
Wendi C. Thomas: Classes nudge us to just try something

By Wendi C. Thomas

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When the catalog arrives in the mail just after New Year, it's like a big kick in the rear.

A tangible reminder of resolutions made -- to learn another language, to exercise, to travel.

It's the University of Memphis' Continuing Education catalog, pages and pages of ways to improve the quality of your life, to make this year the year you fill-in-the-blank.

With more than 200 courses offered this spring, there's got to be something for you.

Get a digital camera for the holidays? Learn how to use it.

Want to go vegetarian? Learn some recipes.

The economy got you thinking about going entrepreneurial? Learn how to start a small business.

From perfecting your golf swing to tuning your palate for fine wines, there's a class for just about everyone.

But, there may not always be a continuing education program. It's self-sustaining, says director Vicki Sallis Murrell, and often in danger of going under.

With three full-time staff, Murrell, who has held this job for three years, counts on students' enrollment fees to cover expenses. Neither the university nor the state contributes to the program.

Murrell's desire to see the continuing education department grow isn't just for self-preservation -- she's convinced it provides a vital role in a healthy community.

People who otherwise would never come to campus do so because of the continuing ed classes offered. And some who wouldn't -- or couldn't -- devote the time to a full-time formal degree program can still satisfy their urge to learn with these shorter classes.

Then, there's the invaluable networking that students do -- with each other and their instructors.

"If we were not offering this venue for those things, I'm not sure where Memphis would

find it," Murrell says.

"I do fear, however, that without the support of the community, it may be something that we'll be wondering about in the not-too-distant future."

Murrell isn't just the program's director, she's a frequent student.

"I can get out of a chokehold," she says. That's thanks to the Krav Maga self-defense class she took.

And her dicing and slicing skills are much improved since she took a knife skills class.

I've taken continuing ed classes at the university, and have a long list of classes I plan to take (*¿Habla Espanol?*).

What they offered to 1,900 students last fall (not including the 4,000 high school students who take the Alive at 25 driving class each year) would be missed by even more if it were gone.

It's an affordable way to expand your mind -- most classes are around \$100 and many are far less.

Learning isn't something that stops when you've gotten your degree, or are comfortable in your job. Expanding your brain should be a lifelong goal -- and continuing ed is a relatively painless (and almost always test-free) way to do so.

If you haven't gotten this spring's green and purple catalog, call 678-6000 or e-mail umce@memphis.edu to have one mailed to you. Or see the catalog online at umce.memphis.edu.

Estará alegre que lo hizo.

Or, for English-only speakers: You'll be glad you did.

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