

The Impact of Mentoring and Intergenerational Programs at GVSU on Older Adults

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Introduction

Research has indicated that intergenerational programs produce favorable outcomes for both older and younger adults (Martins et al., 2018). In 2021, Grand Valley State University developed an intergenerational co-mentoring program, *Grand Connections*. In this program, each student is paired with an older adult to share experiences and learn from one another.

The current study aims to assess the influence of the program on older adults. In order to explore the impact, older adult mentors from the *Grand Connections* program were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format. During the interviews, mentors' experience with one-on-one interactions with college students, their experience as members of *Grand Connections*, and their suggestions for improvements to the program were explored. Themes and patterns from their responses will be presented. This qualitative study will be the first step to examine the effectiveness of the mentoring program and understand the benefits of creating an integrated society.

Background

Intergenerational Mentoring Programs

- Intergenerational programs are structured community initiatives designed to foster a continuous, two-way exchange of life experiences, skills, and resources between older and younger individuals (Cohen-Mansfield & Jensen, 2017, Lai et al., 2025).
- Popular mentoring activities include reading to children, career counseling, and social engagement.

Benefits of Intergenerational Mentoring

For younger adults (DeMichelis et al., 2015; Desouza, 2007; Jones et al., 2004)

- Personal growth
- Improved life skills
- Reduces Ageism

For older adults (Lee, Jarrott, & Juckett, 2020; Ihara et al., 2024)

- Decrease in social isolation
- Better cognitive engagement
- Improved well-being
- A renewed sense of purpose

Older & Younger Adults (Webster et al., 2023): Promotes Intergenerational Understanding

Method

Goal: This study aims to explore the specific experiences of the older adult mentors participating in the *Grand Connections* Program.

Grand Connections: An intergenerational program through GVSU (<https://www.gvsu.edu/grandconnections>). Members are older adults from our community. They serve as mentors for students enrolled in *Perspectives on Aging* class (PSY366). Throughout the school year, they also participate in events organized by SAGE (Students for Aging and Gerontology Enrichment), a student club that works in tandem with *Grand Connections*. The events such as apple picking, pumpkin painting, story circle, and blanket making are designed to give students the opportunity to build intergenerational relationships.



Co-mentoring Project: As a part of the *Perspectives on Aging* course, students must engage in co-mentoring with an older family member or a member of *Grand Connections*. Typically, intergenerational mentoring is a one-way street, where older adults mentor and teach young adults. However, this project involves **co-mentoring**, where older and younger adults learn from each other mutually. They are instructed to meet on three separate occasions and teach each other something or engage in an activity together.

Example Activities: Exchanging music, writing poetry, painting, introducing each other to literature, going on walks, show-and-tell, ceramics, meeting for coffee, learning a family recipe, create decorative artwork, learning modern technology, etc.

Method Cont.

Participants: The sample consisted of 7 older adults who served as mentors as part of their involvement in *Grand Connections* over the course of multiple semesters. They were also regular participants of SAGE events.

Data Collection/Procedure: Data was collected through semi-structured interviews where mentors were asked questions about their background, mentoring experience, their involvement in SAGE events, and any suggestions they may have had. The interviews were conducted in-person (except one over zoom due to weather), lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. They were recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis: The transcriptions were analyzed to identify common themes, patterns, and keywords. Experiences were categorized into 4 areas of benefits, reflecting the responses accordingly.

Results

Mutual Learning: Students taught mentors about navigating today's world, providing information about topics such as mental health, social issues, and modern slang. Older adults also mentioned that the students helped them learn how to use technology throughout the semester. On the other side, older adults were able to share their skills with students, including baking, storytelling, and writing. Others reported that they spent their meetings sharing their wisdom with students as they navigated relationships and careers.

"What I tend to say a little bit because I kind of live that life is that it's not all about your job or your profession or what you do to get paid for. It's more about living your life and your experiences..."

Sense of Purpose: Many older adults interviewed reported that this program allowed them to find a new purpose in life. Almost all of our mentors are retired, which can be very isolating. *Grand Connections* provided an opportunity to not only get out of the house, but to give back. Working with and providing guidance to the next generation made them feel valued.

"But when I talked to the young people, and they're asking about direction and suggestions and advice, um, I realized that that is something that I can give back. That gives me purpose."

