



Clermont College of Creative Life:

Lifelong learning
flourishes at
Clermont Park



A Colorado community's educational initiative benefits from the 'skills, strengths and experience offered by the people who live and work' there

This article profiles a recipient of the 2015 ICAA Innovators Achievement Award, a category of the Innovators Awards program recognizing programs and concepts that advance active aging. Presented in different categories, the annual Innovators Awards honor creativity and excellence in the active-aging industry. They highlight innovations that lead the way, set new standards, and make a difference in the lives of older adults.

"Want to teach a subject this year?" The Clermont College of Creative Life has invited residents, employees and family members for the past two years to share their knowledge and experience with each other by teaching courses. This life-

long-learning initiative has galvanized the Clermont Park community.

Founded in 1972 as a stand-alone nursing home, Clermont Park is one of three life-plan communities in metropolitan Denver, Colorado, operated by local not-for-profit Christian Living Communities (CLC). "CLC's mission and values center on enriching the lives of seniors through a continuum of care and support," states Moriah Bernhardt, director of community life at Clermont Park. Nearly 300 residents live in the community's various neighborhoods.

Bernhardt notes that, at Clermont Park, "we incorporate the principles of The Eden Alternative" and Masterpiece Living—"both culture-change approaches—"into our daily life and purposeful engagement." Clermont College sprang from the community's "deep-rooted

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A culture of inclusivity drives the growth of Clermont College of Creative Life, says Andrew Steward, a lead curriculum developer. Photo: Sarah Allen

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Clermont Park residents display their high spirits at a Clermont College of Creative Life graduation. Photo: Sarah Allen

culture of care as well as its strong spirit of innovation,” she says. Begun in June 2014 “as a way to enhance our culture of inclusiveness, lifelong learning and successful aging,” the educational initiative engages and empowers individuals across the continuum of care.

Masterpiece Living Coordinator Andrew Steward joined Clermont Park the same summer, becoming a lead curriculum developer for Clermont College in spring 2015. Steward’s affiliation with the University of Denver (DU) has led to what Bernhardt calls “an action-based partnership” between Clermont College and the DU Graduate School of Social Work. This relationship provides enriching opportunities for both partners, with many future opportunities anticipated.

To learn more about Clermont College, the *Journal on Active Aging*® recently asked Bernhardt and Steward to discuss the initiative, what it involves, and what it brings to the Clermont Park community.

JAA: Please describe the Clermont College of Creative Life and its key components.

MB: The Clermont College of Creative Life is a data-driven lifelong-learning model, grounded in the belief that anyone of any age and ability can continue to learn and grow. It is based on a trimester university/college model, and is resident and team member directed. This model highlights the skills, strengths and experience offered by the people who live and work at Clermont Park. It also invites educators from the extended Denver community to participate as educators and students in the College.

Clermont College offers a variety of courses tailored to enhance, and engage people in, the 4 components of wellness/successful aging—intellectual, physical, spiritual and social. Tracking individual participation throughout each trimester provides data that support program development and personal goal-setting. Each full college year culminates with a graduation ceremony and certificate, celebrating the success, health and engagement of each student, educator and college partnership. To graduate, students are challenged to participate in at least 30 classes throughout the year.

They must balance 20 core credits across the 4 wellness components (5 credits each) and dedicate 10 elective credits to personal exploration and growth.

JAA: What motivated this initiative, and what are Clermont Park’s goals for it?

MB: The College model was inspired by a Clermont Park resident, who in 2013 recognized that the talents of residents and team members should be shared in an ongoing university learning format. In 2014, the community life team set this vision as a top-priority goal and began working with residents on a curriculum and lifelong-learning model. Masterpiece Living® and The Eden Alternative® culture-change initiatives contributed to the model by helping define well-being and successful-aging components.

AS: Clermont College’s culture of inclusivity drives the organic growth of the initiative. During the first graduation in 2014, the College had 20 graduates from independent living. In the first full academic year, we decided to set a goal of having graduates from all levels of living. By implementing strategies such as tailoring classes to address various learning modalities (auditory, visual, experiential, etc.) and working collaboratively across neighborhoods and departments, we reached our goal. As a result, in 2015, Clermont College celebrated 64 resident graduates—11 from skilled nursing and 14 from assisted-living and memory support neighborhoods. Over 200 residents participated in the college. Our next goal for 2016 is to celebrate staff/team member graduates, as well as to share this model with other communities throughout the United States and beyond.

JAA: What does the program involve practically? What resources does it require from Clermont Park, for example?

MB: The Clermont College model involves community recruitment and community engagement. This is a free model

and does not require extensive funds to operate. Almost all the courses are led by educators who volunteer their time, and the model can be tailored to small or large class rooms/community spaces.

