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Intergenerational Service Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Two Golden Ages

By K. Dale Layfield

Many programs in agricultural education and FFA focus on students/FFA members working with those in the early years of life. These are worthy efforts and the payoff will hopefully result in increased agricultural awareness among young people. However, caution should be taken to not overlook the rich resource available through interactions with senior citizens. According to the Census Bureau "middle series" projections, the elderly population will more than double between now and the year 2050, to 80 million. By that year, as many as 1 in 5 Americans could be elderly. Most of this growth should occur between 2010 and 2030, when the "baby boom" generation enters the elderly years (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996).

Traditional America remembers the times when the elderly and youth were naturally connected, as families were more geographically centered. Children, parents, and grandparents often lived in the same home/farm place or at least the same city. This close mix of varied generations allowed children to gain economic, educational and cultural independence through an exchange of family, religious and cultural traditions. As the third millennium begins, many families in America have seen times change as the youth and the elderly are being separated by demands of today's fast-paced world and the segregation of age groups. Youth are involved in time-consuming activities during after-school hours and summer months. Many senior adults live and socialize in communities of the same age group (Brandes & Green, 1999). This phenomenon has resulted in a

wide gap between the younger and older generations. Moreover, the wealth of knowledge and experience offered by seniors and the curiosity and creative minds of youth miss the opportunity to share their bountiful resources (Chen, 1997).

Intergenerational Service Learning is one tool that offers interaction between two distinct groups with very similar needs. Intergenerational programs can improve the attitudes of elders and youth toward one another as a result of heightened interaction (Chapman & Neal, 1990). Organized programs in agricultural education and the FFA can provide the opportunity for these groups to make contributions and feel appreciated.

The concept of intergenerational service learning is defined as "the combination of two distinct educational concepts that involve planned ongoing interactions between younger and older adults that are mutually worthwhile to both" (Newman & Smith, 1997). The benefits that FFA members could offer to Senior Citizens are numerous. At the same time, some of the attributes offered by older learners might include:

- Bringing a lifetime of background, skills, and experience to a learning situation;
- Motivation to learn by their need for self-esteem and self confidence, and
- The need for new knowledge.

Getting Started

The initial step is to present students with the idea of conducting a service learning project with senior citizens. The Generations United "Guide to Resources" Web site

(<http://www.gu.org/guidetores.htm>) offers a variety of reasonably priced videos that provide an overview of intergenerational service learning. After brainstorming possible activities, establish a service learning committee in an agricultural education course or assign the FFA Community Development committee to establish a connection and objectives with an organized group of senior citizens.

According to the size of the community, some of the potential locations to find organized groups of senior citizens might include: retired teachers associations; aging network volunteers; retired senior volunteer programs; senior companion program; churches and synagogues; local AARP and Green Thumb chapters; Foster Grandparent Programs; hospital-based senior organizations; nursing homes, and assisted living facilities (Blieszner & Artaie, 2001; Brandes & Green, 1999).

Once an organized group is selected, a well-written needs assessment can determine specific areas of need. Students gain leadership skills and develop a sense of community when organizing and conducting needs assessments (Israel & Hoover, 1996). Local Cooperative Extension agents could become partners in the program by teaching students the steps involved in a needs assessment.

Examples

Twin Valley FFA members in Elverson, Pennsylvania, have been active in an intergenerational service learning program for over 20 years. Twice a month throughout the school year, chapter members visit residents of the Tel Hai Retirement Community with an array of small animals, such as a miniature horse, pet turkey, guinea pigs, gerbils, turtles, rabbits,

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cats, and dogs. During visits to Tel Hai, FFA members provide residents with information about the animals that include its native habitat, diet, and general care. The program has had many success stories over the years. In one instance, a woman that would not converse with others would speak to the animals when they would visit. Realizing the value to the mental health of the patients, Tel Hai caretakers maintain records of the responses of residents.

FFA members gain a wealth of knowledge from the interactions with the residents. Many share experiences related to their career, while others speak of their time spent in agriculture and the FFA.

Another example that could be replicated at the secondary level was initiated in an introductory computer course with students in the College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Life Science at Clemson University. Students worked with residents at a local retirement community, Clemson Downs. In the beginning, students visited each of the residents (volunteering participants) in teams to interview them and determine specific computer needs. The residents were engaged in learning such computer aspects as general use of Windows, word processing, desktop publishing, Web research, and scanning. Many residents have taken up genealogy research and use the Internet to investigate potential resources.

The twelve residents then worked with the students in paired "hands-on" learning sessions in a campus computer lab. One student commented:

"I learned a lot from this group and by going over my computer skills with my group, I believe that I reinforced these computer skills for myself. . . I love the time I spent with each member of my group, and they made my semester at Clemson a lot more satisfying."

At the end of the semester, the

residents of Clemson Downs sponsored an informal "celebration" pizza party to express their gratitude. Residents of Clemson Downs have requested to be included in future activities with computer courses.

Benefits

The benefits are numerous for both golden ages of life. Youth have a lot to gain by developing a greater understanding of a growing segment of the nation's population, while reinforcing many skills and concepts learned in agricultural classroom and lab settings. Likewise, senior citizens will bring meaning to their ripened wisdom by sharing life experiences and career skills with tomorrow's leaders. Agriculture teachers should encourage such interactions that are beneficial to the learning environment.

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Available Resources

Generations United - A resource packet that offers an overview of intergenerational concepts, program models, and reference materials.

To receive a free resource guide, contact Generations United or the Points of Light Foundation at (202) 729-8000.

Available for download (<http://www.gu.org/toolkit.htm>), Generations United has a 40-page tool kit designed for those seeking possible grant opportunities.

Generations Together - This organization provides many resources related to intergenerational programming on its Web site (<http://www.pitt.edu/~gt/>).