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Title:
Beyond the Classroom: An Internship Model that Builds Age-Friendliness & Career Readiness

Shortened Title:
Internship Model that Builds Age-Friendliness & Career Readiness

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Biographical notes:
Kristin Souza, M.Ed.
Kristin Souza is the Experiential Education Coordinator for the College of Health Sciences at the University of Rhode Island where she works with faculty and employers to create opportunities for students that enhance career readiness competencies. She is also a part-time faculty member in the departments of Human Development & Family Science, Psychology, and the Center for Career & Experiential Education. Since November of 2020, Kristin has served as the Grant Program Administrator for the URI Engaging Cyber-Seniors Program where she assists in building sustainable processes for the student internship experience including the integration of career readiness competencies within the program.

Skye N. Leedahl, PhD
Dr. Skye Leedahl is an Associate Professor of Aging & Health at the University of Rhode Island in the Department of Human Development & Family Science. Dr. Leedahl served as the Principal Investigator for the funded grant projects related to this paper. Dr. Leedahl’s research is focused on improving quality of life & health for older adults at multiple levels. Her research fits within three themes: 1) intergenerational programming and its impacts on ageism, interest in working with older adults, and digital inclusion & social connectedness for older adults; 2) social integration and health for older adults; and 3) state and community-level policy initiatives.

Emma Pacuzzi, MS
Emma Pascuzzi is a second year doctoral student at the University of Rhode Island in the Department of Human Development and Family Science. Her main research interests focus on
investigating how the environment in early life influences later adult outcomes. Additionally, she served as both a URI Cyber-Seniors mentor and a research assistant for this grant.

**Alexandra Morelli, MPA, CCHW**
Alexandra Morelli is a certified Community Health Worker as well as a graduate of University of Rhode Island’s Master of Public Administration, and Rhode Island College’s Health Care Administration and Gerontology program. She has experience working with older adults, and individuals with developmental disabilities. Alexandra has served on the Rhode Island Certification Board since 2019 and has assisted in developing an Older Adult endorsement for Community Health Workers. She works on a federal Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program grant at the Rhode Island Geriatric Education Center located at the University of Rhode Island where she coordinates educational programs for students, professionals, and the community members. Through her work experience, she has taught several classes including American Sign Language, chronic disease and pain management, falls prevention, and diabetes prevention.
Abstract

Since 2015, the University of Rhode Island (URI) Engaging Generations Cyber-Seniors Program has provided over 400 students from 19 different majors with the opportunity to mentor older adults through internships and service learning courses. Due to the pandemic, interest in the program significantly increased from the community and from students in need of opportunities to work with individuals. As a result, a robust internship program was developed that focused on building age and digital inclusivity across campus and throughout the state. The program integrates a three-pronged approach where students complete field hours, enhance the Career Readiness Competencies employers seek in graduates as determined by the National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE), and complete the components necessary to earn the Rhode Island Geriatric Education Center Interprofessional Teamwork in Geriatrics and Gerontology Certificate. This paper will describe the key elements of this internship model and present survey data related to the student experience.

Keywords: age-friendly, internship, service learning, career readiness, intergenerational program, social capital

Contribution to the Field

This paper advances the field by offering an internship program model that incorporates intergenerational, gerontological education, and career readiness elements. This is a sustainable model that could be adopted by colleges/universities or community sites that serve older adults to help meet service learning, community based learning, civic engagement, or experiential education requirements within higher education. The program also serves as a model to help prepare future health and human services professionals for careers in an aging society while improving social connectedness and technology skills for older adults.
**Brief History**

The University of Rhode Island (URI) Engaging Generations Cyber-Seniors Program is an intergenerational program that serves to teach older adults about technology and positively influence attitudes toward technology, digital use, and digital competence. The program began in 2015 when an interdisciplinary group of faculty members became inspired to connect university students and older adults using the reverse-mentoring model after viewing the Cyber-Seniors ® documentary (Rusnack & Cassaday, 2014). With this program, university students work together with older adults to help them learn about technology, while enhancing career readiness competencies such as communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills. The program integrates service-learning components into existing courses and curricula within multiple majors and disciplines, develops University partnerships with community organizations providing services to older adults, and collects quantitative and qualitative information for program evaluation and research. This case report describes a student internship model created due to grant funding and refined based on program experiences and evaluation data from participants and student interns.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown forced the closure of most senior/community centers, and pushed URI classes and internships to remote experiences. These changes as a result of the pandemic prompted the program to work with partners from across the state to offer remote student field hours and internships due to the heightened need for older adults to gain technological skills. Jarrott et al. (2022) details the events and partnerships during this time. In 2020, the program received a grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Rhode Island to create a robust student internship program that enhances students’ career readiness and focused on building age-friendliness at the university and throughout the state. An additional grant
received in 2021 from the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging grant allowed for the expansion of services by Spanish-speaking student interns to provide mentorship in underserved Spanish speaking communities across the state. Thus, the program’s onboarding and monitoring processes for students and community organizations who speak both English and Spanish was improved, and a sustainable, efficient system for tracking student hours, participant progress, and scheduling appointments was developed.

