

Encore Colleges

By David Bank



MetLife Foundation

Shirley Serey is the community college student of the future: 59 years old, MBA, corporate manager, breast cancer survivor – and new teacher of special education, helping fourth and fifth graders with disabilities learn to read.

After successful careers in corporate management and small business, Serey went to **Rio Salado Community College** in Tempe, Arizona to prepare for her third career.

Serey is at the leading edge of tens of millions of baby boomers who are beginning to shift into a new phase of life and work. As many as four out of five people in their fifties and sixties say they expect to continue to work, some because they have to for financial reasons, but many more because they want to, for the social connections, intellectual engagement and fulfillment of making a difference. Neither old nor young, many are seeking “encore careers” that combine a renewed commitment with continued income and increased flexibility.

The generational shift creates an historic opportunity for community colleges to become “encore colleges,” helping baby boomers manage transitions to their encore careers at the same time they meet the pressing workforce needs of their communities.

The most farsighted colleges are already starting to meet this demand with innovative encore college programs and partnerships. For example:

- The first group of engineers-to-math teachers is scheduled to be certified as teachers through a fast-track program at **Collin Community College** near Plano, Texas that has targeted telecommunications engineers and other

technology professionals downsized – many with sizeable buyouts and severance packages – from major local employers such as Nortel, MCI and Texas Instruments.

- Retiring nurses are being recruited to encore careers as nursing instructors by a partnership between **Owensboro Community and Technical College** (KY) and a large local hospital, tackling the key chokepoint in the national nursing shortage: too few available slots in nurse-training programs.
- African-American women over 50 launching encore careers in public school education, healthcare, and social services will get the same one-on-one coaching and support from a program at **Baltimore City Community College** as full-service executive outplacement programs for senior managers that normally cost thousands of dollars.

By expanding such pathways, encore colleges could help many more boomers find their way to social-purpose encore careers. That could “create an abundance of human capital for those things that matter most,” says Marc Freedman, author of *Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life* (PublicAffairs Books, June 2007, www.encore.org). Increasingly, the scarce resource in many communities is not money, but caring and qualified people doing what only people can do – as case managers and counselors, nurses and social workers, teachers and classroom aides, mentors and entrepreneurs.

“We’re used to the fantasy of money being no object. What if time, talent, and experience were no object?” asks Freedman, head of Civic Ventures (www.civicventures.com), a nonprofit organization working to realize that possibility.

“That new equation might prompt entirely new approaches to solving seemingly intractable problems.”

The emergence of encore colleges return the community college movement to its roots. The first community colleges were founded early in the 20th century, primarily to train teachers and nurses. They expanded to accommodate returning World War II veterans financed on the GI Bill.

The modern community college model, combining academic programs and vocational training, developed only in the 1960s specifically to meet the needs of baby boomers hitting college age. And boomers never stopped going to school, swelling enrollment in all forms of continuing education.

Already, more than one million baby boomers are attending one of the nation’s 1,200 community colleges to retool for their next careers, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. College administrators expect millions more to follow as the generational wave crests over the next two decades. And older students are twice as likely to attend a community college as a four-year college or university, according to the Center for Community College Policy in Denver, Colorado.

But as they hit their 50s and 60s, many boomers are finding traditional community college offerings for “seniors” mismatched to their new stage of life. No longer young, but not yet old, many baby boomers resist labels that imply their prime is past, and programs that prepare them for withdrawal or irrelevance.

“By and large, the two parties – the retirees or early retirees and the higher-education institutions – have not yet connected in ways that meet the needs of either side,” writes Daniel Yankelovich, founder and chairman of Public Agenda, a nonprofit policy-research organization. He says changes must be made in “virtually every aspect of higher education” to respond to the influx of students between 55 and 75 years old, which he considers one of the most significant developments in higher education in the next decade.¹

Gerardo de los Santos, head of the League for Innovation in the Community College, a national association based in Phoenix., says boomers can be counted on to use their clout with elected officials and college administrators to get what they want. “As we see an increasing number of baby boomers from year to year, we’re going to hear a lot about their expectations and demands,” he says.

