

Starting a Third Age Learning Group: 8 Lessons Learned (Dec. 2011) ...

Third Age Learning in Burlington (3ALB) began with one person attending a Third Age Learning (3AL) session in Guelph, Ontario last Spring and thinking, "Burlington needs one of these!"

Well, now we have one. In slightly less than a year, 3ALB has gone from idea to execution. We learned a lot along the way so we'd like to share.

1. It Takes Time

3ALB did it in less than a year, but based on that experience we'd recommend 18 months. Many tasks need to be accomplished simultaneously - program development, incorporation, fund-raising, budgeting, and publicity, for example, to mention only some. They all take time.

2. Grow a Good Team

3ALB has a core team of 8. We have backgrounds in big business and small business, in education, science, engineering, finance, health care, website design, and various sorts of management and marketing ... and we've used every one of those skills. More importantly, we have a committed team.

Your team will have a different mix of skills but when you've done a good job of team-building you'll have two important advantages:

- You can do more than you think possible
- People will rise to the occasion because they're committed to the goal

Attracting people who are already active in your community is also important. They'll have networks you can work with.

3. Fund-Raising

There are two primary sources of funds: government and private funding agencies.

- *New Horizons for Seniors (NHS)* is a federal program with a country-wide mandate to fund activities by and for seniors: http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/community_partnerships/seniors/index.shtml Ontario also has the *Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF)*, whose mandate is funding non-profit programs for all community sectors: <http://www.trilliumfoundation.org/?menuid=57> There will be something similar in your province or territory.
- Most communities have some equivalent of Burlington's Community Foundation. All the big banks have community funding arms, as do many large corporations. *Charity Village* has an excellent database of funding organizations country-wide: <http://www.charityvillage.com/cv/ires/fund.asp>

Most granting organizations have a set application procedure – you apply, a committee evaluates, and sends your application to a final review board for a grant/don't grant decision. That takes time. At NHS, for example, the process takes a minimum of 5 months.

There is a great demand for funds. NHS and OTF typically fund about 50% of the applications they receive and rarely grant the full amount applied for, so be focused and diligent.

4. Build a Website

A website gives you credibility and visibility. How often have you heard about a new program or organization and immediately looked for their website?

A well-designed website provides:

- The opportunity to educate your community to Third Age Learning
- The ability to create a database of your members and communicate with them
- Online registration capability

- A private section where you can post committee minutes, by-laws, practise manuals, etc. You can also store your archive online – no tree-cutting involved!

This is our website: www.3alb.org

5. Allocate Resources Wisely

Since resources are always limited, this is important. Let's take programming as an example.

Your lecture series is the heart of your 3AL organization. Program is also your public face - and Program is a resource hog! We didn't initially realize how much of our resource time and skills the program research, development, and coordination would need. The lesson? Start programming early and be prepared to spend the time.

This is the primary reason we recommend an 18-month start-up period. Give yourselves adequate time and you won't have to work quite as hard as we did.

6. Become Incorporated

If you can find a legal firm willing to prepare your incorporation on a pro bono basis, do it! Incorporation gives you credibility. Incorporation isn't *necessary*; but it is advisable. OTF, for example, doesn't accept grant applications from unincorporated organizations.

7. Expect the Unexpected

Here are a few of 3ALB's unwelcome surprises:

- Our incorporation wasn't completed in time to apply for OTF funding – twice! It wasn't 3ALB's fault and it wasn't the lawyers' fault – just circumstance.
- Our proposed partnership with our venue collapsed, and not because of anything we had done or not done.
- People have lives ... and vacation plans! We were unprepared for the degree of disruption caused by extended absences of key people. Plan for these.

8. Have Fun!

You're retired or semi-retired. Now is the time to do something you enjoy – something useful and challenging. It's also a lot easier to attract and retain volunteers if they come into an organization where people are doing something of value for their community, *and* having fun doing it.

And remember, there is help available. Check out CATALIST, the national 3AL network, for information on 3AL's in your neighbourhood: <http://dev.www.uregina.ca/catalist/eindex.html> In Ontario, see TAN, the new provincial network: <http://www.thirdagenetwork.ca/>] We're also willing to help. Contact us at info@3alb.org.

[**NB:** Just a quick June 2014 update about CATALIST. Although CATALIST is no longer an operational organisation I've kept the link here because it's of historical interest – CATALIST was one of the very first attempts to try and pull together groups that were focused on later life learning and their experience is instructional. There is also contact information on the site for 3AL groups outside of the province.]

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