

AGE INCLUSIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION QUICK START GUIDE

Promoting More Age-Inclusive
Communication in Higher Education

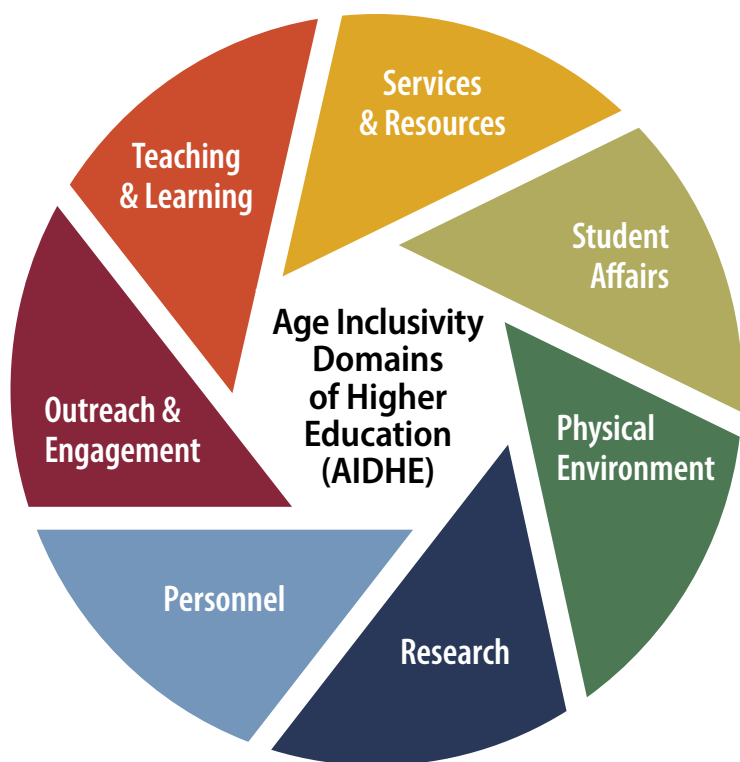


In this guide, we provide ideas for communicating about age and aging within the **Age Inclusivity Domains of Higher Education (AIDHE) model** and present strategies from the **National Center to Reframe Aging** to enhance more age-inclusive messages and language on our campuses. The aim is to promote more positive attitudes about age and more productive learning and work environments for people of all ages.

The AIDHE model¹ entails practices to create an age-inclusive learning and work environment across seven institutional domains within higher education: Teaching & Learning, Services & Resources, Student Affairs, Physical Environment, Research, Personnel, and Outreach & Engagement. For each domain, we present some strategies to address age-inclusive messaging and show how the principles to reframe aging and related considerations might apply.

The National Center to Reframe Aging is the trusted source for proven communication strategies and tools to effectively frame aging issues. It is the nation's leading organization cultivating an active community of individuals and organizations to spread awareness of attitudes toward aging and influence policies and programs that benefit us all as we age.

Major Ideas from the National Center to Reframe Aging to Keep in Mind



- Tell the whole story of aging, highlighting opportunities that come as we age, to address the prevailing narrative of age as decline and deficit
- Highlight the potential of longer lives and the capacity of older people
- Recognize the wide diversity among older people
- Use language that is inclusive and free of age bias, recognizing that aging is a universal experience, use “we” and “us” language and avoid “othering” language like “them” or “those older adults”
- Spread awareness about ageism by defining it and pointing to the systemic and societal bias toward older people
- Promote the values of justice and equal opportunity for all, regardless of age
- Highlight the roles of environment and policy in shaping a person’s life course, rather than personal choice
- Always include a solution that helps people understand that something can be done at a systems level
- Use the concept of ingenuity in the face of new challenges to prompt the “can-do” attitude

Teaching and Learning

AIDHE practices support the development of an aging-related curriculum and inclusive teaching and learning strategies that meet the needs of age-diverse populations.

In classrooms, meetings, and events, talk about aging as a universal, developmental process and advocate for universal design to support people of all ages. We are all aging.

Ageist comments or behaviors in the classroom create opportunities to teach about attitudes and societal expectations regarding aging as well as age discrimination. Point out biased or stereotypical assumptions about older people and later life that are expressed in course materials or class discussions. Remember that ageism affects people of all ages. Invite younger students to talk about ageism that they have experienced.

