

A News Article Approach for Promoting the "Intergenerational Perspective"

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Abstract

In recent years, a groundswell of intergenerational program activity has been occurring on a national scale. At an unprecedented rate, new programs are emerging that aim to bring young people and older adults together in various settings -- to interact, stimulate, educate, support, and care for one another. Yet, the "intergenerational field" consists of more than an amalgamation of "programs." It also represents a distinct perspective with implications for how we address social issues, formulate public policy, construct our basic institutions, and choose to spend our time. This article describes a news article series, "Ideas for Intergenerational Living," developed by Penn State Cooperative Extension as an outreach strategy to raise public awareness of the importance of intergenerational exchange -- within and beyond families -- as a means for building healthy individuals, families, and communities.

The intergenerational programming field

The International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs defines intergenerational programs as "social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations." The focus is on establishing intervention programs which can be implemented in a variety of settings including schools, community organizations, hospitals, and places of worship. These initiatives generally bring together people who are 21 and under and people who are 60 and over, for the benefit of one or both age groups.

Often intergenerational programming is seen as its own field. This makes sense insofar as it refers to a finite domain of inquiry and action, bounded by a clear set of approaches, questions, and skills that practitioners need to function effectively as they facilitate the sharing of skills, knowledge, and experience between the young and the elderly (Henkin and Kingson 1998/99; Newman et al. 1997; Thorp 1985).

The call for increased intergenerational engagement is coming from many directions. We see it in newspaper editorials commenting on the increased sense of social isolation experienced by many young people and older adults. The theme is also finding its way into the publications and meetings conducted by professional societies in a broad range of fields, including education, volunteerism, child development, family studies, service learning, and gerontology. Hundreds of intergenerational program guidebooks and manuals have been published over the past fifteen years and, recently, authors in the intergenerational field are finding mainstream venues for their publications (e.g., Brabazon and Disch 1997; Gambone 1998; Hawkins et al. 1998; Kaplan et al. 1998; Kuehne 1999; Newman et al. 1997; and Winston et al. 2001). In all of these venues, social scientists and human service professionals are recognizing that programmatic efforts to facilitate meaningful intergenerational engagement enhance the quality of lives, strengthen communities, and contribute to needed societal-level change.

Cooperative Extension, with its multifaceted service delivery system and broad-based clientele, contributes actively to this evolving field of inquiry and intervention (CREES 1999). In the areas of human development, aging, 4-H/ youth development, horticulture, and community development, many Extension personnel have developed innovative ways to infuse an intergenerational component into their programs. The intent is typically to install additional layers of educational enrichment and social support in the lives of young people and older adults and to produce tangible benefits at the community level, such as through community gardens and murals.

The "Ideas for Intergenerational Living" news article series

Overview

One of the neglected areas in the academic intergenerational literature is the subject of communicating with the public. Little attention is paid to questions of how to educate the public about existing intergenerational programs and practices, raise awareness of the benefits associated with these initiatives, and draw attention to the need for additional endeavors aimed at connecting the generations. The remainder of this article describes an outreach strategy which Extension specialists, Extension educators, and other professionals within and beyond Cooperative Extension can use to raise public awareness of the core concepts and principles of the intergenerational field.

The "Ideas for Intergenerational Living" news article series, launched in November 2000, is an integral part of the evolving intergenerational program at Penn State. Consistent with Cooperative Extension's tradition of using newspaper articles to advance Extension-based programs (Arbour 1966), this series was conceived as a way to establish a public platform to

describe, explain, and disseminate information about intergenerational programs and perspectives.

The message

The "intergenerational theme," as articulated in the series, simply says that we are better off -- as individuals and as a society -- when open lines of communication, caring, and support exist between the generations. Attention is placed on those programs, policies, and priorities that translate into increased opportunities for the generations to come together in mutually beneficial ways.

The articles also draw attention to the barriers to intergenerational exchange. For example, three of the articles note that when older adults are portrayed in negative stereotypical ways, they are in effect distanced from many opportunities for meaningful intergenerational engagement. By challenging notions that the majority of older adults are passive, unhealthy, forgetful, and disengaged by choice, these articles encourage readers to pay more attention to older adults' extensive assets and, hopefully, to be more receptive to proposals to enlist them as potential mentors, friendly listeners, and educators for young people.

Numerous issues and points of discussion, including those listed below, are likely to generate interest and debate in the years to come.

- Demographic changes, lifestyle changes, and evolving conceptions of family and kinship have contributed to the identifiable trend toward "intergenerational segregation." This trend has a profound, often negative effect on how people live, play, and relate to others.
- Intergenerational advocates make the compelling argument that when we invest in any one age group, such as the education of the young or financial security for the elderly, all generations can benefit. The challenge then is to facilitate the sharing of resources -- including income, knowledge, time, and services -- across generations.
- Intergenerational programs and activities contribute to the learning, personal growth, and quality of life of the young and elderly participants.
- Intergenerational programs and practices vary across geographic regions and cultural contexts. Intergenerational initiatives bring people together, across generations, to share cultural traditions and heritage.
- Mono-generational policies abound. For example, there are senior housing developments that penalize residents when grandchildren visit, long-term care facilities built in isolated

locations, and schools that turn away adults interested in volunteering. Such policies need to be re-examined in light of the extensive contributions that young people and older adults can and do make to each other's lives.

At the root of the array of intergenerational programs and practices, is a distinct, underlying perspective, an "intergenerational perspective," which has ramifications for how we care for and educate our young and develop services and settings for our elders.

