College Companions: Undergraduate Students and Residents Unifying Experience

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Loneliness is a rising epidemic among older adults (Hudson, 2017). The United States is advancing in treatments, medicine and technology but still loneliness is a problem. A solution to address individuals’ lack of social connections, a fundamental component of human nature, remains out of reach. Does cultivating community connection act as a cure to loneliness? This research illustrates the feasibility and evolution of relationships among undergraduate students and residents of an assisted-living facility. A service-learning intergenerational visiting program to increase social connections between a group of older and younger adults was created to investigate this hypothesis. Qualitative data from digital storytelling, field notes from observations, and open-ended questionnaires indicate that the undergraduate students and residents created strong positive reciprocal relationships over time. Programs with college students could help eliminate the loneliness in assisted-living facilities. This project highlights the need for more intergenerational programs that specifically utilize the undergraduate student population.

Introduction

Globally, the older population (aged 65 years and older) continues to grow at a rapid pace and requires us to reevaluate how we handle health care. While the United States’ life expectancy has hit a record high of 78.7 years, it does not even rank in the top twenty countries with the longest life expectancies (OECD, 2013). It is predicted that by the year 2050, 40% of the population will be older than 65 in Japan, Korea and Spain (OECD, 2013). In the United States, it is predicted that one in five people will be 65 years of age or older by the year 2050 (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). The Administration on Aging, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2013), reports that the United States’ older adult population is projected to double in size over the next four decades. An increase in the older adult population will result in an increase in long-term health care needs.

Assisted Living Facilities

The most common long-term residential care provider is the assisted-living facility, caring for almost twice as many individuals as any other type of residential care. According to the
National Center for Assisted Living (2001), assisted-living facilities are defined as “long-term care services that provide a combination of housing, personal care services, and health care designed to respond to individuals who need assistance with normal daily activities in a way that promotes maximum independence” (p.11). On average each resident in an assisted living facility needs about 2 hours and 32 minutes of daily assistance (Harris-Kojetin et. al, 2016). In order to reach every resident, staff members have to limit their time per individual due to the number of people they are responsible for. The average assisted-living facility licensed nursing staff has a ratio of 1:20 residents in the day and 1:25 residents at night (Tilly et al., 2003), while certified nursing assistants have a 1:9 ratio in the day and 1:20 ratio at night (Tilly et al., 2003). Further complicating the lack of staff members, of the 43 states responding to a survey based on maintaining protocol, 86% indicate that the shortage in direct care workers is a serious workforce issue (Tilly, Black, Ormond & Harvell, 2003). The insufficient number of available staff members to care for residents certainly does not help the ascending trend of the lack of connectedness among residents.

The overall decline in older adults’ physical and psychological functions could be attributed to various factors such as relocating stress, isolation, and grieving (Staveley, 1997). Assisted-living facilities try to eliminate those various factors by promoting residents’ health, well-being, social connectedness, and better cognitive functioning through engaging activities (Stevens-Ratchford & Diaz, 2013). All facilities are required to provide time for activities by an activity staff member. Studies have shown that increasing the amount of mandated hours for activity time positively impacts quality of life in almost all domains of a resident’s life (Shippee, Henning-Smith, Kane, & Lewis., 2015). But it is important to note that this does not mean the more an individual attends these social activities, the more they feel connected. Feeling connected depended on the level of social support residents have during these activity times (Cummings, 2002). Connections are the real predictors of well-being (Cummings, 2002). All things considered, in addition to providing activities for their residents, facilities should also be developing strategies to enhance the creation of relationships (Cummings, 2002). One issue is that residents’ social connections are limited, and they often have a difficult time initiating meaningful interactions and sustaining relationships. Many residents have a strong desire to create social relationships but they would like facilities to provide resources to help develop meaningful social interactions (Park, Zimmerman, Kinslow, Jung & Lee, 2010).

Connection as a Cure

The AARP Foundation recently reported that social isolation is a growing epidemic in America, affecting over eight million older adults (AARP Foundation, 2016). The health risks of prolonged isolation are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lundstad, Smith, Baker, Harris & Stephenson, 2015). Individuals who perceive themselves as lonely exhibit overall poor cognitive performance, faster cognitive decline, and poorer executive functioning (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). Activities of daily living and functional status among older adults are adversely impacted as well (Shankar, McMunn, Demakakos, Hamer & Steptoe, 2017). When older adults are involved in social interactions, physical activity also increases (Holmes, Galik & Resnick, 2017). Social interactions are the strongest predictors of a high quality of life, indicated by high life satisfaction and low depression scores (Mitchell & Kemp, 2000).

