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CHRISTINA RORDAM, REALTOR, CSP, CNE, CDPE
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Seniors jump on Rollins lifelong learning opportunities

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Students dance at a class offered at Rollins College's Center for Lifelong Learning, where seniors learn a variety of skills from Mah Jongg to dancing.

- By Tim Briggs
- March 3, 2016 11:42 a.m.



Under the stark glow of florescent lights, students stare at their professor Robert Bernstein in unison. Focused on his words on meditation and the true meanings of Eastern thought, the classroom full of seniors tunes in – and zones out – during class.

It's not uncommon to see a class of seniors at Rollins College. But these seniors aren't your typical 20-somethings. In fact, everyone in the room is over the age of 50.

"Our students love the fact that they get to feel like 'seniors' in college," said Jill Norburn, director of the Rollins College Center for Lifelong Learning. "For many, these classes have pulled them away from depression and isolation. They are meeting new people, learning new things, and also finding ways to get involved in the community through our different volunteer outlets."

The Rollins College Center for Lifelong Learning began in 2013 with the hope for a modest 30 classes with 125 students to engage the local senior community, but due to word of mouth and tireless demand, the program exploded in its first year, amassing 128 classes with over 1,300 students. The mission of RCLL is to provide an academic and social outlet for seniors, ages 50 and older, while aligning with Rollins College's guiding principles of excellence, innovation and community.

From more information about the Rollins Center for Lifelong Learning, visit www.rollins.edu/evening/rollins-center-lifelong-learning/

Currently, the RCLL is offering 128 continuing education classes for seniors in the spring semester alone, with a student total eclipsing 1,000.

"The plethora of classes that are offered are outstanding, the instructors are so top-notch and the administration is so helpful," College Park resident and meditation student Laurin MacLeish said. "It's honestly incredible."

MacLeish is also taking two other classes in February through RCLL in addition to Bernstein's meditation course, including a photography class, sending her strolling down Winter Park with her classmates snapping photos of sights that intrigued them. As a teacher who taught for 40 years, MacLeish raves about the opportunity that RCLL gives her in her free time.

With the slew of options, she said that it's tempting to want to register for them all. Other classes offered this spring include Mah Jongg, Community Engagement 101, Introduction to Postmodernism, and Animal Communication.

With the RCLL, seniors are able to step out of their comfort zone at a reasonable price – \$65 a class – in order to have a social and educational experience with experts in their field such as Bernstein at the helm. And they don't have to worry about the stress of tests or final exams.

"In a way you could say there's no such thing as a teacher and student," Bernstein said. "For 20 years we prepare to go out into the world, so maybe we should prepare for 20 years to leave."

It's with this philosophy that Bernstein finds his niche in teaching senior citizens and establishes an identity as an expert on Eastern thought.

The RCLL was created through a grant in 2013 from the Winter Park Health Foundation. That grant runs out in May 2016, and Norburn said that will leave the program in need of a new home. She said that if the new Winter Park Library gets approved, she would love to be able to take the program there.

Norburn models the RCLL program after Furman University in South Carolina, whose lifelong learning and continued education program is funded by the seniors.

"The [students] are starting their own groups; some are falling in love; some are taking intergenerational classes with our current Rollins students; some are traveling for the first time ever and stepping out of their comfort zones," Norburn said. "And many are connecting with Rollins College and looking for more ways to get involved."



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