

SAGE/OLLI Historical Timeline

(Sharing Across Generations for Enrichment/ Osher Lifelong Learning Institute)

The following timeline has been created from a variety of resources over a number of years. Those resources, as available, are noted at the end of each section of the timeline for anyone who wishes to pursue the information in greater detail.

The Founding Years

1990: Dr. Deanna Eversoll, Director of Evening Programs at UNL, presents a non-traditional continuing education proposal to Dr. Simerly, Dean of the Center for Continuing Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. For the next two years, Dr. Eversoll, along with a 10-person advisory committee made up of community leaders and faculty of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), develops a structure and format for the program to be known as SAGE, an acronym for Sharing Across Generations for Enrichment. The program is unique to UNL.

1992: The Division of Continuing Studies, the Department of Evening Programs and Lifelong Learning Services at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln officially sponsors SAGE with the first class offered in January of 1992. Dr. Eversoll programs all courses, which are taught in the Clifford Hardin Center on East Campus at UNL. Curriculum in the first term consists of 10 courses, each composed of one 90-minute session each week, in six-week segments called “Parts.” The year-end membership for SAGE is 97, of which 53 are full-year members. Full-year membership fees which include an unlimited number of courses are \$100.

1996: In the fifth year of the SAGE program, Dr. Eversoll can no longer conduct the entire program planning for SAGE. It is determined that SAGE members need to take some responsibility for program planning, the beginning of what became the Curriculum Committee.

1999: Dr. Eversoll sends a letter, dated September 21, to all SAGE members. The letter’s primary focus deals with the declining SAGE enrollment. In October, the volunteer Group of 21 meets to discuss the future of SAGE. From the Group of 21, a steering committee (Gordon Culver, Marie Knickrehm, Marge Thomssen, and Lyle Young) meets with Dr. Eversoll with three recommendations: lower the yearly fee to \$200, charge \$35 for each six-session course, offer fewer sessions, and develop a curriculum committee for program planning.

2001: Membership in SAGE drops to an all-time low of 80 individuals. The suggested yearly fee for 2002 is \$220 for full membership, \$100 for partial membership, and \$60 for one course of six sessions. Many members say they feel that SAGE is pricing them out of existence. SAGE is at a crossroads. Seven members (Sid and Gordon Culver, Tom Miller, Ann Morgan, Marge Thomssen, Marge and Lyle Young) take it upon themselves to create an ad hoc committee to determine how to keep SAGE from folding. Dr. Eversoll is kept informed of the committee’s progress. The ad hoc committee sends a letter to the CEO and President of the University of Nebraska Foundation. The letter outlines the need for an active learning program such as SAGE at UNL for the increasing number of retired people in the area. A meeting is requested between SAGE and the University of Nebraska Foundation.

The Transitional Years

2002: University of Nebraska-Lincoln undergoes serious budget reductions. The Division of Continuing Studies is eliminated, and Dr. Deanna Eversoll's position as Director of Evening Programs is eliminated. As a result, SAGE requires a new classroom, administrative home, and leader. The ad hoc committee makes three key decisions: SAGE must become self-sufficient, must increase membership, and must raise money.

- The ad hoc committee and the University of Nebraska Foundation Director of Development and Assistant Director of Development hold a series of meetings to develop a plan for a SAGE fund drive. A goal of \$20,000 is set for the fund drive. The goal is equivalent to the amount needed to operate SAGE for one year. Two SAGE charter members offer matching \$5,000 grants to get the fund started.
- The Ad Hoc committee writes to Harvey Perlman, Chancellor of UNL, acknowledging SAGE's funding problems, advising that SAGE is becoming fiscally self-sustaining, and asking him to support SAGE. Perlman responds positively.
- In November, SAGE formally reorganizes and selects a board of directors. Marge Thomssen is selected as the chair.
- In December, a Memorandum of Understanding is signed between SAGE and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Alumni Association that allows SAGE to become an association within the Alumni Association. The Alumni Association's liaison with SAGE initiates a marketing plan.

2003: Dr. Deanna Eversoll, during a speaking engagement, meets Mr. Bernard Osher, a successful businessman who created The Bernard Osher Foundation that supports lifelong learning. Following that meeting, the SAGE board receives a request from The Bernard Osher Foundation to submit a proposal to become an Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Two requirements must be met before any potential grants will be considered: change the name of SAGE to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) and make it an affiliate to a specific accredited college within UNL.

Having lost access to classroom space at UNL, SAGE begins discussions with the Legacy Retirement Centers concerning the use of space. A Memorandum of Understanding is signed specifying that the Legacy at 56th and Pioneers would provide temporary classroom space and an office for SAGE for a yearly fee of \$600, renewable annually.

By October, SAGE has 71 sustaining members, 21 sampler members, and four guests for a total of 96 members.

