

Challenges and opportunities of age diverse universities: Perspectives from admissions and career services

Nancy Morrow-Howell , Natalie Galucia , Swinford Emma & Tanner Meyer

To cite this article: Nancy Morrow-Howell , Natalie Galucia , Swinford Emma & Tanner Meyer (2020): Challenges and opportunities of age diverse universities: Perspectives from admissions and career services, Gerontology & Geriatrics Education

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701960.2020.1864345>



Published online: 17 Dec 2020.



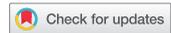
Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Challenges and opportunities of age diverse universities: Perspectives from admissions and career services

Nancy Morrow-Howell, Natalie Galucia, Swinford Emma, and Tanner Meyer

Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

ABSTRACT

Universities are experiencing shifts in age distributions of students, with fewer younger students and an increase in the number of people mid-life and beyond seeking education and job training. Thus, there are strong arguments for universities to embrace opportunities to increase age-diversity on campus. This qualitative study explores the challenges, opportunities, and strategies related to university age-diversity from the perspective of Admissions and Career Services staff from one midwestern university. From focus group data, six subthemes were identified as challenges (fitting in; acclimating; stressors; career concerns; return on investment; and ageism/undervaluing age diversity), three subthemes were identified as assets (intentionality; experienced students; and age diverse educational settings) and eight strategies were recommended to better serve an age-diversity student body (support groups; familial supports; social opportunities; job placement; financial aid; targeted outreach; flexibility in learning; and staff support). This article discusses the benefits and challenges of serving older students from the perspective of staff and administrators and provides action steps for universities to promote age-diversity on campus.

KEYWORDS

Age inclusive; age friendly university; higher education; ageism

Background

There are two age-related trends which suggest that colleges and universities may be well-served by embracing opportunities around age diversity. First, the student body is aging. The demographic that most universities cater to – 18-year-old high school graduates – is shrinking. In 1964, this group comprised 36% of the population. By 2014, it made up 24% of the population, and the trend continues downward (Selingo, 2014). By 2028, approximately 40% of students enrolled in institutions of higher education will be 25 or older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). This decrease in matriculation of traditionally-aged students will cause strain on institutions of higher education that rely on a steady stream of traditional students (Grawe, 2018). Already, many universities around the country are struggling (Camera, 2019).

A second trend is that a growing number of people mid-life and beyond are seeking opportunities to retrain and learn new skills for their jobs (Gerontological Society of America [GSA], 2018). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), people born in the latter years of the baby boom (1957–1964) worked an average of 12 jobs between

the ages of 18–52 years old, and the median employee tenure for workers of all ages was 4.2 years. Because employees are changing jobs with regularity throughout their working lives, it is not realistic to confine education and career-training to early life. Many people need to engage in on-going learning and competency-building to stay relevant in their career or transition to a new field.

Additionally, many older adults are seeking – whether out of desire or necessity – to extend employment beyond the traditional retirement age (Butrica, 2020). In the U.S., 70% of people planning on retiring soon claim to want to work during retirement. Among people who have already retired, nearly half work, have worked, or plan to work (GSA, 2018). These career extensions often require retraining and skill-building in mid and later-life.

There is a strong case to be made for colleges and universities to adopt an age-diverse approach to sustain institutional health and meet market demand. Declining enrollment numbers, increases in lifelong education and career retraining, and the documented advantages of diverse classrooms are pushing universities toward change. However, universities have traditionally focused on youth; and they have remained very age-segregated across their long histories (Morrow-Howell, Lawlor, Macias, Swinford, & Brandt, 2019). Educational programs and policies cater to young people and often fail to embrace older students, given that people over the age of 30 are often in the minority in many university settings (Morrow-Howell, Galucia, & Swinford, 2020). These realities have led to the establishment of a global effort to increase the age-inclusivity of institutions of higher education, the Age-Friendly University Global Network (O’Kelly, 2015). This network aims to increase attention to programs, policies and partnerships that support the involvement of older people in core activities of colleges and universities (Montepare, 2019). The network also seeks to expand understanding of the current realities regarding age-diversity in educational settings and opportunities for moving forward.

