AGE INCLUSIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A NEWSLETTER OF THE GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Promoting age-inclusive practices, programs, and partnerships in higher education.

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The *Age Inclusivity in Higher Education* Newsletter is a place where educators, researchers, campus leaders, and community members can share information about how colleges and universities are responding to aging populations and the rise of more age-diverse campuses. This issue offers perspectives surrounding the call for integrating age inclusivity efforts with broader diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in motion across campuses.

Comments and suggestions about newsletter content and special areas of focus are very much welcomed from our readers. Please send correspondence to ageinclusive@geron.org.

Feature Article

Researching Age as a Diversity Factor in Institutions of Higher Education

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The Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging at Washington University in St. Louis has been interested in how universities incorporate age into their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The Center set out to explore this topic as part of its Age-Friendly University (AFU) initiative—WashU for Life—and its work around age inclusivity on college campuses. The Center aimed to describe how the DEI staff of other universities/colleges think about age as a diversity factor and to document strategies being used to address ageism and increase age inclusivity.

DEI efforts have been growing at institutions across the country over the last several years. At the same time, there has been an expansion of the AFU Global Network and an increase in fostering age-inclusive campuses. We at the Center for Aging were curious about how these two initiatives were (or were not) intersecting at other institutions of higher education. To gather more information about this intersection of age-inclusivity and DEI initiatives, we conducted focus groups and individual interviews with staff of campus-wide DEI offices.

Forty-two participants from 36 institutions of higher education were represented. We asked questions about how participants thought age fit in the scope of diversity in higher education, the value of DEI efforts in addressing age, and the best strategies for becoming more age inclusive or inspiring and motivating institutions to do something about age as a diversity issue.

The research team used thematic analysis to identify nine key themes that were heard from focus group participants:

Theme 1—Age is a diversity factor, but not a priority for DEI.

Theme 2—Multiple reasons contribute to why age is not a recognized identity factor in DEI efforts such as age is seen as a compliance issue and there is a shortage of resources to attend to all demands.

Theme 3—A generational lens is used to describe the issues, especially conflict.

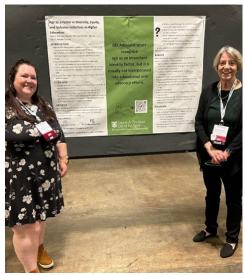Theme 4—Intersectionality is an important concept.

Theme 5—Issues related to age vary by the type of institution and the various programs within the institution.

Theme 6—Faculty, staff, and students have different issues related to age such as employees face age discrimination in the workplace.

Theme 7—Ageism is pervasive.

Theme 8—Responsibility for discussions on age and ageism may lie outside DEI.

Theme 9—DEI offices are doing things (current and potential interventions) to address ageism and increase age-inclusivity. Interventions include programming for nontraditionally aged students, Human Resources initiatives, and facilitating intergenerational interactions.

Natalie Galucia (left) and Nancy Morrow-Howell of the Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging at Washington University in St. Louis present their findings on DEI in higher education at the GSA 2023 Annual Scientific Meeting in Tampa.

Overall, we learned from other institutions that, while age is identified as a diversity factor, it is usually not a part of the educational and advocacy efforts of DEI offices. This was not dissimilar to the experiences we were having at our own university. Participants in the study pointed out that ageism remains unnoticed and unchallenged. More research in this area is certainly needed to explore interventions to incorporate age as a diversity factor and to identify which approaches are most acceptable and effective in reducing age stereotypes and bias.

The full study, "Age as a Factor in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives in Higher Education," will be published in the Journal of Gerontological Social Work.

Making the Case for Intersectionality: Connecting Age-Inclusivity With Campus Efforts On Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Aging is an important part of our individual identities and represents a diverse spectrum across generations. By infusing broader diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) campus efforts with age-inclusivity efforts, campus life is enriched. At the University of Minnesota (UMN) Twin Cities, we have purposefully worked to connect age-inclusivity to DEI efforts. While we still have more work to do, thus far we have been fairly successful. Our work is led by an Age-Friendly UMN Council, which was established in 2020 when we became part of the Age-Friendly University (AFU) Global Network. The following five actions have supported our success—and we are hopeful that they will help to inform efforts on other campuses.

