An Intergenerational Partnership Between a College and Congregate Housing Facility: How It Works, What It Means

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Purpose: We describe the goals, development, operation, and outcomes of an intergenerational programmatic relationship between a private comprehensive college and a congregate facility that houses both independent-living apartments and assisted living for older adults. Design and Methods: Activities are based on a communal-developmental model that promotes “learning with” as opposed to “doing for.” We identify key components involved in implementing such a model and provide examples of the activities that constitute the programmatic relationship. We also identify program implementation challenges and discuss outcomes. Results: Faculty and students report that partnership activities provide excellent opportunities for increasing the understanding of aging and older adults. Residents report programs provide social, recreational, and educational benefits. Implications: Programmatic partnerships between colleges and residential facilities for older adults provide many benefits for students and residents. They require shared responsibility, deliberate and creative planning, and ongoing coordination.

Key Words: Intergenerational programming, Academic partnership, Retirement communities, Assisted living

It is not unusual for college students, especially those in health and social service curriculums, to interact with older adults through internships, service learning, clinical affiliations, coursework, and volunteering. The settings for these encounters have often been health care facilities (nursing homes, hospitals, or clinics), social service agencies, congregate living facilities and, to a much smaller extent, college campuses. The growth of residential options, such as retirement communities, assisted living, and continuing care retirement communities (referred to hereafter as congregate housing) for older adults, and the emerging trend of such facilities to locate in college towns have increased the opportunities for these student/older adult interactions. Intergenerational interactions range from the single field visit or class-related event to semester-long intergenerational experiences in which the elder and younger student participate jointly in learning. Usually, these interactions take place off campus, but opportunities on campus for seniors have been increasing as more colleges market living on or near campus to retired alumni and others (Bacon-Blood, 1998). Examples of such retirement communities include the Kendal facilities in Hanover, New Hampshire (Dartmouth) and Ithaca, New York (Cornell University), Meadowood in Indiana (Indiana University; Sherrid, 1993), and the Pines at Davidson in North Carolina (Davidson College; Manheimer, 2001a). A continuing care retirement community has recently been built on the campus of Lasell College in Boston and residents are required to be significantly involved in campus life as part of their contract with the facility (Manheimer, 2001b).

Why do connections between colleges and congregate facilities for older adults exist? The value of intergenerational programming has been documented for some time. Manheimer (1997) views the scope of

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rational for intergenerational educational programs as a continuum with a human service model that promotes “doing for” at one end, and a communal-developmental model characterized by “learning with” at the other end (p. 81). The doing for approach, typical of many intergenerational programs, includes activities such as friendly visiting and performing needed services. This kind of contact with older adults can modify negative attitudes that younger persons have toward older adults (and vice versa) and provide younger persons with opportunities to view older adults as individuals with diverse characteristics (Friedman, 1997). On the other end of Manheimer’s continuum, the learning with perspective views program participants as being “shaped by, benefiting from and contributing to community ideals” (p. 81). The experiential learning component inherent in intergenerational course-related programming such as fieldwork, internships, service learning, and cooperative education offers students the opportunity to learn from and with older adults. Education philosopher John Dewey felt that the experiential approach to learning encouraged students to grow both intellectually and morally, provided benefits to the community, and instilled a sense of purpose and curiosity in the learner (National Society for Experiential Education Foundations Document Committee, 1998). Intergenerational contact within structured programs can also lead to “cross-generational bonding,” according to Newman (1997, p. 56).

Intergenerational programs provide a variety of learning and social opportunities including the sharing of cultural backgrounds, the exchange of opinions and ideas, collaboration on projects, and the development of relationships. Intergenerational programming has also proven valuable in addressing issues of social isolation and inadequate support systems, which affect the young and the old, and the lack of connection between generations (Newman & Smith, 1997). Finally, these programs provide students in gerontology and other programs and courses with opportunities to apply and augment class-based learning in a variety of disciplines to older people and aging. Common methods for doing this include class projects, independent research, internships, and volunteering (Pogorzala & Krout, 2001).

**Partnership Development and Planning**

The Ithaca College–Longview partnership attempts to apply the communal-developmental model of learning to the goal of increasing college students’ knowledge and understanding of aging, older adults, and the issues facing older people. It also aims to develop more positive attitudes among college students about older adults in general. Program goals are achieved through activities that (a) promote communication and interaction between members of the Ithaca College and Longview communities, (b) create opportunities for student learning through curricular and experiential activities at Longview and on campus, (c) encourage both the use of campus programs and facilities by Longview residents and the presence of students at Longview, (d) stimulate interest in research on aging and related topics, and (e) facilitate interdisciplinary, intergenerational endeavors. Whenever feasible, the program follows the philosophy of involving students and residents as mutual and active participants. The partnership utilizes a wide range of purposeful intergenerational activities that stress programs where students and older adults learn and do together.

