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Opportunities for a Senior Center and University to Serve as Third Places and Advance Age-Friendliness in Their Community

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Opportunities for a Senior Center and University to Serve as Third Places and Advance Age-Friendliness in Their Community

Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to understand the potential use of a community senior center and university campus as third places, where people can gather informally for psychological support through a shared sense of grounding, ease, comfort, friendliness, and mutual concern (Oldenburg, 1999). Third places can help individuals age in place by contributing to the age-friendliness of communities (Banning, Clemons, McKelfresh, & Gibbs, 2010). Through a case study design, researchers used mixed methods to collect data from senior center members, senior center directors, and university administrators. Data were analyzed utilizing focused coding of open-ended responses and descriptive statistics from the quantitative data. Findings revealed implications related to lack of awareness, communication, and perceived barriers, contributing to overall goals of supporting older adults aging in place through creating opportunities for them to feel engaged and empowered in their communities.

Keywords

Third places, Age-Friendly, Senior Center, University, Community

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Keywords: third places, age-friendly, senior center, university, community

Third places have been explored as places outside home and work environments where individuals gather informally with ease, comfort, friendliness, and mutual concern. In a small college town in Oregon, both the local senior center and the public university could serve as third places for community members. The senior center has a thriving community of over 300 members who participate in a broad range of activities including games, trips, potlucks, films, and crafts. Located just next to the senior center, the university provides free tuition for adults 65 years of age or older auditing courses (per ORS 351.658; OregonLaws.org, 2014), as well as inviting spaces open to the community such as the library, gift shop, coffee shops, and food court. The researchers in this study investigated how both the senior center and university might be serving local older adults as third places and how they could help to advance age-friendliness of their community.

THIRD PLACES AND AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

A third place is defined as a setting outside of the home (first place) and work (second place) that serves as an informal place for comfort, to find retreat, and community (Banning, Clemons, McKelfresh, & Gibbs, 2010). These

places have “homey” characteristics and provide psychological support through senses of rootedness, ease, comfort, friendliness, and mutual concern. Typical examples of third places include coffee shops, restaurants, bars, and barbershops (Oldenburg, 1999). A third place allows older adults to age in place, but it also provides sociability, belonging, and an escape from daily stressors (Hutchinson & Gallant, 2016).

As older individuals become a larger share of the overall population, community systems that support their health and independence will be increasingly important to meet their preferences to age in place. Around the world, many cities and communities are focused on becoming more “livable” or “age-friendly,” qualities that enable people of all ages to engage in community activities and afford them opportunities to be healthy, active, and respected. An age-friendly community strengthens feelings of belonging and commonality among all age groups (Tuan, 2002). Livable communities comprise an ample number of public spaces that enhance sociability – the types of places often identified as third places. A third place can ultimately contribute to the creation of an age-friendly community by encouraging communication, engagement, and belonging (Banning et al., 2010).

THE ROLES OF SENIOR CENTERS IN AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Senior centers serve as places within the community dedicated to providing positive social settings to older adults. For many, this is the location where social stimulation and affection is given outside of the home, contributing to the overall well-being and promotion of social ties amongst older adults (Pardasani & Thompson, 2010). Senior centers can therefore be instrumental to creating age-friendly communities as they support both physical and social well-being (Nieboer & Cramm, 2017). Physical well-being is ensured when stimulation and comfort are supported within the environment, whereas social well-being is guaranteed with appropriate levels of affection, status and self-perception.

Older adults 75 to 84 years of age primarily represent the senior center population, and many senior centers are actively seeking ways to attract the growing number of older adults in younger cohorts (Eaton & Salari, 2005). In order to maintain active membership, senior centers across the United States are evaluating the interests of the older adults they serve and many are promoting lifelong learning in order to maintain attendance and continue to serve their communities (Eaton & Salari, 2005; Pardasani & Thompson, 2012).

THE ROLES OF UNIVERSITIES IN AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Higher education plays an important role in contributing to overall quality of life within communities. College towns have historically been considered high-quality places to live, even for those with no direct connections to the institution of higher education; for the community, campus serves as an environment for learning and as a public space (Gumprecht, 2003). As pointed out by Narushima, Liu, and Diestelkamp (2018), participation in lifelong learning is associated with many positive outcomes related to health, relationships, behaviors, and civic participation. Older adults, in particular, have been found to experience increased psychological, social, cognitive, and physical well-being when participating in lifelong learning.