The most vital elements in making the College model successful are its presentation to the community and asking the community, “Is this a model you want and are willing to develop?” It is also essential to have a strong commitment from administration to support the resident-driven curriculum and empower the staff/team to teach and participate. Most important is having a core group of residents and champion team members to help navigate, communicate and sustain the model.

Finally, it is important to have an easy tracking system to collect data. At Clermont Park, we began with simple sign-in sheets for each course, which were then transferred to a computer spreadsheet. This year, we are implementing software that participants can use to check in as they enter each course.

JAA: *How did Clermont Park introduce the Clermont College initiative, and how does the community promote and encourage participation?*

MB: I introduced the college initiative in the 2014 Leadership Strategic Planning session. Clermont Park piloted the model, with the introduction of a summer College catalog and graduation ceremony in 2014. The model was so successful that residents called for it to continue, and since then it has evolved into a full-year-cycle trimester model. Formal leadership in the community embrace this model and continue to volunteer as educators and participants in the College.

AS: If there is any secret to the success of Clermont College, it is that it began with a resident’s idea, and continues to be owned, nurtured and developed by



At Clermont Park, a group celebrates the arrival of the ICAA Innovators Award honoring Clermont College of Creative Life. Photo: Sarah Allen

many informal resident leaders. When participants see other residents/team members sharing their passion or story in a meaningful way, they are inspired to either share their knowledge and passion or try something completely new.

JAA: *Most programs encounter challenges. What challenges have you encountered with Clermont College? How have you addressed them?*

MB: Our participation tracking system was a challenge, as we wanted to capture all residents who took part in each course in the college. We had to educate both residents and staff to sign in for each course. Transferring these sign-in sheets to computer spreadsheets also proved to be time consuming. Thankfully, an amazing concierge team supported this process. Now, we are launching a new software to help with tracking and data outcomes, and we are educating residents on how to use its check-in system, so we can eliminate the spreadsheet process.

The most significant challenge at this point, which is also a monumental

strength, is that so many participants want to teach in the college. We have had to ask educators to lead courses at a later trimester.

JAA: *Has the Clermont College initiative evolved since its launch? If so, how?*

MB: The Clermont College model is constantly evolving. Most recently, we transformed the catalog from a monthly catalog to a three-month/trimester catalog. In addition, we have added a professional growth track for employees, and we are launching our new tracking software and check-in system.

JAA: *How do you see the Clermont College initiative changing as you move forward, including through partnerships that extend the program into the community-at-large?*

MB: Thanks to Andrew, who is a University of Denver alum, and our resident DU alumni, we plan to extend our partnership with the university, in particular with its newly added Knoebel Institute

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Residents beam with pride in their achievements at Graduation Day 2014 for Clermont College of Creative Life. Photo: Sarah Allen

for Healthy Aging. We have had tremendous success working with other DU departments, such as the Graduate School of Social Work. In the past year, over 30 DU students have participated in Clermont College and several residents have been invited to present/teach on the DU campus. In addition, with the support of a university sponsor, we will be part of a research study to see how students' perceptions of aging may change through participation in Clermont College. We aspire to extend our partnerships with other formal universities and high schools in the Denver area as well. Finally, we look forward to sharing our college model of learning, health and engagement with limited-income communities in the region.

JAA: *In your view, how has the Clermont College of Creative Life helped advance wellness and engagement at Clermont Park? What have been the most notable outcomes for residents and staff?*

MB: Clermont College has increased engagement significantly among the residents and the staff/team. Prior to the college model, we had recorded 8–10

resident-led programs per month; a year into the college model, that figure had more than doubled, with an average of 22–26 resident-led programs a month. Staff/team-member engagement also changed dramatically. Before Clermont College, team-member-led courses averaged 1–2 per month; a year into the college model, we had over 25 team members lead college courses and over 40 participate in the college as students or educators.

At Clermont Park, we are proud to have developed an academic and experiential curriculum that focuses on lifelong learning and growth at any age. We hope others will adapt this model as an alternative to more traditional and, in many cases, institutional paradigms of enrichment and wellness. 

The Journal on Active Aging thanks Moriah Bernhardt and Andrew Steward for their help with this article. For more information about Clermont Park, visit www.clermontpark.org.

Images courtesy of Clermont Park of Christian Living Communities

Five key lessons learned about offering a lifelong-learning college initiative

1. Learning and community engagement are vital to our life and growth, especially as we grow older.
2. Creating an interactive, lifelong-learning paradigm takes time, persistence, risk-taking, creativity, collaboration, partnerships, and patience. *But* it can be done virtually anywhere, and it can be done at very low cost.
3. Leadership/administration must be engaged and supportive of the model for it to thrive and sustain itself.
4. Residents must be involved and take part in the model's development and leadership for it to thrive and sustain itself.
5. It is key to implement a data-collection system and use this information to drive lifelong-learning development. This element is essential in helping to fund and shape future healthy-aging initiatives.