Intergenerational

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The Development of an Intergenerational Service-Learning Program at a Nursing Home

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A demonstration intergenerational service-learning model was developed to improve the well-being of elderly nursing home residents. The model involved collaboration of four community agencies and integration of students' learning about aging with visits to the elderly. Ten college students visited 20 elderly nursing home residents and interacted with them socially for one semester. This interaction resulted in substantial improvements in the residents' psychosocial and physical conditions and in the students' perceptions of aging. The model shows promise of replicability in other communities.
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The Development of an Intergenerational Service-Learning Program at a Nursing Home[1]

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Elderly persons living in nursing homes often lack opportunities to interact with people from outside the facility. It has been shown (Butler & Lewis, 1977) that such social isolation may lead to overdependence and loss of interest in the outside world. This social isolation contributes to the gradual deterioration of the psychosocial condition of the residents, which leads to physical deterioration as well (Schultz, 1976).

Since an individual's psychosocial and physical needs are interdependent, long-term care should attend adequately to both of them. Unfortunately, however, the constraints in many nursing homes result in inadequate resources to provide for the psychosocial needs of residents. One way to address both types of needs without straining the home's limited resources is to introduce programs that provide more contact between the residents and persons who are not normally involved in the operation of the nursing home. A recent study (Hook et al., 1982) suggests that contact between nursing home residents and people from the outside world helps the residents to maintain meaningful role relationships with others and contributes to their well-being.

In another study, contact with college students was shown to improve the well-being and morale of the institutionalized elderly (Arthur et al., 1973), indicating that one way in which nursing homes can meet some of the psychosocial and physical needs of residents is by providing experiences that keep them in touch with young people. This position is supported by the assertion (Butler, 1975) that young persons are an immense resource for achieving positive social change and should become part of a volunteer network to support the rehabilitation of older people in nursing homes. Furthermore, intergenerational contacts between the old and young can be beneficial to the latter as well. For example, several studies have reported that students' contact with older people results in positive change in the students' attitudes toward the elderly and their knowledge of aging (Hudis, 1972; Rosencrantz & McNevin, 1969; Steinbaum, 1973). Based on these reported positive impacts on both the elderly and young, it seems clear that intergenerational contacts in nursing homes can enhance the quality of life of both residents and youthful visitors to the facilities.

Background of the Program

In response to the need for a consistent source of young persons to provide social interactions for nursing home residents, a demonstration program was developed in western Pennsylvania as a model that could be replicated in other parts of the state. The program involved the collaboration of four community agencies — a local community college, a local nursing home, an area agency on aging (AAA), and a university-based intergenerational program — and it integrated students' learning about aging with their service to the elderly.

Goals

The program was developed with three goals in mind. The first was to improve the psychosocial and physical conditions of nursing home residents by providing weekly social interactions with college students, the second was to increase students' learning about aging and older persons in institutional settings by integrating service to the residents with formal learning experiences, and the third was to demonstrate the feasibility of collaboration among community agencies in the development of an intergenerational service-learning program at a nursing home.

Procedure for developing the Program

The development of the program was accomplished in three phases: the creation of a consortium of community agencies, the development and implementation of the intergenerational service-learning program, and an assessment of outcomes for both the elders and the students.

1. Creation of a Consortium of Community Agencies

The development of the service-learning program involved the collaborative efforts of four agencies, each of which had specific interests in furthering its mission and service to the community. The college's interest was in expanding its human development curriculum, helping students to explore career options, and increasing its service to the community. The nursing home was interested in improving the quality of life of its residents, enhancing their opportunities for socialization experiences, and increasing its own visibility within the community. The AAA was interested in creating positive attitudes toward nursing homes and support for the well-being of their residents. Generations Together was interested in demonstrating that the program would have positive results for the participating elders, students, and community agencies and creating a program that could be replicated.

In order to ensure that the interests of all collaborating agencies were served, a coordinating team was established that included at least one representative from each agency. The team met regularly throughout the program to discuss strategies for its implementation, to monitor its progress, and to review its outcomes. Additionally, each collaborating agency had a defined role in facilitating the implementation of the program.

The role of Butler County Community College comprised developing a service-learning course, screening prospective students, teaching the course, coordinating and supervising the field placements of the students at the nursing home in conjunction with the nursing staff, and collaborating with Generations Together in assessing the impact of the service-learning experience on the students. Sunnyview Home was responsible for selecting residents who might benefit from visits by students, orienting students to the nursing home and its operating procedures, col-

laborating in the coordination of the students' field placements at the nursing home, and collaborating with Generations Together in assessing the impact of the students' visits on the residents. The role of the AAA was to collaborate in the development of a set of guidelines that other AAAs might follow in facilitating the replication of this program. The AAA also served as a resource to the participating students on careers in aging.

As the indicator of this project, Generations Together was responsible for overseeing all program activities. To this end, Generations Together created a working partnership among the participating agencies by facilitating the development of a coordinating team, assisting in planned and offering the service-learning course, and developing a "How-To" manual to be used by other consortia in replicating the program.

2. Development and Implementation of the Intergenerational Service-Learning Program

This step involved the completion of the following activities.

Development of a course syllabus. — The course syllabus was developed by the instructor with the assistance of Generations Together and in conformity with the format required by Butler County Community College. Like most syllabi, it contained a brief course description, a statement of student objectives, an outline of content, and a list of student evaluation requirements. Also included with this syllabus was a selected bibliography for students' use.

Selection of students. — The student participants were enrolled in a psychology of aging course in the winter term of 1983 at Butler County Community College. Ten students with a mean age 22 years were selectively admitted by the instructor using the following criteria: trustworthiness, sense of responsibility, ability to communicate effectively, and previous volunteer experience.

