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## I. Assessment of Members' Experiences

During the fall semester of 2018 we administered a survey to a stratified sample of classes being offered. The first set of surveys was administered during the fifth week of twelve week and first six week classes; the second set during the fifth week of the second six week classes. One of the classes surveyed was located at the Bridgewater campus.<sup>1</sup> We ended up with 185 completed surveys from eleven different classes.<sup>2</sup> The median number of responses from each class was 20; class attendance on the day of surveying ranged from 7 to 24.

**Information about the members.** The first set of questions collected information about the members and their preferences. Table 1 shows that a little over 75 percent of the members who completed the survey had been taking classes for three years or more. What do members take into consideration when they decide on their choices of classes? Table 2 shows that the subject matter of the class is a clear priority. The others are far behind. The time of day and who the coordinator is follow the subject matter, with format of the class and recommendations by others coming in as less important.

When asked if they take the full amount of classes, 72 percent said that they did, while the rest indicated that they take fewer classes than they could. Since the subject matter of the class is the most important factor in deciding what classes to take, what subjects are preferred? Table 3 shows that information and suggests the balance of topics that the curriculum committee should offer. The respondents were allowed to select as many as they wanted.

When members cannot get the classes that are their first choices, what do they do? Almost half take the alternate classes they have listed as well as ask the coordinator if they can attend the class that was their first choice. Nineteen percent ask the coordinator if they can attend the class they wanted, while a little over 20 percent simply take fewer classes. A small number try all three approaches.

**Members' ratings of classes taken.** The next part of the survey asked them to rate the classes in which they have participated. The members were asked to rate the courses on the following:

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1 Specifically, each general topic (history, art, music are examples), new and repeat classes, twelve and six week classes were all included in the sample.

2 Not all respondents answered all of the questions. Hence there are different total numbers in the various tables.

1. Think of the classes you have taken during the last three semesters. How would you rate your experience in them, on average?
2. Do you think most of the classes you took had a welcoming environment so that you felt that you are a part of the class?
3. How would you rate, overall, the coordinators you have had over the three semesters in the way they manage the class?
4. Did most of the coordinators cover the material that was indicated in the course description in the catalog or the course outline that was handed out the first day?
5. How open were the classes to different points of view?

Table 4 gives the results of the rating of classes on the listed factors. Over all, the rating was four or five 90 percent or more of the time. Enough entered their own choice of 4.5, that it seemed appropriate to include that. That the course fit the description and that the class was a welcoming environment received the highest ratings.

Rating (5 is best)	Overall experience		Welcoming environment		Class management		Course fit description		Classes open to different points of view	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>5</b>	72	46%	110	63%	85	50%	122	67%	95	55%
<b>4.5</b>	4	3%	7	4%	2	2%	1	1%	1	1%
<b>4</b>	72	46%	51	29%	71	43%	55	30%	61	35%
<b>3</b>	9	6%	7	%	10	6%	3	2%	14	8%
<b>2</b>	0		0		1	1%			2	1%
<b>1</b>	0		0							

We asked some open-ended questions of the members to further find out what they liked about the classes they took and what was less satisfactory. About three-fourths of the respondents did answer one or more of those questions.

*What members liked about the best classes they took:* As with the question that asked what determined which class they took, the subject matter of the class and/or its content was considered important to a good experience. But for most, that was not enough. Once a member is in the class they want, the content should be challenging, thought provoking, and contain new ideas. Most also made comments about the coordinator and on that topic their expectations were high. Above all, the coordinator needs to come to class prepared with well-organized subject matter based on a sound base of knowledge about the topic. And the presentation of that material should be dynamic, creative, and engaging, while asking provocative questions. The coordinator should have passion for the subject matter, a sense of humor and a way to make the classes entertaining or fun. Last, but not necessarily least, members want discussion. In fact, they prefer a lively discussion that provides an opportunity for all to speak. A proper mix of some kind of informative presentation and a challenging

discussion that allows for differing points of view is described to be a part of the best classes. As one member wrote, “It depends on the topic, the coordinator and the class...if all are fully engaged, the class works.”

