Faculty perceptions of engaging older adults in higher education: The need for intergenerational pedagogy

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**ABSTRACT**

Institutions of higher education need to become more age friendly. Creating an on-campus lifelong learning program can offer older adults opportunities to audit classes and engage in multigenerational classrooms, but can also promote intergenerational learning when instructors consciously use pedagogy that fosters engagement between learners from various generations. Promoting intergenerational learning to facilitate reciprocal sharing of expertise between generations is also the fourth principle of the Age Friendly University framework. This qualitative interview study examines the perspectives of 27 faculty members who have opened their face to face classrooms to older adult auditors to 1) Explore perceived benefits and challenges associated with having older adults in the college classroom and to 2) Determine what levels of intergenerational learning may be taking place. Compared to lecture-based courses, faculty whose pedagogy promotes discussion, sharing, and small group work reported detailed examples of older adult learners and traditionally-aged college students engaging in course-related discussion. The unique, historical and diverse perspectives of older adults improved the quality of education for students, and fostered in-depth learning. Challenges related to older adult auditors included poor/limited attendance, sharing of strong opinions/dominating class discussion, sensory/mobility and technology accessibility. Recommendations include training to promote intergenerational engagement in college classrooms.

**KEYWORDS**

Lifelong learning; Age Friendly University; Multigenerational Learning; Higher Education; Faculty

**Introduction**

Institutions of higher education are increasing efforts to meet the growing needs of older adult learners within their respective communities (Montepare, Farah, Bloom, & Tauriac, 2020; Pstross, Talmage, Peterson, & Knopf, 2017). One way of doing this is to create lifelong learning programs on college campuses. These programs usually differ from traditional lifelong learning programs as they are designed to offer older adults opportunities to expand their knowledge for the purpose of personal growth, rather than to equip them with skills to begin a new vocation, job or career (Talmage, Lacher, Pstross, Knopf, & Burkhart, 2015). Such programs frequently open existing classes for older adults to audit at little or no financial cost. The benefit of these programs is that the older adults can select classes that pique their interest without having to follow a set curriculum, putting in as little or as much
effort toward the class as they choose. Programs such as these not only help to create and foster opportunities for continued learning and engagement for older and younger aged students alike (Dauenhauer et al., 2018), but continued engagement in educational activities has been found to foster positive psychological, physical, and social well-being of individuals as they age (Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Jenkins, 2011; Lenehan et al., 2016).

Higher education lifelong learning programs can also serve to educate administrators, faculty and students about the needs of their local adult population, while providing meaningful activities, intellectual stimulation, and again, social engagement, for older adults within the college campus community (Pstross, Tulmage, et al., 2017). Additionally, such programs may help enhance traditional students’ levels of aging literacy and improve their attitudes toward aging (Pstross et al., 2017). In order to develop lifelong learning programs, colleges should consider theory behind lifelong learning to guide program development as this will help cultivate a culture change on campus leading toward positive regard for older adults.

**Adult learning and the lifespan**

Just as there is no single theory that explains why or how adults learn best, the term ‘lifelong learning’ may have different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. In developing the lifelong learning program described in this manuscript, the institution supported the premise that learning continues throughout one’s life. As described in earlier work by Thornton (2003), adult learning is conceptualized through a life-span perspective. This perspective encompasses a multi-theoretical framework for organizing what is known about learning in adult development and later life aging. For example, neuroscientists have demonstrated that brain plasticity occurs in both the young and the old (Pauwels, Chalavi, & Swinnen, 2018). Brain plasticity is the brain’s lifelong capacity for physical and functional change which enables experience to induce learning throughout life (Mahncke et al., 2006). In this way, practice can lead to improvement, whether this be in motor development and or cognitive development, as the brain is stimulated. Such learning and development has the potential to improve the quality of life for older adults as they age.

For higher education institutions working to create or enhance lifelong learning programs, it is important to recognize that learning is an essential component of the interactive effects of development and aging (Birren, 1988). Additionally, concepts from the life course perspective can help provide a greater emphasis on intergenerational learning. For example, historical forces are known to shape the social trajectories of individuals which, in turn, influence their experience of the world, noting that all life choices are contingent on the opportunities and constraints of social structure and culture (Hareven, 1978). Intergenerational learning involves creating a space for meaningful exchanges of information, perspectives, and learning opportunities between members of older and younger generations (Sanchez & Kaplan, 2014). Personal development as one ages includes sharing one’s experiences with younger generations (Yu-Ching Chen, 2020). Because the life course perspective allows one to understand how social context changes over time, it acknowledges a person’s perceptions of events and history can change in the same measure. This creates a unique experience for an individual depending on where they were in their life course when an event happened. These intergenerational experiences can be shared through the creation of a multigenerational classroom (Sanchez & Kaplan, 2014), fostering what is
known as ‘generational intelligence’. Biggs and Lowenstein (2011) define generational intelligence as “an ability to reflect and act, which draws on an understanding of one’s own and other’s life-course, family and social history, placed with its social and cultural context” (p. 2).

According to the life course perspective, knowledge, learning and personal growth may take place through the development of intergenerational relationships that allow for an understanding of an event from another generation’s viewpoint. Thus, the benefits of creating lifelong learning programs are mutually reciprocal; creating active ways to engage older adults in meaningful relationships while providing mentorship and/or additional resources to educational systems to help empower younger generations (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008). By virtue of creating such an environment for learning at a college or university, the university becomes more age friendly, especially if the college program adheres to the guiding principles set by the Age Friendly University (AFU) Initiative (Dublin City University, 2020).