One important concern for policy makers, researchers and health professionals is to find ways to create these social connections. Over the past two to three decades, the average size of individuals’ social networks has declined by one-third, and social networks have become less diverse (PEW Research Center, 2009). Lubben (2017) writes, “People often realize that they invested too little, too late in strengthening personal relationships. This happens in part because our society has promoted the myth of rugged individualism, which is counter to reality. Frankly, we all get through life with help from our family and friends who nurture us during critical points in our lives.” The Center for Disease Control and Prevention conducted a national survey of Residential Care (2010), and reported that over a 30-day time period, 8% of the residents never had a visitor, and 26% only had one visitor within a given week. As we age, the connections we had throughout our lives start to diminish, though social connections remain valuable. Social connections are so important that they even correlate with a lower risk of death. Evidence documented in 148 independent prospective studies, which included more than 300,000 participants, revealed that greater social connections are associated with a 50% reduced risk of early death (Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton., 2010).

The Gerontological Society of America’s (2017) Public Policy and Aging highlighted programs, the consequences of, and concerns about the lack of social connectedness in older adults. In terms of policy, we need to develop communities that foster and support building strong social ties as opposed to creating social barriers that might inhibit the development of ties (Lubben, 2017). At the local level, combatting social isolation entails bringing the older adult out into the community or otherwise bringing the community to them (Lenard, 2017).

Another Intergenerational Program in Hawai‘i

Many successful intergenerational programs have been created to help the local elderly community to maintain social interactions. A specific example of a program in Hawai‘i that successfully incorporates social engagement and opportunities for the elderly is the Neighborhood 2000 project, developed
and implemented by Dr. Matt Kaplan (Kaplan, 1997). Neighborhood 2000 was an intergenerational program that brought together university students and older adults to explore attitudes toward aging. The students and elders shared their life experiences, and explored how certain events helped shape their views. This project resulted in members of both age groups learning to question negative age-related stereotypes. Participants also learned that generations are interdependent, and that they have shared concerns about the quality of life in their communities (Kaplan, 1997). In my telephone interview with Dr. Kaplan about Neighborhood 2000, he emphasized the importance of reciprocal relationships in intergenerational programs. Reciprocal relationships allow both groups of people to benefit from the time shared with one another.

**Community Connections**

In Hawaiian, “kākou” is a word used to describe a sense of inclusiveness, belonging, and unity. Kākou was the central guiding value of my intergenerational project. As the team captain on the University of Hawai‘i Track and Field team, I used my leadership skills to pursue my passion for gerontology by creating a volunteer program at a local assisted-living facility. I aimed to observe the effects that such a program would have on both the untrained college students and the older adults who resided in an assisted-living facility. My primary goal was to create a program that benefitted both residents and fellow students through social connections. As noted above, a lack of connectedness can have severely detrimental effects. One way to combat this issue is to use advancements in technology to create new ways of strengthening social connections. Many current and emerging programs designed to counter social isolation focus on enhancing technology usage and accessibility to promote connections in the older population (Czaja, 2017). In contrast, I wanted to go back to the fundamental way of making connections through in-person human contact. I wanted to establish intergenerational relationships through the community, but specifically between college students and assisted-living residents. This study attempts to highlight the potential for utilizing the college population to help eliminate the lack of connections in the older adult population.

**Methods**

**The Setting**

Easy access from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa campus, combined with mentor connections, determined the selection of the setting. The chosen facility includes three houses surrounding a koi pond and courtyard. Certified Nurse Aides provide 24/7 assistance to residents. Licensed nurses work with a team of health care professionals to attend to the medical needs of each individual resident. The facility has 24 residents in total with 8 residents in each house. The residents’ care needs vary from fully ambulatory to intermediate care.

**Procedure**

Prior to the start of the project, I had a meeting with the activity director and facility director of the facility. We decided that students would participate in the residents’ two-hour Sunday afternoon activity sessions, and the activity director would plan an activity for the day prior to our arrival. The activities consisted of talking story, carving pumpkins, decorating Christmas ornaments, making cookies, seasonal crafts, sharing valentines, singing songs, and others. Data were collected during the first eight months of the project, covering twelve different visits. The project is ongoing and will be continued by the next team captain.