*What students would change about the least satisfactory classes they took:* Generally speaking, weaknesses of coordinators contributed to the least satisfactory classes—being unprepared or showing a lack of organization was the most common complaint. Just lecturing, lack of humor, too little substance, boring, too much dependence on a video or PPs, and lack of knowledge were also weaknesses of coordinators mentioned by the attendees. One wrote of concern about a bias, while others didn’t like the fact that discussion often became political, even though there was no reason for it to do so. Being able to manage a good discussion emerged as an important characteristic of a good coordinator, and not all were able to do that. Members wanted coordinators to have knowledge of the subject matter, but not to be “opinionated.”

*Describe how some classes are able to make you feel welcome:* Members welcomed coordinators that were interested in students’ opinions and comments. They also thought it was helpful when coordinators offered a mechanism for members to introduce themselves during the first class. A relaxed and friendly atmosphere is important. It also helps when the coordinator uses the members’ names, and the name cards assist in that cause. One wrote that names should be written on both sides of the card. And it is not just the coordinator that makes the difference. The friendliness of other class members is also important. Finally, good discussions in class matter. The quality of teacher/student interaction and student/student interaction count. Meeting for coffee or lunch after class works for some. Some members mentioned feeling like outsiders, either due to the how coordinators interact with only some class members or to the cliques among the members.

**Members’ evaluation of other A.L.L. offerings.** A third set of questions was about other parts of the Academy of Life Long Learning—the social events, the trips and other off-campus activities, and the extra lectures. Many of our members attend none of the above. Thirty-four percent reported they had attended one or more social events, twenty-eight percent had done the same for other activities. The most frequent reasons offered for not attending were scheduling conflicts or plain lack of time. Some wrote that they didn’t know enough people, or found them clique-dominated. Others thought it was too far to drive or that it was not what they were looking for from the organization. For the trips and off-campus activities, some had never heard of any, others mentioned the expense, or that they do those kinds of activities on their own. A few did mention that they enjoyed the trip to Huntington and lunch in Boston. Table 5 shows the results of the ratings of those events for those who do attend.

The extra lectures were better attended as 105 members responded that they had attended one or more, while 54 indicated that they had not attended any, with time and scheduling conflicts again offered as the reasons why. The rest did not answer the question. Ninety-two percent of those who have attended found them informative. Many suggestions were made for extra lectures, with the most frequent being current events. If climate change or environmental issues and politics are included with current events, then that category far out-weighs other

topics. The next most popular suggestion was some aspect of history. So, the past and the present. Other topics included music and Cape Cod history, issues and hidden gems. Science, poetry, and art each received a mention as well. There was concern about the day or time they were offered. Several didn't like the fact that they competed with times classes were offered, especially when it was a class they were taking.

**Administration of A.L.L.** *The registration process* for classes remains a somewhat controversial issue, though a majority are satisfied with the process. Table 6 shows the results. The most common alternative suggestion was to go back to "first come, first serve." Some indicated a preference to switch to an on-line system. Others were suspicious that some (specifically those more involved with A.L.L. in one way or another) have an inside track to getting the classes they want. One mentioned that the waiting list seems meaningless. Another said that in six years only once had he gotten the classes he wanted. Finally, one concluded, "Unfortunately, people often want the same class, can't fix that!" During fall, 2018, 27 classes were full (33 percent) when registration ended, and there were 222 choices wait listed. At the end of the second day of registration, only two classes were full, so most who got their registration in by the time it started, got the classes they wanted. That number jumped to six classes by the end of the third day.

Most of the respondents were aware that we are an *all-volunteer free standing not-for-profit organization* except for one part-time administrative assistant, but that did not seem to motivate very many to be interested in volunteering. *Their thoughts about volunteering to be on committees* or on the board are given in Table 7. Given that we are an all-volunteer organization, the need for committee and board members is there.

