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## Footprints on the Sands of Time: A Student-Senior Citizen Community Project

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# Footprints on the Sands of Time: A Student-Senior Citizen Community Project

**Cover Page Footnote**

I gratefully acknowledge the constructive comments of W. Edward Folts

# **Footprints on the Sands of Time: A Student-Senior Citizen Community Project\***

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*Edwin Rosenberg, Appalachian State University*

## **ABSTRACT**

*The indisputable growth which will take place in the older American population over the next four decades and the predictable changes in the characteristics of that population allow occupational forecasts of an increase in jobs which directly or indirectly serve the aged. This is one reason for the persistence of gerontology training programs in higher education.*

*While such programs obviously develop a solid academic foundation in gerontology, it is equally important that prospective gerontologists or gerontological human service professionals gain first-hand experience in working with the elderly. Such an experience, and the student's reaction to it, achieves several goals, including broadening the student's understanding of aging and the elderly and helping the student decide on the type of career for which he or she is best suited.*

*It is suggested that such field experience with the aged is not only essential, but should be accomplished as early as possible in the gerontology curriculum. As an example of such an endeavor and the results it can yield, information is presented on the development, implementation, and outcomes of a project pairing students with senior citizens. Limitations and the applicability of this type of project to other sociology subfields are discussed.*

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\* All students quoted in this paper have given their permission to use brief excerpts from their writings. I gratefully acknowledge the constructive comments of W. Edward Folts

Is not wisdom found among the aged?  
Does not long life bring understanding?

Job 12:12

## Introduction

To any student of demography or gerontology, the past, current, and future growth of the American older population is no surprise. The population aged 65 and over comprised but 2 percent of Americans in 1790, the year of the first decennial census, and it took more than a century for this proportion to double (to about 4 percent in 1900). In this century, however, the growth rate of the aged population has been nothing short of spectacular, with the elderly proportion of the population more than tripling; it is currently 12.5 percent and growing.

The first third of the 21st century will see a "Gray Boom," as the Baby Boomers reach the retirement years. At its peak, about 22 percent of all Americans will be over age 64.<sup>1</sup> Imagine the emerging challenges to a nation with a proportion of elderly nearly 25 percent greater than that of Florida (17.8 percent) today!<sup>2</sup>

There are obvious training and career-choice implications in these data for college students and others who are currently in or who are contemplating gerontology-related careers. This growth in the older population, accompanied by other correlates of an aging population structure, implies increasing career openings in all goods and service sectors dealing with the aged.<sup>3</sup>

These trends have been duly noted in higher education; Sterns and Atchley (1991) believe the 1990s will be a decade of growth for gerontology programs. The number of colleges and universities offering gerontology courses exceeds 1,100, with over 100 offering degree programs (Rich, Atchley, & Douglas, 1990). Federal funding for gerontology training programs, currently severely restricted, may increase under the new administration.

One of the first tasks in career preparation in any social service field is to develop a realistic picture of the subject matter, a process that often results in the demise or modification of pre-existing stereotypes. For older Americans, the history of relations between young and old and the social status and role of the elderly have been less than encouraging. While various explanations for changes in age relations have been advanced (see, e.g., Achenbaum, 1978; Cowgill and Holmes, 1972; Fischer, 1978), the prevailing trend since the American Revolution has been toward a society more

fearful of, anxious about, and repulsed by aging and the elderly. The consequent "gerontophobia" and "cult of youth" (to use Fischer's terms) contain stereotypes and stigmas that make aging an unappealing inevitability for Americans. Despite gerontologists' and other researchers' efforts to present a more realistic appraisal, tempering the negative with the positive, the image of the devalued older American remains. Younger people overestimate the severity of the elderly's problems (Harris and Associates, 1975:31; 1981:10), while older people may accept as fact many of the negative stereotypes about themselves, thus giving initial momentum to a downward spiral in self-esteem. (Akin to the "self-fulfilling prophecy," this has been labeled "social breakdown"; see Kuypers and Bengston, 1973.)

