

# Connecting Generations: Influencing Expectations and Attitudes Toward Aging

Jacie L. Green, MA; Amy K. Chesser, PhD; Nicole L. Rogers, PhD

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH SCIENCES  
COLLEGE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS  
WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Ageism is a process of systemic stereotyping of and discrimination against people based on age [1]. Given the phenomenon that is population aging [5], ageism has become a growing societal concern that greatly affects the social, emotional, physical, and mental health of older adults [3]. Combatting ageism is of great importance. One way to combat ageism is to influence expectations and improve attitudes toward aging among young adults [3,6].

## Introduction

This study was informed by recent literature exploring intergenerational contact as a vehicle to promote appreciation and respect between generations. Authors developed a first-year seminar pairing aging curriculum with an intergenerational project to bring college students and older adults together for a purposeful and mutually beneficial activity.

## Objectives

1. Examine the impact of pairing aging lectures with intergenerational contact to reduce ageism.
2. Demonstrate the impact of an intergenerational experience on college student attitudes and expectations toward aging.
3. Evaluate the importance of connecting generations.

## The FYS Experience

Participants (N=32) represent freshmen of diverse majors enrolled in FYPH 102 Connecting Generations: Looking Beyond the Years.

During the first half of the semester students were introduced to aging concepts & theories. Students spent the remainder of the semester immersed in an intergenerational project collecting, synthesizing and summarizing the lives of older adults residing at a senior living community.

Course impact was evaluated by change in student: [1] attitude and expectations of aging/older adults, [2] change in adjective valence of words used to describe older adults and [3] definition of "old".

## Results

Student expectations changed post-FYS in 2 of 3 subscales:

- Physical health expectation increased 13% (t=-2.8, p<.001).
- Cognitive function expectation increased 14% (t=-2.5, p<.01).
- Mental health expectation did not change

Student attitude toward aging (composite score) changed post-FYS (t=-26.20, p<.001). All post-FYS attitude statement responses were more positive. Significant change occurred in 4 of 7 statements:

1. As people grow older, they are better able to cope with life.
2. There are many pleasant things about growing older.
3. People become more accepting of themselves as they grow older.
4. It is very important for older people to pass on the benefits of their experiences.

Compared to the 1st day of class, when asked to describe older adults, students completing the FYS chose more positive adjectives (t=-2.9, p<.001).

Student's open-ended operational definition of "old" increased 10 years post-FYS (t=-2.5, p<.01)

## Outcomes

Learning about and with older adults can influence college students' expectations about aging.

- Compared to pre-FYS, student expectations of physical health and cognitive function increased following exposure to age-based curriculum paired with an intergenerational experience.
- While student expectation of mental health did not significantly change, students reported the highest initial expectation of aging in the mental health domain.

An age-based curriculum "+" intergenerational contact can influence student attitude toward aging.