Members were offered the chance to *make suggestions to the board* that would improve the members' experiences in A.L.L. The most common response was that the board was doing a great job. Members were appreciative of the work that the members of the board do. They did have some suggestions, however. Since each suggestion is unique, they are simply listed here. Have a white board separated

from the screen so that both could be used at the same time. Continue to offer timely topics, and more history. Change up the times that classes are given. Have more classes at Bridgewater. Explore other similar organizations across the country for good ideas. Interact more with members. Encourage persons to meet in the cafeteria. Offer classes in the evening during the winter. Be friendlier, not so clique-like and arrogant. Have more questionnaires. Initiate on-line registration. Tone down liberal bias in classes. Increase communication, perhaps by sharing the minutes through the newsletter. Am hard of hearing, having a mic available for soft-spoken coordinators would be helpful. More new class offerings, a lot are repeats.



More activity-based classes. More history.

Members were also asked to indicate whether or not *they used our website and read our newsletter*. Figure 1 shows that slightly more than half of the



members do use the website. Among those who use it, 78 percent found it helpful (Figure 2). The newsletter was read by 86 percent of the members and of those, most read it to keep up with what is happening at the Academy, though It Is worth mentioning that 15 percent read it for all three reasons combined—to keep up, to read about members, and because it is a good read (Figure 3).

*The office* was found to be the place to go for members if they had a question. Eighty-eight percent gave it a rating of 4 or 5, very helpful.

Two questions pursued other organizational qualities. One was whether members had enough input into the organization. Fewer members answered this question than any other, and some commented instead that they didn't know. The responses do suggest that we could be doing a little better with this one as only 29 percent gave us a five. Half of the ratings were either 3 or 4. Lastly, the membership was asked whether we adequately recognized the interests of the larger diverse 50+ community that lives on Cape Cod. This received a more positive rating with ~80 percent giving it a 4 or 5, but there were also a fair number of 3s. One member wrote that the original purpose of the organization was to define the offerings to serve a specific interest, but it has deviated from that more recently. This would suggest that might be a topic the board should explore more fully.



## II. Assessment of Coordinators' Experiences

We surveyed the coordinators of the classes where we surveyed the members. We received responses from all the coordinators in those classes (one had two coordinators). One person was coordinating his first class, eight had been coordinating for two to five years, and three had been coordinating for six years or more. We asked them four questions.

*How did you decide you would like to coordinate a class?* The answers ranged from “the death of the previous coordinator who had been doing the class, to it looked interesting, to a sense of responsibility to the organization. Two were recruited. Another mentioned deep interest in the subject. Once coordinators start doing classes, they often move on to other topics of their own.

*What is the greatest benefit to you of coordinating a class?* The benefits they receive explain why they do it. Most complemented the quality of the members who take classes. As one coordinator wrote, “The A.L.L. community is a group of curious, experienced, thoughtful and intelligent individuals.” On the other side, the value to them personally, is also an opportunity to learn a new topic and/or keep up in their field of knowledge. “What’s not to like,” wrote another, “no tests, no papers to grade, no grades to assign, students are there because they want to be, and they are eager to participate in discussion.” Another mentioned a sense of satisfaction from imparting new knowledge.

*What is the downside to coordinating a class?* The time it takes to prepare was listed as the main drawback. “That’s what it takes to teach!” The expectations of the members fit with the need to put in the time. A problem mentioned was disruptive class members. Apparently, lively conversation can turn into something less satisfactory.

*What do you think the organization is doing well to help you meet its mission (see the mission statement above)?* One commented that the office staff is wonderful. Another suggested that the organization is doing remarkably well. “They are providing a place for people to continue learning.” Ambience of the setting in providing a welcoming environment, is a good summary.

*What should the organization do differently to help it meet its mission?* There were a few suggestions:

- Efforts to grow into new subject areas should be pursued.