**Focus on Age-Friendliness and Career Readiness**

In 2008, Newman and Hatton-Yeo proposed a new intergenerational learning paradigm that utilizes social capital as a framework for ensuring mutual benefits, reciprocity in the exchange of knowledge and skills across generations, and empowerment creating synergy, trust, and solidarity across generations. Further, they encouraged universities and their respective communities to engage older learners through the promotion of intergenerational relationships. Contributions such as Newman and Hatton Yeo’s (2008) helped to lay the groundwork for recent initiatives focused on age-inclusivity and intergenerational learning.

In 2018, URI became part of the growing Age-Friendly University (AFU) network. The AFU movement was designed to encourage universities to become more globally responsive to the growing number of older adults in our society (Montepare & Brown, 2022). Higher education institutions within the AFU network endorse ten aspirational principles that provide standards to identify gaps and opportunities for growth to make the University an open and welcoming community for adults of all ages (Silverstein et al. 2019). In a previous publication, Clark and Leedahl (2019) described how the university specifically focused its initial efforts on two principles: 1) promote intergenerational learning for reciprocal sharing of expertise (AFU principle 4), and 2) ensure the research agenda is informed by the needs of an aging society.
(AFU principle 6). When the pandemic occurred and the opportunity to grow student involvement in our efforts expanded, we also chose to focus on a third principle: 3) increase student understanding of the complexity and richness that aging brings to society (AFU principle 7). The program’s intention was for students to take part in a meaningful experience that provided them a chance to work with a diverse population of older adults and gain career readiness skills.

“Career readiness is a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management” (National Association for Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2022a, p. 9). In 2015, the NACE launched its Career Readiness Initiative in an effort to create a shared understanding and vocabulary of competencies that are needed to begin a successful career for graduates, the colleges that prepare the graduates, and the employers that hire them. In 2020, NACE reviewed and revised the competencies to reveal those that are transferable across occupations and industries along with sample behaviors associated with each. The eight NACE competencies are: critical thinking, communication, teamwork, technology, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, and career and self-development (NACE, 2022a). According to the NACE 2023 Job Outlook, employers rated communication and critical thinking as the two most important competencies needed in the workforce (NACE, 2022b).

**Program Overview**

From Spring 2021-Fall 2022, 181 total students provided mentorship to 485 older adult participants for an average of 30 student mentors per semester. The student mentors were a diverse group of students in background, languages spoken, and academic programs. The students participating were enrolled in 19 different degree granting programs from five different
colleges including the College of Health Sciences, College of Pharmacy, College of Arts &
Sciences, College of Education & Professional Studies, and College of Business. Most students
received college credit for serving as a mentor in the program through various class/credit
opportunities (see Table 1 for details).

[Insert Table 1 Here]

**Internship Program Key Elements**

The key elements of the internship program involved recruitment, student training and
support, connection to professional certificates, and methods for evaluating student and
participant outcomes.

**Recruitment**

Each semester, a detailed internship description (see Appendix for example) to recruit
student interns was posted to the university’s job and internship platform as well as distributed to
key stakeholders across campus. To identify Spanish-speaking interns, we sent emails to faculty
from majors and programs known to have Spanish-speaking students (e.g., Spanish department).
To recruit older adult participants, a series of emails were sent to community site supervisors
each semester to outline the plan per semester and when to expect student support. They posted
flyers and made announcements in newsletters. Community sites (mostly senior centers or
community centers with senior services across Rhode Island) were identified and on-boarded by
the Principal Investigator (PI) prior to the start of the semester.

**Student Training & Support**

Each student mentor took part in an in-person or Zoom training for 1.5 hours with faculty
or staff members designed to empower students to effectively navigate the URI Engaging
Generations Cyber-Seniors program. Using the university online learning platform, we created a
specific site to build out a comprehensive resource for all student mentors. Prior to the training, each student was added to this resource site, which reviews each of the areas covered within the training.

During the training, we discussed the impact of the program within the state, the benefits of becoming a mentor, and the best practices for engaging with older adults. Students were then guided through how to successfully navigate the program utilizing a carefully constructed Student Mentor Checklist (see Appendix for example). The checklist outlined the spreadsheets and resources necessary for success in the program. The spreadsheets were developed as a way to share participant information with students, track hours each week, schedule appointments, and track participant progress. One spreadsheet was the hours tracker (see Appendix) that included a tab for each week so that students could easily inform us of how they spent their time each week. We also created a participant document so that students could track each participant’s progress in the program. Student resources included a Student Mentor Handbook, videos about setting up an Apple ID and how to get participants on Zoom for the first time, and an electronic copy of the Participant Handbook in both English and Spanish that older adult participants received as part of the program. Students also enhanced their knowledge of how to communicate effectively with older adult clients through a series of online training videos created by the Cyber-Seniors Organization.