While prejudice and stereotyping tend to reduce intergroup contact and preserve inaccurate evaluations of others, research in race/ethnic relations and other fields has consistently shown that intergroup contact, if it can be brought about, can rapidly dispel stereotypes and reduce prejudice. While acquiring gerontological knowledge is not guaranteed *per se* to improve attitudes toward the elderly (Holtzman and Beck, 1979; Michielutte and Diseker, 1985), the odds of positive attitude change increase when new knowledge is combined with interactions with the elderly (Coccaro and Miles, 1984). It thus seemed both useful and logical to me, as a gerontologist and professor, to bring my students—potential gerontology careerists—into contact with their subject matter.

There were other reasons for this as well. First, if some students weren't going to enjoy working with the elderly, it would be best for them to find out as soon as possible, before a timely and expensive commitment had been made (by them) in their training. Second, for an introductory gerontology class, working with older people and keeping a written record of these experiences might be more appealing (and, I hoped, more meaningful) than spending days, or even hours, in the library writing a term paper. They would actually get to work with their subject matter. Third, some students never knew their grandparents, while others—and this was more common—had never known any older people *except* their grandparents. They seemed to think of their grandparents as relatives first and elderly second (if, in fact, the grandparents were even that old). The paucity of opportunities for intergenerational contact was well summed up by one student:

It is out of ignorance when we generalize and hold the view that the elderly are nonproductive members of society, a burden to the economy. I am guilty of stereotyping their behavior and expecting certain attitudes and actions of them, based on society's

age norms. However, these opinions of mine are based on lack of previous interaction with seniors.

### Structuring the Project

The first time I brought gerontology students and senior citizens together was in the fall of 1978. The project proved so successful that, when possible, I've done it in my social gerontology class ever since.

The first task, finding the seniors, was no problem. The local Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) or Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) are good places to start. In such cases one will obviously find a somewhat nonrepresentative sample of elderly; those who participate in these programs (especially one like the RSVP, where I began) are typically healthier, more educated, better off financially, and more active than many of their age peers. However, I felt that this would be a good group for beginning gerontology students. In subsequent semesters my advanced students, more knowledgeable, and with this initial project under their belts, worked with institutionalized elderly.

Contact with the agency director was made by phone. The goal of the phone call was to broach the topic and schedule a face-to-face meeting. At the meeting we discussed the proposal in detail; in addition, the director had a chance to get to know me. While I've encountered hesitant directors over the years, none have refused; their concerns have always been due primarily to the novelty of the project. Once the project was underway they were always quite enthusiastic.

The seniors in the organization were also initially reluctant. This was something new, something being done for the first time, something unfamiliar. (I'm not succumbing to the "old dog new tricks" stereotype—as we'll see, the students were equally anxious.) The project was to prove so rewarding to them, however, that there was a waiting list the next time around, and some seniors participated every term that the project was offered. Their desire for intergenerational social contact was genuine and strong.

The initial meeting of students and seniors was (and remains) the sole awkward aspect of the project. Everyone, including myself and the agency director, was apprehensive. After all, with but brief introductions, each student was going to have to make a term-long commitment to an unknown senior citizen, and vice versa. One student wrote, "I felt apprehensive toward meeting with [my senior partner]. Would I like her? Would she like me?" A second described how a senior came to her rescue:

My first thoughts about our class meeting with members of RSVP admittedly were a little nervous....Thoughts of "What do I say?" and "What can I talk about with people I don't know?" ran through my head....No sooner did I get a cup of coffee than this petite little lady came up to me and introduced herself. From that moment the butterflies left.

Another student noted how her initial discomfort proved unjustified:

When I heard the assignment of this term project in class I thought to myself, "Oh no, another time commitment. I don't know how to talk to an old person." Well, my viewpoint has changed quite a bit. Meeting with [her] has been one of the high points of my week."