**Participants**

Approximately ten residents of the assisted-living facility participated in the Sunday afternoon activity time that was facilitated by the activity director. All the residents that attended the activity time were female, aged 82 to 99. Eighty percent of the population were from Hawai‘i and 20% were from the mainland. The predominant ethnicities were Hawaiian, Japanese, Pacific Islander, Caucasian, and Filipine.

The student population came from the University of Hawai‘i Track and Field team. I sent out an email to the entire team asking them to volunteer their time on Sundays. The student athletes had a choice to attend, with no consequences if they declined to participate. All participating students were female, and their ages ranged from 18 to 22. A total of 14 different volunteers participated at least once, but seven were considered “regulars” because they attended almost every activity session. The majors of the seven “regulars” included business (1), psychology (2), fashion (1), sociology (1), biology (1), and communications (1). Most (85%) students came from the mainland, with only 20% from Hawai‘i.

**Data Collection**

**Digital Storytelling (DST)**

Flottemesch (2013) depicts digital storytelling (DST) as “a multimodal approach that brings the ancient art of telling stories to life using technology.” Digital storytelling allows the researcher to provide readers with a vivid understanding of participants’ experiences. The method involves choosing pictures (in this case, of the volunteer sessions), and then sharing the experience depicted in the picture for the viewer/reader to understand. The different pictures provided help promote deeper connections between the narrator and listener/reader (Roby, 2010). DST is an excellent tool for intergenerational connec-
Over the duration of the project, the activity director took pictures of the visits. The pictures were later distributed to residents and students by text message. A series of pictures were chosen to represent the variety of experiences during the visits.

**Questionnaires**

A series of open-ended self-administered questions were given to staff, students and residents. Each population generated different questions to develop a deeper understanding of the various experiences. Each questionnaire was created to ensure the most unbiased, honest, and reflective answers. Informed consent was obtained for all photos and interviews.

The activity director was one staff member that played a critical role over the duration of the program. This individual’s participation is significant because she saw the residents before, during, and after the students’ visits. The questionnaire was distributed via email after recipients voluntarily agreed to complete it. The activity director’s interview consisted of six open ended questions. Some example questions were: Can you describe what it is like when the track girls come to visit?, and Do you think the residents benefit from their visits and explain why or why not?

Every student that participated in the visit also received an email with a questionnaire. Each student had the opportunity to fill out the questions and a total of five students answered the questionnaire. Some examples of the five-question questionnaire consisted of: Do you benefit from the visits?, and Can you describe what it is like?

Given different health-related problems, only residents that staff could help fill out the questionnaire could participate. Two residents gave verbal answers that the staff members transcribed, while two other residents filled out their questionnaire by themselves and turned them in. A total of four resident interviews were received. Three questions were asked in the questionnaire. One sample question was: What it is like when the girls come to visit?

**Results**

Direct quotes from the student, resident, and activity director questionnaires are integrated into the digital story.

The photo on the right is a very significant photo. This was the first interaction between students and seniors. The activity for the day was a Halloween fashion show. At first arrival students were very hesitant to talk to the residents. After a few minutes the students started helping put costumes on the residents. The energy in the room began to develop as stories, laughter, and everyone’s comfort zone was challenged. A student described this experience: “When I first came to visit the care home I was very unsure. But I soon became instantly connected to many residents. In particular, one resident was a teacher at the University of Hawai’i. I wanted to become a teacher. Just that small connection ignited a fire in both of our hearts. Now when we come to the facility, this resident actually comes out of her room because we are students and she was a teacher. I have learned so much from this experience. The most important thing I learned from the residents was to love a person no matter who or what.”

As described in the quote above, after the first day, residents and students started to develop a trust and bond. This bond was documented in field observation when both groups started asking questions about each others’ lives outside the activity time. Some frequent questions from both populations were, “when will you be back? What are your future plans? How was your test? Can we exchange numbers? Next time will you help me with my laptop? Will you come for lunch? Will you come to our track meets?” These questions helped the transition from the first interaction to becoming friends with one another.

The picture on the left is two students and resident after a holiday crafting activity. The student and resident worked together to make the craft. Over the duration of the program, people would gravitate toward one another and automatically flow into conversation. Students and residents sat in the same seats as the previous visit because they wanted to continue...
learning about each other. This picture shows the diverse backgrounds, personalities, and unique abilities each individual possesses. As you can see, the students and resident are physically very different. But, unity and connectedness was achieved despite these differences. A resident commented on the interaction with the students by saying, “The girls bring a breath of fresh air to the home. They are friendly and loving with all of us. All of us residents like to see the girls. One of my favorite memories is receiving a personal note from a student. I shall treasure the note forever.” The connections were achieved from the energy that everyone shared with one another.