Institutions of higher education are increasingly examining ways to become age-friendly, with over 51 colleges and universities around the world becoming part of what's known as the Age-Friendly University (AFU) Global Network. They are doing this because they are

considering their nontraditional students, older faculty and staff, alumni, donors and community residents (Eisenberg, 2019). As with age-friendly communities, the goals of the partners in this network are aspirational; they are aligned with AFU principles, which include: encourage the participation of older adults in all the core activities of the university, including educational and research programs (Principle 1); and promote personal and career development in the second half of life and to support those who wish to pursue second careers (Principle 2; AGHE, 2019). As the university included in this study recently endorsed the AFU principles, researchers wanted to explore ways to advance the work associated with these principles. This study intended to examine the barriers and facilitators to using the university and senior center as community resources and potential opportunities that exist to increase their use and help to make the larger community more age-friendly.

METHODS

This case study was conducted by an undergraduate research team led by a faculty member with expertise in gerontology, community development, and case study research. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the study occurred in two phases, using a mixed methods approach. In the first phase, researchers conducted survey research to help understand how senior center members used their senior center and, in comparison, how they used the nearby university campus. Items in the survey were designed to assess the frequency, purpose, barriers, and facilitators to use of both places, as well as basic demographic information of participants. The survey was reviewed by two faculty members with expertise in survey design to establish face validity. Researchers distributed surveys over a 3-month period at the senior center, at well-attended events and during regular drop-in visits. Surveys included a pre-stamped envelope and contact information for the participants to follow up for in-depth follow-up interviews.

In the second phase of the study, researchers conducted interviews to gain a deeper understanding of some of the facilitators and opportunities for the senior center and university to serve as third places to older adults in the community. Researchers contacted all survey respondents who indicated interest in participating in interviews and scheduled interviews. All interviews included semi-structured protocols that were reviewed by two faculty members with qualitative methods

expertise. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed professionally.

Sample characteristics shown in Table 1 include study participants who were members of the local senior center.

	Interview (N=9)	Survey (N=46)
Age	M = 73.4	M = 75.2
Race/Ethnicity	100% Caucasian	97.8% Caucasian
Household Size	M = 2	M = 1.6
Education	88.8% at least some college	89.1% at least some college
Mobility Devices	0 % usage	21.7% usage

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

DATA ANALYSIS

For survey data, SPSS and Excel were used to generate descriptive statistics and MAXQDA was used to analyze open-ended responses. Interview data were analyzed both by hand and with MAXQDA. Researchers engaged in collaborative coding, which allowed the research team to build codes together and then create a shared interpretation and understanding of what was happening in the data (Saldana, 2016; Weston et al., 2001). One member of the research team served as the codebook editor, creating, updating, revising, and maintaining the master list for the group. Each team member coded on their own, then members came together as a group to discuss findings and interpretive convivence. Intensive group discussion and group consensus were used to reach agreements, with rare and easily resolved disagreements. As the team coded, patterns/categories emerged; the team met weekly to discuss the meaning of these categories and the relationships among them. They created a preliminary coding scheme based on these categories, which was revised and expanded by the codebook editor as codes were applied to further

interviews. Major categories were compared with each other and consolidated into themes.

RESULTS

From the first phase of data analysis, which included the survey data, researchers gained a sense of how senior center members used their senior center and, in comparison, how they used the nearby university campus. For example, in terms of frequency of attendance: 59% (n = 27) of participants reported attending the senior center more than once a week; 30% (n = 14) reported attending the senior center a few times a month; and 9% (n = 4) reported attending it only a few times a year. In comparison, 9% (n = 4) of participants reported attending the university more than once a week; 17% (n = 8) reported attending the senior center a few times a month; and 26% (n = 4) reported attending it only a few times a year. When asked to rate their experiences at both the university and senior center, 98% (n = 45) of participants rated their experience at the senior center excellent or good whereas 80% (n = 37) of participants rated their experience at the university excellent or good.

