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Age Inclusivity in Higher Education

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

The Age Inclusivity in Higher Education (AIHE) 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 highlights age-inclusive communication and strategies to support more positive learning, intergenerational, and work environments for students, faculty, and staff on our campuses.

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

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Changing the Conversation about Age and Aging in Higher Education >>

Communication matters. The words, images, and messages we use to talk about age and aging at our colleges and universities can shape how members of our community see themselves and one another - and can influence who feels welcomed and valued on our campuses. In this way, positive communication can also impact access and achievement in higher education. Across the many functions of higher education, age-inclusive communication can be refined - from recruiting and advising students to teaching and learning, engaging with faculty and staff, conducting and disseminating research, supporting student life, delivering services, and navigating the campus.

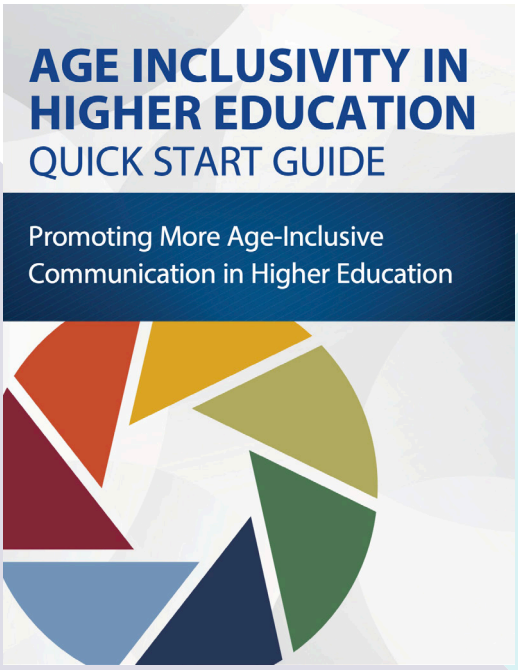
To raise awareness and promote more age-inclusive communication, the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) has developed the Age Inclusivity in Higher Education Quick Start Guide. The Guide offers practical ideas for communicating about age and aging across the seven Age Inclusivity Domains of Higher Education (AIDHE): Teaching & Learning, Student Affairs, Personnel, Services & Resources, Research, Outreach & Engagement, and the Physical Environment. Together, these domains reflect the many functions of higher education - from what and how we teach, to how we support students and employees, design campus spaces, deliver resources, engage with communities,

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and conduct and share research. Moreover, the AIDHE model recognizes that age inclusivity is not the responsibility of a single office or program; rather, it can be integrated across the many practices, departments, and programs that engage students, faculty, and staff - and ultimately connect to the broader community beyond a campus.

The Guide also draws on principles from the National Center to Reframe Aging, which provides evidence-informed strategies for communicating about aging in ways that challenge ageism and tell a larger story of growing older as a universal developmental process. These strategies encourage us to recognize the diversity of people's experiences across the life course, highlight the possibilities of our longer lives, avoid language that "otherizes" or places an emphasis on deficit and decline, and show how environments and circumstances shape aging. They also encourage a solutions-oriented approach that recognizes challenges while emphasizing opportunities for positive change as we age.



Starting the Conversation

Campuses do not need to transform communication all at once. Small steps can open the door to broader conversations and action:

- **Review** campus communications and materials for messages about age and aging.
- **Ask** campus members what could be improved.
- **Find** campus champions to help develop plans and build momentum.
- **Start** with one domain, department, or initiative.
- **Build** on what is already working and connect efforts to existing campus practices.
- **Share** what is happening to spark new ideas and encourage others to participate.

Age-inclusive communication is more than simply choosing different words. It is an opportunity to create campus environments that foster belonging and engagement, and where learning and working across the life course are supported as opportunities for everyone.