Matching of students with nursing home residents. —A pool of 40 nursing home residents was selected from a total of 185 by the nursing staff. Based on written profiles of these residents, the students selected several residents whom they wished to visit. These residents were then informed of the program and given the option of participating. Each of the 10 students was eventually paired with 2 residents. These 20 residents included 7 males and 13 females, and their mean age was 78.5 years.

Conducting class sessions. — Two hour class sessions were held to prepare students for their visits and to brief them about their experiences so as to help them interact more effectively with the residents. The classes were also used to present new ideas related to aging and the operation of nursing homes.

Facilitation of student visits. — The students visited the nursing home residents with whom they

were matched for approximately 3 hours each week throughout the semester in which they were registered for the service-learning course. Upon arrival at the nursing home, the students signed in with a designated member of the nursing staff and received information on the physical and psychosocial status of the residents they were to visit. During their visits, they engaged in various social activities such as conversations, reading aloud, writing letters, card or table games, crafts, bowling, religious services, entertainment, walks around the nursing home and eating at the coffee shop. Before leaving, they reported any noteworthy occurrences that transpired during their visits.

3. Assessment of Outcomes

The outcomes of the program were assessed by using a semi-structured interview and a clinical assessment procedure for the residents and a semi-structured interview for the students. Both interviews were conducted by the authors; the clinical assessment procedure for the residents was carried out by the nursing director at Sunnyview Home.

The residents' semi-structured interview yielded the following data in response to five of the major questions. When asked whether they enjoyed the students' visits, 100% of the residents said that they enjoyed the visits very much. They gave reasons like "I don't get many visitors" and "I like talking to someone other than sick folk."

When asked whether the program had helped them become more friendly with their roommates and other residents, 42% said that it did, 12% were not sure, and 47% said that it had not affected their relationships with fellow residents. However, among those in the third category some residents said that no change in relationships had occurred because they were already friendly with their roommates, and some others said that they always preferred to be by themselves.

Residents were also asked, "Did participation in the program help you to leave your room more often than before?" In response to this question, 59% said the program helped, 23% said it did not help, and 18% said they had already been leaving their rooms frequently before the program began.

On being asked how the experience had affected their feelings toward young people, 41% of the residents said that their feelings had been positively affected, 47% said that their feelings had not been affected, while 12% said that their feelings toward young people had always been positive. None reported a negative change.

When asked whether they would recommend the program to other residents, 88% of the residents said "Yes," 12% said that they were not sure and none said "No."

The clinical assessment procedure involved checking residents' records, discussing their status with charge nurses, and observing and interviewing the residents for any changes in their well-being. The data from the procedure showed that 94.7% of the residents enjoyed the students' visits. The only one who seemed not to have liked them was a 96-year-old resident who was rather disoriented and did not have a clear memory of the visits. With regard to the residents' physical and mental condition, the nursing director rated 27% of the residents as improved, 17% as deteriorated, and 56% as stable. Thus, 83% had at least maintained their status prior to the inception of the program. This high percentage of residents failing to show deterioration was considered remarkable in view of the fact that older people who are residents in intermediate and skilled care nursing homes are normally expected to gradually decline in health. Of particular interest was the case of a 94-year-old male resident who was reported to be literally dying before the program began but whose condition had become very stable by the end of the program. Although no claim is being made that the program was responsible for this spectacular improvement, no other explanation could be found.

From the students' semi-structured interview the following data were obtained. The data showed that the students perceived themselves as having benefited from their service-learning experience. Eighty percent became more accepting of the aging process, of their own aging, and of nursing homes. Typical responses were "There's much you can do in old age" and "You need a healthy attitude." A large majority (70%) of the students reported becoming friendlier with older people, including their own grandparents. Additional evidence of the positive impact of this project on students was demonstrated by the expressed interest of several of them in pursuing a career in gerontology or geriatrics as a result of their experience.

Participating in the project was positive and meaningful for both the nursing home residents and the students, as evidenced by residents' reported interest in increasing the frequency of the students' visits, by requests from other residents for student visitors, and by students' recommendation of the program to their peers. Another indication of the meaningfulness of the project was the continued visits by many of the students to the nursing home during holidays and at non-scheduled times.

Implications for Replication of the Program

In considering the implications for the replication of this program, it is appropriate, first, to review the outcomes and intentions of the collaborating agencies and, second, to consider the program's inherent replicability. At the conclusion of the program's demonstration period, the administrators of the nursing home and the community college agreed that the relationship between the two institutions should be maintained and that the intergenerational service-learning program should be continued. Initiative was taken by Butler County Community College to establish the service-learning experiences as a consistent fall and winter course offering. Additionally, Sunnyview Home administrators ap-

proached the community college to discuss ways in which the program could be expanded to include the spring and summer months as well. The interest expressed by the college in sustaining the service-learning course for students, coupled with the reciprocal interest by the nursing home in providing continued intergenerational experiences for its residents, indicates the program's positive and meaningful impact and its worthiness for replication in other communities.

To enhance its potential for replicability, another outcome for the program was the preparation of a manual which fully describes the procedures for project implementation. The manual also contains copies of materials such as the course syllabus, student log forms, and guidelines for students' visits. The intent of the manual is to help guide a program whose success is contingent upon the collaboration and support of the participating agencies.

Illustrative of the worth of this program is the following statement from the director of an area agency on aging: "I found much of the information [presented through this program] extremely helpful, not only for intergenerational efforts, but also for other issues related to our activities with nursing homes. .

. . I am hopeful that it can be emulated here in other parts of the country." In view of the data reported on both the students and the nursing home residents and the sustained interest of the collaborating agencies, it is evident that this program has been beneficial to its participants and has demonstrated its potential for replicability in other communities.

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