The age friendly university initiative

According to Kochera and Straight (2005) creating an AFU is an expansion of the age friendly movement whose roots go as far back as the early efforts of the AARP’s Livable Communities (AARP, 2020). More recently, the ground-breaking work of a team of international and interdisciplinary educators, researchers, administrators, and community partners met at Dublin City University to discuss and identify how institutions of higher education can positively respond to the needs of a growing older adult population. Their seminal work resulted in the creation of the Age Friendly University (AFU) Initiative which was launched in 2012 (O’Kelly, 2015). The culmination of these discussions yielded ten guiding principles designed to aid higher education institutions in developing more age-friendly programs and policies (Dublin City University, 2020; O’Kelly; 2015; Talmage, Mark, Slowey, & Knopf, 2016). (See Table 1).

The AFU initiative promotes the involvement of older adults in higher education with regards to career, cultural, and wellness activities, extending aging education to younger students, breaking down age-segregation, and promoting age inclusion – bringing younger and older learners together in educational exchange (Montepare et al., 2020). Important to

| Table 1. 10 principles for an age friendly university |
|----------------------------------------------------|
| 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. |
note, is that the purpose of the AFU is more about refining higher educational practices—not simply expanding gerontology programs at universities and colleges (Montepare et al., 2020). Becoming an AFU in practice is not about checking off key boxes on a check list in order to demonstrate one’s college meets certain criteria, rather it requires continuous efforts – involving all stakeholders to ensure that feedback loops are created to sustain continuous work toward becoming an age friendly university. As Talmage et al. (2016) point out, “achieving a university that is age friendly in practice would require nothing less than a cultural transformation for most higher education institutions” (p. 550). As such, many universities start their transformation to becoming age friendly by working toward meeting one or two of the guiding principles instead of attempting to implement all the principles at once.

In this study, we examine the perspectives of faculty members who have agreed to participate in the college’s lifelong learning program by opening their classrooms to older adult auditors – those who can participate in a course, but do not receive college credit. Specifically, there are two research questions: 1) What are the faculty member’s perceived benefits and challenges associated with having older adults in the college classroom? and, 2) What levels of intergenerational learning may be taking place? These questions are related to principle four of the AFU initiative, which calls for the promotion of intergenerational learning; one that facilitates the reciprocal sharing of expertise between learners of all ages (Dublin City University, 2020).

**Intergenerational learning and teaching pedagogy**

Intergenerational learning promotes meaningful exchanges of information, perspectives, and learning opportunities between members of older and younger generations. More specifically, Sanchez and Kaplan (2014) define intergenerational learning as “learning between generations stemming from an awareness of differences amassed through individual and group affiliation to diverse generational positions” (p. 475). Intergenerational learning is different from creating a multigenerational classroom, albeit one must first have a multigenerational classroom to foster intergenerational learning. Multigenerational classrooms are those learning environments in which there are learners from more than one generation present. They act as a capsule or vehicle for intergenerational learning to take place. Herein, the course facilitator plays an important role, actively fostering engagement between the generations. (Heffernan, Cesnales, & Dauenhauer, 2019; Sanchez & Kaplan, 2014; Silverstein, Hendrickson, Marshall Bowen, Fonte Weaver, & Krauss Whitbourne, 2019).

There are no clear recommendations regarding intergenerational learning as a formal pedagogy, however, Kaplan and Sanchez (2014) suggests specific teaching strategies need to be developed. This same article makes it clear that both faculty and students have a role to play in intergenerational learning. However, in order to create intergenerational learning, instructors must create opportunities for students from different generations to interact using generational difference as a way to get both younger and older adult students to critically think about how their experiences of the same content may differ (or be the same) due to, or in spite of, the generational difference (Heffernan et al., 2019; Sanchez & Kaplan, 2014). Furthermore, instructors must strive to promote a dialogue where difference is not judged as good or bad, just different or another way of seeing the same thing. This is an important aspect of engagement and learning within intergenerational learning contexts.
In a recent study that explored the role of faculty in fostering intergenerational learning, findings revealed that while instructors identified benefits of having an older adult learner in the classroom, they did not appear to think consciously about how to teach an age-integrated classroom – in many ways they perceived the older adult auditor as another student in the classroom (Heffernan et al., 2019). There is also evidence that faculty assumed, because of the age difference, that older adult learners would provide a different perspective which would be beneficial to the other students. However, as they did not change their teaching style or pedagogical approach during this window of opportunity, faculty may have missed the opportunity to create an intergenerational dynamic. In the case of intergenerational learning, instructors need to be mindful of they play in fostering inter-cohort engagement that leads to intergenerational learning.

This research will address the gap in knowledge around understanding perceptions of faculty teaching in multi-generational classrooms as it is important to understand if professors facilitating such courses understand intergenerational learning and apply specific pedagogy to foster such learning. We know research has found that many older adults construct their identity as a lifelong learner, in part, by learning from professors on youth-oriented college campuses (McWilliams & Barrett, 2018), but we know less about how these professors construct their role as educators within a multi-generational classroom. Researchers and scholars working to promote AFU principles have an obligation to better understand what intergenerational learning means to the different stakeholders involved and this includes faculty teaching at a university or college with a lifelong learning program. As such, this research is an attempt to fill this gap.

