

Lifelong learning, active aging at AUB's University for Seniors

May 23, 2012 01:37 AM

By Alex Taylor

The Daily Star



BEIRUT: Bright eyed, but hardly young, the American University of Beirut has a new program attracting a different kind of student. The only requirement for admission is that they be above the age of 50. The University for Seniors is a new initiative to promote lifelong learning and active aging, offering lectures, study groups and a social community to older students. "The idea is that everybody has something to contribute from their life, whether it's their working life, their passion or something that they really care about," says program coordinator Cynthia Minti of the inspiration behind the University for Seniors.

The university began as a pilot project two years ago as a part of the AUB neighborhood initiative, a program for research and outreach to the community of Ras Beirut. Now the University for Seniors has just been launched as a full and independent program at AUB's continuing education center, offering two six-week terms a year of volunteer-led study groups and social events.

While doing a needs assessment in the community for the neighborhood initiative "over and over again, people mentioned the idea that there were a lot of old people in the neighborhood whose children had left to work abroad, many who were well educated, possibly retired from careers and really had nothing to do," Minti says of the inspiration behind the project.

The initial idea was to "create a program that addresses older people's aspirations to stay active and engaged and useful," says Minti, who is a professor of public health and responsible for the neighborhood initiative.

Minti, along with her colleague and coordinator Dr. Abla Mehio Sibai, who is also a professor of public health at AUB, researched similar programs that exist in the Europe and the U.S. that promote engaged, active aging.

"We asked ourselves, would a program like this actually work in the context of Beirut? So we spent quite a long time doing a survey of alumni, conducting focus groups with older people in the neighborhood and really asking them if the idea was appealing to them and there was overwhelming support for the idea."

Sixty seniors are registered for the current term which includes five study group offerings: a course on travel in the Mediterranean, the philosophy of religion, memoir writing, digital photography and an introduction to social media. The University for Seniors also offer intermittent lectures on a range of topics from healthy aging to opera and poetry. With a \$100 registration fee per semester, the students can attend all activities within the program.

While continuing adult education programs already exist in Lebanon – including the "University Pour Tous" out of University Saint Joseph – the University for Seniors offers something different, focusing on community rather than career advancement.

"You don't just come, pay your money, sit and take knowledge – it's much more active and participatory. Everybody, no matter who they are, has something to contribute to the University for Seniors," says Minti, emphasizing the program's importance of community building and peer learning.

Members of the University for Seniors can lead their own study groups, organize events and serve on the curriculum and social committees of the program – determining the semester's course offerings and other activities.

“In the focus group discussions, over and over people said, ‘you know, I’d really like to be useful. I’d like to be old and useful.’ Again, that reinforces the idea that everybody has something to contribute,” Minti adds.

While designed around the aspirations of the 50-years-and-over crowd, the last aspect of the program is to form intergenerational connections, involving the seniors with AUB at large. The study group on social media this semester is an example of such efforts, led by AUB undergraduates from a student club called the online collaborative.

Toufic Balaa, one of the members of the University for Seniors who still runs his family business, has especially enjoyed the social media course.

“It’s very interesting for people my age, because we didn’t grow up with computers in our youth. Now I’m using Twitter and Facebook,” he says.

“At our age we have to manage to use our minds. It helps prevent Alzheimer’s [disease],” Balaa continues.

His fellow students concur, enthusiastically discussing their favorite courses and lectures they’ve attended this semester and how important the community has become for them.

“It’s very good for all of us. We work all our life and when we retire we are a bit bored. It’s academic and social,” says Simone Ward, who is now retired.

Ward’s classmate, Irmeline Khoury, is in the middle of an animated discussion about the opera lecture they attended the previous night. Khoury says that initially she was skeptical about whether she would enjoy being a part of the University for Seniors, but now she intends to come back next semester.

“I live far away and I thought with the traffic and everything it would be too much. I said I’d take one class a week but now I spend most of the day here. It’s a great initiative.”

For additional information, please email universityforseniors@aub.edu.lb.