

Volume 33 Issue 2

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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ADULTS: ADAPTING UNIVERSITIES FOR THE
100-YEAR LIFESPAN CASE STUDY: MCGILL
COMMUNITY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

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*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editor-in-Chief: Robert Mizzi
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

33,2 November/novembre 2021, 95–115
ISSN1925-993X (online)

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www.casae-aceea.ca

UNIVERSITY-BASED APPROACHES FOR OLDER ADULTS: ADAPTING UNIVERSITIES FOR THE 100-YEAR LIFESPAN CASE STUDY: MCGILL COMMUNITY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Judith Potter

McGill University

Abstract

This study uses the McGill Community for Lifelong Learning (MCLL) as a case study to probe issues related to seniors' learning within university contexts, including demographics, effects of learning on the lives of older adults, mutual benefits, and expectations for learners and the university community of which they are members. The intention of this research is to enable the continuous improvement of MCLL and, given national and international demographic shifts, to add new perspectives to the literature on the increasingly vital topic of continuing to learn throughout the lifespan. This study adds to the literature regarding seniors' learning and the role of universities by providing an important case study that highlights the voices of older adults. The work provides observations and recommendations that can help to inform other universities and their practices regarding this demographic.

Résumé

Cette étude prend comme cas d'étude la Communauté d'apprentissage continue de McGill (CACM) afin d'explorer les enjeux liés à l'apprentissage chez les personnes âgées en contexte universitaire, notamment la démographie, les effets de l'apprentissage sur la vie des adultes plus âgés, les avantages réciproques et les attentes envers les apprenants et la communauté universitaire dont ils font partie. L'intention de cette recherche est de permettre l'amélioration continue de la CACM et, étant donné les changements démographiques nationaux et internationaux, d'ajouter de nouvelles perspectives aux savoirs sur l'apprentissage continu tout au cours de la vie, un sujet dont l'importance ne cesse de croître. Cette étude contribue à la littérature concernant l'apprentissage des personnes âgées et le rôle des universités en fournissant une étude de cas significative qui souligne les voix des personnes plus âgées. Ce travail offre des observations et des recommandations pouvant aider à orienter les autres universités et leurs pratiques relatives à ce groupe.

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Context of This Study: Literature Related to Older Adults' Learning

Although the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE), in its 40-year history, has earned a reputation for leadership in the field of adult learning, the dearth, with few exceptions, of *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* (CJSAE) publications related to an important and growing demographic, older adults, is striking. This gap needs to be addressed by the academic community.

This paper aims to bring enhanced understanding of older learners, their motivations, and the benefits of including this demographic within university communities. The McGill Community for Lifelong Learning (MCLL) study can be viewed as a case study of a particular organization within a specific university. This project, however, builds on what we already know and develops new knowledge and understandings that can inform more broadly.

The goals of the study are:

1. To more clearly understand the demographics of the current MCLL membership.
2. To understand the ways in which learning (through MCLL) impacts the well-being (e.g., intellectual, social, physical, mental) of MCLL members.
3. To understand what MCLL members perceive that they need from McGill University and how they believe they can contribute to McGill.
4. To understand senior McGill leadership's perceptions about what McGill can contribute to, and how it can benefit from, MCLL.
5. To understand the preferences of MCLL members regarding learning models and options (e.g., peer learning, intergenerational learning, technology-assisted learning).

Literature Review

Demographic trends, both in North America and internationally, speak to the growing significance of the focus of this study—older adults. There is not, however, consensus on the definition of *older adult*, which ranges from 50+ in some studies to 65+ in others, although the trends, and their implications for education, are very clear.

The numbers are indeed striking. According to Statistics Canada (2016), "In 2016, for the first time, the share of seniors (aged 65+) exceeded the share of children (0–14 years) living in Canada," with seniors making up 16.9% and children 16.6% of Canada's total population. The proportion of this demographic will continue to increase in Canada, with one person in four aged 65 or over by 2031, and is expected to remain stable for at least three decades thereafter (Statistics Canada, 2015b). Likewise, there are striking changes in life expectancy. In 1921, life expectancy at birth in Canada was 57.1 years; by 2011, it had increased to 81.7 years (Statistics Canada, 2015a).

American (DiSilvestro, 2013, p. 80; Shinagel, 2012, p. 21) and international (World Economic Forum, 2012) data demonstrate similar trends. Gratton and Scott (2016) contended that the implications of a longer life and increased numbers of older adults—for example, longer work lives and multistaged lives—are upon us and require serious debate and action. Yet this increasing population remains a significantly underserved one on university campuses and in adult education literature.

In addition to the argument of sheer numbers and longer lifespan, why should learning for older adults be a topic of importance? Multiple studies have focused on the benefits associated with learning (formal, informal, or non-formal) undertaken by older adults. Descriptive language varies and can carry subtle differences—for example, greater well-being (Narushima et al., 2013; Talmage et al., 2015), aging successfully (Reichstadt et al., 2010; Simone & Sculli, 2006; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2010), active aging and healthy aging (Boudiny, 2013), comfortable aging (Cruikshank, 2013), productive aging (Boudiny, 2013; Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006)—but, in essence, the various terms refer to the life improvements experienced by older adults as a result of their exposure to learning opportunities. Other authors point to benefits such as "cognitive health, physical health, resilience, self-integration, creative expression, and community-building" (Talmage et al., 2018). Shinagel (2012) also addressed the issue of multiple benefits (p. 21).