A New Stage of Work

The boomers’ biggest change is the emergence of work, rather than retirement, as the defining institution of the encore stage of life, a stage that is only now coming into being as longer lives and better health open a period of a decade or more between “retirement age” and true old age. Boomers are accelerating the shift to longer working lives that started in the mid-1980s, when the post World War II trend toward earlier and earlier retirement reversed itself.

Some people will continue in their current jobs, but many boomers want the next stage of their work to be different from their earlier careers. A study by MetLife found that the biggest reason those age 60 to 65 returned to work after

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“retiring” was to try something new. Merrill Lynch’s survey found that among baby boomers who expect to keep working, nearly two out of three expect to change fields. Smith Barney found that tens of millions of boomers want to remain active in the workforce, and that three out of five “welcome more novelty and change.”²

In many cases, that change represents a reordering of priorities, from climbing the ladder to making a difference. Smith Barney identified a yearning for significance, with respondents indicating they value community, shun materialism for “experiences,” and feel something is missing from their lives. More than twice as many see being “a leader in the community” as more valuable than “having an expensive car.”³

The 2005 MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures New Face of Work study, for example, found that three out of five people aged 50 to 59 wanted to reorder their priorities to put social purpose and impact at the center. The study showed that three-quarters of those who may continue to work at what was traditionally considered retirement age are interested in working with the poor, the elderly or other people in need; half are interested in working in education, health or youth programs.⁴

Encore careers exist at the intersection of longer working lives and the particular need for people to find meaning in the second half of life. “Encore careers are not bridge jobs or senior volunteering, phased retirement or any kind of retirement,” Freedman says. “They are paid positions in social change and community service that promise to make the best and highest use of people’s passions, talents and experience.”

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make the connection between those with the desire to make a difference and actual “purpose-driven jobs.”

Their affordable fees, open access, flexible programs and schedules, and online offerings are a good fit for impatient and demanding baby boomers, many of whom tell researchers they want to get in, get what they need, and get out quickly. Many community colleges already specialize in mid-career transitions, for women returning to the workforce, laid-off and displaced workers, “recareering” professionals and others seeking upward mobility.

And community colleges are already involved in efforts to meet the shortages of teachers, nurses, social workers and other skilled professionals that are pinching schools, hospitals and social service providers.

“Community colleges are poised to become the primary vehicles that help to unleash the important knowledge and social capital that our communities and employers desperately need,” says Tony Zeiss, president of **Central**

Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.C.⁵

Indeed, with innovation and investment, nearly all community colleges can become the go-to institution for a wave of 50- and 60-somethings who are getting ready to make some very big changes. As “encore colleges” they can become leaders in higher education, responding to the opportunities as well as the challenges of an aging society. To do so, they’ll need to:

- Recognize the “encore” stage as a new stage of life that is emerging before true retirement, and the encore career as the intersection of longer working lives and the need for social purpose.

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- Revamp their services – and their marketing – to meet the wide variety of career-training needs of boomers of all income and skill levels for flexibility, responsiveness and resources while avoiding any taint of euphemism or condescension.
- Be innovative in helping motivated individuals succeed in the nonprofit and public sectors in order to fulfill many boomers’ desire to make a difference as well as to make a living.
- Go beyond training people to fill existing jobs and take leadership to change work itself and help employers shape new kinds of jobs.

Shirley Serey is typical of the target market for such encore colleges. Her story weaves several themes common to boomers managing their transitions to this new stage of their lives – the need for flexibility, the unexpected obstacles in the search for meaning, an impulse to give something back, to help other people and to make a direct and noticeable impact.

As a young business-school graduate, Serey had broken into the old-boys club of logistics management at Procter & Gamble and had a successful, 24-year corporate career. Tired of Cincinnati’s snow, the Sereys quit their jobs and moved to Arizona in 2000. They started a successful travel agency, and sold it to a larger company after 18 months. When her daughter left home, Serey found herself asking, “Now, what do *I* want to do?”