Related literature and need for current study

A growing literature in higher education and gerontology acknowledges the importance of post-secondary education across the longer life course and the reality that persons mid-life and beyond need options for degree completion, post-graduate certificates, and self-development (Gerontological Society of America, 2018; Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2007). As noted by Van Noy and Heidkamp (2013), older students often have different life contexts and different learning needs. They often prioritize work and family versus school, seek to use knowledge in more immediate and relevant ways, and base learning on prior experience. Studies of older persons who return to school to seek graduate degrees indicate positive outcomes around career attainment and personal satisfaction from this life course decision (Gonzales, Morrow-Howell, Daftary, Stafford, & Echols, 2013; Halvorsen & Emmanuel, 2020).

The value of including older and younger students together has been widely documented. It is suggested that older learners prefer intergenerational classrooms over age-segregated classrooms (Lakin, Mullane, & Porter, 2008). Learning in an age-diverse environment has been shown to help younger people by challenging ageist stereotypes and developing competencies and skills (Merz, Stark, Morrow-Howell, & Carpenter, 2018; Penick, Fallshore, & Adrian, 2014). Older people benefit from these circumstances by

having the opportunity to learn, interact with younger people, gain new perspectives, and engage with technology (Pstross et al., 2017). Multigenerational classrooms represent a chance for younger and older people to explore generational identity, deepen awareness of personal positionality and consider new opportunities for intergenerational cooperation (Sanchez & Kaplan, 2014). Scholars have discussed the value of including older adults as students in gerontology classes (Steitz, Tan, & Priyanto, 2018), curricula using intergenerational enrichment modules (Montepare & Farah, 2018) and service learning projects involving older adults and younger students (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018).

As the benefits of age-diverse learning settings are being identified, the challenges including older students in colleges and universities are also discussed. The American Council on Education identified the need for expanding educational options for older people (focus on ‘third agers,’ age 55 to 79 years), and they reviewed demographic, attitudinal and structural barriers that limit engagement of older students (Lakin et al., 2008, 2007). Hansen, Talmage, Thaxton, and Knopf (2019) documented barriers that keep older adults away from lifelong learning programs and suggested that these same issues (including time, cost, and transportation) must be confronted to create age-friendly universities more generally. Silverstein, Hendricksen, Bowen, Weaver, and Whitbourne (2019) documented that some university stakeholders use the presence of a lifelong learning program or a gerontology curriculum as evidence of an age-friendly institution. These authors also pointed out the pervasiveness of a ‘passive inclusivity approach’ to age diversity, meaning that there is an absence of overt exclusion and they approach students, faculty and staff in a manner that indicates they are “open” to everyone. (p. 215). There has not been widespread, systematic efforts in higher education to specifically recruit and support older students in degree programs (Halvorsen & Emmanuel, 2020).

This study seeks to add to the growing knowledge base about age-diverse universities and serving older students. The study focuses on admissions and career services professionals at one private research university in the mid-west to elucidate perceived barriers and potentials to becoming a more age-diverse institution and current strategies in serving older students. We aim to understand the perspectives of administrators and staff members who serve older students (defined as 30 years of age or older) in undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The perspectives of these university personnel have not received much attention in the current literature; and we believe that capturing their voices is important, given that they are key forces in academic environments. Their perspectives come from interacting with students, faculty and other administrators as different student cohorts move through the programs. We ask the following research question: *How do admissions and career services staff at Washington University in St. Louis perceive the challenges and opportunities related to increasing age-diversity in the student body and what strategies do they suggest to serve older students?*

Methods

Focus groups and thematic data analysis were used to understand the perspectives of admissions and career services staff on the challenges and opportunities associated with increasing age-diversity at Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL). Approval for this project was granted by the WUSTL Institutional Review Board.