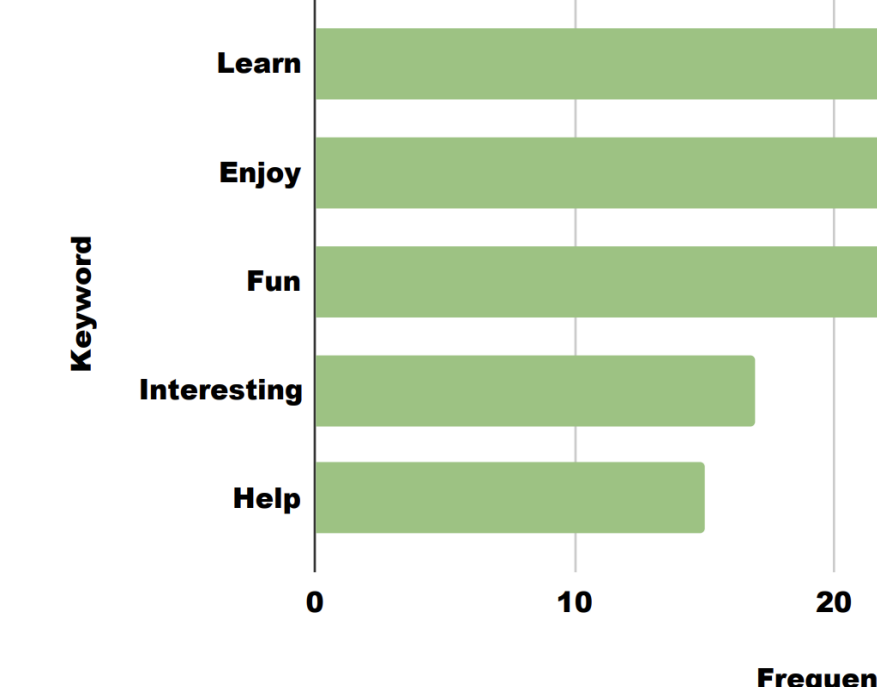
Well-being: Older adults often noted that being around college students brought them joy and improved their mood. The students' optimism gave older adults a new perspective and hope for what future generations' lives will look like.

"Yeah, even just if it's a breakaway from the good craziness of the world, it gives us something to get together and connect and realize maybe it's not all so bad."

"Just the spirit in the fun of being around younger people who are motivated and excited and idealistic and optimistic, um and just that they have such a joy, which brings me joy. I just have a smile on my face when I just listen to people talk."

Empathy and Connection: Mentors discovered that they had a lot in common with students despite the age difference. Both generations are at a stage in their lives where they are forced to redefine themselves and (most likely) live alone/away from their families. Mentors also learned about the unique challenges students face as college students in the modern world. Students and older adults engaged in vulnerable conversations creating a deeper bond and sense of empathy.

"You know, even if you're living on campus and your family is only an hour or two away. Yeah, so you're not seeing them every day? Still. And we're in that situation, too, you know. Our children have moved away..."



Frequency of Keywords used by Mentors in their Interview Responses

Suggestions from the Mentors

As part of the interview process, older adult mentors were asked what their suggestions were for improving the program. Here's what they had to say...

- Recruit more mentors through presentations and online marketing
- Allowing older adults to sit in on classes and/or live on campus to better integrate the two generations
- Invite older adults to campus for a monthly meeting to involve them in the school's mission
- Receive feedback from both the students and older adults throughout the semester to assess the productivity of the meetings
- Provide mentors a space to talk to one another, give advice, and support each other throughout the mentoring process
- Encourage students to bring more curiosity to the meetings, and rely less on structured questions and activities
- Holding an initial meeting to set structural guidelines or lack thereof based on both parties' preferences



Implications & Conclusions

Based on the interviews, the *Grand Connections* co-mentoring program is highly effective in benefitting older adults. Older adults experienced mutual learning, a new purpose, increased well-being, and new levels of empathy.

The co-mentoring aspect allows the student and older adult to see each other as equals, therefore dismantling stereotypes that older adults may have that students are less than or inferior because of their age. It allows them to connect and see their similarities rather than differences.

In future studies, it will be imperative to examine the effectiveness of the co-mentoring program over time, as well as studying the effects of the program on the student participants.

Selected References

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