The last thing she thought she wanted was to go back to school. Nonetheless, she sought out career-planning software offered at **Scottsdale Community College**. Her aptitudes, interest

and experience generated three possibilities. “FBI agent” was out – those over 35 need not apply. “Park ranger” seemed hazardous in the Arizona heat. The third possibility appealed to her: “Teacher.”

Serey was attracted by Rio Salado’s online classes, which begin every two weeks. She was quickly drawn in and added extra courses to get her Special Ed certificate.

One night, while she was studying for six final exams, the telephone rang and she learned she had breast cancer. She had a mastectomy, completed her student teaching and began her new job last November, only two months later than originally planned. Her job’s health insurance benefits have turned out to be unexpectedly crucial.

Now she works with children with Down’s syndrome, autism and other disabilities at Fountain Hills Middle School. The daily progress makes the work satisfying.

“When a little girl who can hardly talk starts to say words like ostrich, tiger and elephant, that’s a real feel-good,” Serey says. “There is a real need for those of us who were fortunate to have lucrative careers to give back.”

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Unmet Needs, Untapped Resources

Health care represents, by far, the largest pool of available encore jobs. Health programs consistently top the American Association of Community College’s annual list of “hot” community college offerings, because of the demand for trained personnel from hospitals, nursing homes and other health care facilities. The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists seven health care positions among the 10 fastest-growing

occupations through 2014, and expects demand for more than 1 million new “allied” health professionals. The American Hospital Association estimates that 118,000 registered nurses are needed to fill vacancies at U.S. hospitals. By 2010, experts estimate a shortage of up to 1 million licensed practical nurses.

Owensboro Medical Health Systems, Kentucky’s second largest hospital, for example, has aggressive plans to expand to rural counties in western Kentucky and southern Indiana, but is constrained by a shortage of trained health professionals. Hospital officials forecast the need for an additional 500 registered nurses and 300 hundred other positions in the next five years.

But the nursing program at **Owensboro Community and Technical College** has 800 students on the waiting list for a program that currently enrolls only 75 registered nursing students each year for daytime and nighttime programs. The program is unable to expand because of a shortage of nursing instructors to serve as adjunct faculty members. “Without addressing the critical need for faculty, the community is unable to address the critical need for additional nurses,” says Cindy Fiorella, the college’s dean of economic and workforce development.

The college and the hospital are teaming to run three “adjunct boot camps” to prepare retiring nurses to become faculty members. The first recruits will come from nurses retiring from the hospital system itself, who number about 20 each year. The program also includes a resource center and a mentoring program to help retiring nurses use “years of expertise to mentor the future nursing workforce,” says Vicki Stogsdill, the hospital’s senior vice president for nursing.

Education is also emerging as a major encore career field, with individual interests well-matched to pressing needs.

Community colleges are playing a growing role in teacher training, particularly for those switching from another career. Many community colleges offer routes to “alternative certification” for aspiring teachers who already have baccalaureate degrees in other fields. Some, such as **Broward Community College** in south Florida, are even preparing to offer B.A.s in education, as well as nursing, to help meet talent shortages. With more than one-fifth of all public school teachers expected to be retired in five years, school districts around the country need an estimated 200,000 new teachers every year.

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“If there are no institutions of higher education that are serving specific needs, community colleges are being asked to fill that gap,” says de los Santos of the League for Innovation in the Community College. “We’re filling the skills that are needed by the business community.”

Encore career teachers are expected to be particularly attracted to fast-track programs that take advantage of their previous experience and get them into classrooms quickly. **Virginia’s statewide community college system**, for example, is trying to fill some of the state’s nearly 1,300 unfilled teaching positions through a “career-switcher” certification program for professionals who already have a bachelor’s degree and work experience that enables participants to be in the classroom teaching in less than six months.

