

A Look Back As We Step Forward

Revised

As a relatively new member of LIR, having joined in the spring of 1993, I find myself in a midstream position. Now that our long range planning study has culminated and we are looking ahead to consider ways in which our organization can further develop, I find myself looking back at the native shore and wondering about our origins and our original purpose. With that in mind I have spoken to a number of people, reviewed some of the early documents, and tried to piece together from my perspective how the LIR that I have experienced has evolved so far.

It is in the nature of all things to change over time--to grow and develop or to atrophy and die. The main concern is to make sure that we maintain a healthy organization that is able to maintain the integrity of its purpose while nurturing its growth. To do this we must understand what we stand for so that we can work together harmoniously in meeting the challenges of growth and changing circumstances.

When we look back at the origins of our 5CLIR, or at most learning in retirement groups recently founded, we find that the main purpose was to establish a learning community of retired persons who conduct their own study groups or seminars in affiliation with a college or university. The prime characteristic of these groups is that they do not rely on outside paid faculty but solely on the leadership and active participation of their members. The original proposal (Request for Approval for a Five College Learning in Retirement Program) submitted to the Five Colleges on May 3, 1988) stated: "Peer learning and active participation by members will not only be the intertwined concepts on which this proposed program will rise, but they will remain integral to it at every stage." As stated in the October 5, 1988 letter signed by the heads of the five colleges, "Beginning March 1989, our five institutions will co-sponsor 'peer-learning' seminars: small groups of mature men and women who learn from each other about topics of common intellectual interest." This letter was accompanied by a questionnaire sent out to the community to elicit a response and to discover the fields of choice for the study groups.

On looking over the seminar and study group offerings of the past five years one cannot help but be impressed by their range and originality. To a great extent they also reflect the choices revealed by the original questionnaire on which literature was ranked first, followed closely by art, history, and then music, current events, religion, creative writing, computers, finance, and philosophy as the first ten choices from among twenty-one.

A concern has sometimes been raised about the "intellectual" content or approach of a subject because our "charter," the letter which accompanied the questionnaire, specifically refers to "topics of common *intellectual* interest." The Request for Approval uses similar language: ". . . we propose a program of senior study groups . . . that will draw on the richly endowed *intellectual* resources of the Valley's retired community . . . Our membership will include those individuals who feel *intellectually* restless and who are now free to: 1) pursue new fields of study, 2) reponder old neglected ones, and/or 3) share and thus reshape familiar ideas with peers of diverse backgrounds and experiences who also remain *intellectually* independent and alert but who wish to join with others in study." It would be most unfortunate to restrict our understanding of what an intellectual pursuit entails to a too narrow view of subject matters.

In pursuing our educational goals we have not limited our topics to strictly academic subjects but have covered a wide range from the theoretical to the practical, from the historic to the creative, from the academic to the esthetic. These approaches are well within the range and scope of what is found at most colleges and universities. All of these offerings provide our members a rich opportunity for continuing personal growth in a stimulating environment of friendly and supportive peers.

Another opportunity for participation and personal growth has come about quite unexpectedly since the founding of our LIR under the auspices of 5 Colleges, Inc. Our program originally came under the jurisdiction of the Division of Continuing Education of the University with their coordinator to provide guidance, support and management of member determined activities. This arrangement lasted a year when we found ourselves operating independently and reporting directly to Jean Stabell, the financial officer at 5 Colleges, Inc.

This has expanded the scope of our activities considerably. Not only are we concerned in carrying out our study programs but we must also undertake the planning and management of our organization. As a self-governing body without a professional coordinator we have had to meet the greater challenge of working together harmoniously and democratically and finding new ways of involving more of our members to serve on committees and participate in the running of our affairs.

In the course of the five years since our inception we have carried out our original goals; maintained a lively and actively involved participation in our seminars and study groups; created a very popular program of activities for year

round participation; and have grappled with the problems of organizational management. Our membership seems to have stabilized at 130 in the past two years and there is a fairly even balance between incoming and outgoing members. While a membership of 150 would seem a desirable goal to increase our pool of moderators and secure our finances, a greater number would overtax the meeting spaces available to us.

We have evolved not only as an educational enterprise but as a membership group that has the responsibility of its own governance. In both areas the opportunities for participation and involvement can lead to an interactive enrichment of our personal lives. As we encounter in our courses the problems of society past and present, confront the personal challenges revealed in our studies of literature, biography, autobiography, aging and mortality, ponder the relationship between science and philosophy, thrill to the creative ingenuity and beauty revealed in the arts, discover our own creative power in autobiographical writing or watercolor painting, we recharge our inner batteries and can extend these experiences not only in our interaction as participants in the study groups but also as participants in the larger group as well.

We can be proud of our achievements without falling into complacency; there is always room for improvement in what we have accomplished. This is what we are now concerned about in considering the proposals of the long range planning study. This is our great opportunity to be involved, to participate and to work together for the common and greater good we all want to achieve at Five College LIR.

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