When presenting information in the curriculum about older people and aging, make sure to talk about the “whole story” of aging, including the capability and potential of older people. In addition to discussing the realities that

some people encounter, such as needing assistance with activities of daily living, a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease, or relocation to a nursing home, present data with examples that demonstrate that most older people are functional and engaged.

Include information about solutions-based programs and policies, especially after reviewing a challenge associated with aging. For example, when discussing challenges associated with driving, frame the discussion around maintaining mobility rather than focusing only on the loss of the ability to drive. Highlight innovative programs that expand transportation and connection opportunities—such as ride-share services, community shuttles, walkable neighborhoods, and virtual engagement platforms.

TRY	INSTEAD OF	BECAUSE
Using messages that are inclusive of people of all ages and abilities. “Some of us are more familiar with this e-learning platform than others; let me know if you need help.”	Using language that otherizes or diminishes older students; avoid trying to use humor. “I know some of the older students are not as computer-literate and will find this digital platform challenging.”	Inclusive language reflects the reality that people of all ages have different strengths and different learning needs.
Being specific when identifying a group by using condition or situation rather than chronological age. “People with mobility limitations” or “People who live alone.”	Using age categories that set up us-versus-them thinking. “People over the age of 65 need help with activities of daily living.”	Age categories are otherizing and mask the diversity of the older population, reinforcing the myth that all older people are the same.

Services and Resources

AIDHE practices provide health, caregiving, and technology support services for age-diverse students, faculty, and staff.

Students, faculty, and staff of all ages will likely, at some point during their time on campus, experience needs and challenges with respect to their health, caregiving, and the use of technology. How we communicate with them about these issues and the available resources will help them to navigate circumstances in a more productive way. It will also send a positive message about how these issues are normal and how a campus supports and values all its members.

For example, when introducing new technologies, make no age assumptions about technology skills. Instead, communicate that “Training is available for all users adjusting to new technology.”

Similarly, if your campus has resources to support students, faculty, or staff who are caregivers, remove assumptions that caregiving equals stress or only applies to certain age groups (e.g., “Resources for staff who care for aging parents and may be overwhelmed.”) and communicate about them in a way that reaches all campus members (e.g., “Resources for all caregivers balancing study and work responsibilities.”) Do the same when communicating about health and wellness programs because people can experience health concerns at any point in their lives, and they should not be discouraged from seeking support because they believe they are “too young” or “too old” to do so.

TRY	INSTEAD OF	BECAUSE
Using inclusive language about services, such as “Support services are available for all faculty and staff navigating personal or professional transitions.”	Using specific ages or calling out age unnecessarily, such as “Support services are available for our older faculty and staff.”	Many of these policies are beneficial across one’s life course, and naming age when it’s not relevant can reinforce “othering.” Focus on roles or needs that speak to the issues.
Reaching out to all age groups when describing services and programs, such as “We provide training for anyone adjusting to new digital tools or platforms.”	Implying decline or deficiency by focusing on older groups, such as “Older employees often have difficulty adjusting to new technology, but we can help.”	Using language that focuses on inclusion and adaptability expands who may see themselves as finding these resources helpful and avoids reinforcing that aging means decline.

Student Affairs

AIDHE practices support career services, admissions, recruitment, and advising.

Certain messages communicated in student affairs' materials and activities can be seen by older students as discouraging and can reinforce assumptions about who "belongs" in higher education. This can include welcoming language — and images — on campus websites and in recruitment materials, as well as information communicated on application forms, in admission interviews, and during meetings with advisors and other institutional staff.

In promotional materials and website copy, move toward a communication approach that recognizes that your campus welcomes new students at all stages of life and career. While it is fine to highlight how your campus invites younger

students, older students will welcome language that also focuses on them.

Be sure that details like options on application forms do not limit age ranges (e.g., ending at "35+") and use open-ended options instead (e.g., ranges such as "18–24," "25–34," "35–44," "45–54," etc.). Consider alternative ways to require information. For example, instead of using mandatory fields such as "High School Graduation Year" with no option to skip or explain, make the fields optional, or include "Prefer not to say," "Older student applicant," or "Returning student" options.