- Explore ways to reach a more diverse community

- Expand advertising to include the entire Cape.

- Be more transparent to members about what the Board does and how everyone can be involved.

- Increase the range of classes offered, diversity in classes and in students.

- Do more one on one to reach out to potential coordinators. There needs to be a sense of urgency. Co-coordination might be a good way to promote new coordinators trying it out.

### **III. Assessment of Volunteers' Experiences**

We attempted to survey all volunteers. We received 45 responses for the volunteer survey, an 85 percent response rate. That indicates only a little over eight percent of the membership volunteers. When the Board members are included, then about ten percent of the membership is doing most of the work of the organization.

To get new volunteers it appears we need to approach people who have been members three or more years. Nearly two-thirds (29) of the volunteers have been an A.L.L. Member for six or more years and only a couple are new, first or second year members (one each). The remaining third (13) have been a member for three to five years. The volunteers are not newcomers to the Cape, as more than three-fourths (30) of them have lived here six or more years, and the remaining (9) have lived here three to five years.

They take classes because of the interesting courses (29), and the opportunity to learn something new (22) or to meet people (24). A few (12) take classes because it is something to do or because a friend talked them into it (11).

The volunteers join committees because someone asked them to join (18), but also they feel they can contribute (16) and they feel it is important to help out (27). Some are volunteering because they are on the board (7) or because they knew someone on the committee (5). In the survey they could circle all that applied so there are overlaps in their reasons.

About 46 percent (17) serve on one committee, and 27 percent (10) serve on three committees. The remaining 27 percent serve on two committees (10), four committees (2), and even one person serves on five committees.

For most of the volunteers the committee was what they expected (95 percent, 42) but two people did not feel the committee was what they expected and they did not explain.

Of our volunteers 68 percent (26) are not interested in being on the Board of Directors, but 32 percent said they would be interested. Perhaps some are already serving on the Board, but they would be a resource for the Nominating Committee.

We are doing something right because 97 percent (39) feel they get enough recognition.

#### **IV. Assessment of Membership and Class Data**

In preparation for the Board Retreat during the fall of 2017, the Long Range Planning Committee prepared a data report of membership and class number trends. In this report, 2018 and 2019 data is added. First to the membership numbers (Figure 4). A concern emerged as a part of that report that our membership numbers were in decline. At the retreat the Board

decided to set the goal of maintaining the enrollment figures of the last years rather than growing beyond where we are now. Of course, due to the fact we lose a few members every year, there is a need to add new members to maintain our present level. The fall membership number of 685 is the first uptick since 2014. The spring 2019 number of 584 also shows an improvement after a slow but steady decline since 2015. The lines do indicate a slowing down of the reduction in members if not a total leveling off. It takes three to five years to indicate a trend rather than year to year variation so it is important to continue to keep track of our numbers.

The number of classes we offer also matters. The more classes we have, the greater the variation in content that will be offered and the more seats available. Figure 5 shows what is happening. The good news is the increase in the number of classes both fall, 2018 and this spring, 2019. The fall number continues a trend of considerable variation from year to year, but no trend line up or down. For the spring, the number puts a halt to a two year decline.

But the number of total seats available is also dependent upon the number of 6 week versus 12 week classes. That breakdown is presented in Table 8. Fall semester shows a steady year to year variation. This spring shows an upturn after a fairly serious decline since 2013.

We also refund some membership fees when the applicant cannot get any of the classes they want. Figure 6 shows that data for both the semesters of 2011 to 2015 as well as the number of new members. There is a solid decline in the

number of withdrawals since 2015, whereas the number of new members has been about the same since 2015.

One last set of data was to find out how many new members returned either the spring or the fall semesters a year later. The examination was done with the 98 new members of Fall, 2017. Member data from fall, 2018 and spring 2019 was used. Fifty new members from fall, 2017 did not return either of the two later semesters. Forty-eight did return. Did any of those new members from fall, 2017 return the next semester, spring, 2018? Eight did. This suggests that we get one semester for members to decide whether our program is something they want to do or not. It will be important to learn why those 50 new members did not return, either after one semester or two.

