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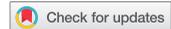
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Age-Friendly Universities (AFU): Possibilities and Power in Campus Connections

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ABSTRACT

Shifting age demographics are reshaping societies and challenging institutions of higher education to respond to aging populations through new approaches to teaching, research, and community engagement. The Age-Friendly University (AFU) initiative offers a set of guiding principles institutions can use to assess the extent to which their programs and practices are age inclusive, as well as identify gaps and opportunities. However, institutions need guiding change models to help them mount more comprehensive, integrated age-friendly efforts. Hirschhorn and May's campaign approach to change in higher education offers one such model. Drawing on its four core elements (i.e., "listen in" to the institution, develop a strategic theme, sweep people in, build the infrastructure), the present paper shows how AFU partners are working to move their age-friendly efforts across their campuses by building connections, coalitions, and partnerships. It is argued that such relationships are essential for achieving and sustaining an institution's age-friendly vision.

The call for higher education to be more age-friendly

Changing demographics that are reshaping the age structure of populations is a defining issue of our time with far-reaching implications for higher education. As more individuals experience extended longevity, local and national communities are witnessing historic increases in the number of adults over the age of 60 – and gerontology educators have signaled the urgent need to prepare for these longer lives (McGuire, Klein, & Couper, 2005; Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014; Talmage, Mark, Slowey, & Knopf, 2016). For example, the years added have extended middle age and produced a rapidly growing "longevity economy" calling for a trained workforce to provide services to support the health and functioning of individuals as they age, as well as a broader industry sector to provide goods and experiences in technology, travel, entertainment, home design, fashion, and more (Gerontological Society of America (GSA), 2018). Thus, aging populations are creating opportunities along a variety of career paths for which higher education can prepare students as future practitioners and professionals (Pak & Kambil, 2006; Whitbourne & Montepare, 2017).

Adults beyond the traditional student age are looking to higher education in increasing numbers to meet their professional needs as they experience longer work lives, move through multiple career paths, put off retirement, and continue to work for income and career advancement. Moreover, AARP's report (Van Horn, Krepcio, & Heidkamp, 2015)

on "The Future of Work@50+" found that many adults are interested in programs delivered in higher education settings to advance the skills they need to continue in their present work roles or explore new work options. Similarly, the American Council on Education (Larkin, Mullane, & Porter Robinson, 2007) and DiSilvestro (2013) found that many older adults plan to stay engaged in some form of learning for personal development, with obvious implications for higher education. Beyond meeting educational needs and interests, continued engagement in educational activities is also of consequence for the positive psychological, physical, and social well-being of individuals as they age (Lenehan et al., 2016). As well, directing attention to the development and delivery of new programs for older learners can benefit institutions by helping to offset the consequences of shrinking enrollment of younger learners many institutions are experiencing (Grawe, 2018; Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014).

Despite these historic longevity developments, students in contemporary higher education are seldom exposed to aging in the curriculum and they rarely interact with older individuals in their postsecondary activities. Thus, most graduate with negligible awareness about aging issues (Whitbourne & Montepare, 2017). Certainly, more needs to be done to educate students about aging issues as they prepare to enter their adult personal and professional worlds. Preparing for greater age diversity is also of importance on broader societal levels. Ageist beliefs permeate society with age stereotypes having become increasingly negative (Nelson, 2017; Ng, Allore, Trentalange, Monin, & Levy, 2015). The neglect of age in academia and the age-segregated structure of higher education that reinforces intergenerational tensions contribute to negative attitudes and unconscious age bias that impact both younger and older individuals (Levy, 2003; North & Fiske, 2012; Whitbourne & Montepare, 2017). In response, higher education should offer a teaching and learning environment to tackle ageist beliefs and biases in constructive ways and promote intergenerational solidarity. Increasing attention to research on aging is also of great societal importance, as is developing supportive partnerships with neighboring communities that are working to address the needs of their aging populations.

