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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 innovative approaches to making research efforts in higher education more age inclusive.

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

The *Age Inclusivity in Higher Education* newsletter is produced by the Gerontological Society of America.

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Don't Study Us Without Us: Creating Age-Inclusive Strategies in the AIDHE Research Domain

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As population aging accelerates across the United States, academic institutions are reexamining how research is conducted — and exploring ways to increase its reach, impact, and effectiveness. Within the Age Inclusivity Domains of Higher Education (AIDHE) framework, the Research Domain plays a crucial role in ensuring that scientific inquiry reflects the lived experiences, priorities, and diversity of older adults. At the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, this commitment extends well beyond the lab. It is being realized through innovative, community-centered models that position older adults as partners, advisors, and catalysts for meaningful change in the research ecosystem.

AIDHE underscores that research must not only include older adults but fully engage them across each stage of the process — from study design and recruitment to interpretation and dissemination. This shift is urgently needed, given the persistent underrepresentation of older adults in research. Although they are the fastest-growing segment of the population, older adults remain one of the least-represented groups in clinical studies. This disconnect has significant consequences: interventions

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developed without older adult input often fail to meet real-world needs, limiting effectiveness and deepening disparities in access, care, and outcomes. To help reshape the research landscape and address these gaps, CU Anschutz is leading several nationally recognized initiatives that exemplify age-inclusive research practices.

Older Adult Research Specialist (OARS) Program
The OARS program prepares and employs older adults as research navigators who support recruitment, informed consent, community engagement, and culturally responsive communication. More than 80 trainees have completed the 14-week curriculum, which combines community health worker training with foundational research skills. OARS strengthens the research workforce, enhances intergenerational collaboration, and builds trust with older participants — bridging a critical divide between the community's research intentions to serve older adults and the professionals conducting that research.

Living Lab in Senior Living Communities
The Living Lab dissolves traditional barriers between academia and community by embedding research within senior living environments. Through an Academic Research Advisory Council, residents review proposals, identify priorities, and co-develop grant concepts. By transforming communities into active research spaces, the Living Lab ensures that older adults guide research that directly influences their daily lives and that studies reflect genuine community needs rather than assumptions.

Research Roadshows
Research Roadshows bring immersive, hands-on research experiences to communities across Colorado. These events demystify research, allow older adults to participate in real studies, and connect them with research teams — including OARS graduates. This experiential model deepens understanding of how research works and how older adult engagement improves the relevance, quality, and inclusivity of emerging scientific discoveries.

I KNOW Care Network
The I KNOW Care Network expands the age-inclusive research ecosystem by connecting industry partners and academic teams with meaningful opportunities to guide health research. As a platform for shared stories, research opportunities, and community priorities, it strengthens two-way communication between researchers and the senior living industry, helping both sectors collaboratively address complex challenges facing older adult-serving communities.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate what becomes possible when institutions adopt the aspirations of the AIDHE Research Domain as both guiding vision and daily practice: research that is rigorous, equitable, community-rooted, and authentically age inclusive. By engaging older adults as experts, CU Anschutz is redefining aging research and shaping a national model for inclusive innovation.



Jodi Waterhouse, MHA
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

Aging PCOR Learning Collaborative: Expanding Age-Inclusive Approaches to Research

The Aging PCOR Learning Collaborative is a Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI)-funded initiative designed to increase researchers' readiness to engage older adults and caregivers meaningfully in research. Led by Dr. Erin McGaffigan of Collective Insight and Dr. Marc Cohen of the LeadingAge LTSS Center at the University of Massachusetts Boston, the Learning Collaborative brought older adults, caregivers, students, funders, researchers, and academic leaders together across two phases from 2021–2024. Guided by a Steering Committee and an Older Adult Subcommittee, the project developed educational resources, trained aging-focused scholars in engagement, and encouraged academic leaders and funders to embed engagement principles into campus curricula and funding expectations.

A central component of the project was Aging Research Feedback Sessions, developed by the Older Adult Subcommittee to create structured opportunities for older adult advisors to provide input on research led by doctoral students and early-career researchers. During eight sessions with four researchers, ten older adult advisors engaged with projects addressing dementia detection among Vietnamese-speaking older adults, older adult learning attitudes, nutrition and aging, and driving cessation. These sessions positioned self-identified older adults, who ranged in age from their late 50s to early 80s, as experts whose lived experience strengthened research relevance and accessibility.

To prepare, advisors completed Research 101 training and reviewed project materials in advance of each session. During the sessions, advisors engaged with researchers, offering feedback, questions, and reflections, and contributed follow-up input afterward. Researchers participated in technical assistance sessions focused on accessible communication, material development, and facilitation skills, and later shared how the feedback influenced their work.

At the close of the project, the Older Adult Subcommittee sought to document these efforts. Engagement lead Sophia Webber and older adult advisor Janet Sasser led a qualitative coding process to evaluate activities and outcomes. Findings highlighted practices that supported the success of the feedback sessions, including building engagement capacity for both older adults and researchers, creating

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From left to right: Janet Sasser, older adult advisor and coresearcher; Sophia Webber, engagement lead and coresearcher; Taylor Gray, engagement lead

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"When I started this process, I didn't think I'd have much to contribute. But I have since discovered I have a knack for this … Now I'm starting a gerontology graduate program." – Janet Sasser, older adult advisor

clear documentation, and establishing transparent follow-up processes. Advisors provided specific suggestions around research focus and design, material development, facilitation strategies, data collection approaches, and trust building. Researchers described concrete changes to their projects, such as expanding research questions, strengthening literature reviews, refining survey instruments, implementing strategies to overcome language barriers, and incorporating trust-building activities prior to data collection.