The program has produced 200 certified teachers in its first three years. With little marketing to baby boomers, about one in five

participants has been over the age of 50. Officials are embarking on an aggressive marketing campaign to increase the percentage of older adults to 40 percent or more. "Our colleges are expecting an influx of vibrant adults age 50 or higher who are seeking new skill sets to enable new work that they find fulfilling," says Monty Sullivan, Virginia's vice chancellor of academic services and research.

In Texas, a statewide push to require an additional year of math for high school graduation, combined with a chronic shortage of math teachers, is creating an acute pinch. **Collin County Community College**, located along the Dallas-area telecommunications corridor, identified downsized engineers and other technology professionals from companies such as Nortel, MCI and Texas Instruments as potentially good math teachers. "Many employees accept an early retirement package but are not ready to get out of the workforce," says Sabrina Belt, who directs the college's Center for Teaching, Learning and Professional Development. "They are looking for a new career that is more fulfilling and personally enriching."

Collin has created an intensive, fast-track alternative certification for this specific population, enabling them to get certified in less than a year, compared to nearly two years, as is more typical. The first batch of 15 engineers-to-teachers will do their student teaching this spring and have their certificates in time to teach in September 2009.

Community colleges are also playing a growing role in career training for educational paraprofessionals. The federal No Child Left Behind legislation requires classroom aides to complete two years of full-time

study at an institution of higher education, obtain an associate's degree, or otherwise demonstrate rigorous standards of quality. Many paraprofessionals are enrolling in community colleges to keep their jobs.

The **Maricopa Community College** system in Arizona, for example, is working with local school districts to establish a training curriculum for tutors working with K-3 students on reading skills. The tutors are part of Experience Corps, a nationwide service program for adults over 55 that has more than 2,000 members working with 20,000 children in 19 cities. Once the curriculum is approved, Experience Corps members around the country (via online distance learning) will be able to get college credit for 30 hours of tutoring, or two credits for 60 hours.

"Getting credit might actually start them on a path to get more training. Some might like to become classroom aides, or even teachers," says Bernie Ronan, Mesa Community College's interim president. For Maricopa, it's also an opportunity to capture the small education awards Experience Corpsmembers earn through the federal AmeriCorps program.

"We need just-in-time programs that are a lot easier for boomers to access and get just enough for what they need," he says.

Similarly, some community colleges are seeking to improve the often underappreciated and underpaid field of **social services and nonprofit management** by attracting talented and experienced boomers. Working with companies and nonprofit agencies, some community colleges are helping boomers transition from the private sector into jobs as executives, financial managers, program directors and field coordinators in the nonprofit sector.

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“We can provide the workforce training that employers need, but we also have to rethink the nature of work itself,” for example, by helping employers shape encore jobs that will appeal to boomers by making schedules and benefits more flexible, says Barbara Viniar, former president of **Berkshire Community College** in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, who now heads the Institute for Community College Development at Cornell University.

For example, **GateWay Community College** in Phoenix is seeking to speed the entry of boomers into the caregiving field through a Workforce Transition Center that includes partnerships with local employers such as HomeInstead LLC and Cypress HomeCare Solutions LLC. In addition to instructors, curriculum and tuition assistance, the employers are committed to offer flexible scheduling and to support an encore career development and professional growth plan.

Coastline Community College in Orange County, California, is helping people turn their personal experience as family caregivers into employable skills by offering credentials and skills for jobs that serve the elderly. Already, one-third of the college’s online gerontology students are over 50; many of them got interested in gerontology through their own family caregiving. The college’s program goes well beyond caregiving, preparing students for jobs in financial counseling, real estate, travel and fitness and wellness.

Coastline is developing three encore-career “mastery skills courses” specifically for boomers who want to change careers to give back to the community. The for-credit courses draw on learning in biology, psychology and sociology as well as

professional issues, and are “modular,” allowing instructors to tailor the program to the new skills students need for their chosen encore careers.

