

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND FACTS:

- *How did the Unlimited Learning program formally organize as a lifelong learning group?* The early organizers of the lifelong learning group took three actions. Specifically UL:
  1. **Verified a need.** During 2001, the earliest interested citizens were part of a healthy community planning effort. They helped determine that lifelong learning was one of the three top efforts which would help add to the positive health of our area. Following intensive multiple discussions of interested citizens, ideas were generated as to next steps. (Heule, Johnston, Bussard, Widmar, etc.)
  2. **Established a mission and purpose.** A small group framed up long/short range ideas and plans. They fleshed out a mission and purpose and verified this with the larger interested people. Then sought to add more structure to the plans. They began to look for a compatible partner.
  3. **Formalized a partnership.** Although it was agreed the programming should begin as soon as possible using a checkbook and sheer luck, the longer range commitment was to evolve a stable legal and cooperative relationship with an existing non-profit organization. In 2002, a formal joint powers agreement was made with the Crosby-Ironton School District. This provided the essential legal and cooperative mechanism for fiscal accountability and programmatic stability.
  
- *How did the organizational details come into place?* Several steps:
  1. **Group consensus.** Anyone willing and interested in volunteering became part of a large ongoing group that met monthly (named the All Committee Group). This group helped determine that we needed 3 basic committees, a budget, policies and procedures to maintain consistency, and a spirit that emphasized quality and fun!
  2. **Decision-making process.** It was agreed that the All Committee Group should serve as the defacto board of the fledgling organization.
  3. **Staff needs.** It was felt that a staff person would be required for a time. One person volunteered to help with a minimal draw on resources. In time, the need for this role would be re-evaluated.
  
- *What were some of the critical decisions made early on?* Here are the most important:
  1. **Develop a Committee Structure:** This was one of the most critical decisions. Our committees involve over 20 active volunteers. Some serve on more than one committee. Here is how we organized:
    - **Program Committee** – This is the heart of our group – where all program ideas flow to and through. And are manifested in interesting, quality programming. They use data from evaluations to gauge how we are doing.
    - **Membership and Marketing Committee** – This group provides a backbone of keeping track of our members. This group develops strategies and implements plans to let interested individuals know what our offerings are.

- **Finance, Operations and Planning Committee** – This group keeps us looking forward, on track fiscally and assuring smooth operations for our members and volunteers.
- **Executive Committee** – This group oversees all aspects of Unlimited Learning. Our policies, procedures, ongoing needs and glitches. And provides a coordinated voice to all matters involving UL.

2. ***Financing the organization:*** This was a bottom-line essential series of decisions.

- **Importance of money** – It was strongly felt we should not be driven by only money. Quality was paramount. Money was secondary. The belief that people would have to find our programs useful and meaningful. If we could get a small grant for a specific purpose, that would be all right. We built everything we did on a “break-even” basis. We committed to develop a cash balance in order to cover unanticipated expenditures.
- **Member-driven organization or not?** It was determined that annual memberships are offered. And that we would not become a membership only-operation. We wanted as many people to be able to take advantage of our programming as possible. The belief is that this would give people a chance to “try us out” – and see if a membership is right for them. We created a sliding scale and also allowed anyone who could not afford a small gate fee or membership to be able to attend – no questions asked. This type of structure is unique in most lifelong learning programs. Most insist that you become a member. From the perspective of UL – it does not make a difference if you are a member or not.

3. ***How to spend our money (and how not to spend our money)?***

- Early on (2002) it was decided our organization would not pay for costs of people to speak. UNLESS, it was a special project covered by outside funds (e.g. grant funds). This became important in order to maintain the collegial nature of the speakers who come to our programs. What we decided to do however was to pay the mileage costs for those speakers who had to pay the costs of travel themselves.
- We decided to pay for costs of room use from our venues. These costs helped provide for coffee and at times treats. We have also helped some of our venues with infrastructure costs (e.g. projection screen).
- **What is the UL “Break Even” Policy?** The programs with very high overhead costs (expensive book, media) and other costs are offset with an additional fee (“materials charge”). Examples are Great Decisions and Western Political Philosophy. The idea is that UL will charge a fee in order that UL will break even.

4. ***What times should UL hold meetings?***

UL decided early on that we should meet on as regular as basis as possible for most of our programming and also during the daytime hours. Examples are our regular UL programs held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday of each month and the Great Decisions programming on the third Monday of each month.

These decisions were made with experimentation, research and consultation with the participants. As we went on, we began to offer more programming. These “extra” programs are offered at times that are at varied times. And we continue that same pattern today. Some Example of these are: smaller interest group trips to the Metropolitan Opera virtual events in HD in St. Cloud; the “absent narrative” of native peoples in Minnesota, supported with a grant from the Minnesota Humanities Commission; field trips to the theater in the Twin Cities; an annual night of fine dining.

5. *To what extent should UL develop partnerships?*

It is the firm belief that UL should cooperate with other lifelong organizations and agencies that are in our interests. UL seeks and wishes to cooperate with others. UL needs to be about cooperation and collaboration, NOT about competition. In this regard, UL has been fortunate to work with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute ( U of M, Minneapolis), the College for Seniors (U of M, Duluth); the University of Massachusetts; the Minnesota Humanities Center (St. Paul) in order to share directly in innovative programming. These organizations have had a policy to help smaller lifelong learning organizations such as Unlimited Learning. This has been a tremendous help for our small lifelong learning program. Other very important partners include the Minnesota International Center (Minneapolis); The Road Scholar Network.

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