**Materials and methods**

**Context of the study**

In 2016, a medium-sized public liberal arts college in New York State embarked on an initiative to engage community-dwelling older adults in the classroom as ‘auditors.’ The State University of New York (SUNY) allows state residents aged 60+ to audit any college course for free as long as they have permission from the course instructor and there is space in the class (SUNY, 1992). While some SUNY institutions charge a nominal registration fee for auditing, there is no fee at the authors’ institution. Other benefits associated with auditing include reduced-rate parking, creation of a college e-mail account and access to all college technology, library privileges, and membership discounts for the college fitness center. Each semester, the College’s Director of Multigenerational Engagement works with faculty across campus to gain permission to add a limited number of ‘seats’ to select face to face classes for older adult auditors; between 30–40 courses are promoted each semester. This list is disseminated in the form of a brochure that is mailed to community members and alumni and is also available electronically. Potential auditors then attend the college’s Lifelong Learning Orientation where they register for 1–2 classes on a first-come first served basis and participate in a ‘tech talk’ to assist auditors with accessing college e-mail and technology as well as other supportive services. The orientation also covers various educational programs offered by the college that are open to lifelong learners and community members. Prior to 2016, approximately six older adults enrolled as auditors. Auditing was not promoted by the college and tended to be limited to retired faculty familiar with college
registration procedures. As an institution in the early phases of AFU adoption, building upon this existing, but underutilized infrastructure and policy, was a logical starting point for engaging older community members on campus. Since promotion of the program, enrollment has increased dramatically. In the 2019–2020 academic year, over 80 older adults have enrolled in courses across many departments.

**Study design**

This research builds upon the initial work published by Heffernan et al., (2019) by conducting in depth face to face interviews with faculty members. It is based on the analysis of qualitative data collected from faculty member interviews conducted between February-May 2019. The purpose was to collect in-depth information from faculty who had granted permission for an older adult to enroll as an auditor in at least one of their courses since the fall 2016 semester. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to collect demographic information from faculty (e.g., age, gender, department, rank, etc.), to inquire specifically about the faculty member’s perceived benefits and challenges associated with having older adults in the college classroom and to determine what levels of intergenerational learning may be taking place. Interview questions were developed by two of the coauthors [JD & KH], several of which were modified from the previous study exploring faculty perspectives related to older adult auditors. Slight changes were made following a review of the questions from another faculty colleague. Please see Table 2 for the questions included on the interview guide.

**Participants**

Based on a report from the college’s registrar, a total of 43 faculty members had at least one older adult auditor enrolled in at least one of their courses between Fall 2016 and Spring 2019. Each of these faculty members were sent an e-mail from the Director of Multigenerational Engagement describing the interview study and apprising their interest in being interviewed by a graduate assistant. If they were interested in participating, their contact information was sent to the graduate assistant who scheduled a convenient day/time to interview the faculty member in their respective offices. The graduate assistant was

| Table 2. Semi-structured interview guide. |
|------------------------------------------|
| 1. In what department is your primary appointment (e.g., history, psychology, etc.)? |
| 2. What is your academic rank (Lecturer, Assistant Professor, Associate, Full Professor)? |
| 3. How many years have you been teaching at the college? |
| 4. What is your highest degree of education (e.g., Masters, Doctorate, etc.)? |
| 5. How would you describe your racial/ethnic background? |
| 6. What is your age? |
| 7. How would you describe your gender? |
| 8. The registrar’s office indicates that you have taught at least one auditor aged 60+ within the past three years. When thinking about previous or current auditors enrolled in your courses, please describe any benefits related to their participation or presence in class. |
| 9. Have you experienced any challenges? If so, please describe these challenges and how you handled them. |
| 10. Multigenerational classrooms are those where there are one or more different generations in the same learning environment. Intergenerational is the interaction or what occurs between younger and older generations in a classroom. How would you describe the level of intergenerational engagement in classes with auditors and traditional college students? Can you give examples? |
trained by the first author to conduct the interviews in a consistent format as well as the informed consent protocol. During the interview meeting, participants were provided with a letter of informed consent that was reviewed by the graduate assistant. A total of 27 of the 43 faculty participated in this study for a 62% response rate. Participants represented ten different academic departments. Table 3 presents participants’ demographic information including rank, department, and years teaching. The 16 faculty who did not participate in the study were from the following departments: History (n = 2), Public Health (n = 2), Physical Education (n = 2), Philosophy (n = 1), Sociology (n = 1), Environmental Science (n = 1), English (n = 1), Spanish (n = 1), Political Science (n = 1), Theater (n = 1), Psychology (n = 1), Anthropology (n = 1), and Social Work (n = 1). Reasons given by eligible faculty for not participating include limited interaction with auditors to have meaningful insights (n = 4), conflict of interest (n = 1); the remaining faculty (n = 11) did not respond to the interview request.

Following consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed using a phone-based application entitled ‘Otter’ (Otter, 2019). The graduate assistant and first author then cross-checked the voice to text transcripts by listening to the audio to ensure narrative accuracy. Approximately 10% of words were incorrectly captured and then corrected prior to formal analysis. This research project was reviewed and approved by the college’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

| Table 3. Participant demographic data |
|--------------------------------------|
| **M (SD), %** | **n** |
| Age | 49.2 (10.6) | 26 |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 67 | 18 |
| Male | 33 | 9 |
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| White non-Hispanic | 89 | 24 |
| Hispanic | 4 | 1 |
| Asian | 4 | 1 |
| Other | 4 | 1 |
| Education/Highest Degree | | |
| Doctorate | 78 | 21 |
| Masters | 19 | 5 |
| Other | 4 | 1 |
| Years teaching | 15.6 (8.7) | 27 |
| Academic Rank | | |
| Professor (full) | 7 | 2 |
| Associate | 59 | 18 |
| Assistant | 15 | 4 |
| Lecturer | 7 | 2 |
| Adjunct | 11 | 3 |
| Department | | |
| Anthropology | 7 | 2 |
| Art | 4 | 1 |
| Communication | 4 | 1 |
| Criminal Justice | 4 | 1 |
| Dance | 4 | 1 |
| English | 11 | 3 |
| Film Studies | 4 | 1 |
| History | 26 | 7 |
| Political Science | 11 | 3 |
| Psychology | 19 | 5 |
| Theater/Music Studies | 7 | 2 |
Data analysis

Data from the face-to-face interviews with faculty members were analyzed using qualitative content analytic approach. As an analytic tool for verbal data, qualitative content analysis makes it possible to summarize large amounts of text into themes or categories that represent similar meanings (Sandelowski, 2010). This methodological approach was utilized for this study because of its usefulness in gaining detailed understanding of the topic being investigated (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Specifically, qualitative content analysis was useful in facilitating the development of knowledge regarding the types of intergenerational engagement taking place in the classroom. It also helped in shedding light on the benefits and challenges of creating multigenerational classrooms on the campus where this study took place.