Sloane-Seale and Kops's work (2010) provided a more detailed description of benefits achieved through learning. Likewise, Withnall (2016) drew conclusions from behaviourist, cognitivist, social, and humanistic perspectives (p. 160).

In addition to advantages to individuals, are there effects on communities when older adults participate in learning activities? Merriam and Kee (2014) made a compelling case from a social capital perspective for greater attention to learning for older adults. They pointed to international initiatives to draw attention to this issue. Some academic interest exists on the topic of community enrichment—for example, a collaboration between the Stanford Graduate School of Education's Center on Adolescence and Encore.org that explores purposeful lives and community contribution by older adults. In addition, reference to the value of intergenerational learning—that is, the reciprocal sharing of expertise among learners of all ages—increasingly appears in higher-educational publications (e.g., Pstross et al., 2017; Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014). From the limited literature that addresses the broader societal benefits resulting from ensuring that older adults are afforded rich learning opportunities, however, it appears to be a topic worthy of further exploration.

Considerable literature exists regarding learning programs and organizations that are targeted specifically for older adults. Most common in North America are community-based programs, but these are typically independent (e.g., Encore.org). Shinagel (2012) briefly reviewed a number of organized models, such as the University of the Third Age (U3A) (primarily existing in Europe) and those that mainly exist in the United States, including the Institute of Retired Professionals, Elderhostel (Road Scholar), the Institute for Learning in Retirement, and Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLIs). Of these models, OLLIs (of which there are about 130) are consistently associated with universities (but not necessarily funded by their hosts) and feature non-credit programming for those 50+. Simone and Sculli (2006) likewise identified providers of learning for older adults and focused on cognitive benefits of participation in lifelong learning institutes associated with universities. They also pointed to a growing trend of retirement communities linked with universities, of which there are about 50 in the United States. Kops (2020) reviewed trends in programs for older adults in Canadian universities from the perspective of the providers of those opportunities.

While there are calls for universities to embrace older adults as part of their mission, little seems to have been written regarding benefits or potential benefits to universities of doing so. Notably, Withnall (2016) explored the topic of what universities can contribute to learning in later life (defined as 50+), provided some practical examples, and concluded

with the following question: "Universities, however, are large, complex institutions with a myriad of goals, often competing. If the needs of adult learners in general and older adult learners, in particular, are not to be marginalised, might a more strategic and multifaceted approach be required?" (p. 164)

The approach most commonly cited is the Age-Friendly University (AFU) movement. Talmage et al. (2016) began their discussion of AFUs with the following observation: "While traditionally geared towards provision for younger adults...universities have the potential to play a major role in innovation for later life learning for older adults" (p. 538).

The AFU movement began with the collaboration among three universities—Dublin City University, University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, and Arizona State University—and the subsequent development of 10 AFU principles (<https://www.dcu.ie/agefriendly/principles-age-friendly-university>). Talmage et al. (2016) reported that 48 institutions have joined the AFU network, with 27 of these in the U.S. and seven in Canada. From the list provided, however, major research-intensive universities in North America, including McGill University, are largely absent. Talmage et al. (2016) provided examples of innovative ways in which the three founding institutions have implemented the AFU principles.

DiSilvestro (2013) proposed that embracing older adults provides a growing challenge but also a golden opportunity for higher education:

Higher education is important to older adults, and older adults are important to higher education. Adult and continuing educators have an important role in helping colleges and universities understand the characteristics, needs, and aspirations of older adults. There is a wide diversity in the needs of older adults, and the reasons they participate in higher education are multifaceted. Yet higher education must chart new pathways for older adults to participate, and continuing education is poised to do this best. Lifelong learning is an important ingredient for aging well. Older adults not only learn for themselves, but they also contribute to their communities and the higher education institutions that help them. The challenge is clear. The opportunity is real. The time to act is now. (p. 87)

Ratsoy (2016) argued that embracing older learners can help universities to advance the frequently touted intention of improved community engagement. Likewise, there are important economic and institutional considerations for universities, particularly those that are publicly funded.

The most comprehensive identification of future research needs regarding learning for older adults is found in Talmage et al. (2018), and it was based on a detailed review of 60 articles regarding the Osher lifelong learning network in the United States. The authors identified 12 emerging under-researched questions that might guide future research and practice (p. 115). They also suggested that, in terms of methodology, "meta-analyses and cross-institute analyses will help research on lifelong learning institutes move forward" (p. 116). They further observed that "many more studies will be necessary to achieve necessary depth in the areas of adult and continuing education, aging and health, and educational gerontology. As already mentioned, greater interdisciplinary research is important" (p. 119). Notably, research into what older adults need and want from universities, what little there is, focuses largely on subjects of interest; an exploration of policy and practice is virtually absent.

Research Methodology

To achieve the goals of this study, multiple and mixed methodologies—both qualitative and quantitative were used. To collect data on the demographics as well as attitudes, perceptions, ideas, and learning needs of older adults, a survey (using both closed and open-ended questions) was sent using LimeSurvey, the tool supported by McGill University, to 1,003 MCLL members (defined as individuals who had participated in a study group within the previous 2 years). Five hundred and thirty surveys were completed (373 fully and 157 partially) for a return rate of 52.9%.

