Senior only communities have long been an option for adults over a certain age. A variety of activities and clubs are often available to residents of these communities. The purpose of this research project was to understand the lived experience of recreational softball players regarding players decision to play senior softball and to determine what social opportunities were associated with recreational senior softball leagues. A phenomenological research study was constructed to seek further inquiry into two research questions associated with this project. Participants were members of a senior living community and members of a recreational senior softball league. Convenience and snowball sampling techniques were utilized, and 25 interviews were conducted. The interview transcripts were analyzed for phenomenological themes by the research team. The researchers used Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutical approach to analyze data. Trustworthiness was established by the use of a peer reviewer to assess the themes for accuracy. Themes associated with the first research question indicate that interviewees participated in softball for a variety of reasons, including having played softball as a younger adult, wanting to maintain a level of physical fitness, and for the social connections that participation in a softball league provided. Themes associated with the second research question found that participants enjoyed many social benefits from playing softball, including informal and formal social opportunities. In conclusion, the willingness and opportunity to play senior softball provided older adults the ability to maintain a certain level of physical activity and to engage in meaningful social interactions.

SESSION 2435 (POSTER)

UPDATE ON TEACHING STRATEGIES IN GERONTOLOGY AND GERIATRICS

SERVICE LEARNING AS A MEANS TO ENHANCE CONNECTIONS TO OLDER ADULTS

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Aging is a distinct part of the life cycle. College students enrolled in courses in gerontology often have difficulty relating to aging, that part of life not yet experienced. They may not fully appreciate that adults become more unique, not more similar, as they age. We describe courses in an undergraduate gerontology certificate program that incorporate experiential learning activities with older adults across a hierarchical sequence of courses. These courses feature service learning opportunities focused on increased understanding of course content, broader appreciation of the discipline and improved sense of civic responsibility. Much like the course content of the curriculum, the incorporated experiential learning opportunities for each course level fit a hierarchy leading to student competence and skills development needed for success in the final independent practicum. For the described courses, students provided community service, experienced direct contact with older adults and used reflective practices to integrate course content into service learning activities. We report on qualitative data obtained from students enrolled in the foundational course, Biophysical Aspects of Aging and the third level course, Aging and Mental Health. Content analyses of reflective essays identified five themes: (a) insights about the realities of aging in America (b) perceptions concerning personal negative stereotypes about older adults; (c) feelings of accomplishment/awareness of new skills in providing community services; (d) understandings related to the importance/value of community service; and (e) successes in integrating the course work on aging into service-learning experiences. Other experiential learning activities incorporated into this gerontology certificate program are highlighted.

UNDERGRADUATE EXERCISE AND AGING STUDENTS KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS REGARDING OLDER ADULTS

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The aging population presents far ranging implications and opportunities for individuals, families, policy makers, and healthcare providers. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates an increase in the population aged 65+, which is projected to reach 83.7 million by 2050. With this changing demographic environment, human services and health care professionals with specialized training in aging are needed, regardless of career goals all students deserve exposure to aging education. Undergraduate students have varying knowledge and attitudes towards older adults. Many times undergraduate students have had limited interactions with older adults and their attitudes and perceptions are based on interactions with grandparents and other relatives. In order to better understand undergraduate student’s knowledge and attitudes regarding older adults we surveyed a group of 50 undergraduate students enrolled in an exercise and aging course offered through the Department of Kinesiology and Health. Students were surveyed using the Facts on Aging Quiz (Breystpraak & Bandura, 2015) and the Aging Semantic Differential (ASD) (Rosenzcran & McNevin, 1969). Preliminary findings suggest that students have relatively low knowledge about older adults, as the average score of the Facts on Aging Quiz was 30.4 out of 50 (SD= 3.86). However, scores on the ASD indicate that the student have generally more positive attitudes towards older adults (M=74.29; SD=20.9). At the end of the semester the same students will be surveyed again to evaluate the impact of the course. Findings from this study will be used to augment course content to increase student knowledge and attitudes about older adults.

CREATING THE CT GERONTOLOGY CONSORTIUM TO BRING FACULTY AND STUDENTS TOGETHER TO PROMOTE GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Although commonplace for faculty across universities to collaborate on research, it is less common to bring faculty and students from different institutions together for pedagogical purposes. In this poster, we describe the development