SAGE is informed by the University of Nebraska Foundation that the SAGE Developmental Fund had reached \$21,011.03. SAGE exceeds its goal of \$20,000.

2004: Osher Foundation awards SAGE a renewable grant of \$100,000. SAGE officially becomes OLLI. Thanks to Dean Marjorie Kostelnik, OLLI becomes a program in the College of Education and Human Sciences (CEHS) at UNL. Deanna Eversoll returns, temporarily, to oversee the growing program. Board of directors name is changed to OLLI Council.

The Growth Years

2005: Osher Grant renews at \$100,000, the same amount as in 2004. Deanna Eversoll hires Dee Aguilar to become Program Assistant. OLLI at UNL creates a “stand-alone” website. (It had previously had a presence on the Alumni Association website.)

2006: Osher Grant renews for third year at same amount. First OLLI at UNL newsletter is mailed to all members. First of many open house events is held to promote membership.

2007: A fourth and final year of the renewable grant is funded. A number of “firsts” occur:

- First radio commercials for OLLI are broadcast on KFOR.
- OLLI creates marketing partnership with Nebraska Educational Telecommunications.
- Partnership is developed with Keith Larson, editor of the “55+,” Lincoln’s “free” senior newspaper.
- University of Nebraska Emeriti Association creates a partnership with OLLI, paying for retired faculty members’ first-year membership in OLLI.
- Curriculum Committee reorganizes itself into thematic sub-committees.
- Planning begins for an OLLI travel program.
- Membership increases to more than 680 members.
- Dr. Deanna Eversoll retires on June 30; she continues her involvement with OLLI as a member. Dee Aguilar becomes first full-time Project Coordinator.

2008: OLLI at UNL now meets necessary criteria to submit an application to the Osher Foundation for a \$1 million endowment: more than 500 members, an in-depth program of study, and an academic home. Receipt of the endowment is announced in June 2008. A one-time \$50,000 bridge grant from Osher Foundation is received to provide funds to support the organization while the \$1 million endowment is invested and earning prior to any distributions. Dean Kostelnik, Dean of CEHS, provides expanded staff support, office space, and dedicated classrooms on UNL’s East Campus. At the time, the annual membership fee is \$50. The “OLLI Insider” becomes the primary form of communication with members. Travel program begins with some day trips and a trip to Washington, D.C.

2009: OLLI adopts the slogan “Curiosity never retires.” Council agrees to conduct an annual fund drive with the goal of \$20,000. (Only the interest on the \$1 million endowment can be used to sustain the institute. Additional funding is still needed.)

2010: OLLI introduces “Happenings,” a weekly electronic newsletter to members. Membership fee is increased to \$75 for the full year and \$50 for a mid-year membership. OLLI bylaws are re-written. Marketing focus changes from a broad spectrum to a more targeted marketing demographic. A DVD presentation called “OLLI at UNL” is produced.

2011: Current membership reaches more than 800. Annual membership fees remain constant. New goals are set by the OLLI Council: create a 2015 vision, increase membership retention, reach out to diverse populations, and extend OLLI programs beyond Lancaster County.

2012: OLLI celebrates its 20th anniversary.

2013: With OLLI membership now exceeding 1,000, the Osher Foundation invites OLLI at UNL to apply for a second \$1 million endowment. A strategic plan is developed and implemented.

2014: The second \$1 million endowment is awarded to OLLI at UNL in 2014. This is the last of the grants and endowments from the Osher Foundation. OLLI continues to conduct an Annual Ask for additional funding. Part-time Communications Associate position is added to staff.

The Development Years

2015: OLLI at UNL expands and matures in a number of ways during 2015.

- Curriculum committee offers more than 175 courses during the 2014-2015 academic year.
- Council reaffirms OLLI's intended relationship with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in carrying out the requirements of the approved endowment agreements with a new Memorandum of Agreement.
- Council establishes the Pillar Society for OLLI at UNL for the purpose of creating its own endowment through the University of Nebraska Foundation. In the first year, 70 members pledged more than \$70,000, more than enough to establish the endowment.
- Interest Groups grow out of course activities and quickly gain in popularity.
- OLLI launches an initiative for inclusiveness and diversity.
- OLLI holds initial discussions with Winter Lecture Series, hosted by the Unitarian Church, on the possibility of collaborating.
- A full-time Events Coordinator is hired to facilitate travel and special events.
- OLLI at UNL Facebook page goes live.

2016: Membership surpasses 1,500. Travel opportunities become more plentiful. Staff and volunteers focus on changing needs of a growing membership.

2017: OLLI at UNL celebrates its 25th anniversary. Council rewrites earlier bylaws into Policies and Procedures.

2018: Membership surpasses 1,700. The rewritten Policies and Procedures are implemented. OLLI Council changes name to Advisory Council. A Curriculum Coordinator is hired to facilitate the expanding curriculum. Distance Learning Ad Hoc Committee begins to explore development of a distance learning curriculum.