To probe in greater depth the learning preferences of members as well as their perceptions and ideas about the relationship of MCLL with the larger university, eight focus groups (2 hours each) were conducted with a total of 64 participants from the MCLL community. To collect data on the attitudes, perceptions, experiences, and ideas of senior university leadership, the following individuals generously agreed to add their insights through telephone interviews: the McGill University principal, the associate provost (teaching and academic programs), and the dean of continuing studies.

Quantitative data analysis was undertaken using LimeSurvey tools, Excel, and SPSS. Qualitative content analysis was undertaken by identifying major themes and frequencies, as well as collating all comments and ideas.

Research Findings

Research findings are presented below according to the themes that emerged from the data.

Demographics

Responses to the survey question on gender ($N = 378$) indicated that females were in the majority (70.3% female, 29.7% male), which is consistent with the gender distribution of the overall MCLL population (70.5% female, 29.5% male). As seen in Figure 1, there was a wide spread in age among respondents, with approximately two-thirds between 65 and 80. When compared with age ranges recorded in the overall MCLL database, which shows 15% below 65, survey respondents slightly skewed toward older age groupings.

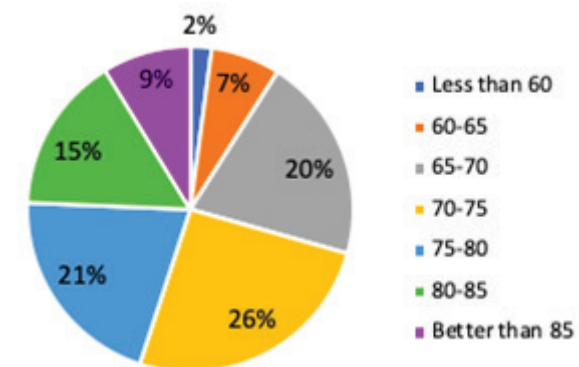


Figure 1. Age Ranges of Respondents ($N = 378$)

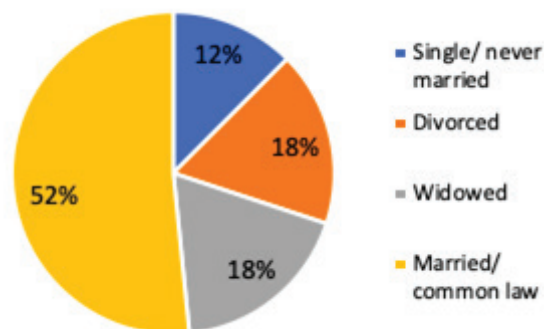


Figure 2. Marital Status of Respondents (N = 376)

Marital status and living arrangements also help us to understand the MCLL population. As seen in Figure 2, just over half of respondents had a partner (married/common-law), with approximately equal proportions who were widowed or divorced and about 12% who were single/never married. Living arrangements data reveal that just under half of respondents lived alone and approximately the same proportion lived with a partner.

With regard to length of time with MCLL, Table 1 indicates that there was a range of experience among respondents, with 43.7% having significant longevity (more than 5 years) with the organization, 44.1% in the 1–5 years category, and 12.2% being relatively new to MCLL. This range allowed testing to determine whether there was a link between this and other selected variables.

Linguistic and Ethnic Diversity

For the question of country of birth (N = 378), 61.4% of respondents reported that they were born in Canada—a smaller percentage than for the overall Montreal population (74.9%) as reported by Statistics Canada (2016) and somewhat less than the percentage of the total McGill student body born in Canada (69.5%), according to McGill University (2020). An additional 20.6% of survey respondents indicated that they were born in the United Kingdom (12.4%) or the United States (8.2%), with the remainder originating in a wide variety of locations worldwide. With regard to mother tongue, 73.0% of total respondents (N = 378) reported English and 12.2% indicated French. The remaining, approximately 15%, reported a broad array of languages as their mother tongue, most commonly German (3.4%) and Italian (2.1%), but also including multiple other languages. These results for survey respondents differ from the overall population of the Island of

Table 1. Length of MCLL Membership (N = 444)

Membership duration	Count	Percentage
Less than 1 year	54	12.2%
1–5 years	196	44.1%
5–10 years	96	21.6%
More than 10 years	98	22.1%

Montreal; 2016 census figures show that 46.4% of the population declared French as their mother tongue, 16.0% claimed English, 32.8% declared another language, while 4.8% declared more than one mother tongue (Montréal en statistiques, 2017). For the total McGill student population, 46.2% and 18.9% report English and French, respectively, as mother tongue, indicating greater linguistic diversity; this finding is not surprising given the international student representation at McGill.

With regard to physical challenges, Table 2 demonstrates that one-third of respondents experienced at least one issue that might have had implications for the learning environment.

Educational Background

As seen in Table 3, the level of education of MCLL members is high; four out of five respondents (N = 378) reported holding a minimum of an undergraduate degree. More specifically, 38.1% had a master's degree, 30.4% had completed an undergraduate degree, and 10.8% had earned a doctorate. Another 11.9% had completed a partial university undergraduate program or a full or partial community/technical college program. No one claimed less than high-school graduation.

