

Never too late to learn something new: East Coast seniors head back to class

Premium content

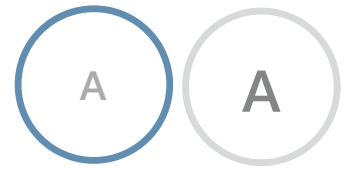
David Keating (davidcjkeating@gmail.com)

Published: Feb 16 at 3 p.m.

Updated: Feb 16 at 6:10 p.m.



Across Atlantic Canada, 'older than average' and senior students who may not have seen the inside of a classroom in quite a while are taking advantage of opportunities for life-long learning. Organizations available to support students have found ways to continue operating through the pandemic. - RF Stock



Forget 50 is the new 40. With life-long learning, 60 is the new 20.

Across Atlantic Canada, associations dedicated to supporting 'older than average' and senior students are opening doors to new learning opportunities for people who may not have seen the inside of a classroom in quite a while.

Whether returning to school to complete a degree or simply learning a new subject out of interest, older students can find like-minded peers through associations like [The Seniors' College Association of Nova Scotia](#) and [Memorial University's Students Older Than Average Society](#).

Pleasure and Camaraderie

Lois Block is the president of the Seniors' College Association of Nova Scotia (SCANS), a non-profit volunteer organization that's been offering courses to seniors since 2007. The majority of students involved with SCANS are in their retirement years and looking for new interests and new activities, explains Block.

"You go from one day from being busy and you're very engaged," says Block. "Then you're looking for things to be engaged with. But now's the time to explore areas that you never had a chance to before. That's been a big motivation for a lot of us. You meet people with common interests and you form fast friends because of that."

Founded by retired professors from Dalhousie University, the subject areas covered by SCANS cross all academic disciplines, with history, literature, music, astronomy, and geology among the areas that have been offered in the past.

"We're not a how-to – something like how to use a computer," says Block. "But we do offer science courses, literature courses – a wide variety of subjects."

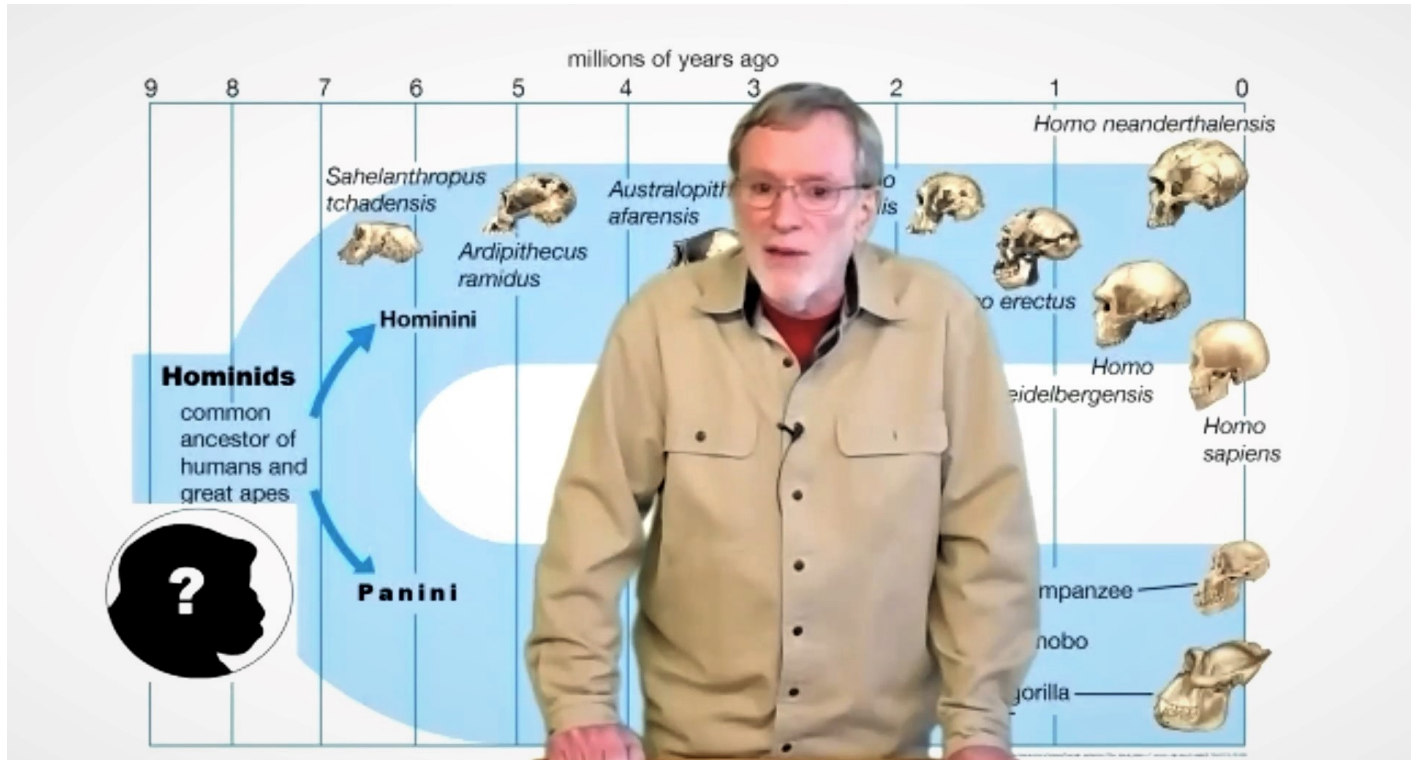
While the focus is strictly on academic subjects, you don't need a degree to be a member. The courses are all non-credit and there is no expectation of writing papers or exams.