Nancy Morrow-Howell, PhD
Washington University in St. Louis



Joann M. Montepare, PhD
Lasell University

Reframe Aging: Higher Education's Call to Join the Movement

The National Center for Reframing Aging offers evidence-based strategies for shifting the age narrative and telling a more complete story about what it means to grow older. Higher education is uniquely positioned to lead this movement. Colleges and universities are not only places where knowledge is created and shared; they are also powerful institutions for shaping culture, influencing public discourse, and building partnerships that create needed and lasting change.

Here are ways higher education can lead.

Increase Awareness of Reframing

One of higher education's most important purposes is to increase knowledge through education. We can embrace that calling by proactively learning about the reframing aging movement and sharing that knowledge across campus and throughout our communities.

<< At the University of Minnesota, we incorporate Reframing Aging principles into educational programming, and supplement with GSA's resources such as its newly launched Understanding Ageism online course and AARP's Disrupt Aging Classroom curriculum. In 2025 alone, we hosted 22 workshops that engaged 1,540 people in conversations about reframing aging and creating age-inclusive environments. We also share our expertise through guest lectures and presentations at our own institution and with partner colleges and universities.

Engage in Shifting the Narrative

Ageism remains pervasive in our society—and higher education can play an important role in challenging it. When a recent *New York Times* commentary characterized older adults as hoarding America's potential, we felt compelled to respond. In our commentary, rather than simply rebutting the argument, we used Reframing Aging strategies to offer a different way of understanding the issue and drew attention to the underlying problem: ageism.

Our response demonstrates how institutions can use their expertise and platforms to contribute constructively to public conversations about aging. For those looking for a place to begin, the National Center to Reframe Aging offers a Responding to Opinion Pieces Toolkit with practical guidance for developing impactful messages.

Partner for Impact

Reframing aging becomes even more powerful when institutions work together. In Minnesota, the University of Minnesota is a co-lead of Reframe Aging Minnesota alongside the Minnesota Leadership Council on Aging, with a steering committee that includes AARP Minnesota, area agencies on aging, and nonprofit partners.

What began as an effort to bring Reframing Aging content to Minnesota has grown into a statewide collaborative offering quarterly virtual workshops. Drawing on Project ECHO (a virtual learning and knowledge-sharing network) principles, the initiative uses technology to amplify resources and case-based learning to help participants navigate complexity. Sessions combine guided practice, peer learning, case studies, and collaborative problem-solving. Topics have included recognizing ageism in popular media, the intersections of aging and gender, reframing rather than rebutting, and measuring ageism. Learn more at www.mnlcoa.org/reframeaging >>

These efforts require resources, passion, and prioritization. Higher education has a tremendous opportunity - and responsibility - to use its knowledge, influence, and partnerships to help create a more accurate, equitable, and inclusive story of aging.



Rajean P. Moone, PhD
Associate Director for Policy
University of Minnesota Center for Healthy Aging & Innovation

Humans of VUU: Conversations Across Generations



Winner of the CoGenerate and Stanford Center on Longevity Big Ideas Challenge

Hollee Freeman, PhD
Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences
Virginia Union University

"In a time when higher education often compartmentalizes students and educators and privileges data over life experiences, this initiative positions human stories as vital tools for promoting empathy, leadership, and connection." Hollee Freeman

What inspired your project?

I remember taking my 95-year-old grandmother to see the repurposed spaces which formerly held statues honoring Civil Wars generals. By and large, younger people in the community had taken up the mantle of transforming these spaces associated with a horrific history into places reflecting honor, joy, and resilience. When my grandmother saw the repurposed spaces, I recorded her saying that she was proud of the younger generation and encouraged them to "keep going." That moment sparked a question for me: What is each generation learning and experiencing from the other?

Humans of VUU: Conversations Across Generations was born from this question in 2025 and is situated at Virginia Union University, an HBCU (historically black college and university). Conversations Across Generations reimagines higher education as a living bridge between generations, transforming the university into a hub of memory, dialogue, and connection.

What are the core elements of the project?

The project expands the classroom beyond age and discipline. Knowledge becomes rooted in lived experience, where each generation teaches and learns from the other. By valuing life stories as both curriculum and catalyst, the project encourages a deeper kind of sustainability grounded in cultural continuity, shared stewardship, and collective wisdom.