To begin the content analytic process, the data obtained from the face-to-face interviews with faculty members were transcribed verbatim using Otter (Otter, 2019) whose accuracy was cross-checked as described previously. Three of the authors [JD, AH, & CM] independently read all the interview transcripts to achieve robust understanding of the data obtained from the interviews with the faculty members who participated in this study. Following the completion of the data immersion process, each of the three authors performed independent coding by writing down words or codes from each interview that seemed to capture important thoughts or concepts. These authors then met face to face on three occasions to compare codes, finalize the initial coding scheme, and to sort the codes into emergent themes that represent the key findings from the face-to-face interviews with faculty members. As part of the data analysis process, three study team members [JD, AH, and CM] compared the results of their individual analyses during each of the three face-to-face meetings. Disagreements in the analyses results were discussed at each meeting until a consensus was reached on the final themes. Therefore, there was interobserver or intercoder agreement on all the themes included in the final results (Shek, Tang, & Han, 2005). In order to achieve “trustworthiness,” the final coding scheme was developed by selecting themes that were as close as possible to the perspectives of the research participants (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). This was achieved by focusing on the four components of trustworthiness as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) which are: credibility, transferability, auditability, and confirmability.

To enhance the credibility, the authors worked to ensure the final themes and their interpretations were authentic and accurate to the descriptions of the faculty members who participated in the interviews. The researchers were mindful of their potential bias and did not allow these to influence the choice of the final themes included. In addition, the context of the study as well as the applicability of the findings to other settings helps in achieving transferability of the findings, particularly to other AFU campuses in North America and Europe. Further, the research procedures are fully documented and all of the study data, including interview transcripts and meeting notes, are available upon request. Finally, confirmability was achieved because the study’s findings are clearly linked to the experiences and ideas of the participants as represented in the data collected during the interviews (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986).
Table 4. Results: themes by research question (RQ).

| RQ 1: What are the benefits and challenges of creating multigenerational classrooms? |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Benefits:**                          | 1) Improving the quality of education                                           |
|                                        | 2) Complementing instructor expertise: Opportunities to discuss historical context/issues whose meaning may have changed over time |
|                                        | 3) Increasing the diversity of opinion in the classroom                          |
| **Challenges:**                        | 1) Higher rates of absenteeism/lack of engagement in course material             |
|                                        | 2) Imposing strong opinions/dominating class discussions                        |
|                                        | 3) Sensory/mobility impairments and technology                                   |

| RQ 2: What levels of intergenerational engagement may be taking place? |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Small group/seminar discussion: Engagement related to course content   |
| 2) Small group/seminar discussion: Engagement related to informal socialization |
| 3) Limited or no engagement in courses using a lecture-style pedagogy     |

**Results**

See Table 4 for thematic summary of each research question.

**Research Question 1: What are the benefits and challenges of creating multigenerational classrooms?**

All faculty interviewed for this study articulated benefits associated with having multigenerational classrooms. The benefits were organized into three themes, which sometimes overlap: 1) Improving the quality of education, 2) Complementing instructor expertise by offering unique opportunities to discuss historical context/issues whose meaning may have changed over time, and 3) Increasing the diversity of opinion in the classroom.

**Theme 1: Improving the quality of education**

Multiple faculty expressed auditors’ strong interest in course material as a benefit to the classroom learning environment and to their self-esteem as described by an Anthropology professor:

“... one thing is that it’s always nice to have people who are really genuinely interested ... because they’re interested in the subject matter that helps the classroom environment, as well as my own self esteem.”  (Interview 1)

This sentiment was echoed by an English professor:

“... but they become leaders in the classroom ... whether or not they intend to, because they are choosing to take this class in a way that a lot of students aren’t. Not to say my students don’t take it seriously, but the auditors come in every single day and they have something to offer to the class and they’re, you know, they’re constantly thinking and usually what they have to say is not provocative but something that gets others talking.”  (Interview 9)

Another English faculty member describes having a retired Economics professor as a class auditor who provided insights into the economy related to the Wizard of Oz and the gold standard. She describes his strong interest in the course content, but how his expertise helped shape and advance the classroom learning experience:
“... he took it really seriously, and he gave us this really thoughtful view of economics that’s going to help me the next time I teach this text and help the students as well see the relevance of these kinds of questions which seemed very old and they may seem very abstract and so he was able to ground it because he too was used to being in the classroom and so that’s a really concrete way in which the auditor’s experience played right into the kind of work I was trying to do in the classroom” (Interview 5)

A faculty member in the Department of Political Science described the advantage of auditors sharing life experiences with students in the classroom as a major benefit:

“I think it’s just useful for them (traditional college students) to get that opportunity to, to be around, you know, real adults, and not just feeling like they’re kids, because they’re still in college, but seriously discussing these issues with people who have been out there in the labor force beyond college.” (Interview 16)

Theme 2: Complementing instructor expertise by offering unique opportunities to discuss historical context/issues whose meaning may have changed over time

Many faculty described how older adult auditors bring a historical perspective to course content that enhances classroom discussions and greater insights into various topics. These unique perspectives complement instructor knowledge and expertise.