The age-friendly university (AFU) initiative

The American Council on Education (2007) questioned how colleges and universities will adapt their programs, policies, and practices to meet the demands of our aging populations. The Age-Friendly University (AFU) initiative provides an answer. The AFU initiative reflects the pioneering work of an international, interdisciplinary team of educators, researchers, administrators, and community partners convened by Dublin City University (Ireland) to identify the contributions institutions of higher education can make in responding to aging populations (O'Kelly, 2015). The AFU team identified 10 principles to guide the development of age-friendly programs and policies, built on six pillars of institutional activity: 1) teaching and learning, 2) research and innovation, 3) lifelong learning, 4) intergenerational learning, 5) encore careers and enterprise, and 6) civic engagement (see Table 1). The AFU framework advocates that older adults be enabled to participate in higher educational career, cultural, and wellness activities, and that institutions extend aging education to younger students, break down age-segregation, and promote age inclusion by bringing younger and older learners together in educational exchange.

Table 1. 10 principles for an Age Friendly University (AFU).

1. To encourage the participation of older adults in all the **core activities** of the university, including educational and research programs.
2. To promote personal and career development in the second half of life and to support those who wish to pursue **second careers**.
3. To recognize the **range of educational needs** of older adults (from those who were early school-leavers through to those who wish to pursue Master's or PhD qualifications).
4. To promote **intergenerational learning** to facilitate the reciprocal sharing of expertise between learners of all ages.
5. To widen access to **online educational opportunities** for older adults to ensure a diversity of routes to participation.
6. To ensure that the university's **research agenda** is informed by the needs of an aging society and to promote public discourse on how higher education can better respond to the varied interests and needs of older adults.
7. To increase the understanding of students of the **longevity dividend** and the increasing complexity and richness that aging brings to our society.
8. To enhance access for older adults to the university's range of **health and wellness** programs and its **arts** and **cultural activities**.
9. To engage actively with the university's own **retired community**.
10. To ensure regular **dialogue** with organizations representing the interests of the aging population.

Age-friendly institutions further support aging research by developing agendas informed by older adults' diverse needs, and they look to develop partnerships beyond their campuses to address the needs of the local aging community. In a short time, the AFU network has grown from a few institutions to over 60 colleges and universities across the globe – with more expressing a steady interest. The widespread endorsement of the AFU framework speaks to the academic appeal of its approach and its educational potential (Montepare, 2019).

At many U.S. institutions, the AFU initiative has been led by gerontology faculty, many of whom are members of the Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE), the educational section of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA). These members have shared their experiences and identified several core goals underlying what it means to be age-friendly. In particular, an age-friendly approach uses a campus-wide lens that reaches across a campus and its programs, and ultimately connects to its community. As such, the AFU initiative is more about refining higher education practices and not simply about expanding gerontology programs. A second goal recognizes that institutions differ widely. Consequently, how they address AFU principles and their age-friendly profiles will be equally diversified. Such diversification is a positive aspect given that different institutions serve distinctive younger and older student populations. Finally, in order to build, deepen, and sustain age-friendly practices, joining forces with others and looking for ways to infuse an age-friendly lens collectively are vital to achieving these goals (Mark, 2018).

Strategies for building and sustaining age-friendly campuses

How might institutions begin to tackle these age-friendly goals and their age-friendly aspirations? Clark and Leedahl (2019) recommend a first step is to identify an AFU change model to guide planning for enlisting campus support and embarking on the process of promoting age-friendly efforts in the academic community. One model that offers a useful framework is what Hirschhorn and May (2000) described as a "campaign approach to change in higher education", which entails four core elements: 1) "listen in" to the institution, 2) develop a strategic theme, 3) sweep people in, and 4) build the infrastructure. These elements map well onto the mobilization, implementation, institutionalization change model strategies described by Clark and Leedahl (2019) and capture

the multidimensional macro-, meso-, and micro-level approach recommended for advancing diversity and inclusion on campuses (Takayama, Kaplan, & Cook-Sather, 2017; Williams, 2013). Below is a description of each element with examples from the efforts of AFU partners.

