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Baby Boomers Looking for Reinvention Try College—Again

Fellowship programs offer a ‘gap year’ for successful types to press pause before their second act

By Douglas Belkin

Pat Collins has worked as a therapist for 30 years and is looking to reinvent herself. So she has gone back to the place where she invented herself the first time—college.

“I’m not sure what I want to do next,” said Mrs. Collins, 66 years old. “I’m able to retire financially. But I’m not ready to stop working.”

Mrs. Collins is a fellow at the University of Minnesota’s Advanced Careers initiative, one of many programs at schools catering to baby boomers looking for a second act.

Schools like Harvard University and Stanford University pioneered the idea. University of Notre Dame will start a new program next fall and many other schools have expressed interest.

Adult students have been a growing force at universities for more than a decade—mostly blue-collar workers or [those pursuing advanced degrees](#) focused on getting new skills. The advanced career fellowships target white-collar workers paying sometimes hefty tuition to take advantage of all a major university has to offer.

“There are 10,000 baby boomers retiring every day and we need them; we can’t let them just be on the sidelines,” said Phyllis Moen, the University of Minnesota sociologist who started the fellowship program.

Universities can also use the business, with some of the programs charging tens of thousands of dollars—and most of the fellows paying full freight.

A decline in the number of high-school graduates is expected to continue sapping university enrollments. In early December, [Moody’s](#) cut its outlook for the higher-education sector to negative from stable, citing a failure of operating revenue to keep pace with expenses.

Harvard University launched the first program in 2008 to direct accomplished executives toward global problems. Fellows at the Advanced Leadership Initiative pay \$65,000 and get free rein of the campus to audit graduate and undergraduate classes and lunch with faculty.

The first class had 12 students; this year there were 48, chosen among 550 applicants. Among the key components: the ability of boomers and millennials to take classes together and learn from each other.

“There are only two segments of life that have the total freedom to think about the great issues of social change,” said Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a professor at Harvard Business School who helped create the program. “Undergraduates and people who may be at the end of their middle years who aren’t preoccupied with how to make money or raise a family.”

Stanford’s program launched in 2015. Officials liken it to a gap year for successful professionals wanting some time to reflect before they start something new. The price point is similar (\$65,000 per student—add \$30,000 to bring a partner or spouse). Both programs attract a lot of corporate attorneys, c-suite executives and money managers.

Phil Pizzo, a medical doctor and the founder of Stanford’s program, said he has fielded inquiries from 30 universities in the U.S. and abroad about how to establish a

professional fellowship. This year, the program received about 10 applications for each of the 25 spots.

“Since the 11th century, universities have focused on young people,” Dr. Pizzo said.

“Now, with longevity being what it is, we need to expand the role to lifelong learning and intergenerational learning and teaching.”

Dr. Moen observed Stanford’s Distinguished Career Initiative and decided to start a public school version in Minneapolis. Tuition is \$7,500 for the year but is likely to rise. The program began this fall. Undergraduate students took a class called “The Future of Work and Life in the 21st Century” with the fellows.

“The first time I walked into the class I was like, ‘Why are there a bunch of old people in here with us?’” said Madison Smiley, a 20-year-old junior, majoring in psychology. “I was afraid it was going to feel like taking a class with my mom.”

But during an assignment aimed at figuring out ways to help contract workers find a sense of community in the workplace, the fellows offered a real-world perspective that made their project work.

“My peers aren’t in the workforce,” Ms. Smiley said. “They were able to share the problems they have actually seen.”

By the end of the semester, they took group photographs, the first time a class had done that in Dr. Moen’s career.