Table 2. Physical Challenges Experienced by Respondents (N = 410*)

Physical challenges	Count	Percentage of respondents
Reduced mobility	46	11.9%
Reduced hearing acuity	76	19.8%
Reduced sight	15	3.9%
I do not experience any of the situations described	255	66.4%
Other	18	4.7%

*Note. The number of responses (410) exceeds the number of respondents (384), as some respondents indicated more than one choice.

Table 3. Educational Background of Respondents (N = 378)

Highest level achieved	Count	Percentage
Partial high school	0	0.0%
High-school graduation	8	2.1%
Partial community/technical college	4	1.1%
Community/technical college graduation	11	2.9%
Partial university undergraduate program	30	7.9%
University undergraduate graduation	115	30.4%
Master's degree	144	38.1%
Doctorate degree	41	10.8%
Other	25	6.6%

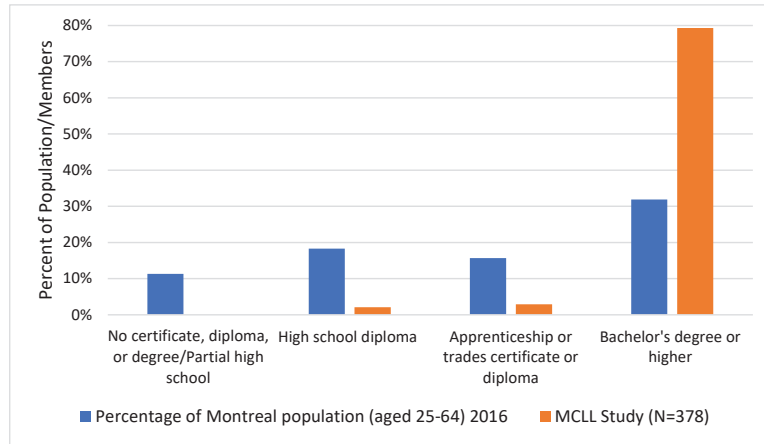


Figure 3. Comparison of Education Levels

Note. The Montreal population data is from Statistics Canada (2017).

Comparison data with the population of Montreal are not available for the age group of 65+. Figure 3, however, compares the levels of education of MCLL survey respondents with adults (aged 25 to 64) living in Montreal. Despite education levels having increased in the general adult population, it is clear that MCLL members have much higher educational attainment than the current adult population of Montreal.

Career Backgrounds/Income Levels

Not surprisingly, given the educational achievement of MCLL members, the array of careers reported by respondents is impressive. Only four respondents (out of $N = 378$) indicated that they did not work outside the home. A total of 84.1% reported having worked as professionals (45.5%), educators (23.5%), or managers (15.1%). The professionals category includes careers in a wide selection of fields (law, health care, engineering, or accountancy, for example), demonstrating the broad range of professional expertise within MCLL. The educator category likewise includes all levels.

Questions about income levels are always sensitive. Not surprisingly, for both personal and household incomes, approximately one-third of respondents selected "Prefer not to answer." Regarding personal income, just under half of respondents indicated that their annual income was \$75,000 or less. For household (self and partner) income, just over 50% reported an income of \$75,000 or above and 37% reported an income of \$100,000 or above.

Comparisons with the Montreal population are informative, even if not perfectly aligned. For example, the average annual income for individuals aged 65 living in Montreal is \$37,600 (Statistics Canada, 2021).

For family income, comparisons with the Montreal population aged 65+ are shown in Figure 4. For both individuals as well as family units, MCLL members have substantially higher income levels than the general population of Montreal.

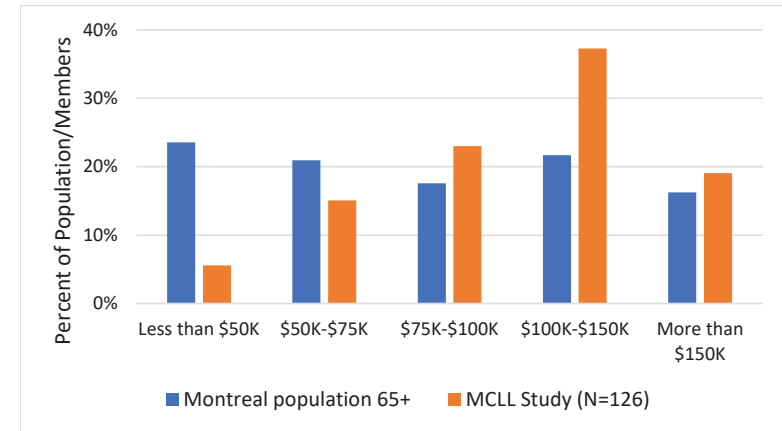


Figure 4. Comparison of Annual Family Incomes

Note. The Montreal population data is from Statistics Canada (2017).

Donor History and Preferences

The survey probed members' donor history as well as their plans with regard to giving to MCLL and to McGill University. When asked whether they had donated to MCLL in the past, 22.1% of respondents ($N = 393$) indicated that they had. With regard to their intentions for 2020, approximately one-quarter definitely planned to make a donation or to give if there was a project/cause of interest. Just over one-third of respondents reported that they were uncertain.