An Anthropology professor describes this benefit concisely:

“[auditors] bring such an interesting perspective because they have a longer view of a history... they’ve had more experiences, maybe being in this particular society.” (Interview 2)

An English faculty member gives an example of how an older adult auditor helped provide context on changing gender roles:

“... it became more of an opportunity to talk about generational differences towards cultural attitudes about race and gender and class. I think we had read a picture book and I think there was a representation of gender in it and one of the auditors had said something like, ‘oh you know that wouldn’t have floated in my day,’ or something like that. And then it offered us a chance for me to say wow you know that’s such a great example thinking about childhood as a construct that you know gender is a construct and the way that it shifts and changes over time.” (Interview 5)

Similarly, a Music instructor describes the benefits of having an older adult auditor share his knowledge of band music during the World War II era:

“One of the things we talked about were the girl bands that came into prominence in World War II, when a lot of the males went off to war, and so the women bands did exist, but they came into more prominence because they were filling the shoes of the musicians who were off and serving in the war. And so one of my older student auditors, he, you know, he lived during that time. And so he, you know, those were groups he used to listen to. So it just, it was really neat to have someone who actually was sort of there firsthand, as opposed to just reading about it as a piece of history in a book” (Interview 20)

A Criminal Justice professor describes the impact of older adults sharing first-person examples of living during specific political climates:

“... it’s nice to have individuals in the classroom who may have been around, like, say, for example, when I’m when I’m discussing social movements, that were, you know, around during that time, they could provide specific examples or insights as to as to what the atmosphere was, our political climate around that time that these things were happening.” (Interview 23)
In this final example, a Psychology professor teaching a course related to mindfulness describes how an older adult, who is also a yoga instructor, enhanced the delivery of course material by teaching the class how to meditate.

“I have a yoga instructor in the class, so she’s got skills I don’t have. And so, she’s leading meditations in the class, she’s bringing her expertise. She’s doing all this great stuff.” (Interview 3)

Theme 3: Increasing the diversity of opinion in the classroom

Several interviewees referenced the term ‘diversity’ when describing the benefits of older adult auditors in the classroom. Specifically, they referenced auditors’ perspectives on course topics as promoting discussion based on different opinions.

In the following excerpt, and English professor describes how older adult learners bring their diversity of experience and how faculty should promote age-related diversity:

“… Definitely brings experiences and perspectives that we might not have in our traditional students … we have a diverse student body … but, I think they’re (auditors) more likely to potentially add to our conversation in a way that’s different from other students in the classroom … I know some professors don’t necessarily like to have discussions about one’s background or experiences … but I feel like they should make a space for that, as long as you are able to apply it to whatever you’re doing, tends to foster a better classroom environment.” (Interview 4)

A faculty member in the Art department describes how age-diverse classrooms can enhance learning and a sense of community across generations similar to other forms of diversity:

“So whether we’re talking about race, gender, age, any of that, I think the broader, you know, sampling you have in a class makes it more interesting, especially when it comes to art, because that gives a very different perspective on things. Young people learn from older people, older people learn from young people, it’s, it’s a nice kind of community, I mean, I really strive to have a community atmosphere. So we’re a community of all sorts.” (Interview 21)

In addition to providing historical context, a Criminal Justice faculty member also references sharing perspectives from older learners as a form of diversity:

“I think that the biggest contributing factor is diversity in the classroom. It’s nice to get a perspective, from a different range of age group individuals. They carry a lot more life experience than traditional college students” (Interview 23)

While all faculty interviewees described benefits related to multigenerational classrooms, approximately 30% (n = 9) of the sample reported challenges in addition to the benefits. These challenges were grouped within three primary themes, 1) Higher rates of absenteeism/Lack of Engagement in course material, 2) Imposing strong opinions or dominating class discussions, and 3) Sensory/mobility impairments and technology.

Theme 1: Higher rates of absenteeism/lack of engagement in course material

Several instructors described how some of their older adult learners have higher rates of absenteeism due to other commitments outside of the school environment.

A Political Science faculty member states:

“Sometimes there’s a bit of inconsistent attendance, because people are in and out of town, going to Florida going on vacation. And the result is that sometimes only a very few of the lifelong learners will be present” (Interview 16)
Similarly, an English professor notes that an older adult learner may be absent due to caregiving responsibilities for a grandchild:

“... but I think external life commitments did sometimes affect the student’s ability to be present in class that maybe our students don’t necessarily have, you know, a grandchild... so they have to sort of drive to and be with that child or whatever, like, you know, things like that.” (Interview 4)

Other faculty didn’t give context, but noted that some older adult learners didn’t attend many classes, or had inconsistent attendance.

“And I’m trying to think of the previous semester I had an auditor that only showed up to like, one or two classes.” (Interview 12)

“The only challenge is that they’re not always able to make every class.” (Interview 2)

Some faculty expressed expectations for attendance and engagement with course material by auditors. One History instructor described how he addressed it, but may have impacted the older adult’s level of participation in the class:

“And for me, it was an issue of how do I approach this student and say, 'I don’t think you’re doing the reading.' And this is really problematic, because I need you to do the reading in order to be informed and participate in discussions in informed ways. So the student became less active and discussion because of that.” (Interview 11)

Theme 2: Imposing strong opinions or dominating class discussions

Due to their higher levels of experience, some faculty reported that older adult learners/auditors may try to impose their opinion/point-of-view on the rest of the class.