The project started with five faculty-student pairs. Each pair received a core set of questions and was encouraged to follow the conversation wherever their curiosity led. While the program initially focused on "elders," I quickly realized that this constraint could exclude other "older" faculty and staff whose experiences were equally valuable.

Can you share an impactful moment and some lessons learned?

One of the most memorable conversations paired a sophomore international student majoring in biomechanical engineering with a university groundskeeper who is also an herbalist. They met in the university greenhouse and discovered a shared love of nature, from the grounds beneath them to the heavens above. At the end of the interview, the groundskeeper told the student, "Man, I'm really proud of you." The student replied, "I'm proud of you too." Now, when they pass each other on campus, they do not simply walk by. They stop and catch up. That connection is the impact I envision across our university.

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The project also presents a challenge. It is a "slow burn." Amid AI, packed schedules, and pressure for immediate outcomes, meaningful conversation requires people to slow down, listen, and make time for one another. Participation must be cultivated, relationships cannot be rushed, and impact may not always fit neatly into traditional metrics.

Yet it is worth it. Drawing from activist and educator Myles Horton, we are creating "islands of decency": small pockets of connection, empathy, and optimism that can spread across our close-knit university and into the surrounding community.

Ultimately, I envision a campus-wide framework that embeds storytelling, oral history, and civic reflection into teaching, research, and university life, eventually growing into an Intergenerational Learning Institute. Through digital archives, public exhibitions, and community partnerships, we can preserve and repurpose our shared experiences while keeping a firm focus on the honor, joy, and resilience my grandmother saw in those transformed spaces.



Rahim Shabazz (left) and D'Nado Burrows (right) at Virginia Union University share stories to get to know each other

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From Network to Practice: Expanding Age-Inclusive Campuses

GSA Online Workshop – November 18, 2026, 12:00-2:00 PM (EST)

REGISTRATION

As colleges and universities respond to shifting age demographics and the growing demand for lifelong personal and professional development opportunities, creating age-inclusive campuses has never been more urgent - or more achievable. This interactive workshop spotlights two powerful pathways for action: the Age-Friendly University (AFU) Global Network and the Age Inclusivity Domains of Higher Education (AIDHE) framework. Designed for educators, administrators, researchers, and policymakers, the workshop blends big-picture vision with practical application. Participants will learn how to join the AFU network, apply AFU principles, and integrate AIDHE strategies across programs, practices, and partnerships to support age-diverse students, faculty, and staff. Join us to exchange ideas, address common challenges, and cultivate more inclusive, future-ready campuses.

Learn More about Age Inclusivity in Higher Education

Search the online program for the upcoming GSA's 2026 Annual Scientific Meeting by the Primary Session Topic "Age-Friendly and Age-Inclusive Systems" for information about these and related presentations.

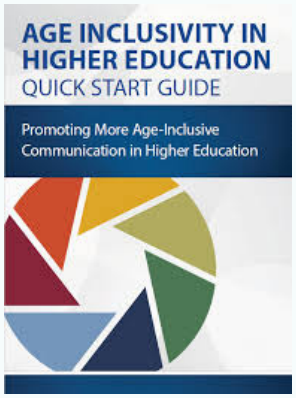
- Developing Resilient Institutions through Data-Driven Age-Inclusive Practices - Age Inclusivity in Higher Education (AIHE) Interest Group Sponsored Symposium
- Addressing Ageism: Taking an Age Inclusivity Domains of Higher Education (AIDHE) Approach
- Universities as Agents of Change: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Reframe Aging
- Embedding Age Inclusivity Across Higher Education: A Champions Model for Institutional Change

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Learning Center, Introducing—Understanding Ageism





Join us for a live webinar on
October 23, 2026, 1:00-2:00 PM (EDT)
to learn more about GSA's
Age Inclusivity in Higher Education Quick Start Guide
and gain useful ideas to put into practice to build a campus culture where individuals of every age can thrive.

REGISTRATION

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