The Ithaca College–Longview partnership started 30 years ago when Longview’s parent not-for-profit organization (Ithacare) purchased an off-campus Ithaca College dormitory and converted it into a 60-person adult home. Ithaca College students and faculty immediately became involved with residents in programmatic interactions including recreational activities, volunteer work, administrative internships, research projects, and an intergenerational choir. In the early 1990s, Ithacare board members and college officials began a dialogue on how to expand the facility to include independent living and, at the same time, create more opportunities for students and residents to interact, bringing the two institutions much closer, both physically and programmatically. These discussions culminated in the building of a new residential facility on land donated by the college and located approximately one-half mile from the center of campus. Opened in 1998 and named Longview, it houses 101 independent-living apartments for about 150 older adults and an assisted-living unit for 60 individuals. Also included in the construction was 1,800 square feet of dedicated space for intergenerational programs with the college. Other spaces in the facility, such as an exercise room, auditorium, adult day care area, and therapeutic swimming pool, were planned to facilitate intergenerational programming.

A considerable amount of effort was devoted to planning the programmatic relationship before the new facility was opened, and this planning continues today. With support from the college’s administration, the Ithaca College Gerontology Institute consulted with faculty, staff, administrators, and students to determine their specific interests in curricular and experiential learning, the layout and design of the college’s space in the facility, and the resources that would be needed to implement intergenerational programs. Several committees (one on programming and one on operational issues) including administrative and facility officials were formed, and a survey of older adults on the facility’s waiting list was conducted to identify resident program interests. Students in marketing and therapeutic recreation classes have subsequently collected information on program interests using surveys and interviews of current residents. Key in the planning process was the half-time appointment of a faculty member as the college’s coordinator for the relationship. This allowed for follow-up with faculty and the coordination of activities internally with a counterpart at the facility. Funded by a grant for the first three years, this responsibility is now built into the faculty member’s load. During the
planning process, more than 40 faculty members identified 89 courses as having potential for interaction with Longview residents and staff.

Another key in the planning was a focus on the mechanics of the relationship and how policy decisions would be implemented. Topics and their outcomes included:

1. **Communications.** Longview’s telephone system is a stand-alone node off the college’s system, and all of the Longview offices have been hard wired for access to the college’s computer system. All calls to the facility are routed as on-campus calls.

2. **Safety and Liability.** Protocols were developed which address the areas of transportation and partnership-related activities at the facility and on campus.

3. **Access.** A shuttle van, jointly funded, makes a regular morning circuit between Longview and a number of points on campus. This transports residents to classes and also is used to bring residents to campus for special events such as music or theater performances.

4. **Sharing of Facilities.** With only a few exceptions, Longview residents and staff have the same use of college facilities as faculty and students and vice versa. This includes recreational, academic, food service, and cultural facilities. Residents have college identification (ID) cards that identify them as Longview residents and have the same functions as student, faculty, and staff IDs.

5. **Sharing of Services.** After careful consideration, sharing of services such as security, insurance coverage, disposal of hazardous medical waste, and lawn mowing was determined to be impractical due to staffing and cost.

6. **Program Administration.** A formal Memorandum of Understanding was implemented that outlines the goals of the relationship and responsibilities of each organization and provides a framework for the general operation of the relationship.

A committee was also formed to assist in the planning of the main focus of the partnership, the intergenerational programmatic interactions between Ithaca College faculty and students and Longview residents. This group also advises on the marketing of the partnership to members of both institutions. Orientation brochures were developed that describe the partnership and provide specific information for three audiences—faculty and staff, students, and Longview residents (see Pogorzala & Krout, 2001, for a detailed discussion of the planning process).

**Overview of Programmatic Activities**

The Ithaca College–Longview programmatic relationship is designed to provide as many opportunities as possible for students to learn through active engagement with older adults. We encourage faculty and staff to develop interactions with Longview residents in as many ways as possible to fit curricular goals and to consider other modes of interaction that are not credit based. Noncredit activities include eating meals with residents at Longview or on campus; participating in joint social activities such as dances, quilting groups, or belly dancing; volunteering in programs directed by facility staff or campus service organizations; and simply talking with residents about each other’s experiences.

Although it is difficult to characterize the depth and breadth of activities, we have identified a number of dimensions that may be useful in describing the program. The first dimension, frequency of scheduling, varies tremendously. Some activities are single encounters on an individual or group basis, others occur several times during a semester, and a small number occur on a weekly basis. Second, the type of social interaction also varies, from one on one, to small groups, to students or faculty performing or presenting for a resident audience. A small number of volunteer activities are directed at assisting the Longview staff in facility administration projects and may involve limited or no social contact with residents. A third dimension is curricular integration. Student activities may be directly linked to a course through a required project or internship, or may be purely voluntary in nature. The primary setting for activities is Longview, but residents and staff also attend classes and musical and theatrical events on campus. A fourth dimension, focus of control involving decision making about the type and duration of activities, generally rests with faculty and staff members. To a lesser degree, students and/or residents also make these determinations.