Data collection

Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, USA is a medium sized private research university with undergraduate and graduate programs, including a medical school. Between July 2019 and February 2020, five focus groups with a total of 32 university personnel were conducted by Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging staff. Focus group participants included campus staff and administrators from admissions and career services departments across WUSTL's Danforth and School of Medicine campuses. Participants were identified through a university directory of career services or admissions staff. University administrators also made initial recommendations on potential participants. At the completion of each focus group, participants were asked to recommend additional participants for the study. Participants were recruited through university e-mail; and we requested their participation in a focus group discussion regarding the challenges and opportunities related to increasing age-diversity in the student body. All participation was voluntary. No remuneration was provided for participation.

Eighty percent of the focus group participants were female, 77% self-identified as White, 13% as Black, 7% as Asian and 3% indicated they were Hispanic. Participants were an average of 49.5 years old and had worked at WUSTL for an average of 13.2 years. Slightly more than half (55%) of participants worked in admissions roles while 45% of participants worked in a Career Services capacity.

Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and were held on campus. The composition of the focus groups was not predetermined and each group had 4–7 participants. Two groups consisted entirely of admissions staff and one consisted entirely of career service staff; and the other two groups included both. The same two staff members from the Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging facilitated each focus group and sessions were audio recorded. A structured protocol was used to review verbal consent, provide information on the project, and define the term “older student.” Given that the majority of students at WUSTL are under the age of 25, the term “older student” referred to people in their 30s and beyond. They are “non-traditional” in that they are typically returning to school after pursuing other engagements.

Focus group facilitators used a semi-structured interview guide that included the following questions: 1) What are your experiences with ‘older’ people in current admission and career placement efforts? 2) Do you see advantages or benefits of recruiting and matriculating more older students than we currently do? 3) What challenges would you anticipate if Wash U made efforts to recruit/educate/place older students? What concerns do you have? 4) What strategies might be most effective to serve older people who come to Wash U for a degree or certificate? These questions were deemed general enough to elicit perspectives on age-diversity and reveal current attitudes and practices; yet we hoped for more specificity when discussing strategies to advance age-diversity.

The research team concluded data collection after five focus groups because the same themes were consistently being heard.

Data analysis

All focus groups had a note-taker present and were audiotaped. The note-takers then used their notes as a basis for listening to the tapes and transcribing the discussions. Three

research team members carried out data analysis using an open coding method and thematic analysis, and met over four times to discuss findings (Barbour, 2007; Saldanña, 2016). First, during an initial meeting of the research team, three major organizing principals were identified: challenges faced by older students and university personnel; assets brought by older students or positive aspects of age-diversity; and current or potential strategies to address challenges or advance age-diversity. At this time, a provisional coding matrix was developed and subsequent ideas were organized under these three themes. Then, the data analysis team met to discuss the topics and consolidate these lists into a set of sub-themes. After the sub-themes were identified, an additional team member reviewed them for clarity. The data analysis team met twice more to reconcile inconsistencies and discuss results in more detail. Each data analyst also identified pertinent quotes for the sub-themes. After the themes and sub-themes were identified and reviewed, preliminary findings were sent to focus group participants via e-mail with a request for comment or observation. No suggestions were submitted.

The goal of this qualitative strategy was to be as comprehensive as possible and present the findings in a useful manner (Padgett, 2008). The overall intent of this approach was to adequately understand the implications of serving more older students and to assemble a list of recommendations that would be useful to students, faculty, and administrators at WUSTL. Generalizability of findings beyond our institution is appropriate to similar types of private, research institutions.

Results

Data analysis resulted in the identification of three main themes related to age-diversity on campus (challenges, assets, and strategies) and corresponding sub-themes for each category (Figure 1). This section is organized by these themes and sub-themes. It is important to reiterate that these findings derive from the perspectives of admission and career services staff at Washington University. These staff reported what they understood about the student experience from their interactions with the students and faculty; thus these observations may not consistently reflect what students or faculty actually experienced in all cases.