The students and seniors briefly introduced themselves and described their activities and hobbies. Both groups had been advised to identify any members of the opposite group with whom they shared interests. After the introductions, the groups were allowed to mingle and settle on partners for the project. The agency director and I kept a list of all students and their senior partners, along with addresses and phone numbers.

The students and their senior partners were to set up a weekly meeting at a mutually convenient time. The meetings would be to discuss topics being covered in class. Some students, whose image of the elderly lifestyle was one of disengaged leisure, were in for a scheduling shock:

We wrote a copy of our weekly schedules to trade with one another. I thought she would be impressed with how busy and involved I was as a college coed—I was wrong. Her schedule was far more complex and full compared to mine. She works at the RSVP office three mornings a week, is enrolled in two guitar classes through [the nearby] Community College (she didn't figure she would learn enough in one class so she's taking two!), and is teaching three yoga classes at the Senior Center. Along with all of that she swims at least twice weekly with a handicapped friend, plays in a couple of musical groups, and attends all sorts of luncheons and teas. (Mind you, this goes on every week!) We decided that the only time we could meet would be Tuesday mornings at 7:30.

By this time—typically the third week of the semester—the students had some foundation of gerontological knowledge. I distributed the topic schedule to them (Appendix 1); it corresponded roughly with the topics we'd be covering each week in class. In this way, the students would know something about each topic before meeting with their senior partners, and they would be able to use their senior as a case study "reality check" against the readings and in-class materials.

I also gave the students some advice and cautions. They were to avoid any topics or subtopics which seemed to make their senior partner uneasy; the seniors were volunteering their time and energy and should not have to endure any discomfort. The same held for the students. If anything began to go wrong—if their senior developed a health problem, was going on vacation for a month (we tried to discourage such people from participating), began to miss meetings, or made the student feel uncomfortable in any way—they were to see me immediately and, along with the agency director, we'd find a remedy for the problem. In one case, this meant disqualifying a senior from the program and finding a new partner for the student. Both for the sake of the project and because such problems are best nipped in the bud, it was important to become aware of and deal with these events as early as possible.

The students were to keep journals of their conversations with their senior partners. The final submission, a paper of 15-20 pages in length, was to interpret their seniors' experiences and attitudes gerontologically, i.e., to apply in-class concepts and theoretical perspectives to a life story. Rather than merely writing a biography or descriptive narration, they were actually conducting case studies in aging. The guidelines I gave them for their final write-up included remarks about confidentiality.

Barring difficulties, the students were then on their own with their seniors. Virtually all were extremely conscientious about their weekly meetings, and independently made alternative arrangements (e.g., a double meeting) if a meeting was missed. Meeting sites would vary, even for the same pair: one week at the Senior Center, the next at the senior's home for dinner, then at the student's apartment, at the senior's hobby club, church, etc.

By the end of the term, students and seniors knew each other well. A party was organized by the agency director and me to bring us all together (for only the second time!) and allow us to share our new friends with the others. The students had been encouraged to give a copy of their papers to their respective senior partners, and everyone—students and seniors alike—had a chance to say a few words about their partner and their experiences over the term. Finally, to add a tangible reward for the seniors, a Certificate of

Appreciation was given to each participating senior. I was pleased to later find that nearly all of the seniors had framed and hung their certificates.

## Outcomes and Evaluation

The overall results exceeded all expectations: mine, the agency director's, the seniors' and the students.' One student wrote:

We seemed to hit it off just fine, which really surprised me. I don't know why the fact that we hit it off so well surprised me, but it did. Maybe I was uneasy because in the past my encounters with the elderly had been so few and far between and not very pleasant.

A few samples from student's journals suffice to show how any initial awkwardness quickly disappeared as young and old eagerly shared themselves and their interests. "I guess this might not be as scary as I thought it would be!" exclaimed one. "I'm already anxious to talk to her again." Another wrote: "When we first started I was a little scared because I was always a little uneasy around old people. This project really helped me."