Fifth, activities can be discipline specific or multidisciplinary. Although many of the faculty-initiated activities at Longview are based in the individual’s discipline, there have been a number of successful multi- and interdisciplinary endeavors. Finally, even though the bulk of activities are designed to impact student learning and attitudes, many of them also focus on resident knowledge and quality of life. Examples include resident course auditing or class involvement in less formal ways, class activities designed to benefit specific residents’ needs, and student volunteer tutoring or mentoring of residents in areas such as computer use and musicianship.

Space limitations preclude a full listing of the activities that make up the programmatic relationship. A typical semester will find two dozen faculty, 10 staff, approximately 250–300 students representing 20–30 majors, and close to 100 residents participating in approximately 40 different activities. Listed below are examples of some activities that have taken place since the partnership programming began in 1999:

1. Counseling the Older Adult, a sociology course offered each Spring semester, meets once a week at Longview and involves students and residents in discussions of life experiences that are focused on readings and a central theme.

2. Nutrition for the Older Adult students plan and implement a Longview-related event each year. Past years included a nutrition fair that featured information tables on various nutrition topics,
interactive games, and informative handouts developed by the students; a “Nutrition Jeopardy!” game; and, most recently, a health promotion event titled “Food for Thought.”

3. Occupational therapy students designed and implemented a series of workshops on stress reduction for residents in Fall 1999. These include sessions on breathing and relaxation, yoga and stretching, tai chi, aromatherapy, and humor.

4. Gerontology Fieldwork students are assigned to Longview each semester and spend 8 hr per week assisting with recreational activities, conducting friendly visits, and working with participants in a social adult day program.

5. Communications majors have assisted Longview’s Development and Community Relations staff in developing and periodically updating a web site for Longview.

6. Business students assist residents each spring with income tax preparation through a volunteer program funded by the Internal Revenue Service.

7. Student chamber music groups perform several times per year at Longview, and members of a music fraternity direct an ongoing intergenerational choir.

8. A theater student initiated a weekly program of role-playing games called “Act Your Age” in Spring 2001 and has continued to offer this activity for three consecutive semesters.

9. Allied health faculty members directed graduate students in a study of exercise on function in Fall 2000. The students led residents in large and small group exercise sessions twice a week for eight weeks.

10. Residents audit classes and come to campus to attend performances and presentations on a regular basis every semester. Several residents use the college’s fitness facility.

11. The campus chaplains and their student volunteers perform services and special holiday observances at Longview throughout the year.

12. Students in a Spring 2002 advertising and illustration course offered themselves as personal photographers to Longview residents for an afternoon. Residents received prints at the conclusion of the project.

13. A music professor held eight class sessions of her course Creative Arts for the Older Adult at Longview in Spring 2002. The students planned and implemented activities involving music, movement, crafts, and role playing.

**Successes and Challenges**

Overall, the intergenerational programmatic relationship has been a resounding success. This success is evidenced by the breadth and depth of activities as well as the level of involvement of faculty, students, staff, and residents. This level of activity has been very high and includes all areas of the college. In addition, the variety of activities being conducted reflects the whole range of Manheimer’s (1997, p. 81) doing for–learning with continuum, identified earlier in this article. Another measure of success has been sustainability and growth. Activities continue from semester to semester as classes are taught and new activities constantly emerge. Thus, the programmatic relationship is dynamic, not static, and changes as new cohorts of faculty, staff, students, and residents become involved and the interests of existing participants change.

A third measure of success is feedback from participants. We regularly evaluate specific activities and collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Comments from all involved have been extremely positive. Without exception, student comments on course evaluations reflect the positive value of involvement in activities with Longview residents, and feedback from faculty and staff has been equally positive. A sociology major wrote, “It was a wonderful, inspiring experience that made me think a lot about my own life, and what I hope to get out of life to be happy in old age,” and a physical therapy major stated, “The more time I spend with the older population, the more comfortable I feel with them and with growing old.” Residents have an even more positive view of the partnership. Typical comments include “My life is full and satisfying thanks to the partnership,” “A day doesn’t go by that I don’t encourage others to take advantage of the facilities across the road,” “It is a unique and rewarding association for all ages,” and “It is a mutually beneficial arrangement, students learn from our life experiences, which are many and varied.”