Theme 1: challenges

We identified six subthemes that admissions and career services staff viewed as the more difficult aspects of being an older student or working with older students in their support roles. In most cases, the challenge was experienced by the student (fitting in, acclimating to learning environment and technology, and stressors), and the staff provided resources or advice when possible. In other cases, the challenge was experienced more directly by the staff in their work with the student or on the student's behalf (career concerns, return on investment, ageism and the undervaluing of age diversity). In their work with the community, referring institutions or employing organizations, staff more directly encountered these types of challenging situations.

Fitting in

Focus group responses indicated that older students commonly struggled with feeling part of campus community. They have difficulty integrating into campus social life because

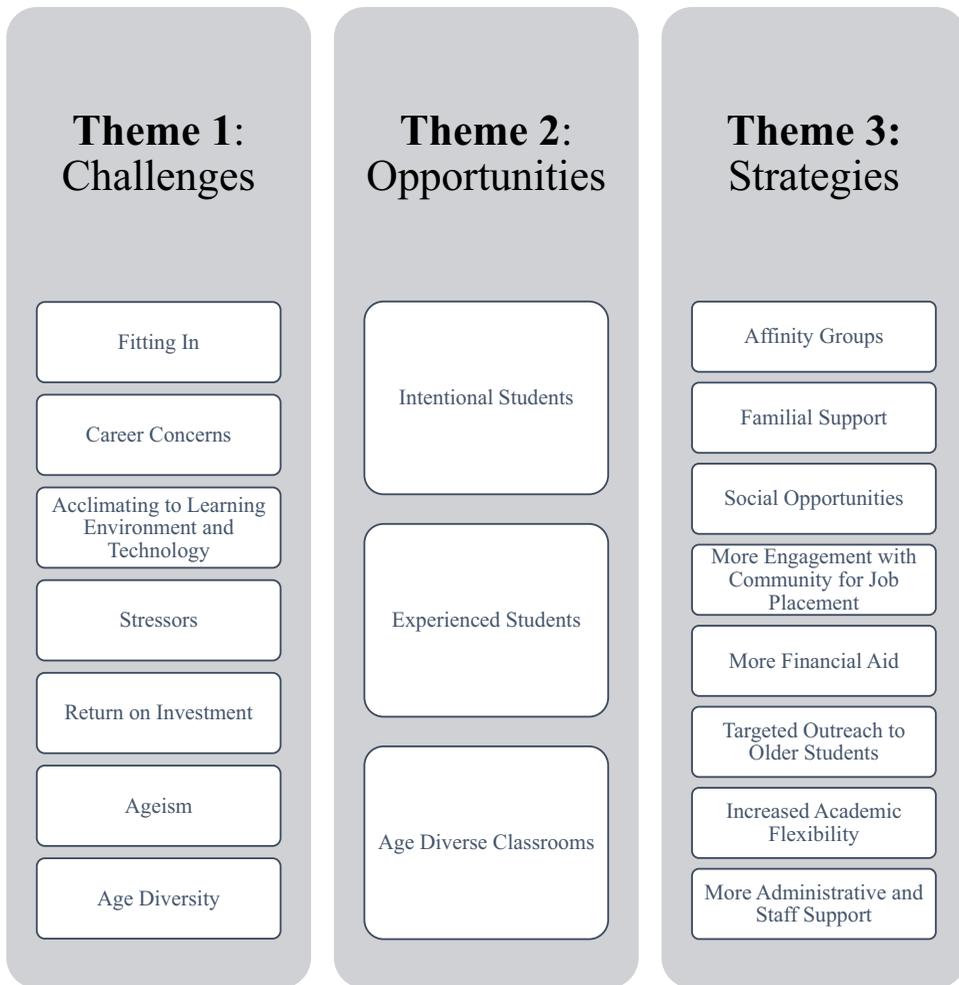


Figure 1. Themes from focus group data.

student activities are typically tailored to younger students. Participants reported that older students are often unsure how to find their place on campus, leaving them feeling “*other*” or “*isolated*.” This was often attributed to the idea that school is not aligned with the life stage of older students who may be married, have a family, are caregivers or work full-time.