While learning is an obvious draw for seniors to join SCANS, the opportunity to meet people and socialize is just as important.

"A lot of seniors can be quite isolated," says Block. "So this does get people out. And people really like it – we have music courses that are wonderful, film courses, and wonderful instructors."

For the association, 'senior' is defined as anyone over the age of 50. The majority of members are people who are retired but are looking for opportunities to continue to learn.

"We have one member who tells us he's 93 or 94 or 95 each year," says Block. "There's still a lot of members in their eighties."



During the winter semester, Barnett Richling has been teaching a class via Zoom on understanding human evolution to senior students with the Seniors' College Association of Nova Scotia (SCANS). Founded by retired professors from Dalhousie University, the subject areas covered by SCANS cross a variety of academic disciplines and allow senior students to explore new areas of interest. - Contributed

COVID pivot

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, SCANS has had to shift to an entirely online model rather than continue in-person classes.

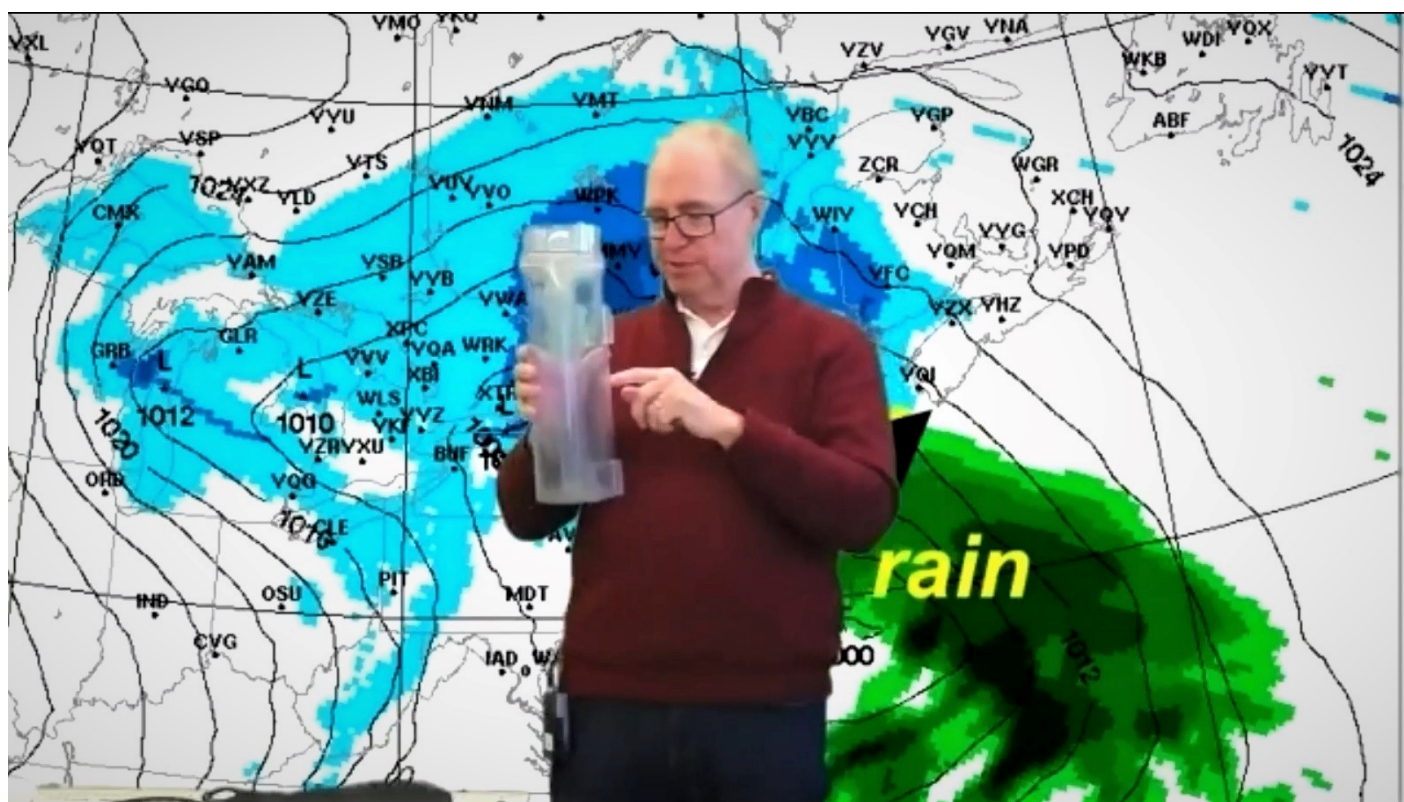
Block says the transition, led by their volunteer team, has been a different experience but has had a few unexpected benefits.

