

Promoting Intergenerational Diversity Outside the College Classroom: The Elder Service Partner Program

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Messiah College
National Council on Family Relations Conference
November 18, 2017

History of Elder Service Partner Program

- Intergenerational Service Learning and Intergenerational Service-Learning Research Grants from Association of Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) and University of Pittsburgh's Generations Together (GT)
- Intended to promote intergenerational service programs



"Program of Distinction"

- In July 2015, Generations United recognized Messiah College's Elder Service Partner Program as a **Program of Distinction**. "This designation serves as the U.S. benchmark for intergenerational programs."

The logo for Generations United features the word "generations" in a bold, orange, lowercase sans-serif font. The word "united" is positioned directly below it in a bold, purple, lowercase sans-serif font. A registered trademark symbol (®) is located to the right of the word "united".

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Sociology of Aging Course

- One of several courses in *Human Growth and Development over the Life Course* content area for CFLE
- Each student linked with Elder Service Partner (ESP) for duration of semester
- List of possible ESPs provided on first day of class
- Elder Service Partner characteristics



Elder Service Partner Program

- Students engage in two types of service:
 - Community Service
 - Life Story Interview



Educational Objectives

- Competently, responsibly and directly interact with an Elder Service Partner in the community
- Practically apply gerontological information when interacting with Elder Service Partners, making connections between the text/classroom and real life



Educational Objectives (contd.)

- Challenge stereotypes or misconceptions about old age, older adults and the aging process
- Develop a sense of civic and social responsibility
- Gain an appreciation for relationships with an older adults



Educational Objectives (contd.) Particularly as Related to Life Story

- Enhance interviewing skills
- Practice data collection and analysis skills
- Practice social skills, including effective dialogue
- Create "chapter" of Life Story document



Critique of ESP Partnership

- Sources of student data
 - Pre- and post-tests
 - Standard IDEA student course evaluations administered toward end of semester
 - Student reflection journal entries
- Sources of ESP data
 - Mid- and end-of-semester evaluations



Student Response to ESP Partnership

■ Logistical Concerns

- Inhibitions associated with initiating relationship with stranger
- Worries about balancing **time** demands (ESPs are also busy; scheduling can be problematic)
- Transportation



Student Response to ESP Partnership

- Application of Gerontological Information
 - Topics integrated into journal entry reflections were typically covered in class, readings, discussion (e.g., stereotypes of aging, retirement, friendships, housing and relocation issues, caregiver roles, death and loss, grandparenting, etc.)
 - E.g., box labeled "deceased" in mailroom; assessed living arrangements of nursing facility while filling water pitchers

Student Response to ESP Partnership

- Challenged Stereotypes and Misconceptions
 - Tested previously held notions of older adults as fragile, asexual, self-absorbed, isolated, asexual, inactive
 - E.g., male ESP's work with pre-school children: "he is 80-years old, but he got down on the floor and played with them"
 - Most students have greater respect for older adults

Student Response to ESP Partnership

- Sensitivity to Diversity of Aging Experiences
 - Learned aging is a very “individualized process”; noted implications of differences in sex, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, marital status, and health status
 - E.g., Older adults “do not fit all the age norms society has placed on them”; struck by “variation in functioning among elders of same age”; women outnumber men

Student Response to ESP Partnership

- Sensitivity to Diversity of Aging Experiences
 - Most felt better informed about social issues, including social security, being old in a youth-dominated culture, age discrimination in the job market, adequacy of financial resources and issues of poverty, caregiving demands, affordability of healthcare
 - E.g., older husband caring for frail wife

Student Response to ESP Partnership

Civic Responsibility

- ESPs are excellent models of civil servants
- Students acknowledge their social obligations, need to “stop waiting for others to do things that I see need to be done”; realization that “service work does not have to be hard labor. It can also be giving your time as a companion to someone else.”
- For some, translates into career shifts or new occupational goals

Student Response to ESP Partnership

- Appreciation for Intergenerational Relationships with Older Adults
 - Express appreciation for growing relationship with ESP, opportunity to be taken out of their comfort zone, continually learning from ESP
 - ESPs as role models: strong spiritual convictions, contentment, generous spirits, grateful attitudes, fulfilling lives, satisfying marriages
 - Gleaned tidbits of wisdom: "Change can be good"; "Choose to see the glass half full"; "Be thankful"
 - Elders as "lived history"; listening to stories about farm life, the depression, differential treatment between boys and girls, race relations, houses without plumbing



Student Response to ESP Partnership

■ Enhance Communication

- Spent class time generating strategies for initiating conversations, finding mutual topics for engagement; felt equipped with communication skills
- Pleased by ease of communication and range of topics discussed
- E.g., male student confided in male ESP issues related to upcoming marriage



Student Response to ESP Partnership

■ Interviewing Skills

- Receive instruction on interviewing techniques, ethics of working with human participants, and importance of respect
- Reflected on need to be familiar with questions and equipment, need to be flexible, how to monitor feedback, reduction of noise and distraction, recording device as aid; how to allow ESP to have greater control of conversations (stories of greatest significance to them)



Elder Responses to the Elder Service Partnership

- Overwhelmingly satisfied
- Most strongly agreed or agreed that:
 - Enjoyed volunteering with student partner
 - Elders can teach students about aging and older adults
 - Benefitted from the student companionship
 - Appreciated interacting with younger person
 - Relationship was more like a friendship
 - Student was respectful
 - Service positively impacted community



Final Reflections

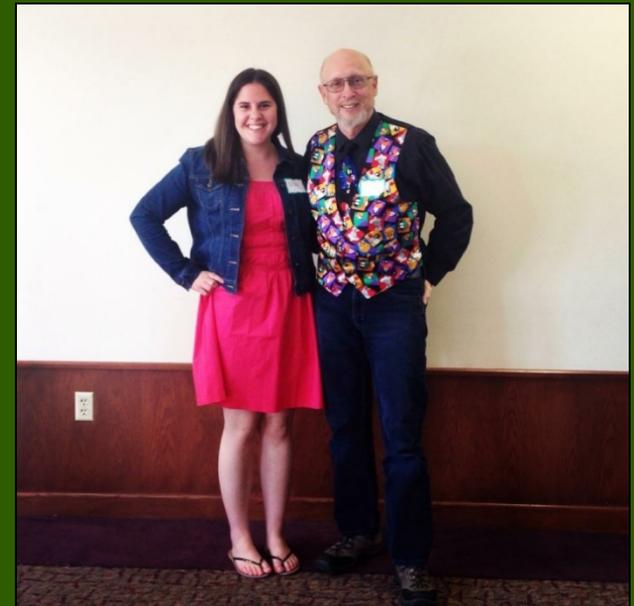
- Great deal of potential
- Must be done well to produce positive outcomes
- All participants must be well-informed about objectives and expectations (meet with ESPs)
- Help students see value of service-learning
- Impress upon students need for respect, start asap
- Careful planning is critical; students should take their calendars EARLY to set up meeting times
- Equip students with necessary skills

Final Reflections

- Focus the life story on one aspect of the ESP's life
- Afford lots of opportunity for student reflection, in writing, in class, etc.
- Allow opportunities to briefly share about the experience or the student/ESP partner during reception at end of semester
- Take photos for records/memento

Final Reflections

- Imperative for faculty member to remain abreast of how things are going)
- Need for flexibility; modify requirements as necessary (e.g., ESP who is hospitalized)
- Encourage students to invite ESP to campus



Final Thoughts

- Incorporate components of good service-learning pedagogy
 - course content
 - authentic service which meets identified need
 - opportunity for critical reflection
 - reciprocity

