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# Bringing Old and Young Together

Jane Angelis

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*

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# Bringing Old and Young Together

National Information Center  
for Service Learning  
1954 Buford Ave, Room R290  
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

by Jane Angelis

**I** just can't get it all done!" It is the classic lament of the teacher stretched too thin by the demands of the classroom. Imagine what educators could accomplish if only we had enough resources, time, help...

Help has arrived: In schools across the country, teachers are bringing older volunteers into their classrooms to share skills and experiences with the students. A piano tuner teaches his trade. A retired secretary assists business education students with shorthand. An older caregiver discusses nursing care in a health occupations program.

These are just a few examples of intergenerational programs, which bring young and older people together for their mutual benefit. As mentors, tutors, guest lecturers, oral historians, and sharers of life experiences, older volunteers can enliven a classroom by offering new and unique perspectives to traditional topics.

An intergenerational program can also fill a personal gap left by the demise of the extended family. Years ago, grandparents enjoyed long hours with their grandchildren, and Sunday get-togethers usually included relatives from at least three generations. Intergenerational programs can restore the opportunity to learn from the experiences and talents of elders and retirees.

The educational system in many communities loses valuable resources because it lacks a mechanism for involving older adults in education. A little planning and a few phone calls are all it takes to get the process going, however. This article outlines the steps that any teacher can follow to establish an intergenerational program.

### Steps to success

An intergenerational program can mean a few volunteers in a single classroom or a school-wide network. In the single classroom, the teacher finds older adults to volunteer for specific tasks. In the larger programs, a volunteer coordi-



Photo by ACTION: Foster Grandparent Program

**Intergenerational programs allow older people to share a lifetime of skills and knowledge with students.**

nator matches the needs of teachers to the abilities and interests of volunteers. Regardless of the size of the program, there are seven steps to follow in developing a successful intergenerational program: needs assessment, job description, recruitment, screening, orientation and training, recognition, and evaluation.

**1. Needs Assessment.** The first step in program development is to define clearly what you would like to accomplish. This could be as simple as a discussion of what volunteers could do, or as comprehensive as an elaborate survey of the needs of your classroom, school, and district. Do the students require tutoring, or perhaps older mentors who can provide career guidance and inspiration? Or are you looking for guest lecturers with experience in a particular skill or trade? The needs will shape the goals of the project.

Once you have chosen the activity for a volunteer program, look at the broad impact of your efforts. What are the benefits for the students, teachers, older persons, and the school? Who will be involved? What will the project accomplish? Writing simple goals helps develop

a clearer picture of what the program will do and what steps are necessary to make it happen.

Identify the key administrators and other decision makers whose influence and support can make the program successful. Involve them as much as possible by keeping them well-informed and building institutional support for your efforts. Remember, involvement fosters commitment!

**2. Job Description.** You have expectations for your activity—you know what should happen as a result. Use that information to make a detailed list of the specific tasks volunteers will perform. From this list, write a job description that tells volunteers the purpose of the program, what skills are necessary, how much time they must commit, and what is expected of them.

**3. Recruitment.** Preparing a needs assessment, goals, and a job description is a familiar activity for most educators. But when the time comes to find volunteers, some may have difficulty. It is important to remember that recruitment often

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means just asking. The best technique is personal contact, either a phone call or a casual query in conversation. Mention your needs at church, to another colleague, or to a retiree's club. Once you have found one or two volunteers, word of mouth will often do your recruiting for you.

It pays to review where you come in contact with older people. If you are recruiting for a larger program or need specialized talents, contact adult education programs at community colleges, retiree organizations, grandparent day gatherings, social clubs, and library groups. You can also use the media—newspapers, newsletters, radio, and television all make room for free public service announcements. Remember: just ask.

**4. Screening.** When potential volunteers contact you, extend a warm welcome and commend them for their interest in education. Then ask about their special training, education, skills, hobbies, interests, other volunteer experiences, membership in organizations, and whether they prefer to work with students of a specific age. You should also inquire about their health, physical limitations, and attitudes toward students.

A screening interview will give you an opportunity to evaluate the volunteer's background and suitability for the volunteer position. It also gives the new volunteers information about the position so they can decide if the opportunity is right for them. The session will help them identify their strengths and weaknesses and what they can do.

Unfortunately, not every volunteer is right for every position. It is important to identify the interests and talents of each volunteer and match them to the available position. If a volunteer's talents would better benefit another teacher, make that referral.

**5. Orientation and Training.** Three different groups must be briefed about the volunteer program: the administration and your colleagues, the students, and the volunteers. Presumably you have kept staff and key decision makers up to date on your program and have shared information with them about the role volunteers will play in your classroom.

Before a volunteer comes to the classroom for the first time, the teacher should discuss the program with the students. This orientation is an opportunity for students to learn about aging and build friendships with older adults.

Orientation and training for the volunteer begins with a description of the pro-

gram and an overview of their tasks. Use the job description as a basis for the discussion so they can ask questions as you review the components of the position. It helps to go through the requirements for the position one step at a time. Remember that some older volunteers may need time to learn how things are done in a new and unfamiliar environment. It is also helpful to supplement the orientation with written materials.

Give the volunteers a tour of the classroom and surrounding areas, and introduce them to other teachers and the principal. Then have the students prepare a simple welcoming event that will give them and the volunteers an opportunity to get acquainted. (An afternoon tea is fine, but pizza is a shared passion of

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young and old.) The volunteers will be interested in the class, so allow time to answer their questions about the students they meet.

**6. Recognition.** The volunteer experience carries many rewards—social contact, for instance, and feelings of involvement and importance. In many cases, these feelings alone will be enough to keep volunteers motivated. Nevertheless, periodic recognition of their efforts is a critical step in maintaining a volunteer program. Rewards sustain momentum and stimulate consistent productivity.

**7. Evaluation.** Evaluation gives teachers, students, parents, and volunteers an opportunity to express their feelings about the program. In this last stage of the process, you will acknowledge what is going well, what is not going well, and what should be done differently.

Volunteers may have a wealth of ideas that could make the program more effec-

tive, so seek out their opinions periodically. Educators must also evaluate each volunteer. Emphasize the positive points, but be sure to address problems, if they exist. Occasionally, a volunteer doesn't work out. In that case, it is best to try to direct the volunteer to another opportunity.

Have students document activities as they happen and keep a journal of their interactions with the older volunteers. As part of the evaluation, ask the students to write an essay expressing their feelings about the program. Their journals will help them to recall poignant moments.

### Friendly persuasion

Developing a volunteer program is primarily a promotional effort. Each step involves persuading others that bringing generations together is beneficial for all concerned. First, you will be persuading yourself that the program will enhance education and meet your special needs. Second, you must persuade your superiors that the program will be effective. Last, you will persuade older adults that by volunteering they can make an important contribution to your classroom.

This article is a starting point. As you work through it and develop your own program, you will undoubtedly encounter other challenges, and your solutions to those problems will make the program uniquely yours. The process you follow will provide a solid foundation for a small classroom program or the beginning of a school-wide or district-wide project.

Throughout the process, it is important to remember that an intergenerational program is a winning proposition for everyone involved. Yes, retirees bring life experiences to the classroom and provide support for the students. But students discover that they too have something valuable to give their older mentors—a chance to be accepted and involved, a feeling that they have not been written off as useless just because they are retired. It is not uncommon to hear older volunteers look back on their experiences in intergenerational programs and say, "I received far more from the students than I gave them."



### About the Author

Jane Angelis is director of the Illinois Intergenerational Initiative, a project of the office of the associate vice president for academic affairs and research at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.