## V. Summary

The purpose of this survey was to evaluate how well the Academy is doing in general, but also specifically to meet its mission. In addition, it explored some topics that are important to our long range plan. Our mission statement indicates that we have two goals—to offer classes that meet the educational interests of our members and to expand the social relationships among our members. Four themes dominated our long range plan—they revolved around maintaining high quality classes and coordinators, strengthening the organizational structure, increasing volunteer recruitment, and addressing membership levels. Within that there was recognition of the need of increased diversity among members to enrich our organization and its offerings.

*Offering classes of high quality that meet our members' interests*, then, is of utmost important. How well are we doing at that? Ratings of four and five on all six elements of our courses suggests our classes are doing well at providing a welcoming environment, class management, and recognition of differing points of view. In addition, the course as it evolved fit the description given of it. The comments by members of what makes classes of high quality is informative and worth sharing with coordinators. The worthiness of the class content, the impressiveness of the teaching style, and the openness and worthiness of class discussions were all important to our members. From the coordinators' point of view, they also saw discussion as important and valued the quality of the members and their contributions to the classes. Figure 4 gives a word picture of the most important characteristics of a “good class.”

### **Figure 4. Qualities of “good classes”**

Luckily, members and coordinators are basically in agreement, which may explain the high ratings that our members give to our classes. Enough items were mentioned about less than satisfactory classes to pay attention to them.

Another necessary component our are offerings is to provide a wide range of subjects and to continually find new courses to offer (either by the same coordinators or by recruiting new ones) to meet the interests of our members and to keep members coming. Not a lot of ways were mentioned as to how to do this, but it certainly is an important responsibility of the curriculum committee as well as the board. The members did offer an indication the content proportions most likely to satisfy their preferences.

The classes offer our best opportunity to meet the second part of our mission statement by offering a welcoming environment. Although the ratings were high, the students did have recommendations here as well. Again, it is really up to the coordinators to set the kind of open and friendly environment that our members like. The coordinators, in their assessment, did not mention that responsibility. In fact, some members were critical of coordinators who failed to do that. Ways to continually socially engage is an important quality that we need in our lives as we age. A recent study of healthy aging factors in Massachusetts by county<sup>3</sup> found that in

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3 <https://mahealthyagingcollaborative.org/wp-content/themes/mhac/pdf/counties/Barnstable.pdf>

Barnstable County<sup>4</sup> the rate of depression is 30 percent among residents 65+. Besides medical and behavioral treatment, most research promotes the importance of continuing social engagement for seniors as the best anecdote against feeling down and lonely. Several research studies have shown a strong correlation between social interaction and health and well-being among older adults.<sup>5</sup> We should perhaps explore how we as an organization can also promote healthy aging<sup>6</sup> among our members. One member said to me, when she had read the news article about this depression rate across Massachusetts, “Thank goodness for A.L.L.!” Another member wrote on his survey that he valued the classes for challenging his brain to ward off dementia. Both were talking of the classes, not the social events.

Our social events and special offerings are a direct attempt to meet the goal of expanding social interaction and social relationships among our members. For those members who attend, they are seen as good, but a majority do not attend. Lack of interest, time and scheduling conflicts, and driving distance were all mentioned as reasons for not participating, along with not knowing anyone or lack of friendliness by others. We may want to think about other avenues for meeting this goal more effectively.

Additional lectures is about both goals—they can further meet educational interests and increase social relationships, but more fully the first than the second. Two-thirds of our respondents did attend them and mostly rated them highly. Members provided a list of the kinds of topics they would like to hear. The lectures enrich our offerings.