1. Understand the Scope of Aging

An important foundation in connecting age-inclusivity efforts into broader DEI work is to understand the scope of "aging" on campus. First, we generally use the broad phrase of "lifelong learners, retirees, and older Minnesotans" when we talk about age inclusivity. Second, we leveraged the Age-Friendly Inventory and Campus Climate Survey assessment tool developed by Silverstein, Whitbourne, Bowen, Montepare, Jansen, Beaulieu, and Prasad (2022) to inventory our campus, including the number of students and employees on campus over the age of 50. This helped paint a vivid picture of what age inclusivity currently looks like on campus.

2. Map DEI Infrastructures and Efforts

Each university structures DEI work differently. It was important for us to understand the infrastructure around DEI efforts to best engage in conversations and collaborations. As part of our endeavor, we met with representatives from the Office for Equity and Diversity (OED). At this meeting, we learned we not only have OED but also a Diversity Community of Practice, which is a grassroots network of staff and faculty across the university's five-campus system who are passionate about infusing DEI principles in their work.

3. Connect Age-Inclusivity Work in Broader DEI Strategies

Once we understood what DEI structures looked like on campus, we began to explore how our age-inclusivity strategies mapped to these DEI strategies. Modifying the National Center to Reframe Aging messaging, we positioned age inclusivity as a way to live up to our ideals by reshaping campus so that older people are fully included in campus life. To that end, the Age-Friendly UMN Council adopted four beliefs: (1) we all benefit from intergenerational approaches and exchanges; (2) lifelong learners bring experience and perspective that enrich education; (3) diversity, equity, and inclusion are central pillars to all the work we do; and (4) ageism is a pervasive form of bigotry that must be challenged and eliminated.

4. Build Authentic Relationships

After understanding the DEI structures and how our age-inclusivity work intersects with them, we invited a representative from OED to join our Age-Friendly UMN Council. This representative, who is an equal participant and leader in our age-inclusivity efforts, is able to connect the work of OED to our broader initiatives and vice versa.

5. Provide Technical Assistance

Since building authentic relationships, we have accepted presentation requests from the Diversity Community of Practice, including with their leadership team and their annual Diversity Data Deep Dive virtual conference. At the conference, we presented a plenary session on reframing aging within the context of campus life. The Age-Friendly UMN Council is available to provide technical assistance to OED on their initiatives.

Our OED and other stakeholders have been immensely supportive of our work and have taken our recommendations into consideration. We have more work to do, including further partnership and strategy alignment with OED. Given our recent history and collaborations, we are hopeful for continued success.

Advancing Age Inclusivity and Diversity
At the University of Minnesota

Chris Farrell, economics editor of Marketplace Money, which is produced and distributed by American Public Media, hosts a panel exploring what it means to find purpose in later life.

Mariann Johnson, mindfulness and well-being instructor at the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality and Healing, hosts an age-friendly session.

A Conversation About Age Diversity With Megan Gerhardt, PhD

Dr. Gerhardt is Professor of Management, Co-Director of the William Isaac and Michael Oxley Center for Business Leadership, and Director of Leadership Development at Miami University Farmer School of Business and the co-author of *Gentelligence: The Revolutionary Approach to Leading an Intergenerational Workforce.*

Why is integrating age inclusivity in campus efforts around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) important at this time?
Higher education, like all industries, is currently experiencing a unique dynamic: we have five generations working and learning together on our campuses for the first time in history. Due to gains in longevity (both in terms of health and careers), many professionals are working longer. In higher education, this means not only are many of our faculty and staff continuing to work well past a "traditional" retirement age, we also have more older individuals returning to our institutions to continue their education.

To remain relevant, higher education needs to embrace lifelong learning. This doesn't just apply to our students (of all ages) but creates workplace cultures for our faculty and staff that normalize intergenerational learning and collaboration across all generations—a concept I call "Gentelligence." We have an even greater opportunity to leverage age diversity than other industries due to our rich resources in terms of our student body. We have the ability to help shape healthy perceptions of intergenerational dynamics as our youngest students begin their careers.

What barriers do you see for making these connections in our DEI campus efforts?
Unfortunately, almost all generational conversations on campuses and in workplaces tend to be entrenched in unfounded stereotypes and biases. Much of my work begins with helping people of all ages examine the assumptions they are making about others who are considerably older or younger: What judgments are being made about someone's intent, work ethic, or value based on stereotypes? Whether it's the tired notions of "Gen Z snowflakes," "entitled Millennials," "slacker Gen Xers," or "OK Boomer," every age group has been saddled with unflattering labels by those in other generations. The root of these lazy stereotypes is a lack of curiosity and willingness to explore what we may not understand, and this creates quite a barrier to intergenerational learning and collaboration.