I had expected that many of the students would enter the class and the project with some of the negative stereotypes of the elderly we encounter so often in society. I also anticipated that most, if not all, such beliefs would decline or dissipate during the term, in large part due to the counterevidence discovered during student-senior interactions. This did, indeed, seem to occur. Here's what the students had to say about their preconceptions of the elderly (such as boring, dull, homogeneous, having nothing to teach us or contribute to society) and the fate of those preconceptions:

It's so hard trying to ask [her] questions. Not that she's hard to talk to, she's just so interesting to listen to. She told me today that someday when we had more time she'd tell me about the time she was a paratroop instructor!

As we finished our coffee and were leaving we decided to meet next Tuesday for breakfast. I walked over to my Toyota and got in. [She] walked over to her van, with curtains, sunroof, and very loud pipes, got in, waved, and drove off. Her vehicle fits her personality. Very mod, very youthful, with a lot of snap, crackle, pop!

At the beginning of this project there was no way I could have envisioned how much I would learn from my visits with [her]. She has shown me a totally different outlook on aging, something I had never faced before. It makes me both mad and sad to think about all the stereotypes that I've heard about the elderly, because from my first-hand experience all of these have been disproven.

I learned so much from him. I have learned that the elderly are just as easy to talk to as young people, and what they have to say is often more wise and experienced. I have learned that old people can't be categorized because there are so many people with so many different backgrounds and experiences. Most of all, I have learned that the elderly are an invaluable part of our society.

At our first meeting, [she] told me the reason she got involved in this project was because she never had any children, and had no contact with any young people. All she knew about young people was what she read about them in the newspaper, and that wasn't very good. She wanted to meet and get to know a young person to find out what makes them tick. So this project has been one of sharing and learning on both our parts. We have both learned a lot about each other's generation, and I feel for both of us it has been a success.

The preceding quote describes a "bonus" outcome. Many of the seniors harbored negative images of today's youth. The students provided real-life counterexamples. Just as the students reported having to modify their stereotypes of the aged, so did the seniors relinquish—happily, it seems—their lack of faith in today's young adults.

There were two other pleasant results from the project. First, virtually every senior partner expressed strong interest in participating, the next time the opportunity arose. Second, in many cases, although everyone knew it wasn't required, students and their senior partners continued to see each other on a regular basis long after the term and course had concluded. For some, the relationship was perhaps best described as "adoptive," filling some unmet needs of both old and young.

The papers submitted by the students at the project's conclusion were the standard quality mix, but a few generalizations can be made. In most

cases, the journal entries were complete, enthusiastic, and in depth. Some students, however, found it difficult to interpret their case studies using the concepts and theoretical frameworks to which they'd been exposed in class. In some cases, the reason for this was lack of understanding, but in most it seemed instead to be lack of practice. In future projects I asked for a draft of one week's write-up, commented upon it and returned it to the student. Knowing what improvements (if any) were needed, the students' final submissions were of markedly higher quality.

Like their senior partners, the students' responses to the project were overwhelmingly positive. A representative evaluation read, "This project has meant a lot to me, and I know it has to [her], also. For myself, I think it's great that an educational class allows students to learn not only from textbooks but also from people and their experiences."

The outcome most frequently mentioned by students was their more balanced picture of aging due to the unmasking of stereotypes of the elderly:

As far as my concept of the elderly is concerned, I realize and admit my reliance on the stereotypes and images of old people and I feel that I can now safely say that those images were pretty much torn down one by one.

I guess I thought that when I turned 65 I would automatically want to learn to knit or crochet and continue to do so until I died. I guess I thought that's all that would be available for me to do. I learned from [my senior partner] that I was wrong.

I have always felt that it must be terrible to grow old. But seeing how [he] has adjusted to it, I don't think it will be bad at all.

[She] said there were no classes like this when she was young, and if there were, she would have taken them because she feels as I do, that knowledge of aging or knowledge of anything decreases fear.

