INTRODUCTORY ASTRONOMY FOR MATURE STUDENTS

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Much of this meeting has been concerned with the teaching of introductory astronomy to children, teenagers, and young adults. Introductory astronomy for working and retired adults has been given short shrift, however. Because the mature population is significant in number and in its influence on governmental support for astronomy, I thought that some mention should be made. My own experience concerns the educational programs that are available to mature students in the United States.

Most working adults are restricted by their jobs to taking classes in the evening. Most large universities in the United States provide such classes. These are often administered by organizations that are completely autonomous from the "host" school. A typical arrangement is for the school to provide classroom space, access to audio-visual equipment (sometimes), and university credit for those who register for credit. The "adult education," "continuing education," or "university extension" organization handles the rest. It obtains the necessary faculty to teach the courses, advertises the classes, and administers the registration and grading. For the "credit" courses in astronomy, the most common teachers are graduate students and postdoctoral fellows looking for some extra cash and teaching experience. There is no real impetus for regular faculty members to teach these classes. This is an unfortunate circumstance that could be remedied by some private, state, or federal funding of endowed "chairs" in adult education.

The attitudes, expectations, and tolerances of mature students are very different from those of their younger counterparts. These differences must be recognized and addressed, if one wishes to teach introductory astronomy with any degree of success. Because the teacher is often faced with students who are older and more experienced in a general sense, he or she must carefully define the proper realm of authority. I have found that the students appreciate a well-run class complete with challenging homework and exams, just as long as they can deal with me as a fellow adult who will be responsive to their opinions. I have also found that, on-average, the mature students are more motivated and enthusiastic than their younger counterparts who are often taking astronomy to satisfy some institutional requirement.

One of the most exciting educational developments in the United States is the emergence of ElderHostel programs for students 60 years of age or older. These programs are typically one or two week workshops, where 10 to 30 students live together "dormitory-style" and participate in a coordinated program of classes and

field trips. I had the pleasure of relaxing in a rustic lodge in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts while teaching astronomy in a program that also included cross-country ski lessons and lectures on famous authors of the Berkshires. A dizzying variety of ElderHostel packages are now available throughout the United States and in other countries as well. In 1987 over 140,000 hostelers enrolled in programs operating in all 50 states, all 10 Canadian provinces, and in 35 countries overseas. More than 1000 universities and colleges are involved as hosts of these programs. Perhaps most important, the programs are inexpensive compared to the lodging and eating expenses of equivalent vacations. Information on the ElderHostel program (and how one can get involved as an educator or host) can be obtained by writing to Judy Goggin, ElderHostel, 80 Boylston St., Suite 400, Boston, Massachusetts 02116, U.S.A.

Comment

Jay M. Pasachoff: I had the pleasure of teaching an ElderHostel course to 35 students here at Williams just two weeks ago. My five one-hour lectures were: Halley's Comet, Stellar Evolution, Supernova 1987A, Solar Eclipses, and Observing with a Field Guide. The students were attentive and devoted, and the feedback was very favorable.