After completing the second phase of data analysis, which included the data from the interviews (N = 9), researchers found that four major categorical themes emerged. These themes included: benefits of attending the senior center, which primarily included opportunities for socialization and friendship, exercise, and education/learning; barriers to attending the senior center, which primarily included lack of awareness/promotional activity, lack of diversity, and desire for more activities/offerings; benefits of the university in the community, which included the aesthetics of the university campus, events, and opportunities for intergenerational interaction; and barriers to accessing the university in the community, which included lack of parking, unawareness of activities/offerings, and feeling unwelcome.

BENEFITS TO ATTENDING THE SENIOR CENTER

A recurring theme in the data related to socialization and friendship as a primary benefit of attending the senior center. To illustrate, 96% (n = 44) of survey respondents and 100% (n = 9) of interviewees discussed the use of the senior center as a way to remain socially connected, make new friends, and/or feel welcomed or supported. One survey respondent commented: "It is a friendly and welcoming place to come; I feel respected," while another said "Activities with other seniors providing

contact to form new acquaintances with interesting backgrounds.” From the interviews, one participant stated: “...some people are coming here and getting active trying to stave off or get through depression; you know, get back out in the world so they don’t isolate; they’re doing that on purpose (Interviewee #2).” This was reinforced by a comment by Interviewee #3: “...when I stopped working it was pretty depressing...I decided to start coming to the senior center and doing some volunteer work.” Exercise was also considered a primary benefit for 28% (n = 13) of survey respondents and 56% (n = 5) of interviewees. For example, a survey respondent commented, “The stretch exercise helps my body so I can move without as much pain; it gives me a sense of worth.” Education/learning was considered another primary benefit by 24% (n = 11) of survey respondents and 67% (n = 6) of interviewees, with one survey respondent commenting, “Because we are a university town, many of us are retired teachers.” From the interviews, one participant said, “I know I’m not the only one that is intellectually hungry (Interviewee #1)”; another said she likes that “the kinds of things I do to keep my brain active [laughs] ... and I usually go with friends to these things, so it’s a socialization thing as well (Interviewee #7).”

BARRIERS TO ATTENDING THE SENIOR CENTER

Among survey respondents, only 24% (n = 11) reported any barriers to, or limitations of, the senior center. Over 63% of these reflected a desire for more activities/offerings. Suggestions included computer training courses, lectures from university professors, a lending library, and activities targeted for more diverse older adults. Among interviewees, 89% (n = 8) identified barriers to attending the senior center, largely the lack of diversity among participants (n = 7) and issues around marketing and misunderstanding/unawareness of what is going on at the senior center. As one interviewee stated, “I think it’s really important to be able to... show an active group of people...doing active things, activities, that are not just playing cards (Interviewee #3).”

BENEFITS OF THE UNIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY

Primary benefits expressed by survey respondents with regard to the benefits of the university as part of their community included social connections with students (n = 8, 17%), campus beauty (n = 5, 11%), and events on campus, such as sports games (n = 5, 11%). Among interviewees, all respondents (n = 9) identified some

benefits of co-location of the university and the senior center, primarily because this provides intergenerational interaction, as illustrated by the following quote: “There’s a lot of grandmas and grandpas that want to nurture these kids (Interviewees #8-9).” The university also provides access to more activities and events, a vibrant/active feel in the community. As one interviewee stated, “...without the university we’d really be out of balance as a community.” Other interviewees commented on the benefits of living in a college town: “I love living in a small town that has a college” (Interviewee #7); “We like college towns ... I had always taught part-time and wanted to continue to teach part-time... so yeah ... we often will walk down to the campus (Interviewee #4).”

