

**Title: Rethinking and Revitalizing Intergenerational Connections: An
Agenda for Global Well-Being across the Life Course**

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Rethinking and Revitalizing Intergenerational Connections: An Agenda for Global Well-Being across the Life Course

*imagine a country where...we invest in the future...where children get a good start in life...
where older people and young people are valued and respect each other...where extended
families are supported to care for each other...where communities are designed for everyone to
live, work and play together...* (from United for All Ages website: www.unitedforallages.com).

Today's world faces a range of growing crises - war, economic deprivation, global climate change, and interpersonal violence - to name just a few of the pressing issues. Policy makers and community leaders rarely view the quality of relationships among people of different generations as holding the potential to address such concerns. For this reason, a recent Conference sponsored by Generations United was designed to explore insights and new proposals on how promoting positive intergenerational connections has transformative potential. Many people leave a conference excited, but uncertain as to how to apply most effectively the ideas they have heard. For this Conference, however, data were gathered throughout to capture innovative, instrumental strategies for building positive intergenerational relationships, and to develop future action steps. This paper describes the data collection process, major findings, and outlines an action agenda for the future.

Generations United is a professional organization that serves both a national and a growing international audience of researchers and practitioners who advocate for an inter-dependent society where age no longer segregates us. The bi-annual conference brings these voices together to imagine a better future, share successes, and celebrate community. For its 2011 conference, the Co-Chairs wanted to take the experience to another level, extending the conversations

beyond the three-day gathering by collecting data from the participants and using the outcomes to set a purposeful agenda of next steps. Input from participants was organized into three main stages: an initial survey sent out prior to the conference; observation forms completed in each session to document what was discussed, and index cards with focused questions about future actions collected throughout each day. Here, we will present emergent themes as well as recommendations for the field of intergenerational practice.

The approach

The initial survey contained nine questions (Appendix A) asking about participants' vision of an ideal intergenerational community, and how the conference might contribute to creating this as a reality. It was sent to 150 members, and 27 completed the questionnaire electronically. Co-Chair Mariano Sanchez shared the results of the survey with the participants at the plenary session early in the conference.

The society that was envisioned was an inclusive, inter-dependent, age-integrated, non-ageist community for all ages. Intergenerational programming would flow naturally and would be more diverse and integral to this society, driven by a coherent plan for community development to ensure real needs are met. It would be different from what we see today in that people would be working together on innovative solutions to problems, and there would be more cooperation and recognition for the need to have Intergenerational Specialists and funding to support these empowered communities. In order to realize this vision the respondents indicated we need more champions to disseminate knowledge, as well as more funding to increase awareness and advocate for justice. All age groups must be actively involved.

Keynote speakers presented compelling reasons for why the generations must be inter-dependent in order to survive and to thrive. Karen VanderVen and Andy Schneider-Munoz also identified dangerous and destructive mindsets that contribute to a conflict-ridden world as described by Eidelson and Eidelson, "Dangerous Ideas: Five Beliefs That Propel Groups Towards Conflict" (American Psychologist, 2003): injustice, superiority, vulnerability, distrust and helplessness. Pictures and stories were shared to illustrate how counter-productive beliefs are visible in the world today, serving to separate the generations and undermine mutual support.

Emergent themes

From the observation forms completed in each session (see Appendix B), a number of themes emerged which begin to shape our agenda for the future. An initial analysis of the data was conducted before the last session of the conference by Co-chair Liz Larkin and Keynote Speaker Karen VanderVen to formulate a summary for the participants. Later, Generations United staff member, Leah Bradley, followed up with a review of the additional observation forms that had been collected. Ten main threads were identified in the documentation:

- Every person, no matter what age or cultural context, needs to know he/she will be cared for by somebody else.
 - We must recognize the importance of fidelity and attachment.
- Change is possible through small actions within the context of our daily work:
 - Individual actions set off reverberations that play out over the long term.
 - Individual expertise is powerful when combined in a collective whole.
- Trust modeled across the life course breeds trust among generations to create greater harmony.
- Transmitting seniors' knowledge and experience is crucial to the survival of younger generations.

- The physical environment plays a critical role in health and well-being throughout the life course.
- Across the life course, access to health care and access to a safe environment have interdependent effects.
- Technology can be either an integrating or a dividing force. How can we use new media as a tool to enable connections across age groups, increase collaboration across geographic distances, and improve communication to diminish stereotyping?
- Let's reconfigure our boundaries of operation and reach across sectors and traditional disciplinary partners to form new collaborations and alliances.
- Youth as well as seniors must take the initiative and provide leadership so there is greater reciprocity in assuming responsibility for advancing intergenerational values.
- Our advocacy is urgently needed. We need a critical mass to voice community needs and promote the value of intergenerational relationships.

Strategies for rethinking and revitalizing

One step we can all take is to challenge dangerous perspectives. For example, we must vocally reject the notion that older adults are a drain on our society, or that young people are irresponsible. When leadership is shared by people of different ages, it is more likely that trust will be built, that divergent goals and needs will be heard, and that groups can move toward a common vision for change. Safe environments are sustained by the people who use them, not by external planners who have no stake beyond designing attractive (and affordable) spaces and being paid. Thus, every age group should be actively engaged in addressing threats to safety in the community, as well as threats to working respectfully on improving the well-being of the community's diverse members.