The feedback sessions demonstrated how engaging older adults as experts supports age inclusivity in higher education. Older adults gained research skills and confidence, students refined communication competencies, and institutions benefited from stronger partnerships with older adults. Moreover, this initiative offers a replicable model for advancing age-inclusive scholarship that recognizes older adults as contributors and assets to the research process.

To learn more about the Aging PCOR Learning Collaborative, visit the website.

This project was funded through two Eugene Washington PCORI Engagement Awards 19514-LTSS and EACB-26961.



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Older Adult Subcommittee Members and Aging Research Feedback Session Advisors in the Aging PCOR Learning Collaborative. Read more about them here.

Research on Intergenerational Classroom Experiences: The Importance of Insights from Older Learners, Students, and Faculty

A Conversation with Chaya Koren, PhD, University of Haifa, Israel

Why is more age-inclusive research needed in academic educational practice?

Age-inclusive research supports the Age-Friendly University (AFU) vision and the Age Inclusivity Domains of Higher Education (AIDHE) framework by recognizing education as a lifelong right. It challenges ageist perceptions by providing evidence needed for relating to older adults' contribution within academic settings. It provides the empirical basis needed to examine how age diversity can be addressed in teaching practices and university learning environments. Accordingly, Haifa AFU initiated a qualitative interview study using an ecosystem's domain perspective that aimed to investigate the experiences of three groups of intergenerational classroom stakeholders, composed of older learners aged 63 to 86, younger students aged 22 to 34, and faculty. Of 187 courses open to older learners in the spring semester at the University of Haifa, 50 courses were randomly chosen. Faculty were contacted to suggest their course participate in the research. The sample included 11 courses, some with 80 to 150 participants, others with up to 20 participants. Some included more older learners than younger students. Participants included 11 older learners, 11 students, and 7 faculty.

Why is it valuable to learn from faculty as well as student perspectives?

Triangulating the perspectives of all three campus groups provides a more holistic view of education as a lifelong right, revealing its complexity. Each group occupies a distinct position within the academic ecosystem, contributing unique, complementary forms of knowledge. Faculty provide insight into curriculum design, assessment, institutional constraints, pedagogical intentions, and their influence on norms and power relations. Younger students reflect early adult learning needs and academic socialization, whereas older learners contribute life experience and reflections shaped by long-term trajectories. Faculty may view a course as inclusive and effective, while students and older learners could experience it differently. Considering all three perspectives reveals how teaching intentions, learning experiences, and outcomes overlap or contradict across age and role. Learning from multiple perspectives helps identify gaps between pedagogical intentions and lived experiences, allowing for meaningful improvement in practice.

How has your research impacted your approach to intergenerational teaching and engagement?

The research findings highlight contrasting learning motivations and their consequences. Older learners sought enrichment, enjoyment, and meaningful engagement without academic obligations, whereas younger students focused on degree completion and professional development. These contrasting motivations shaped classroom dynamics, influencing perceptions of older learners as contributing to discussions alongside disrupting structured learning. Faculty described challenges they faced. All three groups addressed the importance of knowing how to successfully manage an intergenerational classroom, illustrating how classroom dynamics change when faculty know how to navigate the lesson. These findings emphasize the importance of creating a learning environment that is initially planned pedagogically to accommodate lifelong learning.

Our research also found that although older and younger age groups value social engagement, generational differences can lead to limited cross-generational exchanges mutually shared by both generations. Older learners form peer connections while perceiving younger students as part of the campus environment rather than social partners. These findings led to the understanding that perhaps Haifa AFU and its application of the AIDHE model could broaden lifelong learning options by offering multiple learning settings that include intergenerational classrooms alongside academic programs for older learners only.



Chaya Koren, PhD
University of Haifa, Israel

Registration Open!

Longevity Innovations in Higher Education Summit and AFU GN North American Regional Meeting



For the first time, this convening brings together Age-Friendly University (AFU) institutions across North America, as well as leaders of institutions and organizations who are developing longevity innovations in higher education, such as The NEXEL Collaborative, University Retirement Communities, Campus CoGenerate, and GSA's Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE).

The **University of Manitoba (UM)** has been appointed the Regional Lead for North America of the Age-Friendly University (AFU) Global Network, a prominent role that elevates UM's leadership in advancing age-inclusive higher education. UM will support strategy, outreach, and education, partnering with the Global Network Secretariat to help shape global efforts. Read more here about UM and coleads **Michelle Porter**, Director of the Centre on Aging and Professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management, and **Angie Conrad**, Anti-Ableism and Age-Inclusivity Specialist in the Office of Equity Transformation.

Researchers at AFU partner campus **The University of Massachusetts Boston** (Nina Silverstein, Joann Montepare, Lauren Bowen, Susan Whitbourne) have received funding from Next50 for the study **Expanding Age Inclusivity in U.S. Higher Education to Increase Community Impact and Access for Older Learners,** which will identify actionable, evidence-based outreach and engagement strategies institutions can use to support older students, faculty, and staff within the Age Inclusivity Domains of Higher Education (AIDHE) framework. Special attention will be given to exploring barriers that hold older learners back from engaging in campus opportunities for personal and professional development.

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Coming Soon!

The **Gerontology Competencies for Undergraduate and Graduate Education** have been revised by GSA's Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) and will be available in 2026. The competencies outline core and selective areas to guide academic programs in fostering ethical practice, interdisciplinary collaboration, effective communication, critical inquiry, and culturally responsive engagement with older people, families, and communities. This unified, biopsychosocial foundation equips students with the theoretical, scientific, and practice-based knowledge for understanding human aging across diverse contexts in a flexible yet rigorous framework.

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