As hoped, the project also served the students as a "reality check," enabling them to discuss or test what they'd read or heard in class with a member of the older population. Their awareness of this process and its results are evident in the following student comments:

The term heterogeneity [of the aged as a group] comes to my mind when I think of [him]. He doesn't fit the stereotype of the "little old man." He is very motivated and has a great productive capacity in many areas. All older people simply cannot be placed in the same category because there is a great diversity among their population.

This was very helpful to me because everything that I've heard and read all term was verified through [her] own opinions and views.

For me, it was good to discuss some of the things that were brought up in class with an older person to see what [she] thought of it. I think that because of this project, the principles that we learned seem more real and practical than if I had only learned about them in class. I can see that they aren't just principles, but that we have learned about people and their way of life.

Students also noted the project's benefits, both in general and in terms of career preparation, in bringing them into contact with elderly nonrelatives:

When I first began this program, I had not had a relationship with anyone over 60 other than relatives....After meeting [my senior partner]...more than ever I am questioning "whom" we call old and what "old" means.

[My senior partner] has shown me that the aged are not deviants; they are people who have gone a little distance ahead of us on the life journey....It is necessary for us to learn more about the needs of the elderly so that in the future we can work more effectively with and live among the growing population of the elderly. Also, it is to our own benefit that we become familiar with the process and adjustment of aging, since all of us will become old someday.

Finally, as the following quotes illustrate, the students recognized the life perspective insights that the experience of advanced years can bring. Their expressions of personal growth were gratifying.

I really enjoy [her] company and our conversations together. Her attitude towards life is so positive and encouraging—it is changing my own fears and insecurities about aging into feelings of expectation, peace, and a little curiosity.

This term has been a valuable learning experience for me. I have gained applicable knowledge on the aging process, the situations the elderly face in our society, how they are treated and also how it is to grow old in America today....I feel that many of my previous prejudices have been dissolved and I am more assured about my own journey down the path into old age—that it will be as rewarding and satisfying as I let it be.

I've learned that people, despite age differences, can open up to one another, express their feelings and be understood. In many cases there need be no communication gap between generations if we would only sit down and take the time to talk and listen to one another.

I think that I can understand older people's situation better now. I can understand my grandparents better and appreciate they things that they do. This class opened my eyes to some things I didn't really think about before.

## Conclusions

The goals of the student-senior citizen community project are (1) to allow the student to conduct research and write a research paper using the case study method; (2) to promote a more realistic understanding of aging and the elderly by exposing stereotypes through direct contact with the aged; (3) to reinforce in-class learning by providing an outside "reality check"; (4) to enhance gerontology career preparation through lengthy interactions with nonrelative elderly; and (5) to provide an opportunity for personal growth. Fifteen years after the project's initiation I feel confident in saying that it achieves every goal, given a minimally sufficient effort on the student's part. Students and seniors enjoy the project, once the inevitable initial uneasiness is overcome. The students' papers indicate feelings of academic and personal growth; seniors' comments and willing-

ness to participate again imply enhanced life satisfaction and a sense of meaningful contribution.

Students should be cautioned, however, against overgeneralizing their positive experiences with an admittedly nonrepresentative group of elderly. They should also be made aware that the project's aim is not simply to replace negative stereotypes with positive ones (for there are dangers in that, too), but also to gain insight into the origins and nature of (age) stereotyping and to emerge with a greater respect for the heterogeneity and ongoing potential of this population segment. In a more advanced gerontology class, this project was successfully replicated, with appropriate modifications, in a nursing home and with a support group for widowed persons.

There is no reason why this form of learning experience cannot be used in other classes (or even nonacademic settings), given necessary adaptations and adequate preplanning. Many classes in the social sciences and human services fields can easily specify at least one target population for such an undertaking. Also, this project bridges the gap between "day-trip" field experiences and semester- or year-long practica or internships (the latter recommended by AGHE for any gerontology program [Connelly, 1990]).

Working with one's subject matter—in this case, the aged—is an educational approach which, at the very least, significantly supplements and complements pure classroom instruction. The interaction which occurs first-hand seems to make a great impression on students and represents a gift from their senior partners that will outlast the partners themselves. One student, no doubt echoing the sentiments of others, concluded her paper on the student-senior citizen community project with these words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time.