The last older student who re-careered really struggled being surrounded by millennials. It takes a certain personality to assimilate.

When we’re talking to students who are a bit older and have a longer period of time out of undergraduate, they’re often concerned about how they will fit in with their peers and classmates, and what kind of issues that might cause in the classroom.

Additionally, focus group participants reported that older students find that younger students expect them to adopt a parent or grandparent role. This forces older students to be a mentor to other students instead of a student themselves. This othering can be challenging socially, but it can also impact academic performance if older students aren’t

able to build connections with other students that can support them in the classroom or in study groups.

It's harder for our older students to feel part of the community . . . without feeling like they are looked at as the parent or the grandparent providing guidance and advice about life in general.

Beyond the struggles to assimilate socially with their peer group, it was reported that some students experience imposter syndrome and worry that they do not belong in a prestigious environment. This mentality can make it difficult for older students to apply to WUSTL and feel comfortable on campus.

They're afraid to come to WUSTL. They're afraid they won't fit in on campus. They're afraid they won't have the technological or intellectual skills to succeed.

Acclimating to learning environment and technology

Older students are more likely to have trouble with the logistics of being a student. Technology issues and the digital divide were frequently mentioned challenges for some older students.

For students who first had experience with university 10-15 years ago, a lot has changed since then and it is a different experience now: technology, application, advisors, registering . . . staff and faculty do a lot of hand-holding for prospective and current students.

Another common challenge discussed by focus group participants is the steep learning curve related to re-adjusting to an academic environment. One participant described this difficulty.

When you're a student you're kind of in that groove of being a student and you become effective at being a student. And then, you go work for a while and it's hard to get back in that mindset for some older students . . . and [remember] what makes you effective as a student.

It was reported that for some older students, learning from younger instructors can be a complicated experience.

I have heard from some older students that it can be strange to be in a classroom with a professor much younger than they are.

There was also commentary on the benefits of having adjunct professors teach older students because they “may have a lot of life experiences, and that could help a non-traditional student – versus a freshly minted post doc or graduate student.” Indeed, some instructors’ classroom policies disproportionately affect older students. One participant gave the example of a ‘no tolerance late policy,’ designed to encourage professionalism from younger students, but that could easily disadvantage an older student running late due to a sick child or work obligation: “hard rules end up impacting the older group.”

Stressors

Admissions and career services staff discussed how stressors for older students are both internal and external. Many students have extremely high expectations for themselves and feel like they must excel:

They put particular pressure on themselves because they have families and sacrificed well-paying jobs to be there.

The external pressures that older students often face are also substantial. In addition to classwork, older students more often juggle additional responsibilities related to jobs, families, and other obligations. These demands on their time can complicate their schedule, making it difficult to attend review sessions or office hours.

As people age, there are so many other combinations of challenges that people have as a result of their identity, or frustration, or how it impacts family life, lifestyle, preparing for the future. It's very complicated.

Focus group participants suggested that, aside from the immediate stressors related to commitments outside of school, older students may have additional considerations related to their personal lives. One participant gave an example of medical students and family planning. Some older students consider delaying starting a family due to their education: "I've heard them talking about freezing eggs."

Career concerns

Career services staff reported that many students are concerned about securing stable employment after graduation, but older students often confront a specific set of obstacles related to their careers. Across departments and roles, participants reiterated that older students are not recruited by companies in the same way, or with the same enthusiasm, as younger students.

There can be a phenomenally qualified, great-fit MBA student, PhD student, grad school student, law school student or whatever, but companies are not necessarily willing to be creative in how they view their candidate pool. It's like, 'this is the formula that works,' and it takes a lot of selling and influence on our teams to get them to open up ... to an older student, a non-traditional student.

From staff experience, older students often have a much harder time being seen as serious competitors for a job because they do not fit the image that many recruiters have. Students do face age-stereotyping, as described by a participant from the law school.

