

CURIOUS MINDS GO BACK TO SCHOOL

Many classes, programs cater to retirees

Days after retiring from a 47-year job as an engineer, Donald Harmon, of Annandale, traded in his briefcase for a backpack and a pile of dirt.

Harmon, 75, had gone to work for aerospace and defense contractor Lockheed (now Lockheed Martin) at the dawn of the semiconductor era, in 1965.

When his engineering career ended, Harmon began to pursue what had always interested him: “I decided I would go back to my first love, anthropology.”

Harmon takes advantage of a state program called the Senior

Citizen Tuition Waiver. Residents of Virginia for at least a year who are 60 or older can enroll or audit (without academic credit) classes at state schools. Harmon doesn’t qualify to have the tuition waived—that’s available only to those with taxable income of up to \$23,850 a year.

But he doesn’t have to pay tuition for classes he audits and gets other perks, like free parking and no lab fees. And he enjoys the benefits of campus life at George Mason University in Fairfax County, such as the rec centers, evening events and libraries.

Last school year, 2,595 students used the waivers, mostly at community colleges, according to Laura Osberger, spokesperson for the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

A LARGE MENU OF CLASSES

Harmon, an AARP Virginia volunteer, has taken about 35 classes over the past seven years, seeking a deeper understanding of issues like climate change and the chance to dig into archeology, literally and figuratively.

“There’s a lot more than just the specialty you’re interested in,” he said. “It opens up your mind to the world.”

As part of a student internship, he did fieldwork near the Occoquan River, looking for pottery and other clues to colonial and Native American life.

The physical labor of digging in the dirt was rewarding, he said, and the much younger students and archaeologists were welcoming as he learned what a career in the field was like.

The waiver program requires that regular students be given priority in getting into classes, but Harmon said he rarely has a problem because he’s taking upper-level courses.

Other intellectual pursuits are also available for older Virginians.

Jerry Niles, 74, a retired professor and dean emeritus at Virginia Tech, chairs the board of its Lifelong Learning Institute, one of several programs at colleges around the state offering shorter courses for older students.

Instructors are retired or current faculty and people with expertise in a certain field. The weekly 90-minute classes run for three or six weeks. Popular courses include current events, painting, literature and history.

“What you are looking at in Lifelong Learning is learners who are really hungry,” said Niles. “The students want to be there, and the instructors want to be there.”

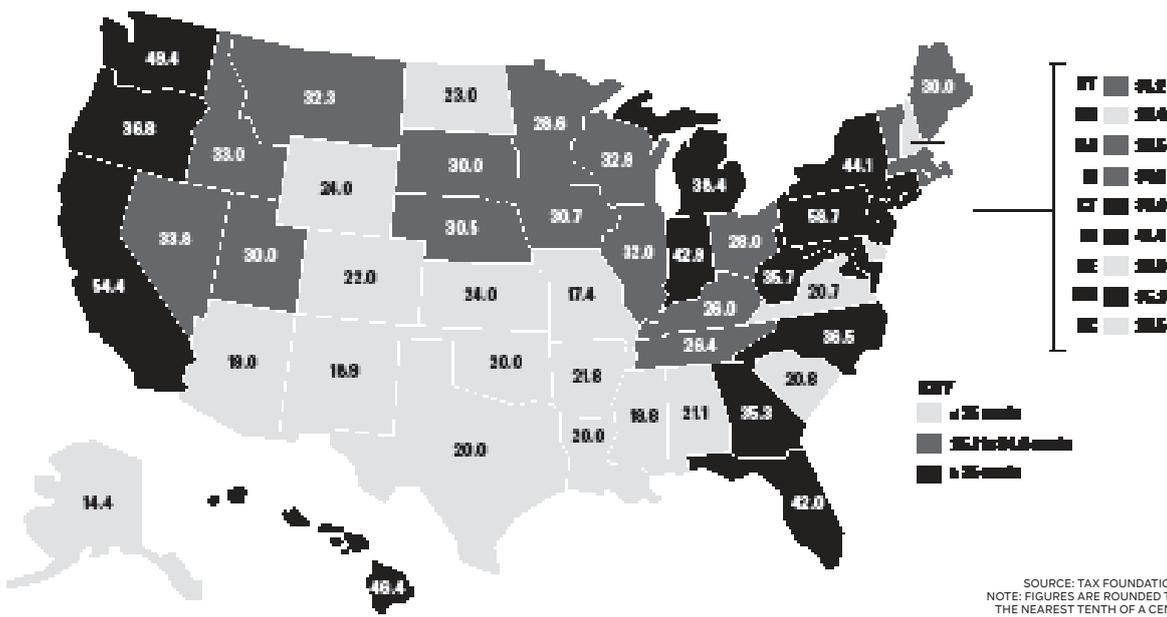
The classes provide socializing, a variety of field trips and ways to keep active.

Harmon wishes more older people knew about the state’s academic opportunities. “Everybody needs to choose the important things in their life. Try to make good use of your time.”

For more information on the state programs and classes, go to seniorcitizenguideforcollege.com. —*Tamara Lytle*

DATABANK USA

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SOURCE: TAX FOUNDATION
NOTE: FIGURES ARE ROUNDED TO THE NEAREST TENTH OF A CENT AND ARE ACCURATE AS OF JAN. 1

11,895

That’s the number of Virginians 65 and older who received home-delivered meals in 2016, according to an AARP Public Policy Institute study. Go to aarp.org/olderamericansact for more information.

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