Moreover, challenging dangerous ideas would need a shared sense of purpose, and empowering all generations through prioritization of listening and relationships. Early childhood

interventions are critical to make sure that all current and future generations are willing to contribute.

Working collectively, intergenerational advocates are a powerful force for change. If we look across organizational and disciplinary boundaries for our partners, we may find new resources and expertise. If many of us are modeling a better lexicon, one that avoids ageist terminology and stereotypical depictions of ourselves and others, over time we will begin to see some impact. If we present a common agenda, we cannot be forced into competing for scarce resources. With solidarity, we make a difference. We should strive for moving from individual to collective impact.

Participants articulated some specific steps they intended to take to begin the journey of realizing the vision of a better intergenerational society. One person wrote about crossing disciplines to locate new partners: “Find and invite a group of architects to work together with people who have been working on intergenerational program/activities, and come up with a set of specific design guidelines for designing intergenerational facilities.” Another positive outcome was a proposal to take an intergenerational problem-solving approach: “I am encouraged to create a community roundtable with youth and our residents to discuss what is going on in their community and ways they would like to change it.” A third comment stressed the need to advocate: “I am going to commit to collecting honest, quality data about the efficacy of my program to provide increased information, not just about my program, but also to continue the groundbreaking research of others.” One final quote sums up the need to remain steadfast over the long haul: “Be constant no matter what time it takes to see results.”

We all have the right and the responsibility to advocate. Part of being an advocate is to educate others at any and every opportunity that arises. Ask yourself, “Am I too timid and

accepting?” “Am I connecting with others who are older/younger than me in my workplace and my community?” “If not me, then who?” Start small, but keep the bigger picture in mind. Find out who shares your ideals. Look for success stories as models for your own goals. Become a trustee for future generations. Take time to reflect. Pay it forward.

The conference participants were guided by Gary Glazner, founder of the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project, to create a shared poem in celebration of our community. The group creative process was engaging as well as inspirational. Here is the result:

Fly High

If you were a bird where would you fly?
I’d fly over the Continental Divide and see rocks, trees, and clouds.
I would fly over the top of Canada and see all the mountains and lakes.
I would fly high in the sky.
Birds do it, why can’t I?
I would fly over the national parks.
I would see all the waterfalls.
I would fly over the Grand Canyon (Canyon...Canyon...Canyon...Canyon)
Right over the river. (River... River... River...River...)
I would fly high in the sky.
Birds do it, why can’t I?
I would fly right here.
To the warmth and safety of this nest.
Land among these friends and chirping stories.
Year after year
I would return.

Revitalizing and rethinking our work toward the 2013 agenda

Generations United conferences connect with all our senses and touch our hearts each time. We are given time to reflect, revitalize and rethink our work in a global context. Each conference promotes conversations about the work that has already been done, amidst new or renewed connections and relationships. Each conference revitalizes our energy, enthusiasm and the spark for returning to our work. Each conference sends us home rethinking what we do every day.

Co-chair Larry Cooper reflects from his office in Tampa, Florida on the site visit in Baltimore, the sights and sounds of the Senior Fashion Show, and the intensity of the multigenerational dance performance. He is revitalizing the spirit and energy with which others shared their stories on Capitol Hill with legislators. He re-visits the feelings of watching the intergenerational movie *Whose Grandma Are You?*, and the joy of cheering, eating and laughing with new friends at the Washington Nationals baseball game. He returns to childhood's playful times recalling how we displayed artful imagination with a blank piece of paper, tape and a pair of scissors at the Keynote Address. He remembers being touched by poignant appreciation from Japanese conference friends for the support offered to them during their country's tragic tsunami. He is rethinking how Youth from around the country are sharing their creative Service Learning Projects in connecting the generations.

Some steps that can be taken to continue rethinking and revitalizing the intergenerational agenda are:

- Rejoin like-minded colleagues on social media (*go to: www.gu.org and contribute to the Blog so we can keep the conversation going*) where age is not a factor, to build trust and the power of working collectively.
 - Pursue age-integrated projects, advocate, and find new partners in the days and months ahead. Document and disseminate successful strategies that bring young and old together to create safe communities.
 - Imagine how GU 2013 will touch our work and collective spirits again, and volunteer to help plan the next stage. Bring back to the next Generations United Conference your successes, challenges and ideas.
 - Share how the conference continues to influence your day-to-day activities (Britain's United for All Ages was inspired to create a new logo for their website, for example) to increase well-being in your community.
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GU SURVEY 2011

Question 1: Your vision (the desired future). Imagine a situation where your ideals of intergenerational aspects of society and programming are a reality. Describe it for us:

- a. How do you describe that society?*

- b. How does intergenerational programming look in that society?*

- c. What is happening in this society and/or in this programming that is different from what you see currently happening?*

Question 2: The way to make your vision happen in reality (pathways towards the desired future).

- d. What evidence do you currently see that we are moving in the right direction toward your vision?:*

- e. What changes are most needed to make your vision a reality?*

- f. What is within your reach right now to move toward this vision?*

Question 3: Your vision & our Conference:

- g. If you are presenting during the conference, how will your session contribute to developing the vision and action steps needed to attain the ideal situation you described above?*

- h. Regarding conference sessions that you will be attending as a participant, what do you most need from those sessions to move toward the situation you described above?*

- i. Finally, on the conference product, how do you think you can contribute to this *something bigger* that we will all work together to create during and after the conference? (No contribution is too small!)*