Two Psychology instructors described how they would need to intervene when an older adult auditor was sharing their strong opinion related to the course discussion:

“And I had to cut her off, like I’ve developed a strategy where that I told her I would not have a conversation until I was up to speed on the bill because the things she was saying, seemed to me that they weren’t true.” (Interview 3)

“But I think sometimes this person sort of dominates class discussion to the extent that other students were kind of, like, we’ve heard from her, like, we keep hearing from her and just kind of going on and on.” (Interview 12)

Sometimes strong perspectives from older adult auditors can lead to traditionally-aged students not feeling comfortable to share their perspectives as described by this History professor:

“But sometimes that’s the one thing I have to look out for is that the younger students in the class are intimidated by the comments and sort of the breadth of knowledge that our older students bring to the classroom” (Interview 11)

An Art professor described a unique challenge of an older adult auditor providing resistance toward certain class assignments and how this was difficult to manage and feeling powerless since the auditor does not receive a formal grade for the course like a typical college student taking the course for credit:

“... sometimes lifelong learners come in to an art class and they think it’s going to be the community center. And I’m giving the guidelines of the project and ... I had somebody who says, ‘I don’t want to do that, I want to do this instead.’ ... And I’m very clear up front about
this as a college level art class, we have assignments you have to do like all the other students do. But clearly, I can’t make them. There’s no grade attached to it.” (Interview 21)

Theme 3: Sensory/mobility impairments and technology.
Several faculty described how some older adult learners may find it more difficult to navigate on-campus locations related to the classroom/learning space and assistance with technology.

Hearing challenges were reported by a History faculty member:

“… one of the issues I had with one of my adult auditors was that he didn’t hear very well. So that would be something to make faculty aware of how to sort of navigate that if, say, the adult auditors in the front of the room, and he cannot hear what a student is saying, five rows back or four rows back, how do we deal with that, especially if we’re having a discussion of sort of the clip or a primary document or reading that they’ve done before class.” (Interview 11)

An English and Psychology professor note that physical mobility issues can be a challenge for auditors in some buildings and classroom spaces:

“We do have an elevator in the building so for mobility I could see where that could really be a concern. And I know some of my auditors used it.” (Interview 5)

“… so I think I definitely feel like some physical limitations with the way the classrooms look within our building is sort of an issue.” (Interview 12)

A History professor related this to having students who have had mobility issues due to falls:

“I always have that with students with disabilities and yes, with the adult auditors. For instance, they have a lot of mobility issues and I’ve had students who’ve had falls and haven’t been able to come to class … .” (Interview 19)

Becoming familiar with learning technology (e.g., Blackboard, etc.) was noted by a faculty member in the Psychology department:

“[technology] Some of them do have trouble. And it’s not that it’s more trouble or, they don’t know how to use it at all, it’s more about accessing it can be very difficult, especially getting that initial [logon], and then if something goes wrong having to contact tech services, things like that.” (Interview 18)

Research Question 2: What levels of intergenerational engagement may be taking place?
Types of engagement were directly related to the method of teaching. The pedagogy of some faculty promoted robust classroom exchanges, open dialogue and small group discussion while others strictly used lectures. These were often classes with larger enrollments and as such, limited opportunity for meaningful dialogue.

Two distinct themes of engagement between generations arose for those faculty who used small groups and seminar-style teaching practice: 1) intergenerational engagement related to course content and 2) informal conversation/socialization. In a third and final theme, limited or no engagement underpinned the narrative of faculty who primarily taught courses using a lecture-style pedagogy.

Theme 1: Engagement related to course content using small group or seminar discussion pedagogy.

An Anthropology instructor describes how older adult auditors engage in small group discussions:
“... we do a lot of discussion sections in a couple of classes that I’ve had them in and they completely participated in the discussion. And it’s kind of fun, because the students have to read a couple articles and summarize them. And then they have to discuss these articles, and like a small group, and then talk about them in the broader class. I pepper [the auditors] into different conversations because the students have to explain it to them ... it’s great, they ask the students all types of questions ... the students have really appreciated the feedback from the lifelong learners as well.” (Interview 15).

A Political Science professor describes how the class is a seminar style which requires ongoing discussions:

“Our classes are seminars, so they’re conversations from start to finish. They are closely integrated and talking with each other at all points in the class. They’re sharing different perspectives, they’re sharing their viewpoints ... there’s a bit of camaraderie, sort of an esprit de corps developing within the class.” (Interview 16)

When talking about some previous auditors in class, a Communications professor describes how students enjoyed the older adults’ perspective:

“It was the same in another class where I had a woman who was auditing, like, everybody wanted her in their group because she had insight into what we were doing ... they all wanted to be involved with the older people in class because they, you know, had things to say ... it was a quality experience.” (Interview 17).

A History professor provides an example of an in-class discussion group on military history comprised of three different generations of learners who had military experience and how that contributed to the learning environment:

“All three generations brought up fascinating questions about military history about the nature of guerilla warfare ... terrorism ... so they formed a group but then it enriched the whole class ... they were always discussing in class and then after class.” (Interview 19)

A final example from an Art professor describes regular engagement within her ceramics course:

“... I teach ceramics and some very physical activity, they help load kilns together, they make clay together, we critique together, you know, so, um, every part of the courses are inter-generational.” (Interview 21)

Theme 2: Engagement based on observations of informal socialization between auditors and students:

An English professor described seeing students and auditors discussing their families:

“... in the moments before class starts or after class starts when people are talking about their children and then some of the students can identify.” (Interview 9)

A History professor describes intergenerational conversation prior to the start of class:

“But I do know that students who were sitting around some of the adult auditors really appreciated their presence, and oftentimes before class would interact and engage and talk about things not only related to the class, but just in general.” (Interview 11)

Another History professor described similar observations:

“... when we take breaks, or when we’re moving around the beginning of the class, oftentimes, they’ll exchange and talk about other things like sports, or whatever it is, they’re following.” (Interview 16)
Theme 3: Limited, or no engagement was observed by professors who specifically taught using lectures and where small group dialogs were not an intentional component of course instruction.

Two Psychology professors describe this factor.

“… the lecture style classes are more difficult, it’s going to be more of me talking. So I think that you would see more engagement in a course that is less lecture based, that that might open the door for more engagement between the older and younger generation.” (Interview 12)

“It was a lecture class. Okay, so there wasn’t a lot of interaction, unfortunately, for anyone.” (Interview 13)

A Criminal Justice professor describes his experience with auditors being engaged in responding to questions, but engagement with other students was not apparent.