"Listen in" to your institution

This element can be seen as articulating age-friendly efforts and strengths already present from which to build on – within gerontology as well as programs in psychology, sociology, health science, and related disciplines where aging-focused work is happening, with an eye toward the potential for building connections around common age-friendly interests. Gerontology programs are well positioned to guide these efforts with their multidisciplinary focus.

Considering how an age-friendly focus connects with an institution's mission and distinctive character is another valuable listening step. For example, the University of Strathclyde's egalitarian ethos that has traditionally guided its inclusivity and community outreach naturally fueled its growing commitment to learning in later life and recent decision to join the AFU movement (Mark, 2018). Appraising how an age-friendly focus connects with an institution's commitment to diversity and inclusion is also an important listening component of mounting an age-friendly initiative. Interestingly, a study of diversity statements across 80 institutions found that age was referenced in only about 5% of the statements (Wilson, Meyer, & McNeal, 2012). Thus, beginning with a review of diversity statements is a good starting point. However, institutions should bear in mind that integrating age diversity with other diversity components takes thoughtful consideration. Integrating an age diversity focus will call for raising awareness about the complex ways in which age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and related social identities intersect, and exploring how these intersections can best be incorporated into an institution's inclusion efforts (Williams, 2013). Indeed, promoting age-friendly practices and policies without prior consultation and coordination with institutional diversity and inclusion advocates runs the risk of alienating those partners, and inadvertently conveying a belief that age-friendly initiatives should be prioritized above existing initiatives to support other underrepresented and socio-politically marginalized students (Johnson & Howard, 2008).

Another listening strategy AFU partners have found useful is to reach across major institutional units when approaching the administration about an institution's readiness to mount an AFU initiative. For example, Chesser and Porter (2019) successfully launched their institution's AFU initiative by connecting with units such as the Office of Government and Community Engagement, Alumni and Donor Relations, Campus Planning, and Extended Education to identify how the institution was positioned to address AFU principles, which in turn informed the President's Council who welcomed the initiative on the basis of this all-inclusive mapping. Montepare, Farah, Doyle, and Dixon (2019) have described how their university's working relationship with its affiliated retirement community housed on its campus provided the administration the institutional incentive for joining the AFU network.

Develop a strategic theme

As part of their AFU work, several institutions have found that pulling together efforts around a "programming theme" is an energizing strategy for mounting age-friendly connections. For example, Lasell University (Montepare et al., 2019) uses the *Talk of Ages* theme to shape its age-friendly intergenerational teaching and learning connections. An annual *Talk of Ages* focus (e.g., Environment and Health, Dignity and Care, Mentors) guides a range of educational opportunities. To this end, classes join efforts to bring speakers to campus for intergenerational exchange; faculty develop intergenerational classroom activities to bring older and younger learners together; interactive art and wellness programs are created; and, events with community partners are co-hosted.

Other campuses have developed themes that reflect their distinctive AFU goals. For example, Washington University in St. Louis created the *WashU for Life* theme to bring age diversity into its university environment via programs that support adult learners, encore seekers, aging research, and intergenerational housing (Morrow-Howell, Lawlor, Macias, Swinford, & Brandt, 2019). Age-friendly efforts at Central Connecticut State University were linked to the institution's *Community is Central* campaign to promote age awareness and disrupt aging among faculty, students, aging network professionals, and community members (Andreoletti & June, 2019). Michigan State University's *AgeAlive* program offers another example of the value of using a strategic theme to coordinate age-friendly programming and a commitment to building an aging network connecting research, education, and outreach based on AFU principles (Luz & Baldwin, 2019).

