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Welcome from the *AGHExchange* Editor



Welcome to a brand-new year and with it, a new edition of the *AGHExchange*! In this issue, we offer an encouraging reflection by Elise Eifert Freeman from UNC Greensboro about her program's positive experience with the gerontology accreditation process as well as a reminder from Sandra McGuire and Lyn Holley about the importance of a lifespan approach to gerontology education. Also included is an account of a virtual, age-friendly intergenerational project at the University of North Carolina Wilmington that emphasizes the benefits of meaningful intergenerational interactions on attitudes toward aging and older adults. Finally, in our Faculty Spotlight column, we feature Laura Donorfio from the University of Connecticut.

As a reminder, if you have an article about gerontology education, an announcement, or other research or program news you would like to share with your AGHE colleagues via this newsletter, please reach out to me (borrerol@uindy.edu) and/or Aaron Guest (Aaron.Guest@asu.edu) with your ideas and any questions you may have.

Warmly,
Lisa

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Promoting an Intergenerational Lifespan Approach to Gerontological Education

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on behalf of the Geriatric Education and the Intergenerational Learning, Research, and Community Engagement Interest Groups

Lifespan aging education has been endorsed since the first White House Conference on Aging, Education and Aging, in 1961. This education enables addressing the omissions, stereotypes, and misleading information that continue to characterize people's knowledge of aging (National Retired Teachers Association & National Academy for Teaching and Learning About Aging, 1998). Society cannot afford to have its future guided by people who grow up ignorant about aging. People need to be prepared to live a long life in an aging world.

Learning about aging needs to begin with young children. Research has consistently shown that children as young as preschool exhibit ageist attitudes, that these attitudes become more negative as the child grows older, and that they become increasingly difficult to change. What is conveyed to children about aging lays a foundation for attitudes and beliefs about aging. Indeed, "If we teach children that growing old is a natural part of life, and raise them to appreciate and value the contributions of older people to their world, ageist stereotypes and fears of growing old will become obsolete" (Butler, 1999, p. v).

Attitudes about aging play a significant role in how people age, and people with positive attitudes about aging are living longer, healthier lives (Levy 2009). Ageist attitudes are readily transmitted. Creating awareness of what one is transmitting about age and aging is important. This is especially important with young children who readily assimilate societal values and attitudes.

Literature on aging education tends to focus on what is being done in academic settings, often times in secondary education. This education also needs to be promoted outside educational

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settings and to regularly occur in homes and communities. Numerous aging education opportunities exist every day that can be implemented immediately, at little or no cost, and with great rewards. Its past time to start promoting them. *Intergenerationality* is an important part of this education and promotes intergenerational knowledge and understanding.

Numerous resources exist for lifespan aging education. The Gerontological Society of America's social change initiative, Reframing Aging, educates about aging, strives to defuse aging myths and stereotypes and increase public and self-awareness of aging. Canada's Age Is More initiative (<https://ageismore.com>) promotes aging education and intergenerational collaborations, positively changes thinking about aging, and counteracts ageism. The initiative offers the Are You Age Aware? quiz. Australia's EveryAGE Counts initiative (<https://www.everyagecounts.org.au/>) strives to educate about aging, change public thinking about aging, and lay a foundation for current and future generations to age without ageism. Age Friendly City initiatives can provide a stepping stone to operationalizing intergenerational opportunities and aging education. Celebrations of Older Americans Month and Intergenerational Month provide opportunities to educate about aging and promote intergenerational knowledge and understanding. Generations United (<https://gu.org>) is a 35+ year champion for intergenerational programs and collaborations, offers an Intergenerational Program Database, and has numerous resources available.

A number of K-12 curricular resources for aging education exist. However, many of these resources have become "fugitive" in nature and can be difficult to locate. Learning for Longer Life: A Guide for Developers of K-12 Curriculum and Instructional Materials (Couper & Pratt, 1999) is a comprehensive reference for K-12 aging education and provides general learning objectives and classroom activities for teaching about aging. It was written by leaders in the aging education field and remains available in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) (<https://eric.ed.gov>) along with other K-12 aging education resources. A quiz to educate about aging and explore attitudes about aging is the EveryAGE Counts "Am I Ageist" quiz (https://everyagecounts.org.au/take_the_quiz). GSA and AGHE offer a number of secondary educational aging education curricular resources. Children's literature has been identified as an

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important resource for intergenerational aging education. AGHE's Best Children's Literature on Aging award highlights children's literature (PS-Primary) with positive, meaningful portrayals of aging.

Increased life expectancy worldwide makes preparation for a long life in an aging world imminently important. Aging education can aid in this preparation. This education needs advocates. Gerontologists have the opportunity to play an important role in advocating for intergenerational lifespan aging education. Let's do it!

Please contact either of the Interest Groups directly for more detailed resources and information.

