

## **History of Seniors College of PEI by Olive Bryanton**

### **SENIORS COLLEGE OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND CONCEPT/MODEL**

**Presented at Seniors College Conference – August 26 to 28, 2007  
By Olive Bryanton**

#### **THE CONCEPT**

The concept of a Seniors College was introduced by Dr. Thomy Nilsson Professor of Psychology and Principal Investigator for the PEI Centre for the Study of Health and Aging. He advanced the idea of a Seniors College as a component to a longitudinal cohort study, on how education affects cognitive decline, health care costs and the quality of life experienced by persons over the age of sixty-five.

Thomy contacted me (Olive Bryanton) to discuss the idea, and in my position as Coordinator of the PEI Senior Citizens Federation I was able to bring a focus group of seniors together to see if there was interest in such a concept. This group confirmed there was indeed interest and enthusiasm so we began working on a funding proposal.

The proposal was submitted to the Knowledge Economy Partnership seeking financial support to conduct the study and to develop the Seniors College idea. The Centre on the Study of Health and Aging provided the lead with support from Health and Social Services, the PEI Association on Gerontology, the PEI Senior Citizens Federation and Veterans Affairs Canada. Thomy and I were invited to meet with a committee from the Knowledge Economy Partnership to provide more clarity and to answer any questions. I responded to their questions around the Seniors College and Thomy responded to the questions around the proposed study.

Unfortunately we did not receive funding to enable a clinical trial study, but we were granted \$20,000. to do a survey and develop a business plan, and to begin the process of establishing some kind of learning opportunity for older adults if the business plan indicated that such a concept would be viable.

#### **THE PROCESS**

Our first step was to learn as much as we could about starting a learning centre, so in April 1997 Thomy, myself (Olive Bryanton), two Board members from the PEI Centre on the Study of Health and Aging (Joan Walsh and Debbie Connolly) and one Board member from the Seniors Federation (Mary Gallant), attended the Northeast Regional Conference of "Institutes for Learning in Retirement" in Amherst, Massachusetts.

This conference was sponsored by Elderhostel Institute Network and hosted by Five Colleges Learning in Retirement. The topics included:

- \* How Adults Learn: Many Roads to Success,
- \* Getting Members Involved and Encouraging New Leaders,
- \* How to Develop a Good Course for the ILR Setting, Courses That Work!,

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- \* Who Does What?: Volunteer and Staff Roles (one of the presentations for this category was given by Carolynn Rafman & Joan Walker, MILR, McGill University),
  - \* Appreciating Peer Learning,
  - \* Membership and Marketing,
  - \* The Goldilocks Debate: What size is "just right" for an ILR?.

This conference proved to be extremely beneficial because many of the sessions dealt with how to start an Institute for Learning in Retirement and others dealt with course development, marketing, etc. We each attended different sessions and between us we gathered a lot of information and returned home armed with supportive materials, enthusiasm and motivation.

In May 1997 we hosted an information meeting about Institutes for Learning in Retirement and approximately 20 to 25 people attended the meeting. From that meeting seven people indicated an interest in helping to explore the possibility of establishing some type of learning opportunities for seniors on PEI.

On June 23, 1997 our first formal Steering Committee Meeting was held with 10 people in attendance. Following a discussion and agreement on process the following people were selected as the Executive:

- \* Olive Bryanton as Chairperson,
- \* Ron and Daphne Irving as Recorders, and
- \* Thomy Nilsson as Treasurer.

Others involved at that first meeting were: Bernice Bell, Roger Black, Jim Fraser, Pat Malone, Carl Mathis and Libby Smith. This group grew at the second meeting with the following people adding their expertise: Connie Auld, David Boswell, Mary Gallant and Henry Purdy. A discussion by the Steering Committee around a name resulted in the name Seniors College of Prince Edward Island being agreed upon.

The need for the assistance of a staff person had been identified at the first meeting and a draft of the job description, hiring criteria and suggested questions for applicant interviews were adopted. Thomy met with university personnel to establish procedures for advertising the position on the campus. In December 2007 we hired Anna MacDonald for two days per week and she worked out of the office of the Centre for the Study of Health and Aging on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

To help with the process, a business plan was required and consultant Gerry Gallant was hired to conduct a survey to gauge the interest of seniors and the viability of establishing the Seniors College. The information gathered would also be used to develop a business plan. The Executive worked closely with Gerry during the process. A telephone survey of 200 seniors within commuting distance from UPEI indicated that such a concept would be a viable venture and a business plan was developed.

The most popular subject areas were computer, hobbies and special interests, followed by health, history and cultural studies. The most convenient times of day, days of week and season of the year

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for respondents were as follows: Winter/fall were equally most preferred semesters as first choices, and fall was preferred as second choice. Monday and Tuesday were preferred first day choices, with Thursday and Tuesday as second choices. Fifty-one percent had no preference for which day of the week. There were no strong preferences for time of day with 28% preferring morning between 10:00 AM and noon. The second choice revealed lunch time between 12 Noon and 2 PM as most preferable.