When donor behaviour was reviewed in light of duration of MCLL membership, a longer membership period corresponded with greater likelihood to have donated or the intention to donate in 2020. When reviewed in light of affiliation with McGill, individuals who had no link with the university outside of their membership in MCLL were dramatically less likely to support MCLL financially.

Almost twice as many respondents, 43.3%, reported that they had donated to McGill University (other than MCLL) in the past ($N = 393$). In the same vein, just over 30% planned to make a donation to McGill University in 2020 or to give if there was a project/cause of interest.

As anticipated, graduates of McGill were the most likely affiliation group to have donated to the university in the past or to intend to do so in 2020, although those with a family connection also showed strong donor history and intention.

Effects of MCLL on Members' Lives

When asked about life events that had influenced survey respondents to join MCLL, the most common response (almost two-thirds of respondents) was, not surprisingly, retirement. Table 4, however, shows that other triggers prompted members to join. In the "Other" category, "interest to continue learning" was the most common response added; this aspect was strongly brought forward in focus group discussions.

Table 4. Life Events Influencing Decision to Join MCLL ($N = 543^*$)

Life events	Count	Percentage of respondents
Retirement	319	65.5%
Loss of a spouse/partner	30	6.2%
Move to Montreal	47	9.7%
No specific life event	75	15.4%
Other	72	14.8%

Note. The number of responses (543) exceeds the number of respondents (487), as some respondents indicated more than one choice.

Table 5. Positive Impacts of MCLL ($N = 1,191^*$)

Impacts	Count	Percentage of respondents
Intellectual stimulation	398	89.4%
Social interaction with others	332	74.6%
Physical activity-gets me out of the house	169	38.0%
Personal growth	257	57.8%
Other	35	7.9%

**Note.* The number of responses (1,191) exceeds the number of respondents (445), as some respondents indicated more than one choice.

Respondents provided multiple positive impacts of MCLL on their lives. Table 5 shows the breakdown of all responses, with intellectual stimulation and social interaction being the most popular choices. When pressed to pick the most significant positive impact, almost three-quarters of respondents selected intellectual stimulation, although focus group discussions reinforced the critical value of the social interaction aspects.

Quotations from focus group discussions bring life to the numbers above:

MCLL has opened windows for me into new worlds that I never knew existed...always a new window, always a new world.

MCLL gave me...a real reason...but it's also about the communication: the friendships that I've made here that have opened my eyes.

This has really made my retirement special.

I would say the main benefit is [MCLL] widened my horizons.

Peer Learning Model

A significant topic of discussion in the focus group sessions relates to learning approaches at MCLL. Peer learning has been a cornerstone at MCLL since its inception—but peer learning can have many interpretations. Some believe that peer learning requires that each member of a study group make a presentation on the topic; others take more flexible approaches. Most members, however, strongly believe that the integration of significant discussion is a key component to peer learning—and that peer learning, with this as a defining feature, remains a unique and important feature of MCLL.

In recent times, MCLL study group descriptions specify three approaches so that learners can select according to their preference:

- Member presentation required and participant involvement in discussion expected
- Member presentation not required but participant involvement in discussion expected
- Primarily moderator led

Most focus group members voiced support for the acceptance of a diversity of learning styles and preferences for the extent of participation by study group members. Others felt that they have benefited from being “forced” to make a class presentation. There was, however, agreement that study group topics and approaches need to be clearly described in the calendar—and then adhered to.

Study groups are moderated by volunteers and are vetted by the MCLL curriculum committee. Focus group participants largely recognized the challenges faced by moderators and appreciated the work done by these colleagues. They did, however, recommend that more fulsome training be available to moderators, especially new ones, in areas such as older adults' learning, use of educational technologies, and engaging members in discussion.

Some focus group participants had, of course, been moderators, either at the time of the focus group or in the past—and knew well the challenges and benefits of stepping into this role. There were some troubling moments when past moderators shared difficulties that they had experienced—and indicated that they did not plan to repeat the experience.

Again, hearing representative voices of learners adds richness to the data:

I think the most effective groups are the discussion groups, from my limited experience here, for a number of reasons. One, everybody gets involved so they feel invested in the course. Two, there's a social interaction that I think is really important in this organization. And three, I think you probably learn the most...rather than being a passive receptor, you're actually trying to articulate your ideas on an issue.

I think [the peer learning aspect] is very important because we've got such a varied background. Everyone has got all this experience and it's a chance to make the most of all this varied experience.

I think it's nice having the options that people can opt in or opt out to the type of group learning, with their different styles of learning, just as there are different styles of teaching. I think having diverse methods is really important.

Peer learning for me is very important. Very important. I think it's what sets MCLL apart from other groups. It is really unique.

Engagement with MCLL and McGill

As a volunteer-based organization, MCLL depends heavily on capable individuals taking on a wide range of roles. When asked about volunteering with MCLL, respondents indicated an impressive array of current active volunteer activities and/or past volunteer activities. Overall, 29.5% of respondents indicated that they were currently volunteers with MCLL and 35.1% had volunteered in the past.