"Certainly, some positives were learned from being on Zoom," says Block. "Where we don't have chapters, seniors couldn't participate before."

Whether classes will continue as both in-person and via Zoom events is a decision SCANS will make once the pandemic has passed.

"Our members say, 'I'm glad there's Zoom, but we miss getting together,'" says Block

SCANS is an entirely Nova Scotia-based organization, with five existing chapters across Nova Scotia in Halifax, Chester, Mahone Bay, Liverpool, and Truro. With Zoom classes, participants are now joining in from across the province and other parts of the country. SCANS' courses are offered during three six-week terms each year in October, February, and April. In the summer, SCANS students take a break from the classroom. In-person classes are usually two hours, while online Zoom classes have been cut back to one-and-a-half hours.



Jim Abraham's students at the Seniors' College Association of Nova Scotia (SCANS) have been learning via Zoom since the pandemic began. During this semester, he's teaching a class on forecasting weather and climate. - Contributed

University Experience

For older students looking to return to university for credited courses, organizations like the Students Older Than Average Society (SOTA) at Memorial University in St. John's can

often be found on campus to provide support.

'Older than average' is defined for SOTA as being 21 and over, with the students who are accessing services ranging into their 60s.

According to Joshua Tucker, president of SOTA, the primary activity of the society is operating a resource centre for older students. There, students can access a computer, take a break between classes, and generally meet students in their age range.

"Sometimes there's technical support they want," says Tucker, explaining that some older students are not as familiar with navigating the online world of university logins and accessing digital resources.

Along with the practical resources, older students also find another important support: the camaraderie of students their age.

"There are older students who come to the university and they feel alienated," says Tucker. "Not through any fault of their own, but primarily because of the age gap."

Like SCAN, SOTA has had to adapt the way it supports older students during COVID-19. During a usual academic year, SOTA organizes events for older students, like board game nights, karaoke nights, and an end-of-semester outing to a local restaurant. Now, more events are being hosted online.

As more and more people choose to return to school at an older age, Tucker has likewise seen an uptick in the use of the SOTA Resource Centre in his five-year involvement with the society.

"In recent years, there's been a trend for more older students to visit the resources centre," he says.

With aging populations in every Atlantic Canadian province and life-long learning gaining more and more momentum as a trend, returning to school as an older student is becoming a more common choice at any age, and it's not expected to change any time soon.

RELATED:

- **Memorial University study says sustainable ocean management requires holistic approach**
- **Acadia Lifelong Learning class finds pieces of local history in Starr's Point**

Did this story inform or enhance your perspective on this subject?

1 being least likely, and 10 being most likely

Submit feedback