The picture below represents a student and resident engaged in “talking story”. A reciprocal relationship was produced as each individual shared aspects of their lives. The more the students attended the visits, the easier it was for them to engage in conversation. Both populations shared gifts, stories, and their own unique abilities with each other. The unpredicted development was the sharing of telephone numbers, life stories, personal belongings, and creating presents between resident and student. It is important to note that this picture was not taken on the normal visiting day. The students missed practice to ensure the residents received a Valentine gift. The students took their time out of their holiday to see their friends. A student commented on this day, “When I came for Valentine’s Day, it brought joy to my heart that a rose could make a resident tear. The joy that we brought to them will always be a significant memory in my heart, because they brought it right back. It humbled my heart that a simple gesture can bring pure joy to a person. I really love spending Sunday at the care home. They are all so friendly and loving. I feel like we both give each other a sense of purpose. They bring the best qualities out in my heart and I believe we do the same.”

The picture on the right is fourteen hand-crafted bears that the residents made for the students’ Christmas presents. One resident would cut the shape of the bears, another would sew, and some would put the eyes on the bears. Each resident did a different part of the bear to give to their college companions. This took them over two weeks to make because each bear is hand-sewn and stuffed. The activity director talked about this experience by saying, “When the students come to visit, the facility comes alive with youthful sounds, laughter, stories and beautiful smiles. The residents absolutely benefit from the visits. The students provide a change to the routine in the day. Their positive energy is contagious and their enthusiasm as well. Sharing their backgrounds and hearing the residents’ stories benefits both parties. I do think more college students could benefit from visits to assisted living facilities.”

Discussion

The photos and quotes above confirm that residents and students are capable of accomplishing connections. After just the first day, I observed the development of social relationships and trust between participants. The results from these qualitative data showed community connection in three ways: the creation of bonds over time, expressions of the emotion of joy, and reciprocal relationships.

The first theme noted was the creation of bonds over time. Throughout the program, the residents and students developed connections and meaningful relationships. Some students were hesitant to participate in this program at first because of their uncertainty over sitting with a stranger, but with time, students’ confidence grew through talking, learning, and helping each resident with her own particular needs. The first picture taken at the facility showed all the residents together in the front and the students next to each other in the back. Throughout the eight months, the pictures went from group pictures to individual pictures because individuals would request the activity director to take their picture together for future memories. Also, students and residents would sit next to the people they gravitated toward because some individuals “clicked” more than others. These connections had nothing to do with similar lifestyles or experiences. The connections
were random and enigmatic. These pairs that connected would perform all their activities together and became very close by sharing personal stories, advice, and conversation. A student commented on this topic by saying, “A resident has truly impacted my life. I sat with her as she walked me through the journey of her life. I have never had anyone do that. She said something that will stick with me forever: ‘Never be mean to people, because it will come back to you. Always be kind to everyone.’ I think more college students should visit a care home because they would be filled with love, joy and deeper sense of compassion. I have learned that if you are a good listener for an hour or two then you will receive so much more than you would expect. Sometimes all you have to do is listen and give love.” When performing activities the time spent together would fly by, in contrast to the first visit, when two hours of activities seemed long, and minimal conversations happened. As time developed, everyone began to engage in conversation, and the time would eventually run out, requiring the staff to take the residents back to dinner. Additionally, the creation of bonds over time made it hard for the students and residents to say goodbye to one another. At the end of the visits, it was not unusual for a resident to ask a student to come to dinner with them, stop by during the week, or inquire about which day they would be back.

The second theme was “joy.” This emotion was visible in pictures and verbalized in multiple quotes from the questionnaires. A resident said in her interview, “It is difficult for me to remember the names of the students, but I do recognize them. I have joy in my heart when they come.” In the questionnaires collected, the emotion “joy” was referenced in four of the ten (40%). In various pictures, joy is evident in smiles, the proximity of the participants, and the story behind each picture. In considering this emotion, some people might believe that joy and happiness are the same, but there are differences between these emotional states. In a study comparing the two words, joy was associated with connection, awareness and freedom, while happiness was associated with self-control and virtue (Cottrell, 2016). One unknown author writes, “Happiness is based on what is happening around us. Joy is based on what is happening within us.” Creating a powerful emotion like joy with strangers is a beautiful concept to process. Joy really impacts a person’s life. This was noted when a resident quoted, “I enjoy when the students come to visit. The girls are very warm, sincere, and patient! Their spirits brighten up this care home. I feel alive when they are around. I am always happy to hear all the laughter and see all their smiles.”