“They’ve been good at answering questions … but the interactions between the actual students and the auditors, I really don’t see a whole lot of.” (Interview 23)

A History professor describes older adult auditors sitting together and talking, but not engaging with traditional-aged college students.

“When I have more than one auditor in a class, sometimes they sit together, and then it’s less likely that they interact as much with the younger students on that direct interpersonal level, as opposed to the class thing still happens. But if they’re sitting next to another person who’s an auditor, they’re more likely to chat before class with that person.” (Interview 25)

An instructor in the Dance department described an auditor who was reserved in the class:

“Right now there is very limited engagement … but because she is so quiet … after spring break we will be doing more partnering and working together … She’s around them, but I cannot say there’s a true engagement between the two parties.” (Interview 6)

**Discussion**

With regards to the first research question, faculty descriptions of the benefits of intergenerational learning were significant across disciplines and occurred in classroom settings where individual, small, and large group discussion were promoted. Excerpts highlight how faculty believe the unique, historical and diverse perspectives of older adults improved the quality of education for students, complemented the faculty member’s expertise, and introduced different ideas to foster in-depth learning on a variety of issues. Each theme was clearly related to the other. For example, when older adults share historical or diverse perspectives, it can help improve the depth and quality of the learning experience of those within the learning environment. Faculty can then utilize these positive experiences/insights in future classes for new learners. These positive experiences may also lead the instructor to promote/encourage intergenerational exchanges. Many of these positive descriptions have been reported in previous studies that look at the benefits of intergenerational learning (Dauenhauer, Steitz, & Cochran, 2016; Montepare, Farah, Doyle, & Dixon, 2019; Pstross et al., 2017).

Challenges of teaching in a multigenerational class were reported much less often than benefits and appeared more prevalent in classes that were lecture based. Faculty descriptions of challenges highlight areas that impact the classroom learning environment for students and instructors. For example, limited or poor attendance was described as a challenge by several
instructors. In this instance, it would appear that instructors who agreed to open their classes to older adult auditors as part of the college’s lifelong learning program, have the same expectations of auditors as of their students taking the class for college credit. It may be that these instructors were not fully aware of how auditing works prior to opening up their class to auditors. Or, taking a positive approach, it could be that these professors are fully aware that in order to foster intergenerational learning, they need to first have a multigenerational class. Either way, expectations of nonparticipation, whether on the part of the auditor or instructor appears to create barriers to the development of intergenerational learning. Colleges wishing to become age friendly through the development of lifelong learning programs that include auditing should work toward striking a balance between cost free classes and language that fully expects and accepts the auditor as a student; a person there to learn without exceptions. In this way, older adults can engage and receive feedback regardless of whether or not they are getting course credits, and faculty can more readily think though how to create space for intergenerational learning knowing that the older adult auditor will be present throughout the semester, except when extenuating circumstances arise.

Like previous research, adult learners’ sharing of strong opinions or dominating class discussion was another challenge that some faculty reported (Montepare & Sciegaj, 2020). Regardless of age, college classrooms should arguably be settings where ideas and differing perspectives are shared to promote learning. Depending on the faculty member’s pedagogy, content, and classroom culture, the extent to which discussion is facilitated may vary widely. However, some of the excerpts highlight the idea that students may perceive older adults’ expressions in a negative light, or as taking away from ‘their’ learning by monopolizing class time. Having a clear understanding of the goal of fostering intergenerational learning may be helpful in this situation, especially since such beliefs about older adult engagement could foster bias or discriminatory beliefs about older adults which could lead to ageism. One way to alleviate such issues in class is to help instructors better understand the purpose of creating multigenerational classrooms for the goal of fostering intergenerational learning. Once they have this understanding the next step is providing guidance on how to develop curriculum that allays negative age related attitudes by bringing older and younger students together to discuss common interest or of mutual concern (Montepare & Farah, 2018). Montepare and Sciegaj (2020) also suggests teaching instructors how to utilize these qualities in older adult learners, engaging them as ‘allies’ to be called on in class to provide further reference points or give further examples in class.

The final type of challenge reported by faculty relates to sensory/mobility and technology accessibility. Similar to research by Silverstein et al. (2019), comments provided by several faculty acknowledge that some of their older adult auditors could benefit from various accommodations so they could more easily engage in classroom discussions (e.g. sound projection in classrooms), arrangement of classroom (e.g., seating/rows), and even the location of the classroom (e.g., proximity to elevators). Interestingly, very few faculty described technology access as a challenge. As the auditing initiative has grown, the College has provided individualized auditor support provided by a graduate assistant for lifelong learning in addition to the services provided by the information technology support line. Faculty are encouraged to refer older adult auditors directly to these services as needed which may explain few challenges related to technology usage. Ultimately, campus leaders and educators need to consider the needs of older adult learners, in addition to others who may need access to supportive services, to help facilitate the implementation of Age Friendly University tenets.
With regard to the second research question—What level of intergenerational learning may be taking place? Results indicate that course pedagogy/instructor teaching style plays a significant role. Faculty who deliver course content in ways that promote discussion, sharing, and small group work often reported detailed examples of older adult learners and traditionally-aged college students engaging in course-related discussion and informal conversation. However, even among these respondents, differences abound. The narratives demonstrated that only a handful of instructors fostered intergenerational learning, strategically putting older and younger adults into groups to create opportunities for intergenerational perspectives to be shared. Others, described interaction between older adults and younger students in the context of their teaching pedagogy. In this way, intergenerational learning is attributed to the nature of the pedagogy, the class being a seminar for instance. This raises several questions about the end goal of intergenerational learning and how colleges and universities achieve intergenerational learning in a multigenerational classroom.

