

OLLI/ERA International Affairs Discussion Group

10 years together and still going strong

by Peter Levitov, group moderator

The monthly International Affairs Discussion Group started as one of the OLLI interest groups in September 2014. The original moderators were retired UNL faculty David Forsythe (political science), Jerry Petr (economics) and Bill Avery (political science), although before the first session, Peter Levitov (International Affairs) joined them, and Bill Avery opted out due to his Legislative schedule. Soon the group offered the ERA (then the UNL Emeriti Association) the opportunity to be a co-sponsor. The group met and continues to meet on the first Wednesday of each month from September through May.



Peter Levitov opens a session of the International Affairs Discussion Group.

The goal of group discussions

The aim was to bring together folks with an interest in current/contemporary issues on the world stage to discuss – not hear lectures about – these timely topics. Each of the moderators took responsibility for a session, briefly introducing two or three topics and facilitating a discussion on them. We met at Stauffer's Café & Pie Shoppe so those attending could have coffee and pie during the discussions. It worked so well that at the very first session there were upwards of 30 folks, and we had to end the session after the 90 minutes Stauffer's allotted us. On occasion, we would bring in guest speakers who spoke and took questions following their presentations. Soon the sessions attracted 40, 50 and even more participants, eager to hear about and discuss these issues, which were announced to both OLLI and ERA members, often with links to relevant background articles.

Topics explored over the years

Over the years topics have ranged from specific countries and/or regions to themes that transcend the globe. A few examples are China (many times), Russia, Mexico, India, the Middle East, migration, humanitarian relief and drought. Guest speakers have included members of the greater Lincoln community as well as local faculty, both retired and active. Participation by those who attend has been robust, to say the least. While few are experts, most of them are well-read, well-traveled and generally current on world affairs. Not everyone chimes in, but many do every month.

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Changes during and following the Covid pandemic

When Covid came, we were unable to meet in person but continued the series by Zoom with a balance of guest speakers and sessions led by the moderators. Beth Ann Brooks (psychiatry/ NU Medical Center) replaced Jerry Petr, who retired from moderating. Some sessions drew upwards of 60 Zoomers. After we were able to meet face-to-face again, we



David Forsythe, moderator, addressing the group in their new location at the Gere Library at a face-to-face meeting after the group had met via Zoom during the pandemic.

changed our venue to Gere Library and adopted an annual cycle of six moderated discussions and three guest speakers, which has worked out well. Last July we even had a special summer gathering to discuss the Russian invasion of Ukraine that was occupying the news every day. About 65 attended. (Sessions are always free.)

Current discussion group details

This year Wes Peterson (Agricultural Economics) and Roger Lempke (former Adjutant General of the Nebraska National Guard) joined the moderators when Beth Ann Brooks stepped down. The group still meets every month at Gere Library, South 56th Street and Normal Boulevard, and welcomes more participants. There is no advance registration, and no fee is required. Both OLLI and ERA members can learn what topics will be discussed at forthcoming sessions in their group's respective email announcements. Please join us.

Recent International Affairs Discussion Group speakers



Political science professor and director of the University of the University Honors Program, Patrice McMahon speaks on "Contemporary Poland."



Political science professor Sergio Wals speaks on "Recent Developments in Central and South America."