

# Capturing and Describing the Relationships between St. John's Elders and Nazareth College Students



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## Background

Founded in 2009, the St. John's Collaborative for Intergenerational Learning (SCIL) is a dynamic, ever-evolving *invitation for personal interactions*. Dynamic and thoughtful teaching of our students not only has the power to inspire students into careers working with older adults, it can also improve the quality of the lives of elders in senior living communities. Gerontology, as an area of study on college campuses, can provide students an opportunity to learn about older adults from multiple perspectives. The availability of gerontological coursework is important not only to academia, but to the students who are preparing for careers in disciplines such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, nursing, social work, communication sciences and disorders, and psychology. *The impetus for this work developed in a recent class discussion, specifically around the following question: "How did we get to the point, historically and pedagogically, where we are comparing and contrasting two different communities (senior living communities and everywhere else) as they are not connected to one another, geographically or culturally?"* Throughout these courses, students and elders form impactful professional relationships, and ultimately meaningful personal relationships and engage in voluntary social experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. This research has been undertaken to determine the nature and value of these intergenerational relationships.



## Courses

### PSY 226: Adulthood & Late Life

Adulthood & Late Life is a survey course designed to meet the educational needs of undergraduate students in disciplines such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, music therapy, art therapy, social work, nursing, and psychology.

- It is listed in the Nazareth College course catalog as a psychology course; it is currently taught as a gerontology-focused course.
- The course connects relevant content to the hands-on, application driven training that students in professional programs will receive.
- The course was not originally focused in this way, but has evolved with an increased awareness and understanding of student's educational needs and wants.

### PSY 354: Issues in Aging

Issues in Aging is an upper-level course typically taken by undergraduate students who have declared a minor in Gerontology.

- The course requirements include an in-depth analysis and presentation of an issue related to aging.
- The identification of this issue, as well as the subsequent analysis and presentation, occurs in groups composed of Nazareth College students and elders from St. John's.
- While the elders do not receive grades for their contribution to this work, they participate in all aspects of the course projects and experiences.

### PSY 355: Aging & Community Service

Aging & Community Service is an upper-level course typically taken by undergraduate students who have declared a minor in Gerontology.

- This is a service-learning course requiring the completion of what are known as "Community Projects".
- These projects require students and elders, again working together in groups, to identify an area of segregation within the community and design a project that brings groups together around mutual understanding and reciprocity.

## Course Projects

- Community Projects\*
- Facilitations → Panels\*
- Issues in Aging Papers
- Mini-Conferences\*
- Poster Presentation
- Oral Presentation
- Reflective Writing
- The ElderVoice Project\*
- \* = student & elder collaboration



## Methodology

A recent course survey was given to 16 elders and 29 students currently enrolled in PSY 226: Adulthood & Late Life. The survey aimed to gather qualitative and quantitative data regarding intergenerational relationships inside and outside of the classroom. The survey is a pilot study for future research across the entirety of the course. Moving forward an online survey will be implemented to capture data from course participants throughout the duration of the course. Previous research on this course has focused around the academic components. Researchers recently realized that in addition to academics, students and elders were forming meaningful relationships that needed to be studied.

## Key Findings

### Did you Form Meaningful Relationships during the Semester?

#### Students

"I feel I have gained an extra grandparent."

"I have formed many meaningful relationships with the elders...age does not determine the relationship you can have with someone."

#### Elders

"Our table shared life experiences outside the class; stories of family, holidays, etc. which allowed us to bond."

### Did any of these Relationships Extend Outside of the Classroom?

#### Students

"We went to dinner and discussed aging and sexuality, to prepare for a class presentation."

"We worked together on community service projects at Nazareth and at an elder's home"

#### Elders

"We invited the students to our apartment, it was a special night for us to share our living quarters."



"I thought the end of the semester would be a grand farewell, that was until the student called to see if I could have dinner with the group. Since then we have attended two Nazareth soccer games, pro-golf lessons at Big Oak, a situation that is still ongoing almost every Thursday and attend Easter dinner with the extended family of one of the students."

## Key Findings (cont.)

### What was learned from the other generation?

#### Students:

"I gained a better understanding that life is short and to make the most of it and take advantage of all the opportunities life gives you"

"The importance of being present in life and not always looking toward the future"

"I learned that students and elders are not as different as we may think. We share a lot of similar views, morals and perspectives"

#### Elders:

"I gained insight into their perspectives, I am impressed with their moral compass and ethics"

"What motivates and inspires the younger generation"

"We are always learning in life and young people, especially, have much to contribute and teach us older folk."

### What is the Value of Intergenerational Relationships?

#### Students:

"We are able to humble ourselves with the knowledge that how our generation thinks is not the only or right way."

"There is only so much information we can gain from a textbook, but with the elders here they have had first hand experiences to share"

"I've gained a friend and someone to spend quality time with which allowed for understanding each other."

#### Elders:

"It has expanded my world and I hope it has expanded theirs"

"My hope would be that something shared from the elder's experience may help shape the lives of the students."

"Some who feel the younger generations are "lost" are sadly mistaken. I have found the Nazareth students to be intelligent, caring and goal oriented."



## Discussion

Each of these courses provide students and elders and opportunity to interact with one another and form meaningful relationships both inside and outside of the classroom. These interactions have provided knowledge and perspective into each others lives.

There is a great deal to be gained from intergenerational relationships. It provides students with an opportunity to engage in non-traditional learning and allows the elders an opportunity to tell their story while learning from the students.