## Notes

1. Unlike fertility projections, forecasts of the older population are quite accurate—after all, everyone who will become elderly within the next 65 years has already been born, and we know how many of them there are. A simple application of age-specific mortality rates yields the number of elderly for the next six and one-half decades (excepting international migration).

2. This is not to be misconstrued as suggesting that Florida's elderly are representative of all Americans age 65 plus, either today or in the future. Florida's senior citizens tend, for example, to be wealthier, healthier, more mobile, and better educated than national norms for the older population.
3. One reviewer noted, "These opportunities already exist—the problem that needs to be addressed is why people won't take these jobs." This point deserves exploration and explanation, but is outside the scope of this paper. In addition, as the elderly comprise a growing consumer market, there should be increasing employment opportunities in private sector businesses for people with gerontology training (Kahl, 1988).

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## Appendix 1

### Case Study Project: Weekly Topics

Here are topics to cover and guideline questions for your visits to your senior partners beginning with the third week of the semester. You will probably want to expand on the questions and gather additional information, but these should help get you going.

#### Weekly Topic and Questions

- 3 Get acquainted. Exchange names and phone numbers. Set day and time for future meetings. Explain term project.
- 4 Biography. Gather fairly detailed biographical information: your senior's parents, his/her upbringing, work history, marriage/s, family, hobbies, current relations with family and friends, etc.
- 5 Economics and housing. Get an "economic history" of your senior—parents' situation, senior's income, investments, etc. What's the situation now—Soc. Sec., pensions, etc.? How does this affect his/her lifestyle? Housing history—what type, where, still maintain outside home? Feelings about other senior citizens' economic and housing situations—are they better or worse off?
- 6 Health care. Get your senior's health history and that of his/her family. Current health status and problems. How are current problems being treated? Opinions of doctors, nurses, the nursing home staff, the medical

system in general. More or less fortunate than other senior citizens in terms of access to health care?

- 7 Independence and services. Importance of autonomy. How much does he/she have? Compare to how much you think he/she *really* has. Impact of dependency on self-esteem, expressed satisfaction with current situation. Awareness of community services available. Past use of such services.
- 8 Nursing homes. Has he/she ever been placed in one? If so, opinion of, prior to institutionalization. Opinion now. View of other seniors' opinions of nursing homes. What might be improved, in your opinion? In your senior's opinion?
- 9 Emotional problems, mental health. Feelings about family, current health and economic situation, self. Ever get depressed, lonely, etc? What could be done? What's *your* impression of your senior's mental and emotional stability? What's your senior's impression of emotional/mental problems for seniors in general?
- 10 Marital status, sexuality. Marriage history, including changes (children, divorce, widowhood). Satisfaction with marital status(es) throughout life. Opinions of other seniors' marital satisfaction. Opinions on sex and the elderly. Own feelings/desires/behaviors. [CAUTION: be careful here. At the first sign of discomfort, back off. Don't invade your senior's privacy.]
- 11 Spring Break—no mandatory meeting. Be sure to tell your senior if you won't see him/her this week.
- 12 Victimization. Senior's opinions about criminal victimization of the aged—types of crimes, prevalence of crimes, consequences for seniors. Have elderly friends or relatives been victimized? Has he/she? Describe. Any lifestyle alterations to discourage victimization? Knowledge/attitude/experiences re: elder abuse.
- 13 Productivity, ageism, dying and death. Does your senior feel people become less productive with age? Less willing/able to learn? How productive is *your* senior? Aware of age discrimination in work force? Know of victims? Been a victim? Plans for dying/death. Will, funeral arrangements, discussion with family? Personal feelings about end of life. Unfinished business? Beliefs in afterlife?
- 14 End-of-project party at senior center. Be sure to bring an edited copy of your paper for your partner. Certificates of appreciation will be given to senior participants.
- 15 Project paper due date.