Strengthening our organizational structure and functioning is also an important part of our strategic plan. For the most part, members are satisfied and it is seen as working; however, only a small number showed any interest in volunteering for our all-volunteer organization. It may be that because members pay a fee, they see that as enough to do. It is clear those who do volunteer see the activity as important and feel that they are adequately recognized. Our members join to take classes. Positive comments were made about the board and members were thankful for the work of the board, but members did have suggestions for things the board could do.

Relevant to our effort to maintain our membership and attract new members is how we communicate. The webpage did not fair too well, as many do not even use it. The newsletter did better, as 86 percent of the respondents do read it. Most see it as a good method for

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4Rural areas such as Cape Cod can be particularly susceptible to depression with lack of access to transportation and health care. [http://mahealthyagingcollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/MA\\_Healthy\\_Aging\\_Highlights\\_2018.pdf](http://mahealthyagingcollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/MA_Healthy_Aging_Highlights_2018.pdf)

5 National Institute on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/about/living-long-well-21st-century-strategic-directions-research-aging/research-suggests-positive>

6 Building age-friendly communities is a state goal. Yarmouth is an established Age-Friendly community, Barnstable and Yarmouth have the status of emerging Age-Friendly Communities. They are a part of the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative.

keeping up with what is happening at the Academy, and that is exactly what a newsletter should do. And the office as a place to get your questions answered also received a high rating.

There was less certainty about whether or not members have enough input into the organization or even what that means. And some were concerned about whether we were meeting the interests of the diverse 50+ population on the Cape, or even who our population is. We may need to directly confront the topic of diversity as an important part of membership recruitment and class offerings.

The membership and class data shows that recently we may be making some progress in the right direction. It is interesting that the number of withdrawals is about the same for fall and spring semesters even though the number of members is considerably higher in the fall. It is also the semester with more classes, so that may be the factor that contributes to fewer withdrawals as a percent of members. It continues to be important to keep track of our membership and class offerings over time. We are approximating the Board retreat goal of maintaining our present membership numbers. Another data point of value might be the number of new classes offered each semester.

We wish to thank the members of the Academy for their thoughtful participation in our survey and thanks to Jackie Faulhaber and Paula Stefani for supplying the raw data for section IV.

## VI. Recommendations

The members of the long range planning committee have made a set of recommendations based on the findings of this report:

- The survey results show that our members take classes based first on the subject matter. And the favorites are history, then political and social issues. Therefore those planning our curriculum should give these subjects high priority.
- Because members have high social interaction expectations in the classroom, it might be a good idea to be more intentional about guidelines for coordinators, including offering a workshop for coordinators who don't have experience working with an older adult population. Older adults have much life experience and respond best to classes where discussion and getting to know each other is a considerable part of the learning experience.
- The need for attracting new coordinators, or for experienced coordinators to offer new and different courses, is always with us. How can we be more intentional in terms of recruitment and support of coordinators? Fall '18 showed the benefit of both for the organization membership increased and number of refunds declined.
- It appears we are doing very well in meeting our first goal of offering high quality classes in a variety of subject matters. As far as the second goal of providing an environment that encourages social interaction, we are providing opportunities in class, with social activities, and communication through newsletters and websites. We need rethink our social events to encourage participation , especially among new members who have the time and are looking for an opportunity to meet people. Many of our members, however, have no interest in social activities outside of class.
- The survey shows that the members understand that it A.L.L. is an all-volunteer organization but very few are willing to volunteer their own services for board or committee work. This is a reality that must be communicated and the challenges that it presents understood by all. We are fortunate that so many are willing to coordinate classes.
- The survey shows that relatively few people utilize our website. At a time when websites are increasingly important, particularly to the younger baby boomers--a demographic that will become increasingly important to A.L.L.--this is a fact that needs to be addressed.
- The survey shows that members generally view the newsletter favorably which suggests we should continue to use it as one of our main methods of communication.
- In some cases the survey showed the ongoing need of transparency particularly as to the decision-making process. In some cases this involves communicating the same information on a regular basis.