Coastline has a direct channel to Orange County’s social purpose employers and agencies as one of the few community colleges to actually operate the local “one-stop” center, the joint county-state-federal effort to coordinate resources and services for employers, job seekers, and those needing education/training for employment. The college’s contract covers job placement and other services for those over 50 with low incomes. But Coastline is going further, expanding its community employment network and job services for those over 50, regardless of their income level, who are seeking encore careers, particularly in gerontology.

Such programs are needed in a variety of other areas as well. Expedited certificates in child development or mental health could produce a bounty of childcare workers, mental health advocates and other caseworkers. Programs in one-credit or even half-credit increments in areas such as nonprofit management, early childhood education and after-school care could appeal to boomers who are still working and only starting to explore their next moves.

“You need an academic institution that can translate people’s life experiences into these career routes,” says Jay Bloom, former executive director of Morrison Child and Family Services, a major social services provider in Portland, Oregon.

Taking a different approach, **Washtenaw Community College** in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is seeking to foster a culture of entrepreneurship in

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both for-profit and nonprofit enterprises. The area has been hard-hit by corporate restructurings, with both General Motors and Ford offering buyouts to many mid-career employees and Pfizer, the pharmaceutical giant, closing its Ann Arbor plant. The college plans a series of seminars to promote encore careers, both through social ventures and traditional small businesses that also deliver a social benefit.

“The time is ripe for harnessing the expert skills and knowledge of these individuals and steering them toward service-oriented careers in fields like community medicine, education, nonprofit management, or social entrepreneurship,” says Larry Whitworth, Washtenaw’s president.

Finicky Boomers

The diversity of the nation’s 78 million boomers means there will be no single model of an encore college. Just as the success of Elderhostel led to a wide variety of lifelong-learning activities, innovations in community colleges will help create a whole new market category within higher education. It will take trial and error to determine the mix of services and marketing messages with appeal.

In particular, encore colleges must tread carefully to balance the special needs of older adults with baby boomers’ resistance to being pigeon-holed in any program they sense is targeted at “seniors” or “older” or “mature” students.

In one of the first surveys of the needs of older community college students, Portland Community College found that students over 40 weren’t interested in enrichment courses or learning as a form of leisure (see sidebar). Three-quarters of the older students surveyed were in school to “upgrade or acquire new work-related

skills,” with nearly as many saying they were there to “prepare for a new career.”

“What baby boomers want is affirmation that ‘You’ve still got it, mister,’” says Pam Cox-Otto, a marketing consultant based in Wisconsin who works extensively with community colleges. “The community colleges that get this are saying, ‘It’s not over ‘til it’s over, and it’s not over.’ They should be phrasing this as, ‘The freedom to make the real dreams come true. You’ve raised the kids, built the career, managed the company. Now it’s time to do the thing you always wanted to do.’”

Central Piedmont Community College (NC), for example, has adopted the banner, “From Success to Significance” for its programs for boomers, to appeal both to baby boomers’ pride in their accomplishments and their desire to do more. The training program includes career counseling and assessment from a certified life coach, a 10-hour workshop to guide students through the culture shift from corporate jobs to the social sector, and partnerships with major employers to provide practical work experiences.

Baltimore City Community College’s Prime 50+ Transition Program is appealing to boomers’ desire for personal attention, offering what it describes as a “full-service comprehensive executive outplacement program,” with one-on-one career counseling, professional mentoring and a 40-hour career transition course.

Many older adults, of course, don’t need any marketing in order to embark on their encore careers. At age 62, Pete Geisler took a buyout from General Electric and moved to North Carolina, where he and his wife planned to build a boat to sail around the world. “We had it all figured out,” he says.

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Survey Highlights Challenges Of Becoming an Encore College

A recent survey of older students at Portland Community College (PCC) highlights the challenges as well as the opportunities in becoming an encore college.