The respondents' volunteer history with McGill University differed markedly from their contributions (past and present) to MCLL. Only 9% indicated that they currently volunteered for the university and 14.3% stated that they had done so in the past.

Relationship with McGill: Past, Current, and Desired

As seen in Table 6, over two-thirds (69.4%) of survey respondents had some affiliation to McGill University beyond their membership in MCLL. Almost half (46.7%) were themselves graduates and many had a connection through a family member. Donor history and intentions toward McGill University reported previously are very likely related to the high level of affiliation with the university.

Focus group discussions revealed nuanced reactions to a question regarding what the affiliation with McGill University added to MCLL. Many participants believed that being a part of a university, especially one with such a strong brand and reputation as McGill, was very important in ensuring quality (or at least a perception of quality), although significant opinion to the contrary—i.e., that it doesn't really matter, were also expressed. Focus group participants clearly appreciated the connection with the McGill library system and many recognized the value of the support provided through the School of Continuing Studies. Appreciation was also voiced for being in a university environment that exposes MCLL

Table 6. Affiliation with McGill University ($N = 573^*$)

Affiliation with McGill	Count	Percentage
I am a graduate of McGill University	185	46.7%
One (or more) of my children is a graduate of McGill University	132	33.3%
One (or more) of my grandchildren is a graduate of McGill University or is currently attending McGill University	33	8.3%
A close family member (mother/father/brother/sister) is a graduate of McGill University	102	25.8%
I do not have any affiliation with McGill University beyond my membership in MCLL	121	30.6%

**Note.* The number of responses (573) exceeds the number of respondents (396), as some respondents indicated more than one choice.

members to other activities going on at McGill and to younger students who daily use the same building as MCLL members.

MCLL members, however, desire to have a much stronger relationship with McGill than simply as donors. The focus group discussions consistently revealed that many members believed that there could be a great deal of mutual benefit with more integrated approaches. As demonstrated in the career data above, there is a great deal of resident experience and expertise within MCLL that McGill could take advantage of.

Members described ways in which this expertise was currently being shared, as well as ideas about more effective connections. Examples of current activities shared by focus group participants include:

- SPEAK program in which MCLL volunteers meet with students in School of Continuing Studies language programs for the purpose of practice through conversation
- A study group on African Development that invited students in a business course to present their proposed business plans to this experienced group of seniors for critique and feedback before they presented them for grading; in addition, an MCLL member aided one of the students to gain funding for his project
- Limited involvement in academic projects

Creative ideas shared by focus group participants for ways in which MCLL members could contribute more effectively to the McGill community include:

- Mentorship programs for students
- Companionship/orientation to Montreal for newcomers
- Community outreach
- Academic support (e.g., through pitches, incubators, practice)
- Opening of some study groups to McGill students
- Participants in research projects
- Intergenerational learning opportunities

Focus group discussions also revealed that members have ideas about ways in which McGill could more effectively support the work of MCLL. For one, they would appreciate more exposure to the intellectual resources of McGill, especially by having faculty/graduate students share their knowledge/research/interests through lecture or study group formats. This concept might also provide benefits to graduate students who need teaching opportunities. Second, members expressed that space issues, especially physical accessibility, were very real constraints for MCLL, and that they would like for McGill to recognize and address these concerns. Third, there was considerable discussion in the focus groups about the lack of opportunity to audit credit courses at McGill, unlike many other Canadian universities. Fourth, several focus group participants referred back to a conference that MCLL organized several years ago—and the recommendations that emerged from these sessions, particularly about McGill embracing the concept of becoming an AFU, which seems to have had limited follow-up. Members are very aware that lifelong learning is much discussed by Canadian universities and would like to see McGill operationalize this complex concept.

The following are voices of focus group participants speaking to the issues of lifelong learning and the relationship between MCLL and McGill University:

I think MCLL is probably a very good public relations gimmick for the university to get to show people that McGill really participates in the life of the city...It shows that McGill is open to a community of people who are not in the academic [bubble].

It would be good for McGill's reputation, as students come from all over the world to study here, to include seniors. Higher education for your whole life, not just up to a cut-off point. That [McGill] is an all-inclusive learning environment for your whole life.

There could be more opportunities for collaboration/integration because if you sat down and did a demographics of the people in MCLL—their work experience, their life experience, where they lived—and looked at the mass of life experience that you have, there are a number of courses here [that] could take advantage of that to help their students.

There is a devaluation of the opinion or the knowledge of people that are now retired and no longer in the mainstream on the job.

I think one of the things we'd hoped would come about through the seminar on aging, which MCLL initiated, was to influence the administration and the Board about the importance of facing up to the rapidly changing demographics and to the notions such as intergenerational studies and lifelong learning. All of these things need to be brought to the table.

[Lifelong learning] is part of a career plan and that's what McGill should be talking about and infusing lifelong learning into that career plan.

Potential Improvements for MCLL

The survey allowed for respondents to make open-ended suggestions for improvements to MCLL. Table 7 provides a thematic representation of these comments, along with the frequency with which they appeared; focus group discussions reinforced many of the items. These suggestions can provide guidance to the MCLL executive regarding factors that may require attention.

