiveness. This book section concluded that these health wellness programs are necessary to improve the health status of older adults, allowing them to have the maximal quality of life.

   c. Economic Benefits: The CDC outlines the economic implications of promoting health for older adults, noting that aging increases the risk of chronic diseases, which are leading drivers of health care costs. Effective health promotion can help older adults remain active and independent, potentially reducing the economic burden of health care and long-term care costs associated with aging populations. You can see more by visiting their website.

3. **Benefits to brain health:** Cognitive health is a key factor to independent living. Many older adults are concerned about their memory and thinking as they age. A number of research articles have looked at the value of creative arts and found that they can have a multitude of benefits from improving cognitive function, reducing stress, and combating depression while improving overall mental health. Looking again at the creative arts programs, the following studies suggest that they can also benefit brain health. In this case, the economic costs of deteriorating cognition can be offset. Some examples include:

   a. Cognitive Shift and Flow: Creative arts can create a unique cognitive shift into a holistic state of mind called flow, a state of optimal engagement that is mentally pleasurable and neurochemically rewarding.

   b. Neuroaethetics (The scientific study of the neurobiological basis of the arts): Studies in this field have found that creating art reduces cortisol levels (markers for stress), and that through art people can induce positive mental states. Neuroimaging studies have also shown that viewing emotionally charged artworks can trigger a ‘rush’ of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. There is evidence that there is an overall decrease in neurotransmitters with aging, so activities which would trigger neurotransmitters would be beneficial to the brain.
c. Enhancing Cognitive Function: With the development of new neural pathways, researchers have found that people who create art show remarkable improvements in cognitive function and problem-solving abilities.

d. Depression and Mental Health: Creative arts interventions, including art, dance movement, drama, and music modalities, are utilized internationally to target depression and depressive symptoms in older adults. These interventions have been found to have mostly significant quantitative or positive qualitative findings. Engaging in creative activities can improve overall mental health, manage symptoms, develop a more positive outlook, and provide a way for individuals to express and process their emotions.

4. **Link between Depression and Cognitive Decline**: Lifelong learning has been shown to have positive effects on mood, often lifting the cloud of depression. Emeritus classes go beyond subject matter and target the student directly. On value of lifelong learning is the affect on depression. Research has found a significant association between cognitive decline and depression, suggesting that depression could contribute to cognitive decline and other age-related changes in brain function. Although more research is needed, here are some examples:

   a) Depression and Brain Aging: A study examining 34 studies that contained more than 71,000 patients found a strong correlation between depression and brain aging – including memory loss, executive function, and information processing. In other words, older adults with signs of depression experienced more rapid cognitive decline than those who were not depressed.

   b) Depression as a Risk Factor: Depression has been recognized as a potential risk factor for cognitive decline in a meta-analysis investigating risk and protective factors for cognition decline including 32 studies with 62,598 participants and a follow-up from 2 to 17 years.

   c) Depression in early adulthood and late-life: Although research suggests a relationship between earlier-life depression and late-life depression and dementia, more research is needed.

   d) Neurocognitive Deficits in Depression: A systematic review of cognitive impairment in the acute and remitted state of depression found strong support for impairment in processing speed, learning, and memory. A positive correlation between the number of episodes and cognitive deficits as well as depression severity and cognitive deficits was reported.

5. **Lifelong learning and brain health**: Not only depression, but lifelong learning has lasting effects on the brain health of older adults. Improving the brain health of older adults have a significant effect on economic and social factors. Some research which supports the value of lifelong learning and brain health include:

   a. Neuron Generation and Connection: Lifelong learning stimulates greater neuron generation and connection in the brain. Neurons are responsible for sending information throughout the body and when this is improved, it positively affects memory, attention, thinking, and reasoning skills. The concept of neuroplasticity suggests that learning changes the brain by rewiring or making connections between neurons, which enhance the volume and functionality of the brain. This can affect positively aspects like memory, attention, thinking and reasoning.
b. Reducing Cognitive Decline: Continually learning new things can reduce the risk of cognitive decline. It may help you cope better with age-related brain changes and reduce the severity of brain diseases or injuries. Studies suggest that our brains can **compensate for age-related deterioration by recruiting other areas** to help improve cognitive performance, supporting the notion of lifelong learning and generating new connections.