The survey, “Boomers Go To College,” challenged conceptions of “senior” programs for older learners interested in enrichment courses or learning as a form of leisure. Three-quarters of the older students surveyed were in school to “upgrade or acquire new work-related skills,” with nearly as many saying they were there to “prepare for a new career.”

But the survey also found PCC, which serves up to 15,000 students over age 40 each semester, still has a ways to go to meet boomers’ needs. Boomers surveyed were impatient with what they perceived as college services that were mismatched to their needs. Half the students wanted job-readiness workshops for older students, but three-quarters said they had not used the job placement services that were available; of those that did use the job services, only 10 percent said they were satisfied with them. Similarly, two-thirds wanted tutoring services for older learners, but only one-third used the tutoring services the college already offered.

The older students surveyed were different from their younger peers in that many already held degrees, almost all were juggling family and job responsibilities and many had returned to school with specific ideas about what they needed to reach their goals. Importantly, they expected fast results, with half saying they were likely to reach their goals within a year. Time constraints were cited as their biggest obstacle.

Even though they didn’t want to be singled out by age, older students made it clear they expected the college to cater to their needs. Older students want to be able to “test out” of courses they feel they don’t need; they want evening, weekend and online courses to fit their schedules; they want healthier food, better signs and desks that fit an older person’s body rather than, as one put it, “junior high school desks” that felt like “torture devices.” And they were dismayed by the lack of “customer service” throughout the college.

The authors of “Boomers Go To College” recommended major changes in organizational culture and practices to meet boomers needs, including:

- Stress the program, not the demographic. Boomers “are not looking for separate ‘senior’ programs,” but rather expect respect from regular college services, the report concluded.
- Ease entry and “honor experience.” Advice and mentoring is crucial to help boomers navigate the bureaucracy and plan a career path.
- Be flexible and responsive and take into account life’s complexities. Innovations such as flexible schedules, online courses, credit for life-experience and fast-track and modular curricula should be expanded.
- Provide internships, placement services and partnerships. Fellowships and other financial aid can help career-changes transition to new fields.

In response, Portland is developing a peer mentorship program for students over 50, particularly for students in the college’s gerontology certificate program. Students will receive individualized support through their first year from peers who will help them get started in the program, assess their needs and skills and plot their coursework, internships and preparation for employment.

Events took a different turn. To lower his property taxes, Geisler organized a volunteer fire department. Tired of climbing ladders, Geisler took a 16-week certification course at **Craven Community College** in New Bern, N.C., to become a paramedic.

“Then I thought I should go the next step – I might as well go into nursing,” Geisler recalls. He worked as a nurse’s aide while he trained at Craven to become a registered nurse, and then got a job at a nursing home closer to his house, where he is older than many of the residents.

At 70, he works 105 hours every two weeks, caring for 25 patients on the 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. shift, administering medications, helping patients go to the bathroom, reading blood sugar levels and giving patients an interested ear for conversation. His sailing plans are on hold.

‘I just wanted to do something socially useful,’ he says. ‘I thought, ‘If I’m going to be around here for another 30 years or so, let’s put something back in the social pot.’”

The MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures Community College Encore Career Grants Program opens doors for boomers who want their next chapter, or encore, to include a “purpose-driven job.” Grants have been awarded to innovative community colleges that are creating new ways for adults 50+ to transition to encore careers in education, healthcare and social services – all sectors facing critical labor shortages.

About the Author

David Bank is a vice president at Civic Ventures. A veteran journalist, Bank was a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* for nine years, covering Silicon Valley and the software industry. His book, *Breaking Windows: How Bill Gates Fumbled the Future of Microsoft* (Free Press) was named one of the “Best Business Books of 2001” by the *Harvard Business Review*.

About Civic Ventures

Civic Ventures (www.civicventures.org) is a think tank and program incubator, working to help society achieve the greatest return on experience.

About the MetLife Foundation

The MetLife Foundation (www.metlife.org) was established in 1976 by MetLife for the purpose of supporting education, health, civic and cultural organizations.

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