The third theme was the ability to create reciprocal relationships. Reciprocal relationships were formed when individuals instinctively drew into their own desired motives. Collectively the group shared their time, performed various activities together, and shared life stories. Individually, a variety of different experiences occurred. The activity director added: “The students interact extremely well with the residents and warm up very quickly to their individual needs. It was surprising to me at the rate of which the students quickly jumped into the care home environment and were at ease around the various levels of population here. They have contributed so much just by being themselves and being good listeners. I know many residents have been truly touched by the friendship and joy that these students bring.” Many residents would share personal life stories, try to give personal advice to the student, ask for cell phone numbers, ask for help on their computer, and create gifts for the students. Residents would even try to share their “snack” with the students that staff members provided for them. On the other hand, students learned to communicate with the older adult population, obtained valuable advice, and developed a deeper understanding of compassion. Additionally, students helped the staff members because residents were able to perform crafts with the help of a student. A student described this in her interview by commenting, “Finding the time out of the week to visit the residents has been one of the wisest decisions I have made. After spending time with the residents I feel enlightened and have a deeper sense of compassion within myself. I do benefit from the visits because by giving my patience, time, and empathy to the elders I have learned much more than I ever expected.” Many residents could not do all the projects without help from another individual. The relationships that developed were not one-sided. These interactions cultivated a sense of purpose and belonging for both the young people and residents. Both groups were reminded of the unity individuals share on this earth. The different roles each of us have or are establishing were reminders of the importance of and need for a world full of different, yet still connected, populations.

The results of this study show that social connections were achieved between both groups. These connections were revealed through a combination of digital storytelling and questionnaires. These community connections included the creation of bonds over time, the emotion of joy, and development of reciprocal relationships. The students, residents and staff members gained individual benefits from the interactions and experiences. Community connections could be the cure to the lack of connections in assisted-living facilities.

Conclusions and Future Implications

The President of the AARP Foundation Lisa Marsh Ryerson (2017) said, “Isolation touches more than the isolated; we all lose without the knowledge, perspective, and talents older adults can bring to our communities” (p. 123). Developing more intergenerational programs would provide greater opportunities to address the lack of connectedness in our community. Everyone has the capability to make someone feel loved and valued, but opportunities to do so should be fostered. Universities may be ideal settings to implement these opportunities for
social connections. In this study, the targeted student population was from the same track and field program, but these students each had different majors, backgrounds, and interests. Future studies could include the entire student population to ensure similar findings. Creating a service-learning course on social connections would help ensure that every student had a chance to participate in similar experiences. Students could receive credit for learning how to communicate, adapt to the different needs of individuals, and learn from an individual that has created that path that we walk today. A systematic review of over 58 articles indicates that the best approach to positively impact students’ knowledge of and attitudes toward older adults and future gerontological practitioners was through service-learning (Chonody, 2015).

The residents at assisted-living facilities could be teachers, moms, husbands, daughters, lawyers, police, nurses, doctors, and so forth. When students talk with such individuals, they gain valuable knowledge about life transformations, and receive useful advice. Sharing experiences, advice, and stories can help everyone learn about life. Many college students have limited free time because of work, school, and extra-curricular activities, but earning credit for a service-learning class could ease possible time conflicts. These future service-learning courses should be offered to all undergraduate students in any degree program, and not just to students in nursing or other health professions. Sharing experiences with the elderly population could potentially impact the career choices of some undergraduate students. The experiences gained through this study prompted two students to reconsider their career goals to include working with the elderly population. Furthermore, residents initially seemed reluctant to have students come into their homes. The residents’ social connections grew as they participated in activities with the help of students. The students supplemented the work of staff by providing an extra set of hands for residents that needed assistance. Heavy workloads and limited staff numbers at assisted-living facilities often prevent staff members from providing adequate time, love, and attention that residents may desperately need. As noted above, one of the residents in this study reported that the students “bring fresh air into the facility.” The purpose of this study was to investigate if the average college student and resident could positively impact each other’s lives. After reviewing the data, it is apparent that communal impact did occur. In my life, it is impossible to make everyone feel valued and loved, but I can try my best to create greater opportunities for others to help foster connections.

References