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Gerontology Accreditation: A Reflection

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In 2017, I came to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as the Graduate Coordinator for their Gerontology Program. The university had decided to move their graduate programs online and to revise their curriculum accordingly. Development and marketing of this new online initiative was supported by an internal grant from UNCG Online, the Division of Online Learning. I was given the unique opportunity to build an online Master of Science in Gerontology program according to my direction and vision. Given my education and training in gerontology, I knew that I wanted the program to be based on the gerontology competencies established by the Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) and that I would seek accreditation the moment the program was eligible. Accreditation from the Accreditation in Gerontology Education Council (AGEC) had newly become available, and I wanted the program to provide a high quality gerontological education that prepared students for a career in aging as well as garnered recognition on a national level for meeting the rigorous standards of the gerontology profession.



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In 2020, the MS in Gerontology program at UNC Greensboro finally met the eligibility requirements for accreditation set by AGECE. I excitedly contacted the secretary of the AGECE Board in January to inquiry about the process and received a prompt response outlining my next steps and an offer of assistance. With the guidance of the AGECE Handbook, I was able to determine the best course of action to ensure the development of a strong application. I spent January through August establishing an accreditation advisory board at UNC Greensboro, mapping our curriculum, and creating a timeline - all strongly recommended by AGECE to prepare for accreditation. In August 2020, I submitted our official application. We received our "Notice to Proceed" letter shortly thereafter, formally beginning our accreditation process!

We immediately began to work on the self-study report which was due on January 1, 2021. The self-study was a major undertaking by me and the UNC Greensboro accreditation advisory board. It was not done hastily, and it took an extraordinary amount of time and effort. It was an intense process of self-review and evaluation that involved data gathering, analysis, reflection, and, of course, writing! It gave us the opportunity to engage in a comprehensive review of all aspects of the MS in Gerontology Program for the first time. I found it to be both rewarding and challenging. I enjoyed being able to pull together the different aspects of the program into one document and to describe the program that I had spent the last four years curating and crafting. I was able to look at the self-study and be proud of what we have accomplished at UNC Greensboro. However, the self-study also revealed aspects of the program that should have been more carefully and thoughtfully considered. I found this invaluable because I am not certain that these areas of growth would have come to my attention without the deep review of the program required by the self-study. Submitting the self-study report to AGECE was satisfying and a huge relief.

In early March 2021, I received word that the AGECE committee had completed its initial evaluation of the self-study report. By April, the committee was ready to schedule the site visit. Again, AGECE was flexible and easy to work with. We were given several time frames and options for the site visit. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, a face-to-face site visit seemed risky, so a virtual site visit was scheduled for three days in early June. The AGECE review team consisted of three individuals with experience in gerontological education or applied gerontology. My experience with the review team was overwhelmingly positive. They interacted with administration, faculty,



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and students from UNC Greensboro to verify the accuracy of information provided in the self-study report as well as to resolve questions or concerns that arose from review of the report. These exchanges were constructive and allowed us to see the program from an “outsiders” perspective. We were impressed with the depth of awareness and understanding of our program demonstrated by the review team. We thought the questions they asked were appropriate and purposeful. One of my colleagues who is experienced with accreditation site visits commented that the review team was the most skilled team she had ever worked with. I was glad to complete another important step in the accreditation process.

After the virtual site visit, I received correspondence from the secretary of the AGEC Board thanking me and my colleagues for a productive site visit, which I thought was very nice, and informing me of the next steps. The committee would convene to review their observations and prepare their report and recommendations for the AGEC Board of Governors regarding our accreditation. On July 19th, 2021, I was informed that the AGEC Board of Governors unanimously accepted the recommendation of the site visit team to accredit our MS in Gerontology Program with no provisions. We were elated with this news and ready to shout it from the rooftops!

Overall, we had an incredible experience seeking accreditation for the MS in Gerontology program at UNC Greensboro. I want to encourage anyone who is considering seeking accreditation to go for it. Gerontology will only grow and be able to meet the rising needs of our aging population if it is able to professionalize the field. Accreditation of academic programs in gerontology is one of the most impactful ways to grow the discipline and profession. Through accreditation, our status as a nationally recognized area of study is enhanced. Students who earn a degree from accredited programs are assured that they are effectively prepared for a career in gerontology. I hope by sharing my experience with accreditation that I can convince you to seek accreditation as well. I want to offer my support to anyone considering seeking accreditation. Please do not hesitate to contact me so I can share our approach to preparing and planning for accreditation. Let’s make accreditation the new normal for gerontology!

