Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes

Background

In the fall of 2000, the Foundation began to consider programs targeted toward more mature students, not necessarily well served by the standard continuing education curriculum. Courses in such programs attract students of all ages eager to accumulate units to complete degrees or to acquire career skills. By contrast, the interest of older adults, many of whom are at retirement age, is in learning for the joy of learning – without examinations or grades.

The Foundation was fortunate to have two immediate examples of lifelong learning programs from which to learn. One was the Fromm Institute of Lifelong Learning at the University of San Francisco; the second was Senior College at the University of Southern Maine.

First Grants

In early 2001, an endowment grant was given to the University of Southern Maine to improve and extend its excellent programs, and the name “Senior College” was changed to “Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.” Shortly after, Sonoma State University, a member of the California State University (CSU) system became a grantee. Both programs progressed admirably, and the Foundation decided to join the “lifelong learning” field in a significant fashion.

National Expansion

Beginning in the fall of 2002, the Foundation issued Requests for Proposals to campuses in the California State University and University of California system. Grants of $100,000 were made on the understanding that, once a lifelong learning institute was launched, the Foundation would consider the renewal of the grant for two or more years with a view to providing an endowment gift of no less than $1 million should the institute demonstrate potential for success and sustainability.

At present, the Foundation supports 119 lifelong learning programs on university and college campuses across the country, with at least one grantee in each of the 50 states (plus the District of Columbia). The Foundation also supports a National Resource Center for the Institutes, which is located at the University of Southern Maine.

Current Program

There is considerable variation among the Osher Institutes but the common threads
remain: Non-credit educational programs specifically developed for seasoned adults who are aged 50 and older; university connection and university support; robust volunteer leadership and sound organizational structure; and a diverse repertoire of intellectually stimulating courses. The designation of each grantee as “The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of X” is a condition of the Foundation’s grant-making as is the use of a logo which consists of a simple circle with the words “Osher Lifelong Learning Institute” arranged within.