Some older students who apply for the legal jobs at large law firms who have an incoming class of first year associate students, most of them are within the same age range. So, if a student falls outside of that ... we're going to have to be intentional. Because when they go for an interview, they're just not who the employer is expecting to see, their resume reads a little differently, so we have to think about that.

Simultaneously, older students who have left a full-time, well-paying job to return to school are frustrated about having to compete with new graduates for entry level jobs (with entry level salaries) in their new field. Their expectations for positions or compensation post-graduation may not align with the market.

Some of our students with close to 10 years work experience have an incoming salary that is the same as the average salary of a recent graduate. So, it's a conversation of 'you're likely not going to see the bump other students are going to see, because other employers aren't willing to make the jump.'

Return on investment

Focus group participants found that for many older students, the combination of concerns about their career, life stressors, and finances are often expressed in terms of the return on

investment. Because older students often make significant personal sacrifices to return to school (leaving a stable job, uprooting their families to a new city, adding additional commitments to an already full schedule, etc.), they tend to approach their education differently than younger students. According to one participant:

They are doing the math on the outcome. They're the ones sitting down and saying, 'it's going to cost this much, loans are this much, I need a job that pays this much.' They are much more likely to do math—especially if they have a family they're taking with them.

Focus group participants found that older students are often carefully weighing their personal and financial inputs – the time spent in the program, job prospects upon graduation, the amount of loans they need versus the time they have to pay back those loans – and the outputs related to having a degree.

I think the other big challenge generally, of course, is money. So many of our students are not able to work part-time or stop working in order to finish a degree quickly. Just the cost of tuition is a barrier.

The total time they're going to have in the job market is going to be less than someone who is 10 years younger than them.

In addition to having less time to pay off accrued loans, entry level positions in a new field might not pay as much as older students hope.

Ageism and undervaluing age-diversity

Focus group participants rarely used the word ageism or described employers as ageist, but comments referring to age-related bias were common. There were numerous sources of ageism identified, including potential employers, instructors, and other students. Older students' interactions with recruiters visiting campus often have an ageist bend. Older students are often described as not “fitting the mold” and one participant said,

Employers are playing a little bit of a numbers game: 'I have 10 spots. I need them all to go into a leadership development program.' They all have to look like a general cookie cutter shape. Occasionally students break the mold—that's usually one-off recruiting. The vast majority of students getting recruited need to fit in the bucket.

In addition to ageism in the hiring process, ageism also exists at the university level. It influences how older students present in classroom spaces: “older students are aware of the ageism and can be more cautious and reserved.” In some cases, there are expectations from within the institution that older students already have certain experiences or knowledge, and don't need the same support as other students. Instructors can also harbor their own ageist biases. One participant shared an experience an older student had:

He was taking a class, and was chatting with other students as the class was starting. He was talking about his aspirations to apply to law school, and he said the instructor overheard as she was passing by and said, 'Well you should give that up, that's never going to happen.'

The focus group participants from the medical school reported a bias in admissions and training toward younger adults, given the length of the training process. They reported that older medical students experience ageism when they are serving in the hospital or in clinical settings because they “stand out” as different.

I can see where an older med student would feel uncomfortable in that setting. Maybe the attending physician is younger; you maybe just don't look typical and could get some ribbing for that.

Clearly, ageism exists within classrooms – from both professors and students. There were also reports of discomfort along generational lines between students: “*we've had probably an 'Okay Boomer' moment in every one of our classes that has had intergenerational learning.*”

Study groups are a thing in law school, so for the older student who maybe doesn't quite feel a natural friend connection with a lot of people in the class because they are younger, then that study group won't grow naturally for that person, so that could maybe be a disadvantage.