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Implementing a Virtual, Age-Friendly Intergenerational Program

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As the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) seeks to become more age-friendly, and faculty in the gerontology program work to pursue endorsement of the Age-Friendly University principles, a virtual intergenerational mentoring project was implemented. The aim was to connect the community's older adults, including retired faculty, and students. Older adults and students were paired and asked to engage in a series of conversations, watch the documentary *Lives Well Lived*, and attend a Q&A with *Lives Well Lived* filmmaker, Sky Bergman. The goal was to improve social connectedness and well-being of older and younger adults in the community, to improve expectations regarding aging for both groups, and to decrease ageism.

Intergenerational Interaction

The opportunity for people of all ages to understand each other better is an important step in creating a more age-friendly society. Intergenerational experiences can serve as opportunities for people to connect with, learn from, and provide social support to one another (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008). Intergenerational mentoring allows older adults to teach younger adults about their lives, while also learning about the experiences and skill sets of younger adults (Pstross et al., 2016). Such interactions can negate stereotypes people may hold of other generations (Ng et al, 2020, Francis et al, 2014).

Over the course of the pandemic, openly ageist behaviors have surfaced anew. COVID-19 has affected the older adult population more than other age groups in terms of severe illness and risk of death (Brooke & Jackson, 2020). Hashtags such as #BoomerRemover and ageist memes circulated on social media platforms indicate that older peoples' lives are less valuable and more expendable than those of younger people (Sparks, 2020). The ageist discourse that has come to light during the pandemic, including the devaluing of older adults' lives, has contributed to

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feelings of worthlessness and of being a burden among older adults (Brooke & Jackson, 2020). These negative feelings exacerbate health risk factors such as social isolation and loneliness (Brooke & Jackson, 2020). Now more than ever, intergenerational experiences are important to help prevent isolation and combat negative aging stereotypes and beliefs.

Research has established that intergenerational experiences offer positive outcomes, such as functional improvements, social support, and mental health improvements (Fair and Delaplane, 2014; Pstross et al, 2016; Sakurai, 2015). Intergenerational experiences also serve to reduce social isolation, which results in a decrease in hospital visits among the older population (Ng, et al., 2020). These interactions can also foster friendships and allow people of different generations to understand each other better (Fair & Delaplane 2015; Pstross et al., 2016) as well as decrease ageist stereotypes younger people may believe about older adults (Ng, et al., 2020; Francis, et al., 2014). In addition, students who have had intergenerational experiences can take their anti-ageist beliefs into their communities and further decrease ageism (Leedahl et al, 2020).

The Project

To expand upon our understanding about these benefits, the influence of intergenerational mentoring and learning on attitudes towards aging and older adults was explored in this project. To this end, 13 intergenerational mentoring groups were formed by pairing one UNCW gerontology student with one retired faculty member or participant in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at UNCW who was at least 60 years of age. Each of the pairs met virtually for approximately 30 minutes three times over the course of five weeks. During the first two weeks of the project, the pairs became acquainted with one other and viewed a film by Sky Bergman, *Lives Well Lived*, featuring the life stories of diverse older adults. The following week, participants attended [a live virtual Q&A with the filmmaker](#). The pairs then met at least two more times over the following two weeks, in which they were instructed to discuss any topic, although discussion guides were provided that covered topics such as aging, mortality, and life lessons.

To evaluate the benefits of these intergenerational interactions, the Expectations Regarding Aging (ERA) scale was completed individually by both members of each pair prior to their first

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interaction and again at the end of the project. Each individual also completed an open-ended questionnaire about their experiences at the conclusion of the project.

Project Benefits

Benefits of these intergenerational experiences were revealed via both the ERA scale results and the responses to the open-ended questionnaire. The ERA scale results reflected improvement of expectations regarding aging on 75% of the items. The most substantial change was from the item, As I get older, I expect I will become more forgetful. This item showed a 30.86% reduction in number of participants who viewed this expectation as true.

Through the open-ended questionnaire, participants indicated that their experiences with the intergenerational interactions were positive. Discussion topics ranged from family, hobbies, passions, education, aging, life lessons to how to experience a life well-lived. Many of the individuals felt comfortable with their partners in the project and were willing to share personal information. Almost everyone stated that their favorite part of the intergenerational experience was the meaningful and comfortable conversations and connections with their partners. Additionally, nearly all reported finding commonalities with their partner and believed it was meaningful to find these connections with someone from another generation.

Use of the film *Lives Well Lived* was particularly beneficial as it provided a common framework and talking points for discussions. Individuals felt the film gave a new perspective on aging and encouraged them to enjoy everyday life. Some younger participants felt it changed their views on older adults, believed the stories told were inspiring, and enjoyed hearing about historical events through the lenses of someone who lived through them.

Key takeaways from the open-ended responses included gaining a new understanding of the older population, enjoying interactions with a different generation, and reflecting on their own lives. One younger participant said, "One key takeaway I gained from this project was understanding I am no different mentally than the [older adult] community." Another noted, "...the biggest takeaway for me was being more cognizant of the wisdom, knowledge and insight an older person has about life - the ups and the downs. It was truly an enlightening experience."