2019: An OLLI Showcase is designed and implemented to market its programs in lieu of the traditional open house program.

2020: In a most unexpected circumstance, with the arrival of COVID-19, plans for distance/virtual learning that had been in the “discussion stage” are quickly implemented so that programming can continue in spite of the pandemic. Membership remains above 1,000. Dr. Deanna Aguilar announces her retirement, and a search committee is formed to hire her successor.

2021: The 2020-21 fiscal year was quite eventful. Covid continued to force classes to be offered in person, Zoom or hybrid (both ways). Membership numbers suffered and were down almost one third for the year. Financially, however, OLLI was in the black at the end of the fiscal year.

It was also a year of change for the management of OLLI. Longtime OLLI Coordinator, Dee Aguilar, retired at mid-year. A new Director (new title), Bob Michl, took over in January. He previously had been the curriculum coordinator for OLLI. A new person was hired for that vacated position. Jeanette Wellsandt was hired and the title of the position was changed to Program Coordinator. In the second half of the year the pandemic finally started to fade.

The council also passed an increase in course fees. Every course fee will include an additional \$5 to cover basic registration costs. This would become effective starting in 2021-22 fiscal year.

2022: OLLI found itself coming out of the shadow of the Covid pandemic. In-person courses were reintroduced and multi-format and zoom classes resulted in strong enrollments and a growth in membership to just under 1,375.

There was a concerted effort by Marketing to reach outside of Lincoln for potential members who benefitted from the high number of classes offered via Zoom. OLLI ended the year with membership in 62 Nebraska communities and in 15 states.

The Membership committee started its Ambassador program to assist new members in their first year in OLLI. Obtaining a dedicated classroom in the Human Sciences Building for in-person and multi format courses and leasing 25 parking spaces just one block away were positive achievements.

OLLI also was invited to begin discussions with UNL and developers for potential relocation of offices and instructional space in a 17 acres development just west of 22nd and Vine. The development would provide senior living options, retail services, a hotel, and other amenities.

2023: Membership continued to grow and Zoom live streaming had a lot to do with that growth. Almost 40% of all OLLI classes were attended via Zoom. OLLI finished the year with over 1,400 members in 21 states and in 73 communities across Nebraska. Because of the growing interest from the Omaha/Metro area base, OLLI began looking to expand programming into the Metro area. A Focus Group for Omaha was conducted in the fall of 2022 and a Showcase/Open House was conducted in Omaha in June 2023, with almost 300 people registering to attend.

The Advisory Council began work on a three-year plan that will focus on six key areas: 1) retention, 2) membership expansion, 3) financial sustainability, 4) operational stability, 5) curriculum variety, and 6) facility stability.

Relationships with senior living facilities were developed to further our outreach to individuals based on our mission. Pop-up events continued to be scheduled and have become popular social and recruiting events. A volunteer appreciation dinner was well attended and appreciated by those in attendance.

2024: The implementation of the “Three-Year Plan” identifying OLLI strengths, growth opportunities, threats and common themes, guided the organization through the first year of the plan. With retention and expansion as primary goals, OLLI membership continued to grow. An 11% increase in membership resulted in total membership of 1,575, with a retention rate of over 80% and a new membership rate of over 27%. This growth is attributed to discount membership fees, increased course offerings, the availability of zoom offerings, and an emphasis on serving the Omaha/Metro area.

OLLI continues to be financially solvent, resulting in no need to increase course fees. Curriculum committee work resulted in four of the five terms having record number of enrollments.

Relationships with senior living communities expanded offerings to locations across the state. An instructor/facilitator appreciation event at the conclusion of the year was widely successful and showcased the value of OLLI and its instructors.

2025: Membership growth continued at a rapid pace and was 1,738 by the end of the year, an 11% growth over the previous year and 23% ahead of the 2022-2023 year. All five terms had record enrollments, and OLLI finished the year in excess of 13,500 enrollments. OLLI also began seeking out “event sponsors” to offset costs of the recruiting events, the fall symposium, and the appreciation events. This allowed membership and course fees to remain unchanged for a fifth consecutive year.

2026: The pace of enrollments and memberships continued to be strong, with numbers similar to those in 2025. The Advisory Council reviewed and updated the Three-Year Plan, giving directions to the areas of focus for 2026-2029.

Patricia Saldana, an 11-year Communications and Marketing Associate for the organization, retired in February 2026. Bob Michl, Director, retired in April after more than 8 years with OLLI. Melissa Hayes-Connolly was selected as the next Director, coming from Nebraska Wesleyan University, where she was the Director of the Cooper Foundation for Academic Research. Bennett Woody was hired as the Communications and Marketing Associate. With programming needs continuing to grow, Karla Chavez was hired to become the Events Coordinator, giving OLLI a 5.0 FTE staff and allowing Jeanette Wellsandt to provide more focus to curriculum offerings.