Research shows that all people, regardless of age, have similar intrinsic needs. For example, we all need to feel respected, connected, and agency over our lives and work. If we stop there, we'd conclude that age and generational diversity challenges are much ado about nothing. But the important piece we'd be missing is that while our needs are similar, the norms we learn growing up about how to fulfill those needs can be quite different. We tend to judge others by those norms. If your norm for gaining respect looks different than mine, I tend to judge it as wrong, and that creates the tension and conflict we experience around intergenerational dynamics.

How do you integrate age inclusivity in your classroom?
The mantra of Gentelligence is that every generation has something to learn and something to teach. That is a core belief of mine, and I think my students would agree that it is reflected in how I design my classes and how I teach. I have tremendous respect for my students and an awareness that they are growing up and starting their careers at a time that is markedly different from my own experience. As a result, they are developing the tools and norms they need to navigate that world. I need to listen to their needs, their concerns, and their ideas before I can see how I can help them. I believe my experience and expertise is still relevant and valuable to them; that's why I am still a teacher. But you can't provide helpful insights unless you are willing to ask questions and understand the current context in which those insights will be used. If I lecture to them with no awareness of how their challenges may be different from the ones we used to experience, how in the world can they find my advice useful? Beyond this, I genuinely believe they are excellent teachers. I have learned so much from my students over the past 20 years just by being open to their ideas and perspectives.

How can other teaching and learning experiences in higher education help prepare students better for age-diversity experiences beyond college?
To create smarter intergenerational conversations, I recommend using great questions. Questions allow us to step away from surface level stereotypes (such as "all Gen Zs like to communicate this way") and instead activate that essential curiosity. One of my favorite Gentelligence questions is: How would you approach this challenge? This question can be used in so many places in higher education, whether it's in the classroom or committee meetings in departments with multigenerational faculty.

When you ask that question (to someone younger or older than you), so many important things happen. You are demonstrating mutual respect, showing you value their perspective and understand it is likely different than your own. You are hearing new and important ideas. And finally, you are creating an opening to share your own insights in a way that is more likely to be heard: people of any age are more likely to listen to you after they truly feel heard and valued.

It's time to reframe the way we look at age diversity in higher education. We have the greatest opportunity of any industry to lead the way on healthy and innovative intergenerational learning.

- As part of its age-inclusive campus efforts, the **University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus (CU Anschutz) Multidisciplinary Center on Aging** graduated the latest cohort of Older Adult Research Specialists, a new intergenerational workforce development initiative that hires older adults to provide peer-to-peer recruitment and retainment of older adults in clinical trials. The latest cohort brings the entire program to 52 new older adults eligible for hire across campus for research support. For more information, email jodi.waterhouse@cuanschutz.edu.

- **CU Anschutz Multidisciplinary Center on Aging** worked to get **Senate Bill 31** successfully passed during the 2023 Colorado Legislative Session. The bill **Improve Health Care Provider Access for Older Coloradans** provides funding to create a geriatrics training program across health care disciplines and across higher education institutions in Colorado. Read more about the bill to improve access to trained geriatric specialist health care providers.

- This past October, more than 250 attendees gathered on the campus of AFU partner **Western Oregon University** for the AARP 2023 Age-Friendly Oregon Summit, a statewide gathering of leaders involved in helping to make cities and communities in the state more livable for people of all ages. The host cities of Monmouth and Independence, which had recently been accepted into the network of Age-Friendly Cities, added to the campus celebration with a community day filled with events focused on advancing age-friendliness throughout the community.

- The **University of Utah** is delighted to announce that it has become a member of the Age-Friendly University (AFU) Global Network reflecting a comprehensive approach to promoting campus age-inclusivity efforts. This institutional milestone was officially recognized during the University's MEDiversity week in a presentation called AFU @ the U: What does the Age-Friendly University designation mean for you?

Advancing Age Inclusivity by Facilitating Older Adult Learning

The **University of Manitoba's Faculty of Extended Education** is offering a micro-certificate on **Facilitating Older Adult Learning** as part of the institution's Age-Friendly University (AFU) efforts. The development of this unique educational program was funded by an AFU Initiative Grant from the Centre on Aging. It was first offered in the winter of 2023 and favorably evaluated by more than two dozen participants. The next session will start in February 2024. Those completing the micro-certificate will learn how aging affects learning and how to design and provide learning experiences for older adults. Find out more about earning the micro-certificate in facilitating older adult learning and how to register—and share this professional development opportunity with your age-inclusivity networks.

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