Sweep people in

Successful age-friendly initiatives will surely draw from partnerships involving faculty working together on the development and delivery of programs (Mark, 2018). In light of the many demands faculty encounter in the face of new initiatives, sweeping people in may appear to be a challenging strategy to undertake. However, within a campaign approach to change, utilizing tactics such as personal invitations, professional development stipends, and opportunities for collaborations can move people into action – especially if the action helps faculty achieve goals such as bringing interesting and useful content to their students, extending their research, building their community connections and engagement, promoting diversity and inclusivity, and raising awareness about critical aging issues.

In addition to building age-friendly connections among individual faculty, AFU conveners (e.g., gerontology centers) should not overlook the value of building connections with other centers and programs. Such collaborations are of mutual benefit given that working together can extend the reach and impact of individual unit efforts. Moreover, such units often have a campus-wide lens with interests and expertise that map onto the age-friendly principles. Developing collaborations and partnerships with established institutional centers and programs is a necessary strategy for building sustainable AFU efforts.

At Lasell University, the Fuss Center for Research on Aging and Intergenerational Studies has developed productive age-friendly programming relationships with the University's Center for Diversity and Inclusion (e.g., Intergenerational Women's History Month Celebration) and Center for Community-Based Learning (e.g., Careers in Aging week

internship and job events) (Montepare et al., 2019). Central Connecticut State University has developed age-friendly programming relationships with its Continuing Education and Professional Studies Program that have allowed for outreach to the campus and neighboring communities, ensuring the broader dialogue on aging in line with AFU principles (Andreoletti & June, 2019).

Working with student organizations is also a powerful strategy for building an age-friendly campus. The University of Southern California has made gerontology student engagement a core feature of its AFU discussions and programming (Nash & Cicero, 2019). Lasell University has encouraged student organizations to take on age-friendly intergenerational efforts such as engaging older adults in its affiliated retirement community in campus service clubs activities (e.g., Empty Bowls Club, She's the First, Red Cross blood drive) as well as more socially-oriented activities (e.g., bingo nights, music and theater events) which have been found to be important foundations for building effective intergenerational classroom connections (Montepare et al., 2019).

Build the infrastructure

Beyond sweeping people in, building an infrastructure is another important component that entails various possibilities (Luz & Baldwin, 2019). For example, it may mean identifying a new office or program (like establishing an AFU coordinator), or it may draw on existing structures to develop initiatives that cut across current offices and programs. Moreover, an age-friendly infrastructure can grow by working with current offices and programs to use an age-friendly lens and taking intentional steps to be more age-inclusive in their programming efforts. To this end, having a representative who can speak to age-friendly issues on diversity and inclusion councils, community engagement offices, and similar units is a valuable tactic for building an infrastructure to sustain AFU efforts.

A higher education campus is a complex entity, and its priorities are reflected in a wide range of major and minor organizational and policy decisions. Thus, exploring infrastructure needs will require assessment instruments that both scan objective environmental assets and opportunities as well as attitudes about age-friendly efforts among constituent groups. Silverstein and colleagues have piloted an AFU audit tool to this end that is being refined and adapted for use by other AFU institutions (Silverstein, Hendricksen, Bowen, Weaver, & Whitbourne, 2019).

Developing AFU capacity to support infrastructure may be a particular challenge for smaller institutions or those with small gerontology programs. However, creative strategies are possible. For example, Lasell University launched a Faculty Fellows program to provide an annual opportunity for faculty members from diverse disciplines without gerontology expertise to extend their scholarship to aging issues and develop opportunities for intergenerational exchange in their classrooms. Fellows receive a course release each semester and support to attend a professional development program (Farah, Montepare, & Zheng, 2016).

Final comments

Population aging is a historic event with implications for people of all ages and their communities. It is neither a fad nor a trend, but rather an exciting and challenging reality that higher education has the talent, resources, and responsibility to help us navigate. The

AFU approach offers higher education a valuable guiding framework to this end. The campaign model for change explored here will offer institutions useful strategies for mounting and sustaining their age-friendly efforts.

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