TRY	INSTEAD OF	BECAUSE
Creating messages that show that higher education is not age specific, such as "Our programs welcome learners at all stages of life and career."	Always focusing on younger students, with messages such as "Our programs are designed for recent high school grads ready to start their journey."	Higher education is fast becoming a choice for learners of all ages seeking educational opportunities for professional and personal development.
Asking questions with a personal focus, such as "What inspired you to pursue your education at this time?"	Asking questions around age, such as "What made you decide to go back to school at your age?"	A person's educational goals and aspirations should be the focus rather than their age.

Physical Environment

AIDHE practices ensure physical accessibility across campus buildings, classrooms, and spaces, meeting the needs of all abilities and ages.

Communicating in an age-inclusive way about how to get around a campus means ensuring that all people — students, faculty, staff, and visitors — can easily understand information and directions.

Practical ways to do this are to use clear, direct language, avoid jargon and acronyms, and offer different formats — including printed maps, digital maps, and apps with adjustable text size and voice navigation, and QR codes on signage with clear instructions about how to use them.

Throughout campus, using consistent visual aids and universally recognized symbols (e.g., directional arrows) alongside readable text to ensure accessibility and safety for all people. The look and placement of wayfaring signs is also important, such as using high-contrast colors (black text on white or yellow backgrounds), sans-serif fonts (like Arial

and Helvetica instead of serif fonts like Times New Roman and Garamond), and signs at eye level for people using wheelchairs. Tactile maps and braille versions in strategic locations are also useful.

Including personal assistance options will also be welcomed by visitors, such as having campus guides or greeters, help desks or information booths, and call numbers for real-time support.

Student and staff orientation sessions that highlight accessible paths, transit stops, rest areas, emergency contacts, and other navigation information will go a long way in creating an inclusive campus environment for all people. Providing feedback channels for users to report navigation issues will also help to make the campus an inviting place to visit, study, and work.

TRY	INSTEAD OF	BECAUSE
Using signage that includes words like <i>accessible entrance</i> or <i>exit</i> .	Using signage that says <i>ADA-compliant</i> or <i>egress</i> .	Direct, jargon-free language is better understood by people of all backgrounds.
Offering different information formats for navigating campus.	Using only a single format such as a digital map.	Different people prefer different formats for navigating spaces.

Research

AIDHE practices facilitate aging-related research by faculty and students with attention to age diversity, intergenerational dynamics, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Communicating about research in a more age-inclusive way ensures that people can understand and learn from the information in a way that doesn't reinforce age biases. Useful strategies include using clear, accessible language; accurately portraying aging; highlighting both strengths and challenges of growing older; and framing research questions so that age is not posed as a problem to be solved.

When talking about aging, it is also important to reinforce that aging is something we all experience and that not only our personal choices but also our diverse experiences as we age shape our late-life experience. Also be mindful

to recognize individuality and diversity in the experiences, abilities, and perspectives of individuals. Terms like “the elderly” or “the aged” mask the great diversity of the older population.

When talking to or about older people, use respectful, people-first language that conveys competence and individuality. Choose words and tone that reflect connection and respect—such as “people living with dementia” instead of “dementia patients”—and use natural, straightforward language rather than exaggerated or simplified speech that communicate stereotypes of dependence known as elderspeak.

TRY	INSTEAD OF	BECAUSE
Describing core issues in neutral, objective ways such as “shifting age demographic patterns.”	Talking about aging as a problem or disaster to be remedied by using phrases like “weathering the silver tsunami.”	Using language that describes demographic change as a looming crisis or burden dehumanizes older people and promotes a fear-based, negative perception of aging.
Speaking with people with a natural tone and volume, and using their preferred name or title (e.g., “Ms. Johnson” or “Dr. Kim”).	Speaking too slowly, too loudly, or with an exaggerated tone.	Clear and adult-level language communicates respect and competence, which can encourage participation in research.

Personnel

AIDHE practices uphold a commitment to age-inclusivity in hiring and promotion practices, professional development opportunities, and retirement planning services.

When communicating about personnel issues relevant to different age groups, using age-inclusive language can help to foster respect, equity, and engagement. To this end, frame aging as a normal, ongoing process and avoid using age-based labels like “young talent” or “senior staff” and making age-based assumptions (e.g., older individuals lack digital experience).

When developing and describing aging-related programs, opt for framing workforce and professional development efforts as opportunities to create age-inclusive, resilient institutions and avoid crisis and decline narratives. Where possible, communicate the value of cross-generational

collaboration by emphasizing the benefits of age diversity in teamwork and shared learning across age groups.