Marketing Concerns

Marketing educational opportunities is a consistent challenge for university continuing education and, in particular, differentiating programs in a location such as Montreal that affords a variety of options. Not surprisingly, focus group discussions indicated that, overwhelmingly, participants first learned about MCLL by word of mouth. Other media (e.g., internet and, to a lesser extent, print materials such as newsletters and brochures) provided support. Focus group participants also recommended that members share MCLL information through their own Facebook sites to bring greater attention to what

Table 7. Respondents' Suggestions for Improvements to MCLL ($N = 377$)

Themes of comments	Count
No improvement needed	106
Improvements needed re moderators/moderator training	53
Improvements needed re physical space/accessibility/class size	42
Greater variety of topics/workshops/outings/physical activities	36
Improvements needed re equipment/IT	22
Improvements needed re registration process	18
More discussion in study groups	14
Fewer required presentations	13
Describe study groups more accurately in the calendar	10
Higher intellectual quality in study groups	9
More lectures available	9
More opportunities for intergenerational learning	7
More advertising	5
Greater diversity in membership	5
More required presentations	5
More study groups in French	4
Online/recorded options	4
Frustration that social exclusivity can exist within MCLL	4
Ability to audit McGill credit courses	3
Provide background/introduction to moderator with study group description	3
Disallow food in classes	3
Ability to take more than two study groups per term	2
Other comments (mentioned by only one respondent)	77

is happening. They also encouraged using images (MCLL website, brochures, etc.) that demonstrate vitality and stimulation rather than passivity.

One survey question invited respondents to indicate aspects of MCLL that they would recommend if they were to make an endorsement of MCLL. Table 8 provides a thematic overview of the open-ended comments provided by respondents that may be considered in marketing materials.

Table 8. Respondents' Recommendations to Others Regarding MCLL (N = 401)

Themes of comments	Count
Intellectual stimulation	102
Social interaction/great quality of members	70
Overall great thing to do	59
Good selection of topics	44
Personal growth	36
Recommend choosing study groups based on style of class and moderator	26
Highlight peer learning model	19
Tolerant environment	15
Benefits of getting out of house	6
Low cost	4
Benefits of library access	2
Would not recommend MCLL	1
Other	17

Discussion and Recommendations

This section considers the findings above in light of the goals of the study. Specific recommendations that emerged from the data are not included, but can be found in the full study (https://www.mcgill.ca/mcll/files/mcll/mcll_study_report_2020-06-30_fv.pdf).

1. *To more clearly understand the demographics of the current MCLL membership*

MCLL is a connected group of approximately 1,000 individuals living within the Greater Montreal area. Breakdowns of gender and age provided in the findings section are not surprising; data regarding marital status and, in particular, living arrangements add to our understanding. With just under half of the members living alone, the importance of social interaction is entirely logical—and requires prominence in programming and planning. Duration of membership, with almost 44% having been part of MCLL for more than 5 years, can be interpreted as a positive signal regarding satisfaction.

Issues regarding diversity emerge from the findings and need to be carefully considered by MCLL. A smaller percentage of respondents were born in Canada than for the population of Montreal as a whole, but the proportion of anglophones is much higher than for the general population. The representation of francophones and individuals whose mother tongue is neither French nor English is much lower than in the population of Montreal as a whole.

The high levels of education among the membership, almost half of whom have achieved a master's or doctoral degree, is clearly a defining feature of MCLL. Likewise, the experience gained through the members' wide array of top-level careers holds important implications

for expectations of members, as well as their ability to contribute to the broader McGill community, as discussed later.

The reality that university-based continuing education programs, of which MCLL is a particular example, tend to attract and benefit individuals who already have high levels of education and career success is an ongoing tension within the field. Much has been written about the need to extend the resources of continuing education to underprivileged communities and to demystify "the university" for those who may be intimidated by the idea of an institution of higher learning. MCLL faces this challenge as well. Educational and income levels of the membership are considerably higher than those of the population as a whole. Likewise, linguistic and cultural distinctions exist. While not necessarily undesirable, these data do present an opportunity for MCLL to reflect on the composition of its current membership and to make an informed decision as to whether, as some members suggest, there is a need to diversify and, if so, to determine ways of encouraging greater diversity.

A further issue that fits within the topic of diversity and accessibility relates to accommodation within the learning approaches and spaces for individuals experiencing physical challenges. With the identification that one-third of members experience reduced mobility, hearing, or sight, this may be an appropriate time to reflect on whether sufficient accommodations are in place or whether additional initiatives are needed to enable current members or to attract new members who are experiencing these challenges.

2. *To understand the ways in which learning (through MCLL) impacts the well-being (e.g., intellectual, social, physical, mental) of MCLL members*

This study clearly demonstrates that while there are improvements that can be made to MCLL, members experience immense benefit to their post-retirement lives as a result of participation in MCLL. Survey results as well as consistent sentiments expressed during focus groups are reinforced by membership duration and volunteer data. Although intellectual stimulation was the top value selected when members were pressed to choose the most significant benefit, other aspects such as social interaction with others (clearly critical for many), personal growth, and getting out of one's own environment were highly regarded as well. These data support the conclusions of other writers, as outlined in the literature review, but add the dimension of the voices of older learners and their personal expressions of what MCLL brings to their lives.