In addition to the successes of the partnership, there have been challenges. One challenge is that of collecting quantitative data via traditional pre- and post-activity surveys. This approach does not make much sense with short-duration activities and adds additional time burdens on faculty and students. Activity participants are not randomly assigned to classes and are often self-selected, so pretest scores are often quite positive and show little change when compared to post-test scores. Residents in particular have been reluctant to fill out post-activity surveys, perhaps because they view the experience positively and feel no need to fill out a form or because they feel like they are being “graded.” However, when they do comment, they state unequivocally that they have enjoyed and benefited from the activities. In their post-activity surveys, students regularly report that they have become more understanding of and comfortable with older adults and more interested in working with them in their careers. For example, across all types of activities, 90% of surveyed students say the experience has made them more understanding of older adults, and 93% disagree that it has made them less comfortable working with older adults. Two thirds of students agree that the experience has made them more interested in working with older adults, but the program has not been running long enough for us to determine if these attitudes are long standing or have affected careers.

Outcome measurement is only one of the challenges programmatic relationships face. A second challenge is that of resources. Faculty and staff get no financial or
time consideration for the extra work they devote to planning and implementing the intergenerational activities. They do it because they believe it enriches the lives and learning of students and residents, and it is what they feel they should be doing as educators. The positive feedback they receive reinforces this, as does the recognition given by campus administrators who value experiential and interdisciplinary learning and the partnership. Nonetheless, dollars for small faculty stipends and to cover special costs associated with programs would be helpful.

A third challenge is the tendency for activities to take place mainly at the facility. Many residents are reluctant to come to campus because they find it somewhat intimidating, and this attitude may intensify as residents age in place and become less mobile. This reluctance results in a reduced presence of older adults on campus. The implementation of the shuttle service has had some positive effect and we hope that an expanded service will have even more.

Communication and coordination are a fourth challenge. Information on activities for residents is provided on facility bulletin boards, in its newsletter, and by its program coordinator and recreation director. The college coordinator provides information to faculty, staff, and students through e-mails, articles in the student newspaper, meetings with faculty, and class presentations. Education on the relationship is ongoing as students and, to a lesser extent, residents, staff, and faculty change each year. Coordinating the who, what, where, when, and how of all of the activities between all the parties can be difficult. Plans can change at the last minute. In addition, faculty have to be reminded that resident participation is totally voluntary and that it is difficult to guarantee numbers of participants for proposed projects. As the partnership matures and the residents become more aware of the activities, this may become less of an issue. Finally, the expectations of residents and faculty, staff, and students are sometimes unrealistic. It is important that everyone involved understand the goals of the partnership and what it does or does not involve.

Conclusion

We have described the goals, development, implementation, and operation of an intergenerational programmatic relationship between a comprehensive college and a congregate facility that houses both independent-living apartments and assisted living for older adults. The relationship provides curricular and cocurricular interactions between students and residents that are mutually beneficial and have significant impacts on the attitudes and learning of students and the quality of life of residents. It is based on the application of a communal-development model that values active and reciprocal engagement between college students, faculty, and older adults. The success of this partnership can be attributed to a number of factors. Detailed and comprehensive planning has been essential, as have resources, administrative support, enthusiasm from all groups involved (administration, residents, students, and faculty), marketing, and transportation. In addition, the considerable variety of programs included in this programmatic partnership has contributed to its success. These range from single social or course-based encounters to repeated contacts over a semester as part of a class, research or service project, or volunteer program. This partnership has been an excellent incubator for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary experiences and course development that span the entire curriculum from humanities to health sciences. The intergenerational programs have been structured for a range of student abilities and resident interests and have also provided excellent opportunities to utilize the talents of nonacademic staff. Students, faculty, and resident enthusiasm for programs has been very high.

Intergenerational partnerships such as the one described in this article also face a number of challenges. As is true for all programs, resources are crucial. In the case of the Ithaca College–Longview partnership, the assignment of half-time coordinators for both institutions has been critical to sustaining and increasing programs; engaging faculty, students, and residents; and avoiding scheduling conflicts. Achieving agreement on a wide range of administrative details can also get in the way of the best intentions; the development of a Memorandum of Understanding was an effective approach in this experience. Transportation, especially of residents to campus, also presents challenges, as does the need for ongoing education about the programs as residents, faculty, and especially students come and go. Collecting assessment data also has proven to be more difficult than expected, as the time available to do this in the context of courses is limited.

The intergenerational partnership we have described involves a comprehensive planning and program implementation approach. We believe the core strength of the Ithaca College–Longview programmatic relationship is the involvement of faculty and students from a variety of disciplines in curricular-based and experiential learning, not just in gerontology or health-related majors. The types of interactions are planned to span a wide variety of contexts so that facility residents are not viewed by students as subjects for study, but as people to learn from and with. We are hopeful that this approach can serve as a model for other academic institutions interested in partnering, or currently working, with residential facilities for older adults.

References


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