The survey attempted to identify any barriers that might prevent participation by seniors at a Seniors College. Eighty-two percent indicated they would have no barriers and 18% indicated a variety of barriers. Hearing was the highest barrier noted with a 30% mention. Transportation was noted by 17% as a barrier.

The Business Plan recommended that a logo be developed creating a unique identity for the College and should be designed to be utilized in all College literature, brochures, mailings, course materials and membership kits. A logo designed by Ron and Daphny Irving was adopted by the Steering Committee.

A brochure was developed describing the College and its programs and was utilized in the direct mail outs and distributed through out various medical offices and facilities, government offices, community centers, recreational facilities, libraries, and other public locations. The Business Plan suggested that a key factor in the launch of the College would be the interest generated in its first course offerings, thus, the Curriculum Committee worked very diligently. The plan also provided governance suggestions.

The objectives for the first year were:

- \* To establish an administrative and partnership relationship with the UPEI
- \* To have an active and functioning Board with productive committees.
- \* To establish 1998 fall and winter sessions with a minimum of two course offerings each semester
- \* To recruit 100 members in the first full year of operations.
- \* To become a recognized and visible entity on Prince Edward Island.
- \* To become a recognized and visible entity on the UPEI campus.

Long Term Objectives were:

- \* To develop and maintain three semesters of course offerings to 200 members.
- \* To establish outreach programs
- \* To become fully self-sustaining without reliance on sponsorship.
- \* To establish linkages and networks with other similar colleges and institutes.
- \* To collaborate with UPEI when appropriate to host a summer program inviting Prince Edward Island visitors to be participants.
- \* To collaborate with UPEI when appropriate to sponsor an educational conference with a focus on seniors education.

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In early August I was interviewed on CBC's Maritime Noon about our desire to establish a Seniors College which resulted in Sheila Laidlaw from the Third Age Centre at St Thomas University in New Brunswick contacting me. She shared with us a report they had just completed entitled "Seniors Education Centre Report"

In August 1997 a day was set aside to formulate a mission statement, and to develop goals and objectives for the College. This day was facilitated by Morley Pinsent. To further help us we invited Sheila Laidlaw from the Third Age Centre at St. Thomas which brought another perspective to our thinking.

Other activities that were occurring simultaneous including meetings with Vice President John Crossley regarding affiliating the Seniors College with UPEI, meetings with the Director of Extension and Summer Sessions, Bill Robertson, to develop a working relationship with UPEI and to help forward our Memorandum of Understanding. Ongoing research around other learning opportunities for seniors was helping us decide the model we wanted for our Seniors College. One of our contacts was the Elderhostel Institute Network (an affiliate of Institutes for Learning in Retirement) to inform them of our plans and to seek assistance. Their reply was enthusiastically welcoming and included valuable information and materials.

After much deliberation it was agreed that the Seniors College of Prince Edward Island would be affiliated with UPEI but would be an autonomous membership based, peer governed organization. A Board of Directors would be the governing body and courses would be facilitated by peers. By-Laws and Constitution was developed and the Memorandum of Understanding was reviewed and revised and presented to the University by Bill Robertson our liaison.

We signed our first Memorandum of Agreement with the University on July 8, 1998. This agreement includes responsibilities for both the Seniors College and the University and they are in part as follows:

The responsibilities the University agreed to include:

- \* The services of a part-time (1/3 person year) Coordinator to provide general management and administrative support.
- \* Adequate classroom space and associated facilities for study groups and classes.
- \* Recognition that the members of the Seniors College are non-credit students of UPEI
- \* Appropriate marketing and promotion services through the Department of Extension
- \* Space for Seniors College Board and committee meetings and social events.
- \* The cooperation and assistance of the Director of Extension and other personnel at the Department.
- \* Liability insurance coverage under the UPEI insurance program for Seniors College and University jointly sponsored on-campus and off-campus activities.

The Responsibilities the Seniors College of Prince Edward Islands agreed to include:

- \* To provide UPEI with an education program and forum for older adults to share mutual

interests in intellectual stimulation, cultural enrichment, and volunteer opportunities.

- \* To support UPEI's educational and cultural initiatives and its efforts to promote its community ties and build community support.

- \* To abide by the rules and regulations of UPEI and to be responsible for policy and to communicate any policy changes to UPEI officials.

- \* To coordinate Seniors College daily activities and programs at UPEI through the Coordinator and to liaise with the University by having an Extension Department representative as an ex-officio member on the Board of the Seniors College.

- \* To collaborate with the University to develop and deliver tourism-related learning opportunities for mutual benefit of the Seniors College and UPEI.