3. *To understand what MCLL members perceive that they need from McGill University and how they believe they can contribute to McGill*

Interestingly, although members were questioned about both aspects of this goal, the majority of the discussion focused on what members believe they can contribute to, rather than what they need from, McGill University. Members generally believe that McGill's reputation and quality standards reflect well on the organization and they hugely appreciate the connection with the McGill libraries, although there is significant sentiment that MCLL is lost in the larger university structure and priorities.

These are engaged individuals. Almost two-thirds have a connection with McGill beyond MCLL, with almost half having graduated from McGill. Approximately one-third of respondents currently volunteer or have volunteered for MCLL in the past.

Although the level of volunteerism by members within MCLL is much higher than with other aspects of McGill, patterns of donation behaviour differ markedly. Members are much more likely to donate to McGill than they are to MCLL, perhaps partially explained by the loyalty of graduates. A high level of uncertainty regarding intention to donate to MCLL, however, raises questions as to whether members are clear on projects or how their funds would be used.

Not surprisingly, the issue of space for MCLL was the one most frequently mentioned in the context of what MCLL needs from the larger university. In particular, space that would allow for less-crowded classes and accommodation for members with physical challenges was emphasized. Given that space limitation is an ongoing constraint for McGill, perhaps internal resources could be mobilized to provide expert advice on maximizing current MCLL spaces.

MCLL members are self-aware and, in particular, are conscious of the experience and expertise that reside within the organization, as evidenced by high education levels and impressive career backgrounds. They are proud of the ways in which they already contribute to the broader university. But there is a widely held sense that they can, and would very much like to, contribute further to the broader academic community and a sense of frustration that the resources of MCLL are not more effectively valued and drawn upon by the university.

The university has recently established a working group on lifelong learning that is charged with making recommendations regarding lifelong learning at McGill. As part of its deliberations, intergenerational learning has been an important consideration. MCLL presents a golden opportunity for growing intergenerational learning at McGill, as well as for helping the university demonstrate its capacity to respond effectively to the 100-year lifespan.

Members also expressed considerable frustration at the lack of action following a very successful conference on lifelong learning organized by MCLL in 2017 that generated much discussion and many recommendations, particularly regarding McGill joining the international AFU community.

4. *To understand senior McGill leadership's perceptions about what McGill can contribute to, and how it can benefit from, MCLL*

The COVID-19 pandemic that reached Canada just after the survey was implemented and focus groups conducted has certainly had an impact on this component of our study. The senior university leadership group has been focusing on fundamental concerns of the institution and, as such, have had limited time to consult. Nevertheless, discussions that took place provided insightful input to the study.

MCLL has demonstrated a strong desire for closer integration with the broader university community and has put forward compelling ideas in this regard that have solicited interest on the part of university officials. Other possibilities raised include a role for MCLL in helping the university implement the concept of a 60-year curriculum, including the provision of learning opportunities for older adults who wish to continue working on a full- or part-time basis, or, perhaps, enlarging the circle of MCLL to include extra-career learning for all ages.

The other side of closer integration, however, may be a lessening of autonomy and a need for greater volunteer leadership and participation in new initiatives. Ideas about closer integration with the School of Continuing Studies and McGill prompt a number of questions that MCLL will need to work through.

Closely connected to the discussion above is the question of how MCLL relates to other organizations or initiatives within McGill University.

5. *To understand the preferences of MCLL members regarding learning models and options (e.g., peer learning, intergenerational learning, technology-assisted learning)*

MCLL members are highly supportive of maintaining peer learning as a pillar of the organization. There is widespread agreement among members that peer learning should include the opportunity for significant discussion and input by learners. Beyond that criterion, however, there is widespread acceptance of different approaches to accommodate learners' preferences, especially with regard to the requirement (or not) of individual presentations in study groups. Members do request clarity in calendar descriptions and adherence to the course descriptions. A members' workshop on peer learning in October 2018 also generated a number of ideas and initiatives.

The face-to-face model has also been a pillar for MCLL. Given the significance of social connectivity for MCLL members, this is no surprise. However, given the issues of physical challenges and, more recently, limitations on social contact due to COVID-19, the enhanced use of technology to deliver MCLL programming and to build connections with other learning groups for older adults should be considered.

MCLL members appreciate greatly the volunteer moderators and their efforts that make possible the core of the MCLL offerings. There were, however, many calls for additional support for moderators in the form of training related to aspects such as older adult learning, use of technology, and engaging learners.

Concluding Comments

This study makes a number of important contributions to questions related to seniors' learning and, more broadly, seniors' health and well-being. At the level of the specific organization used as a case study, the McGill Community for Lifelong Learning, the work has generated comprehensive data that can be used for planning purposes and for the continuous improvement of MCLL for years to come. At the institutional level, the report provides insights and recommendations with regard to ways in which this demographic can make enhanced contributions to the university community as well as ways in which the university can more effectively support this valued component of its student body. Finally, this research project adds to the literature on seniors' learning and the role of our universities, specifically by highlighting the insights, concerns, and voices of older adults with a passion for learning. This work goes some distance to address the current gap in the literature on the relationship between this important demographic and our universities.

It is hoped that CJSAE, in its next decades, will encourage scholarship that focuses on older learners to "expand the tent" of higher education.

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