Use inclusive, age-neutral language in hiring, performance evaluations, promotions, and professional development efforts. Focus on skills, experience, and qualifications rather than age-related cues (“you might be overqualified for this role”; “you’ve had a good run”). In job descriptions, interviews, and feedback, choose wording that welcomes talent of all ages and supports equitable opportunities for growth and advancement (instead of “we’re looking for a digital native” or “an energetic, dynamic candidate”).

TRY	INSTEAD OF	BECAUSE
Using age-neutral language that focuses on skills, qualifications, and contributions, not age or generation. Say “all applicants” instead of “young professionals” or “early-career scholars” (unless specifically targeting a program with those criteria).	Using specific age references, such as “Looking for a cultural fit with a young, dynamic team,” or “seasoned employee,” or “veteran employee” (when used in contrast to being “fresh” or “up to date”).	Age references can signal the exclusion of older professionals and subtly imply outdatedness or decline.
Using descriptive, age-neutral language instead of generational labels when referring to younger or older groups.	Using generational references and descriptions like “boomers,” “Gen Z work ethic,” or “millennial mindset.”	These labels profile individuals through generalizations and assumptions and reinforce common negative stereotypes.

Outreach and Engagement

AIDHE practices mean engagement with age-diverse adults, including retirees, to encourage lifelong learning, intergenerational exchange, and continued personal and professional development.

Try to integrate courses geared toward older people more centrally in campus life and offer courses for professional and personal development as well as for leisure and social engagement. Often, learning opportunities for older people are segregated to locations that are not central to campus life. Further, this programming is viewed as discretionary — for enrichment purposes only, not central to the mission of the institution.

Design intergenerational shared learning, mutual exchange, and collaboration opportunities for students. Promoting interaction across generations should be a key objective.

Provide evaluations or evidence that multigenerational experiences are beneficial when faculty or staff express doubt about integrating older and younger students.

If services and supports are age-targeted (like retirement planning or affinity groups for older students), emphasize that life stage or life circumstances are more relevant than chronological age.

Highlight voices and communicate experiences of retired colleagues in campus newsletters, panels, and marketing — positioning them as experts, mentors, and innovators.

TRY	INSTEAD OF	BECAUSE
Using the terms “students,” “all students,” “students of any age,” “students across the life course.”	Using the terms “lifelong learners,” “nontraditionally aged students,” “seasoned learners.”	Language that doesn’t segregate by age normalizes educational engagement at all ages across the life course. “Lifelong learning” traditionally implies discretionary, enrichment learning and has not been commonly applied to educational activities for professional development.
Affirming lifelong growth, such as when describing colleagues. “She continues to shape campus life through teaching, mentoring, and research.”	Using “exceptional” language such as “Even in retirement, she is still contributing.”	Words like “still” suggest surprise that older individuals remain engaged and make positive contributions.

Resources

Visit the [National Center to Reframing Aging](#) to learn more about advancing an equitable and complete story about aging in America.

Explore the [GSA enrich Learning Center on Age Inclusivity in Higher Education](#) for more Age Inclusivity in Higher Education (AIDHE) resources.

See the [Age-Friendly University Global Network](#) for details about how to join the growing number of campuses committed to advancing age inclusivity.

Ageism First Aid (AFA), GSA's online course, is being relaunched in 2026 as Understanding Ageism. The new course, which prepares students to engage thoughtfully with older people, avoiding stereotypes and ageist language, will feature streamlined content and more interactive engagement for students. The existing course is still available and will remain available in 2026 as classrooms transition to the new tool.

Include GSA's The Ageism Primer (TAP) in your teaching activities to help prepare students to engage thoughtfully with older people, avoiding stereotypes and ageist language.

Reference

¹ Whitbourne, S.K., Bowen, L.M., Silverstein, N.M., Montepare, J.M., & Stokes, J.E. (2024). Promoting age inclusivity in higher education: Campus practices and perceptions by students, faculty, and staff. *Research in Higher Education*. doi:10.1007/s11162-024-09785-8

Suggested Citation

Morrow-Howell, N. & Montepare, J. M. (2026). Promoting More Age-Inclusive Communication in Higher Education: Age Inclusivity in Higher Education Quick Start Guide. Gerontological Society of America.

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