- \* To reimburse UPEI at the rate of \$50 per course per student, plus \$60 of the membership fee to defray the cost of services, facilities and supplies provided by UPEI.

The agreement was signed by Dr Elizabeth Epperly President of UPEI and Olive Bryanton as Chairperson of the Steering Committee of the Seniors College of PEI

In a press release announcing the launching of the Seniors College on September 1998 it was stated that AUPEI is pleased to partner with community groups in the fulfilment of learning needs, as stated by Dr. Lawrence E. Heider and Dr. John Crossley, as UPEI supports the involvement and leadership of seniors in the planning and delivery of education programs designed for seniors.

The three non-credit courses chosen for this semester were:

- \* Genealogy,
- \* Getting to know your Brain, and
- \* Beginners Computer.

On December 9, 1998 a special event was held to recognize the first students to complete courses through the Seniors College. Dr Lawrence Heider Acting President of UPEI presented the certificates.

By-Laws and Constitution were developed by David Boswell and Dale Maddock and the first Annual meeting of the Seniors College of Prince Edward Island was held May 27, 1999. By this time we were in our third semester and had offered 12 courses.

At the first Annual meeting on May 27, 1999 a 12 member Board of Directors was elected by the membership

- \* Olive Bryanton was the first President,
- \* Ron Irving the 1st Vice President,
- \* Inga Blackett - Secretary and
- \* Bruce Garrity - Treasurer.

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Other members of the first Board of Directors were:

- \* Greg Hughes,
- \* Connie Auld,
- \* Bruce Barrett,
- \* Bernice Bell,
- \* Mary Gallant,
- \* Mary Beth Harris,
- \* Dale Mattock, and
- \* Libby Smith.
- \* Bill Robertson, Director of Extension & Summer Sessions was ex-officio, as was
- \* Thomy Nilsson, who was considered our mentor.

As the number of courses began to grow a Facilitators Handbook was developed to provide guidelines for new course facilitators. Bruce Garrity took the lead in the development of this handbook.

We held a very successful brainstorming meeting in July at Dale Mattocks home. We invited a number of retired folks from UPEI to pick their brains and to seek advice. This proved to be a very positive meeting with a great flow of ideas and a great start to building a positive relationship with some of our retired faculty.

We made positive changes to our fee structure - membership fee was changed to \$100.00 per year and entitled students to take as many of our full semester courses as they could fit into their schedule.

Course facilitators was another issue - it was becoming clear that we are asking too much of people to expect them to teach courses on a volunteer basis. Therefore, we looked at offering a small honorarium to help cover the cost of travel.

We developed a Seniors College Web Site which could be accessed through UPEI's home page. We purchased our own display board which was useful for attending trade fairs or workshops. We also purchased our own colour printer which was used for small batch items that need to be printed in colour.

In 1999 Rita Saunders became our Coordinator. Rita worked with Extension and Summer Sessions and I think she had the Seniors College added on as extra duties.

Without her I don't know what we would do, she thinks of all the minute details and is always smiling and willing to help in any way possible - in fact you can even tell by her voice on the phone that she is smiling.

Bill Robertson, Ian MacDonald and Olive Bryanton reviewed and revised the memorandum. Bill met with Vianne Timmonds, Vice President Academic, to advise her of the pending changes and for her input. Bill, Ian and Olive then met with Vianne to further refine the agreement. The major changes in the Memorandum of Agreement were:

- \* the amount of money the university received
- \* the Seniors College will need to hire its own staff person (see new MOU).

These changes enabled the Seniors College to be more independent.

On October 1, 2001 International Day of Older Persons, the 2nd Memorandum of Agreement was signed by Olive Bryanton, President of Seniors College and Wade MacLauchlan, President of UPEI. Ron Irving, 1st Vice President, of Seniors College oversaw the signing and Connie Auld, Board Archivist, took pictures for our history. Pictures were also taken by the University Public Relations department.

The Lieutenant Governor of Prince Edward Island was invited to become patron of the Seniors College of Prince Edward Island and he graciously accepted our invitation. He wanted to be more than a name on stationary and invited our Board members and spouses or a guest to dinner at Government House.

On October 13, 2001 at our 3rd Annual meeting my term as President was completed and Ron Irving capably fulfilled the role of President.

The College is a membership-based, self-directed organization and that means members have a right to decide what courses and other activities occur and a responsibility to help ensure those courses and activities happen.

The Seniors College belongs to the membership and its possibilities are as broad as their imaginations.

The successive Boards of Directors have continued to build the Seniors College of PEI and you will hear more about the progress and achievement from my colleagues.

In closing I agree with Art Linkletter's quote of February 2007 when he said:

"The Seniors College of Prince Edward Island has proven to be a rare gem and successful model for communities throughout North America."