Once Graduate Student Coordinators were trained by staff about the program and how to effectively support student interns, the students met their assigned coordinator who checked-in with students to reinforce training content. Student mentors were then instructed to take a pre-survey and were provided an iPad for the semester to support sites and participants engaged in the program. Once students connected with their site supervisors, they received additional
training relevant to that specific site. Students met with senior/community center members who were in the program about 4-5 times throughout the semester during one-on-one (phone/virtual or in-person) appointments; as the pandemic restrictions were lifted, these gradually became mostly in-person. The students returned their iPads at the end of the semester and completed a post-survey.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person programming was scarce, and our program operated primarily remotely through phone and zoom meetings in Spring 2021 and Summer 2021. As a result, our training and check-in meetings with the students were also completed via remote technology. We met weekly or bi-weekly in either group or individual meetings with student mentors to provide space to ask questions, share concerns and offer support. In the Fall of 2021 and forward, we were able to return in-person where faculty were able to check-in with students during class time of the courses that were associated with the program.

**Certificate Integration**

To enhance the age-friendliness of the internship beyond the one-on-one connection with older participants, we partnered with the Rhode Island Geriatric Education Center’s *Introduction to Teamwork and Geriatrics Certificate* to offer student mentors with a resume-building opportunity starting in the summer of 2021. This certificate was designed to introduce students to interprofessional teamwork as an important element to older adult healthcare. Interprofessional teams are recommended to provide care that spans multiple domains of practice (Busari et al., 2017). In order to receive the certificate as part of our program (see Appendix), students completed field work (e.g., hours working with older adults), self-paced webinars about key
issues such as communication with older adults and health literacy, a case-based discussion with an interdisciplinary group of students, and a written reflection on the experience.

**Assessment**

In order to effectively evaluate how the URI Engaging Generations Cyber-Seniors program enhanced student’s development in the eight NACE Career Readiness Competencies, we utilized the YES Survey Instrument 2.0. The Youth Experience Survey (YES; Hansen & Larson, 2005) was developed as a self-report instrument to examine emerging adults’ developmental experiences in an organized youth activity, such as an extracurricular activity or a community-based program. The YES includes 18 scales that assess self-reported experiences in the activity or program within six conceptual domains of development: Identity Work (e.g. “I tried doing new things”), Initiative (e.g. “I set goals for myself in this activity”), Basic Skills (e.g. “I became better at handling stress”), Teamwork and Social Skills (e.g. “Learned how to be patient with group members”), Interpersonal Relationships (e.g. “This activity improved my relationship with my parents/guardian”), and Adult Networks; this scale was previously tested for reliability and validity and is a post-survey only measure. For age-friendliness assessment, we also included a series of questions derived from the Youth Efficacy/Empowerment Scale (Walker & Powers, 2007) and a couple of questions about working with older adults. These questions were targeted towards assessing skill-building related to the technological and older adult-focused aspects of the program; these questions included a 5-point Likert scale. For this case report, we examined survey results from students involved in the program from Spring 2021 through Fall 2022; paired sample t-tests were conducted when possible. See Table 2 and Supplemental Table 1 for a description of the alignment between the survey questions and the NACE Career Readiness Competencies and age-friendliness.
Results

See Table 3 for descriptive statistics for the post-survey measures from the YES scale \((n=92)\) for students from Spring 2021-Fall 2022. Our program made an impact on students (mean above 3) particularly in the areas of identity exploration, identity reflection, goal setting, effort, problem solving, time management, prosocial norms, group process skills, feedback, leadership and responsibility, and linkages to community. This corresponds to improvements in the NACE Career Readiness Competencies of career and self-development, professionalism, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, teamwork, communication, and leadership. See Table 4 for the pre/post findings for the age-friendliness questions derived from the Youth Efficacy/Empowerment Scale. Pre/post change was significant for most of the questions about improving digital support for older adults, particularly having ideas of how to support older adults, telling people around them about how older adults can be digitally included, helping older adults learn digital resources, speaking out and educating people about what is it like to be an older person, and knowing what internet resources are available for older adults. Based on our findings, it is evident that the mentorship and support flowed across generations in this program. Limitations of these findings include a lack of a control or comparison group, the reality of this only including one university, and the need for additional studies to examine qualitative findings in relation to these quantitative findings.

Conclusion

Due to the growing aging society, there is a need to educate college and university students in the skills necessary to work effectively with older adults regardless of their chosen
major or career field. As employers have expressed a desire for a more prepared workforce, higher education has leaned into the creation of more career readiness initiatives that will support students as they navigate future endeavors. The URI Engaging Generations program showcases an unique internship model that meets both needs by promoting age-friendliness and career readiness competencies in students engaged in the program. The university adoption of the NACE and AFU principles, coupled with community need, contributed to the impactful growth in the program. The positive indicators, such as increased demand from older adults and positive outcomes from students and older adults, have led to the sustainability of this intergenerational opportunity. Intergenerational learning opportunities like the URI Engaging Generations program that uphold the values of Sally Newman help to empower generations to recognize the contributions all members of society can make towards building a unified, economically prosperable society (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008).

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**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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