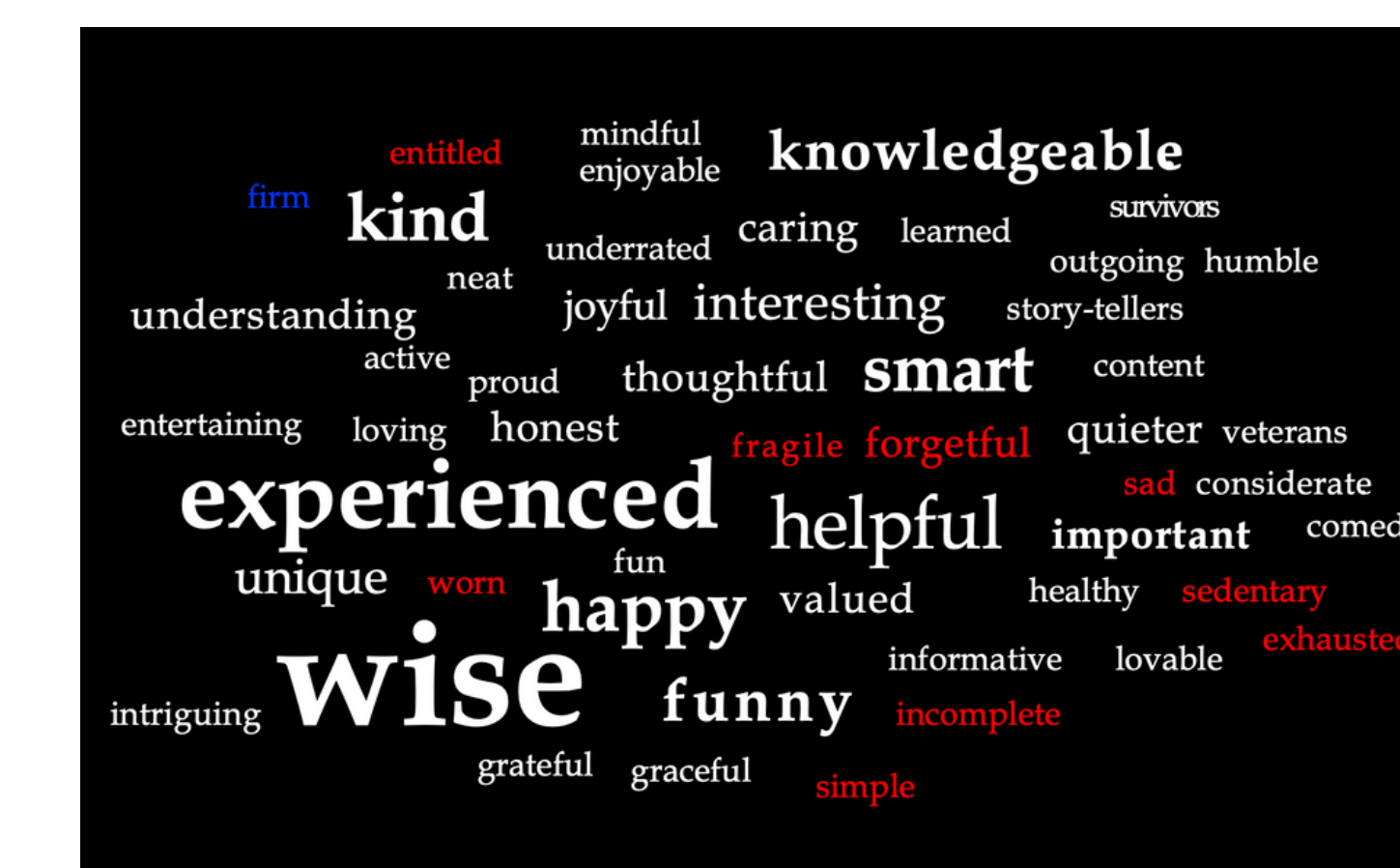
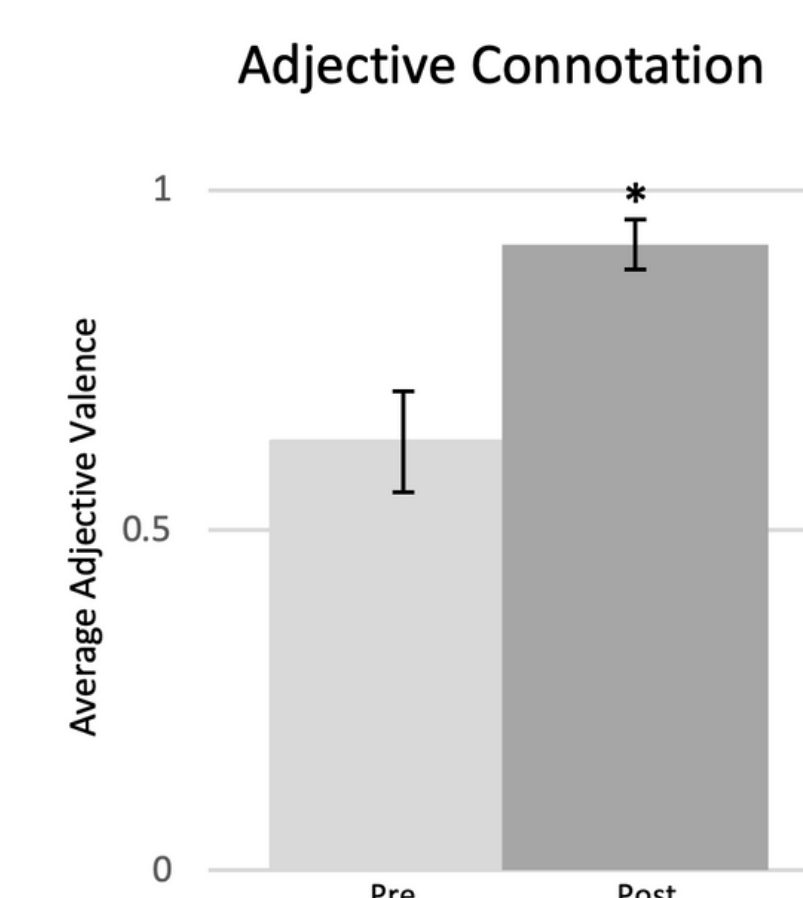
- Compared to pre-FYS, student Attitudes Toward Aging composite scores (post-FYS) were more positive on the following 4 of 7 statements rating older adults':
  - ability to better cope with life
  - acknowledge there are many pleasant things about growing older
  - more accepting of themselves with age
  - the importance of passing on the benefits of their experiences

When surveyed at the end of the semester, the average age of student response to the question "what numerical value do you define as old" increased from 65 yrs (pre-FYS) to 75 yrs (post-FYS).

An intergenerational experience can influence adjectives student's use to describe older adults.

Most common adjectives post-FYS: wise, experienced, happy, helpful, kind, smart & knowledgeable.

The Average Adjective Valence (an inferred criterion of instinctively generated emotions; positive, negative or neutral) was significantly more positive post-FYS.



## Student Snapshots

- "This class has not only helped me learn to communicate better with older adults but it's also given me a new friend and mentor."
- "I am so happy how this project went. I never thought a connecting generations class would have such an impact on my life."
- "It had a big impact hearing how each of us left an imprint on each other's hearts. It made my heart happy to know that for most people, this was more than just a project."
- "I have grown my appreciation for the older generation in our world because they all had their own unique lives that are so interesting to learn about."
- "Overall this process has been a great way to not only get to know a very cool man but I've also seen my approach to communicating with the older generation changing."

## Conclusions



- Pairing aging curriculum with a purposeful, mutually beneficial intergenerational activity resulted in positive change in student attitude toward aging, expectations of older adult's cognitive & physical health, definition of "old" and the adjective valence of words students used to describe older adults.
- Reducing ageism is important, especially in healthcare where young health professionals, many who may hold negative attitudes/expectations about older adults, are entering the workforce.
- Future studies will [1] recruit health profession students to enroll in our FYS and [2] measure older adult attitude/expectations of college students and subsequent impact of intergenerational contact.

## References

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