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Final Thoughts

This intergenerational mentoring experience improved expectations regarding aging, particularly views on memory and aging. Participants expressed positive feelings about their intergenerational experiences, with their connection with their partner being the most meaningful aspect. The film screening was meaningful as it showed different stories of aging and supplied discussion points about the aging process for partners. Expectations regarding aging improved because the intergenerational experiences allowed partners to create connections and view each other as people, rather than stereotypes from their age group. Intergenerational learning is a tool that can be utilized to increase age-friendliness, decrease ageism, and spread awareness of the aging process. In an effort to increase age-friendliness on university campuses, similar intergenerational mentoring projects should be implemented. The inclusion of a film such as *Lives Well Lived* serves as a useful way to ensure participants of all ages have a common experience to discuss.

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Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Laura Donorfio, University of Connecticut

What are some key pedagogical considerations you keep in mind when teaching students about aging? How has your approach changed for you over the years?

Some of the key pedagogical considerations I keep in mind when teaching students about aging center on five themes: 1) Typically this is the first aging course they have ever taken; 2) Helping students become aware of ageism; 3) Teaching aging from a positive perspective/lens, 4) Connecting students with positive aging role models; and 5) Helping students understand that they will be an older adult someday and the attitudes they hold now will be internalized and impact how they will feel about themselves when they are older. What I have noticed over the past five years or so is a shift in the number of students who have ever taken an aging course. Most undergraduate and graduate students I teach have never taken an aging course and frankly

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admit they would not be taking it if it were not a required course in their degree programs. On day one I feel as if I am already behind the eight-ball and working on quality control. I have come to accept that the field of aging is an unknown subject area that is riddled with misconceptions, stereotypes, and myths before they even start.

What are some key barriers and facilitators to “reaching students” about the importance of aging, dispelling aging myths, and the relevance of these skills and knowledge in their respective fields?

I spend a great deal of time breaking down ageist attitudes while also highlighting how various fields and careers intersect with aging and how this will become more important as our aging population increases. A light seems to go off when they see career connections and how this knowledge will give them a leg up when in the job market. Also, I strongly believe that to break down the aging barriers, it is more effective to teach aging from a positive perspective/lens. There is so much negativity and ageism out there that it only adds to their aging barriers. Over time the negative consequences are addressed but only after they have a firm, positive foundation. While we all know how important intergenerational connections are for improving ageist attitudes, sometimes this is not feasible with larger or online classes, so I connect them with positive aging role models in the media, etc. Two of my staple activities I use to teach about aging is to begin each class or online module by introducing them to a positive aging role model via video, news article, etc. I introduce them as someone I want them to meet, making it as personal as possible. I then end each class or online module with a “spotlight on aging,” highlighting something related to aging that has happened in the world. This helps them realize that aging is all around them and how it connects to their lives.

What motivates you to do this work (and how has this changed over time)?

What motivates me is my passion for the field of gerontology and how important I feel it is for students to understand how aging will impact their lives, the lives around them, and the world as a whole. The aging revolution will have an impact on every facet of our society and the ripple effect will be felt by all.

What is unique about teaching about aging in different environments (online vs. face-to-face)? How do you leverage and/or navigate these differences to strengthen your approach?

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What is unique about teaching aging in different teaching platforms is the need to incorporate various activities once thought only possible using old face-to-face models. For instance, making intergenerational connections is imperative to my teaching, so it took some time to figure out how to make this happen in an online environment. Prior to COVID, some of our colleagues were already making this happen online by creatively using technology and the internet. Post-COVID, many of us were pushed into teaching online and/or in synchronous formats, so we were challenged to think of creative ways to restructure our activities and assignments. While it was not easy making this mental shift and learning different ways to transform what we teach effectively online, I think this experience has made our teaching stronger and more seamless. For example, perhaps you did not incorporate videos or media in your face-to-face classes but because you become more comfortable utilizing technology, you were able to implement various activities not used before. For me, I like to create and maintain a “personal touch” teaching environment so I had to think of creative ways to make this happen online. I was pushed to record videos of myself not only giving lectures, but my center for teaching and learning also gave me the idea to provide shorter videos to bring awareness and thoughts to ponder. Previously I did not think about recording 3-minute videos and interspersing them throughout my courses. I think COVID has changed the way we teach and the way students learn and this is not a positive or a negative but a matter of fact.

What advice would you give to a new gerontology educator who is developing their first course about aging?

The advice I would give a new gerontology educator who is developing their first course about aging is to not think of it as a venture to be done alone. Reach out to their institution’s center for learning and teaching. Reach out to colleagues. Most importantly, reach out to AGHE to see what resources they have and how they could be used. Start a conversation on AGHE and GSA connect. We are fortunate as members of AGHE to have so much material at our disposal and so many colleagues excited to help.