

# Talk for SDSU Student Achievement Celebration

Good evening. I am Denny Braun. It is my great pleasure to have the honor and privilege of addressing you this evening. As part of our celebration, I have been chosen to tell you about the Osher Program, which is part of the College of Extended Studies here at San Diego State University. A primary reason why I am representing the Osher Program is because I have been both a student and a teacher in the program, previously presenting a lecture on Growing Income Inequality in the United States and acting as a facilitator for our non-fiction book discussion groups.

My major comments will address what it is like to be an Osher student, and to explain what is involved in the program. But before I do, let me explain about how I came to be part of it. I was a Professor of Sociology at Minnesota State University, in Mankato, for 33 years. In essence, this third of a century spanned my entire career aside from an initial year as a demographer/statistician for the U.S. Census Bureau in Washington, DC. When I retired from my faculty position in 2002, it was a no-brainer to migrate from the frozen tundra of Minnesota to enjoy the sunny warmth of San Diego.

While I immediately enjoyed the wonderful weather and outdoor activities in San Diego, I found I greatly missed the intellectual stimulation and scholarly thought of academic life. Both my colleagues and students at my old university had greatly contributed to what we might call my “cognitive well-being” during my entire adult life, but upon retirement I suddenly lost this important source of stimulation.

Enter the Osher Program at SDSU. A few years ago I learned of this program from a mailed circular to my home. Upon investigating what this program was about, I learned that Osher offered what I would call “abbreviated” or “mini” university courses of an academic nature to persons who are 50 or more years old. Some of the courses I have taken during the past few years

include the archeology of Jamestown and San Diego, the historical influence of religion in America, the sociological importance of various Star Trek series on television, famous musical films, analysis of the 2010 mid-term election campaigns, a history of the Supreme Court, etc. The Osher Program here at SDSU also offers short 2-hour lectures, both fiction and non-fiction book discussion groups, field trips to the symphony and local museums, and so on.

These courses, offered during both spring and fall semesters as well as in a short summer session, are relatively inexpensive. Other than age, there are no entrance requirements such as a minimum GPA, a qualifying SAT score, or even whether one has had any college attendance before. Most of the students have graduated from college, however, and are retired teachers, librarians, social workers, etc. A few (myself included) have a Ph.D. or other advanced graduate degree. This leads to some well-informed, erudite, and knowledgeable classroom discussions—as well as to a challenging, exciting experience for our faculty (who are drawn from the faculties of SDSU and surrounding colleges).

One of the best parts about being an Osher student is that there are no tests or required readings. Our classroom experience revolves around the pure joy of learning for learning's sake. Of course, it goes without saying that there are no “official” college credits given for completing these courses either. Yet for nearly all of us, there is no need to accumulate further academic credits. Those among our age group have “been there and done that”.

So why do we do it? What's in it for us? Why do we keep coming back, signing up for courses semester after semester, year after year? There is the “joy of learning” alluded to previously. But to put the reason more broadly, it makes us “HAPPY”! There is a great deal of recent, ground-breaking, scientific research about happiness (Nic Marks, *The Happiness Manifesto*) that identifies five major factors that contribute to a person's over all happiness. The three factors of physical activity, meditation, and volunteerism will not be discussed. The Osher Program does provide two of these important factors to its participants, however, and that is continued learning activity and

connection with other people in a meaningful community. Indeed, the motto for Osher and the College of Extended Studies is “Never Stop Learning.” It is not an empty slogan, but has real meaning and impact to people of all ages. Scientific research firmly supports the need and benefit of continuous learning.

Lastly, let me conclude with a bow toward what we may call a “meaningful community.” Because Osher students do keep taking courses and meeting with each other in various classrooms year after year, exchanging opinions, thoughts, and resources, we have become interconnected and have evolved into a community. There are acquaintances and flourishing friendships among the students, and with the faculty and staff of the Osher Program. At the beginning of each semester we have an orientation and “get acquainted” day, and at the end of each semester we celebrate by getting together for a potluck luncheon. We participate in an on line Big Tent discussion exchange. Lastly-- in addition to sharing courses-- we go to museums, plays, and symphonies together. In short, we have developed a meaningful community over the years, providing significant social contacts and support to those who may have otherwise been isolated and lonely in their senior years. For myself, I regard this as a real blessing and am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Osher Program. Thank you!