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING THE UNIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY

Among survey respondents, 39% (n = 18) said there are barriers to accessing the university in the community. The most frequently-mentioned barriers included parking issues (15%, n = 7), being unaware of activities/offerings (11%, n = 5), and feeling unwelcome or that campus is not accessible (11%, n = 5). Among the interviewees, 22% (n = 2) also explicitly mentioned parking as a barrier whereas eight interviewees (89%) discussed challenges associated with being unaware of activities/offerings or lack of advertising of events to the community, as demonstrated by Interviewee #4: “If there is anything that’s being offered...it’s not getting here.” Another stated: “I understand that we’re not allowed to be inside of [the recreation center] ... it’s reserved for students... but I’d like to go in (Interviewee #6).” This person also alluded to the fact that faculty don’t seem involved with the senior center: “We have a rich resource in faculty on this campus and I’m not sure they ever participate in the senior center (Interviewee #6).” All of these interviewees (n = 9) mentioned roadblocks to the tuition-free auditing option at the university for older adults, as illustrated by the following quote: “Someone said to me recently – and I did not know this – that seniors can take classes there for free (Interviewee #5).” An item was included in the survey instrument specifically about auditing and if respondents were aware that they could audit classes for free as older adults; the results were that 85% (n = 39) did not know they could audit classes, 15% (n = 7) were aware that they could audit classes, and only 5% (n = 2) had actually audited classes at the university.

DISCUSSION

This study has notable implications for the field as well as potential limitations. Limitations related to the sample include the fact that the sample was fairly small and not a truly random sample due to the methods used to select participants. Additionally, researchers may have had biases toward the data and results that may have affected the study's legitimacy. Also, due to the lack of prior research studies on the topic, there was limited foundation for investigating this particular topic.

This study demonstrated that facilitators and barriers exist for using both the senior center and the university. Notably, there seem to be greater barriers for the research participants to accessing the university, even though the two community resources are co-located. Senior center members seem to use the senior center as a third place, as it allows for informal gathering and seems to be a place for comfort, to find retreat, and community (Banning et al., 2010). Once a stronger relationship is built with the older adult community, the university would potentially be used as a third place as well. Sense of belonging, however, needs to be cultivated further; interestingly, as pointed out by some interviewees, the university does contribute to the identity of the town itself and the participants seem to value its presence overall.

Overcoming barriers will be key to moving forward from this research. Some ideas included simplifying the auditing process and raising awareness of the opportunity to audit; scheduling faculty lectures and workshops at senior center; encouraging students to volunteer at the senior center; and inviting seniors to participate in physical activity (e.g., swimming, walking) on campus. Increased education and leisure activities, for example, could help foster the desire of the senior center members to get more involved in such activities at the university (Chesser & Porter, 2019).

Another concern identified by older adults regarding visiting the university is the perceived sentiment of not being welcome on campus. This concern might prompt older adults to avoid intergenerational interactions with university students for fear of rejection (Stanley, Morrison, Webster, Turner, & Richards, 2019). This could be remediated by conducting training on how to make contact and communicate with older adults prior to any planned interaction between the two cohorts (Vrkljan et

al., 2019). Perhaps by overcoming some of these barriers, older adults in the community can view this location as a place to foster intergenerational relationships and, for retired faculty or alumni, a place to relive the meaning they made years ago on the campus.

The data from this study indicated that there is intentionality and desire for a stronger partnership between the university and the senior center. As a participating member of the AFU global network initiative, the university is working towards improving this partnership through research and identification of areas to improve, expand and implement features of the AFU principles. This research, which entailed involving students in projects to be conducted as part of undergraduate classroom activities – similar to what has been done by other AFU partners like the University of Manitoba (Chesser & Porter, 2019) – is helping to lay the groundwork. This could provide both stakeholders in this study the chance to experience personal growth, add to the age-friendliness of the town overall, and facilitate aging in place.

LIMITATIONS

This study has potential limitations. Limitations related to the sample include the fact that the sample was fairly small and not a truly random sample due to the methods used to select participants. Additionally, researchers may have had biases toward the data and results that may have affected the study's legitimacy. Also, due to the lack of prior research studies on the topic, there was limited foundation for investigating this particular topic.

CONCLUSION

The feedback and insights gathered from participants in this case study indicated that there is room to improve for the university and senior center to serve as third places, and opportunities exist for them to collaborate and contribute to making their community friendly for aging residents. The barriers established all can be overcome; with the university's senior center partnership and AFU endorsement, the campus can work to be more inclusive to all community members, not just the students who pay to attend classes. By partnering, the senior center and university can both enhance the lives of older and younger adults in the community.

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