

OLLI's Community Engagement Special Interest Group Gathers Momentum

Only an idea a little over a year ago, OLLI at Duke's new Community Engagement Special Interest Group (CE SIG) under the leadership of Beth Anderson, Matt Epstein, and Virginia Lee now boasts over twenty participants. And its momentum promises to increase in the year ahead. Please join us in this exciting new venture (see details below)!

Other sister OLLI organizations such as OLLI – UNC Asheville have longstanding community engagement efforts, each with slightly different approaches depending on participant interests and the dynamics of their local communities. We are designing our own approach to best address Durham needs and our own OLLI member interests. About 5,000 non-profits in Durham as well as government agencies and other organizations address a range of issues and constituencies from affordable housing and early childhood development to returned citizens and seniors in need. As a result there are any number of ways for OLLI members to become involved, whether as individuals fulfilling traditional volunteer roles such as tutors or in non-traditional ways described below.

The primary focus of OLLI's Community Engagement SIG is small cohorts of OLLI members working together collaboratively on projects identified by community partners to improve their capacity, effectiveness, and outcomes. In the process we also hope that participants will learn more about Durham and the issues it faces, find a vehicle to use valuable talents and skills, and develop a sense of connection with other OLLI members and the wider community.

The first project of the Initiative was the Fall 2018 course, [Food Insecurity in Durham: A Community Engagement Course](#), capped at 15 participants with a waiting list. Following an orientation to the issue of food insecurity in Durham and initial presentations by our community partners, Participants worked in small groups to develop a project identified by one of the three partners:

East Durham Children's Initiative—a review of alternative models for a community-led movement to address food insecurity in East Durham;

Farmer Foodshare—a review of the organization's Donation Stations program at local farmers' markets with recommendations for their improvement; and

Meals on Wheels Durham—the development of a program of organizational and corporate sponsorship of meal delivery routes for homebound senior citizens.

In a final debrief of the course, participants reported learning a great deal about food insecurity, noted how well organized the class was, and praised the class's project-based learning approach. They also offered suggestions for improving similar course offerings including a two-semester sequence of courses with the first focused on an issue of interest and the second focused on the development and/or implementation of a project with a community partner.

Keeping with the issue of food insecurity, we submitted a proposal for a six-week Spring 2019 course, Crafting Policy on Senior Hunger: A Community Engagement Course. Participants will work with a standing committee of the Durham Partnership for Seniors to lay the groundwork for important policy work related to the funding and provision of food for seniors in need.

In late November, the Community Engagement SIG met to bring together interested class participants as well as those who were not in the class but interested in community engagement through OLLI. Possible ideas for the coming semester including implementing projects developed as part of the Food Insecurity course, a sub-group focused on education in K-12 and community college settings, and collaboration with other Duke units and organizations such as Service Learning, Duke-Durham Neighborhood Partnership and Duke University Retirement Organization (DURO).

We welcome new members who are interested in working in a spirit of collaboration with one another and community partners and have creative ideas, time, and energy to devote to our efforts. The next meeting of the CE SIG will be on Friday, January 18, 2:30 – 4:00 pm at the Southwest Durham Public Library on Shannon Road.

For further information, contact Virginia Lee, CE SIG Coordinator, vlee31@yahoo, 919-314-7071.