The medium

As any person with public relations acumen will attest, for a human services program to survive and thrive, this work must be effectively presented to the general public and policy makers. For the outreach initiative described in this article, the communication vehicle is that of the news article series, akin to the newspaper column.

Arbour (1966) notes how newspaper articles -- in the form of news stories, feature stories, newspaper columns, and special newspaper pages -- provide Extension professionals with an inexpensive, effective, efficient means to garner public awareness and support for Extension programs. She describes six crucial characteristics of effective news stories:

- Newness or recency.
- Importance: They should be of significance to the reader.
- Nearness to point of publication: They should emphasize local people and local situations.
- Unusualness: They should convey something new and different to pique people's interest.
- Human interest: They should describe real people and real activities and avoid abstractions.
- Seasonableness: They should describe activities that have application at the time of publication.

These principles were incorporated, to varying degrees, in the "Ideas for Intergenerational Living" article series. Where possible, real life examples were woven into the articles to illustrate what it means to think and live intergenerationally. The article that generated the greatest amount of public interest was "Out of the Audience and onto the Playing Field: Preventing School Violence." This is likely due to the coincidental timing of the article; it came out only a few days

after the school shootings at Santana High School, near San Diego, California, and at a Roman Catholic school in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

One of the strengths of the news article approach is that it is a form of fast communication; it requires less time to prepare and print than bulletins and other formal publications. This can be useful when highlighting special events and programs.

The articles

The "Ideas for Intergenerational Living" articles are developed by the intergenerational programs and aging specialist, edited by a staff writer within the College of Agricultural Sciences' Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) unit, and then distributed to numerous media outlets by ICT as a press release. The Extension specialist simultaneously sends the completed articles in electronic form to the state's family and consumer science agents and 4-H/youth development agents, and posts them on an intergenerational programs and aging Web site.

Although many of the examples provided in the articles are from Pennsylvania, the articles are written so that they are appropriate for use anywhere in the nation. Through the Web site, Extension specialists and agents in other states have open access to the articles. (See below.)

In preparing and distributing the articles, the specialist has drawn on office staff, colleagues, and Extension communication staff in the following ways:

- A staff assistant sends a "tickler" memo on the last Friday of every month, reminding the specialist that it is time to write another article.
- A few colleagues in the specialist's department have been willing to read and provide critical feedback on article drafts.
- A staff writer within the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) unit helps to edit the articles and distribute them to the press. There is an active, ongoing dialogue between editor and author.

As of August 2001, eight articles have been written:

- Article #1: "Gift-Giving Ideas to Link the Generations"
[\[http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/1.pdf\]](http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/1.pdf)

- Article #2: "From 'Senior Moments' to Wisdom Moments"
[<http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/2.pdf>]
- Article #3: "Intergenerational Dialogue about Work"
[<http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/3.pdf>]
- Article #4: "Out of the Audience and onto the Playing Field: Preventing School Violence" [<http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/4.pdf>]
- Article #5: "Rethinking Retirement" [<http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/5.pdf>]
- Article #6: "The Coming AgeQuake: Boom or Bust?"
[<http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/6.pdf>]
- Article #7: "Linking Lives through Breaking Bread"
[<http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/7.pdf>]
- Article #8: "What Do Ronald Reagan and Lil' Bow Wow Have in Common?"
[<http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/mk/8.pdf>]

Outcomes

The original intent of the series was to publish the articles as a newspaper column, and try to interest as many newspapers as possible. However, since most newspaper columns are published on a daily or weekly basis, and this series is produced every 4-6 weeks, this plan did not materialize. Nevertheless, the response from the media has been positive. Individual articles have either been reprinted, in their entirety or in part, in over 10 regional Pennsylvania newspapers and several newsletters of other non-profit organizations. The press releases have generated interest from other media, resulting in five radio interviews, one television interview, and several invitations to address public forums. Also, several of the articles have been carried on the university's daily "newswire" which is sent over the Internet to 18,000+ individuals who are interested in university-related news, events, and research.

The articles vary in terms of the attention they receive from the media. One article that drew a fair amount of attention was "From 'Senior Moments' to 'Wisdom Moments.'" Some readers took issue with the author's assertion that the "senior moments" phrase, due to the connection drawn between aging and memory loss, has ageist implications. One 80-year-old woman wrote to the author and criticized him for being "politically correct." A local newspaper ran a short editorial piece that advised the author, "Lighten up, prof" (Be Kind, January 24, 2001). This points to one

of the unintended benefits of the series; it provides a lens for viewing the sentiments of the public.

Though the articles are targeted to the general public, they are also intended to contribute to Extension programming at the county level. The articles provide Extension educators with a public education tool to introduce their clientele to new programs and possibilities. Thus far, however, only a handful of Extension educators in Pennsylvania have decided to incorporate the articles (in their entirety or in part) into their county-based publications. This may be due, in part, to the fact that the state's Cooperative Extension intergenerational program has only recently been placed in resurgence mode. New intergenerational program resource materials are now in development. Once Extension agents see and begin to use these resources, it is possible that the articles will receive more attention and be used as ancillary materials to support other facets of the university's Extension-based intergenerational program.

The emergent intergenerational field is growing fast. As more professionals and laypersons become aware of the importance of intergenerational cooperation and understanding, there will likely be a need for new vehicles for education and discussion. It is hoped that the "Ideas for Intergenerational Living" series described in this article will make a small contribution in this regard.

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Cite this article:

Kaplan, Matthew. 2001. A news article approach for promoting the "intergenerational perspective." *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 6(3).