According to Sanchez and Kaplan (2014), a distinctive feature of intergenerational learning in higher education is an acknowledgment of, or ‘becoming aware’ of, existing differences or commonalities due to generational difference and brought about via social interaction between the generations. With this in mind, it is plausible for intergenerational learning to happen without being facilitated by an instructor, as demonstrated by the results of the data collected. However, the results also demonstrate that multigenerational classrooms with participants that have yet to develop generational self-awareness, the capacity for intergenerational empathy, and/or the ability to act in a generationally aware manner may bring about misinformation and miscommunication that could lead to stereotyping one or the other generations or worse, ageist beliefs about both generations (Biggs & Lowenstein, 2011). This was easily seen in the responses of faculty who talked about younger students feeling intimidated by the breadth of knowledge of older adult students and in the way professors responded to older adults who they described as hijacking the class, or dominating the discussions. Such responses speak to the importance of needing to develop intergenerational pedagogy that will help higher education instructors understand multigenerational classrooms as distinctive settings for their teaching to lifelong learners (Sanchez & Kaplan, 2014).

Additionally, it appears as if intergenerational learning takes place along a continuum. There is still much to learn about the role faculty and students play in fostering intergenerational learning in multigenerational classes. Past research has already demonstrated the benefits of in-depth discussion in higher education between smaller groups of students, which includes but are not limited to greater student enthusiasm (Hedley, 1994), deeper understanding and memory of course material (Abowitz, 1990; Kember & Gow, 1994; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006), development of oral communication skills (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008), and a greater sense of course ownership (Frederick, 1994). Whereas lecture based pedagogy, while a good teaching method for transmitting information (Bligh 2000; Burgan, 2006), has been criticized for its limited effectiveness in stimulating interest and critical thinking (Bligh 2000; Buckley, Bain, Luginbuhl, & Dyer, 2004) and usually does not allow for the same kind of interaction between students as one finds in a seminar type class. As such, it is not surprising to learn from this research that instructors who deliver course material primarily through lecture-based formats, tended to have few examples of intergenerational engagement. However, being a lecture style class does not preclude instructors from creating content that fosters questions and answers around content that is of mutual interest or concern (Montepare & Farah, 2018).
Limitations

While the response rate for this study was acceptable, it should be noted that a purposeful sampling technique was used. Although this sampling technique made it possible to identify and select the most information-rich cases for this study, it is possible that those faculty who participated may have had different responses than those who did not participate (Palinkas et al., 2015). Those with positive experiences to report may have been more interested in being interviewed about their experiences than other faculty. Faculty representation from various departments reflected the types of courses often selected by auditors (e.g., History courses are most popular), though some departments who have consistent auditors were not represented (e.g., Social Work, Physical Education, etc.). As this research required interviewees to reflect on previous experiences related to intergenerational classroom experiences since 2016, some may not have been able to recall specific experiences from previous semesters due to the time lapsed. In addition, the research took place within one medium-sized public liberal arts college that is at the beginning stages of AFU implementation and may not be representative of other similarly–sized institutions. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other academic institutions, particularly those at different stages of AFU implementation. Finally, it was impossible to triangulate the data from this study since only one type of data collection method was utilized (Tashakkori & Teddle, 2003; Williamson & Long, 2005).

Conclusion

This study has provided a more in-depth investigation into the level of intergenerational learning taking place within a variety of classrooms and fields of study from the perspective of faculty. When fostered by a faculty member whose pedagogy promotes class-based discussion and by older adults who are motivated to learn and engage with students, the benefits of intergenerational engagement can be significant. For classes that are primarily lecture based, or where expectations about older adult participation may differ between younger and older students as well as instructor – interaction may not only be less likely to occur, but perceptions of engagement may be viewed more negatively. Future research should explore best practices or methods used to promote intergenerational engagement in college classrooms and to assess the perspectives of older adults and younger students, as well as faculty. As pointed out by Kim and Merriam (2004), “older adults are a distinct population that will influence adult education in the future due to their growth in numbers and societal status” (p. 444–445). As such, educators should be aware of their learning needs and learning styles. There seems to be an agreement that an intergenerational pedagogy framework is needed, however work thus far as been limited and not necessarily focused on a pedagogy in higher education (Cartmel, Radford, Dawson, Fitzgerald, & Vecchio, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2019; Sanchez & Kaplan, 2014). Thus, we echo Sanchez and Kaplan’s (2014) call for the development of intergenerational learning pedagogy moving forward. Such education is needed to help instructors of all disciplines, not just those with gerontological expertise, manage classroom conversations and provide a comfortable, respectful environment that allows intergenerational discussion of diverse opinions and experiences for all learners. This information can benefit any institution seeking to become more age friendly.

Additionally, this college’s lifelong learning program was developed based on the belief that learning is an integral component associated with the ongoing process of development and aging. It is based on research that demonstrates older adults often participate in lifelong learning
for the love of learning, wanting to remain intellectually and mentally active and to forge social friendship or networks (Kim & Merriam, 2004). Hence, the development of a lifelong learning program based on auditing. The idea was that auditing classes would provide easy access to classes at a low cost barrier. This program does not address the learning needs and the development of intergenerational learning for older adults that return to college in the hopes of gaining a degree to increase their chance of sustained employability as they age, but it could. It is probable that older adults, as defined by this research, are taking classes for credit at the college. Future research should explore the number of older adults, their demographics, areas of and reasons for study to better understand the differences between these older adult students and those who audit. Creating a barrier-free college for both older adults that take credit and noncredit classes should be equally important and could help inform recruitment and resource development at a college or university. Additionally, because the current program offers classes to alumni, further research should explore if the courses older adults are interested in reflect their field of study when they were at college as this information could be useful in informing program decisions and development at the college level (Hansen, Brady, & Thaxton, 2016).

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