

What is LIRA?

The following is the speech that Toby Hodes gave at the LIRA and Alumni Workshop on April 24, 2017, telling all that LIRA has to offer to retirees.

Hi, I'm so glad to see all of you and want to add my welcome to that of Rich and Reja, and most particularly to our guests. I was quite honored when I was asked to talk to you about LIRA and why I think it is so special.

As I thought about what I would say to you today, getting thoughts and suggestions from a variety of sources, my mind hearkened back to another time, about 45 years ago, when I was writing another talk. I had written my remarks, but was somewhat skeptical about the finished product. Thinking it might sound better spoken than it read, I read it aloud to my then 4-year-old daughter. When I finished, she looked at me and said "You say a lot of words, Mommy." I have lived in fear of that reaction ever since whenever I am called upon to speak. I promise you, I will do my best to avoid that consequence today.

Now that I have started on a personal journey, let me continue along that line. And, yes, it is personal because my membership and activities in LIRA are so important to me personally.

In the last 25 years of my working life, prior to my retirement, I had had three very different careers, each of which involved steep learning curves. After working as a Textile Chemist for several years after my graduation from Lowell Tech, I had spent over ten years, as women my age were want to do, outside the paid workforce. My first job upon reentry into the job market was as the Director of a Women's Service organization, after which I bought jet engine parts for General Electric, and ended up as a career counselor for displaced professionals in the 90's. These had all been very challenging, time consuming and interesting jobs. So, as I retired 18 years ago, I thought what was I going to do with my time and my brain now? Scary!

As luck would have it, a friend of mine had become involved with a group at UMass Lowell, and he thought I might be interested. I attended my first LIRA meeting in 1998, and for me, after 40 years away from Lowell Tech, it turned out to be a homecoming of sorts. And what a home coming!! A snide aside to Thomas Wolfe – YES, you can go home again, and I am here to testify that it has been even better the second-time round.

Let me see a show of hands -How many of you ever enjoyed taking exams, doing homework or, as was the bane of LTI students, writing lab reports? Just as I suspected. Now, how many of you ever took a course in high school or college just because the topic sounded really intriguing or you just wanted to learn a little bit more about the subject?

Well, I am here to tell you, the opportunity to do just that – to, as a member of LIRA, take courses for the mere pleasure of learning, without the onus of all the other "stuff", has been one of the absolute delights of my retirement.

What kind of courses you ask? Well, if you can name it, it can probably be available. Our courses **USUALLY** run for 8 weeks, meeting once a week, for two hours. How many courses can a member take? As many as he or she wants. What happens if you miss a class? Absolutely nothing.

Our courses and instructors come from a variety of sources, and there's always more than something for everybody. - - - When we are lucky, usually once a year, Bob Forrant, distinguished University professor who was with us this morning, offers a course on American history, ranging from the Civil War to the American Labor Movement to this semester's topic on the 60's. Yes, we were there, but it's amazing how much we didn't see, didn't understand or don't remember.

Living in today's world, I found my own lack of knowledge about the major religions of the world embarrassing. And so, I took it upon myself to teach a course on Comparative Religions. The interest raised by that led us to dig further and offer slightly more in-depth courses on each of the world's major religions, particularly the three Abrahamic Religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. From experience, let me tell you, if you really want to learn something, try to teach it.

Each semester we offer Great Decisions. The program is based on background information and policy options for the eight most critical issues facing America each year as provided by the American Foreign Policy Association. If you are interested in learning more about it, I can guarantee that our president Rich Grove will be more than delighted to answer your questions.

Inviolate on our calendar is Wednesday's Art & Music program. This, I will tell you, ranges far and wide, both literally and figuratively – from classroom discussions on various works of art and/or music to docent led field trips to museums and buildings of historic and artistic interest, as well as a trip into Boston for an open rehearsal of the BSO at least once and sometimes twice a year.

Want something a little more attractive to the scientific minded among us? Well, we are just completing a series on robotics (by the way, a great winter intersession program several years ago was a trip to the University's robotic testing facility) and we recently offered courses on big data and the inventions that changed the world.

Keeping us current, the recent election cycle provided an excellent opportunity for us to refresh our knowledge on the way our presidential election system operates. Frank Talty, Assistant Dean of the Political Science Department, guided us through the entire process with a series of four mini courses, including a primer on the electoral college, a look at the primaries and caucuses and their peculiarities in various states, the national conventions and the final result and the data behind it, culminating in our current course on The Constitution of the United States.

In the 30 years LIRA has been in existence, there have been far too many courses to cite them all, covering an amazing number of topics. There is the never to be left out reading of a Shakespeare play each semester, and this year a mini course on the humor in his tragedies. There have been courses on China, Germany and other countries; on economics; on Supreme Court cases, and, yes, even Broadway musicals to name a few. And there is our monthly book discussion, covering a very broad variety of genres and topics. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the exercise program the physical therapy department offers to our members, designed to increase balance, flexibility, and strength for people our age.

And, as a very integral part of all this, there is the wonderful opportunity to meet interesting people and make new friends. There is a very real sense among us of comradery and community, a feeling of understanding and shared interests based on discussions held in classes and during our always delightful coffee breaks with the ever-present home-made goodies, and from sharing a seat on a bus as we take one of our many field trips. What's not to like?

But I can give you even more to like. Up until now, my emphasis has been on the joys and pleasures of taking courses and learning for the sheer enjoyment and intellectual thrill of it. But LIRA has offered me other very real joys and pleasures, the bulk of which take place at our annual holiday party in December. Each year, LIRA members donate many new books and warm clothing such as hats, mittens and gloves, for children of all ages for distribution by Community Teamwork, Inc. of Lowell, the agency which serves families in shelters and oversees many child care programs in the city. Seeing the tables piled high with these donations from our members is always heart-warming.

But for me, the highlight of our holiday party each year is the awarding of our scholarships to undergrads at the University and the chance to meet the winners. When I first joined in 1998, we were giving two \$100 scholarships annually. This has now grown to a wonderful point where, this year, we awarded **six \$1500** scholarships. Fantastic!

Now, before all of you are ready to run me out on a rail, saying that 4-year-old was right – that I do say a lot of words - let me leave you with one last thought - - -

Last week, I was pleased to be present at the dedication of the Pulichino-Tong Business Center, the newest addition to North Campus, and I was struck by something John Pulichino, a major benefactor of the University said in his remarks. Speaking of why he does what he does for the school, he said, "If you want to touch the past, touch a rock. If you want to touch the present, touch a flower. If you want to touch the future, touch a student."

Members of LIRA are certainly familiar with the past, we are living and learning in the present, but we are ready, willing and able to touch the future by the scholarships we give to the students at this wonderful University. LIRA, as a part of UMass Lowell, continues to open up avenues for all of us to continue to learn, and to give, and to grow, and to touch the future.

As I continue my homecoming almost 60 years after my graduation, I remain proud to call this University my alma mater.

Toby Hodes