Although focus group participants were quick to discuss the value of having an age diverse classroom, they also noted that age diversity is not prioritized when compared to other types of diversity. Participants observed that “*WashU needs to increase diversity across all dimensions,*” yet noted that age diversity is not likely to be a focus of diversity initiatives. There are not many messages about age diversity coming from University leadership, and “*if it's not coming from the top down, it's not on the radar.*”

Age-diversity is also not valued in the workforce. One experienced career services administrator noted that while they had participated in discussions with employers about diversity in hiring, “*I have not had a conversation about age diversity in 20 years at this level.*” One participant remarked that the job market in academia discriminates against older PhD students because of negative views around starting a tenure-track position “*after the age of 45.*”

Theme 2: assets

The focus groups elicited a number of challenges associated with increasing campus age diversity, but participants were quick to identify the assets that older students bring to the classroom and to campus. Admission and career services staff identified two major attributes that they appreciated in working with older students (intentional students, experienced students) and one theme was used to capture the benefits of having age-diversity in educational settings.

Intentional students

Focus group participants described older students as having a plan for their education and used words like “*results-oriented,*” “*focused,*” “*directed,*” “*serious,*” “*committed,*” “*equipped*” and “*motivated*” when talking about them. In sum, older students were identified as being more purposeful and intentional about their studies than younger people, who were seen as being more likely to be in school because it is the expected life course step. Participants unanimously agreed that older students tend to be especially driven and value the opportunity to return to school. Many older students make significant sacrifices to return to school, and therefore, they are determined to get the most out of the experience.

There's a general appreciation for the education program that you don't see in 17 and 18-year-olds. They value it more, they're more serious.

I'll say that our students are very motivated. They really are here by choice and the majority of them are paying their own way, in one way or another, and school is very important to most of them.

In addition to being dedicated to the academics, focus group participants found older students may also be more communicative about their learning needs and what they would like to see from the classroom.

I also think the older population is more vocal about what they want to see . . . I feel like they . . . speak up and give suggestions, and I think they're just a little more vocal and suggestive.

Experienced students. Admissions and career staff cited another advantage that older students bring is experience – general life experience and specific work experience. Older students were described as more mature and able to make contributions to classroom discussion that added depth and perspective. Older students were also seen as “*more professional and relatable*” and acted as “*independent learners*” in the classroom. They don't necessarily need the same type of professional coaching as their younger classmates and often bring background knowledge to the classroom, which they can incorporate into their work.

Students may have more professional skills if they've had more time to develop those professional skills and interpersonal skills. That can be helpful. That's definitely a benefit.

Similarly, older students were seen as particularly capable and one focus group participant commented that they often “*understand how to get things done and are more efficient.*” Because older students often bring a wider variety of life and career experiences that can be applied to class content, they create an environment where students can learn from each other and enjoy a rich classroom setting.

Age-diverse educational setting. According to these focus group participants, there are three main advantages associated with age-diverse classrooms. First, age diversity was seen as a mechanism for students to learn from others who may not share their experiences or perspectives: “*having more and richer experiences [represented in the classroom] just makes it richer for everyone.*” This dynamic was seen as beneficial to students and in the classroom, as well as to the University, since learning environments that include people with different experiences were praised for being more stimulating.

I really love a lot of perspectives in a class, and to the institution as a whole, I think we're only better if we are thinking about things from a bunch of different perspectives.

Secondly, since there are not many opportunities for people across the life course to engage in intergenerational learning, focus group participants saw age diverse classrooms as a chance for students to understand another generation and engage in “*informal, intergenerational mentoring.*” There were many examples given as to how older students helped younger students and vice versa, “*I'm a firm believer that mentoring goes both ways.*” Supporting spaces where students can learn about and build relationships with people in another generation was identified as a critically important component of age diversity on campus.

An applicant of a certain age can impart wisdom and experience to their classmates. It's appreciated and it's a mutual relationship. We think it enriches the class and they can learn from each other. So, it's a positive outcome.

Finally, age diverse classrooms were celebrated by focus group participants because they more accurately reflect the age diversity seen in many workplaces; and it was noted that important skills for the multigenerational workplace can be obtained in an age-diverse classroom:

“Look at how many generations are working together, and I think that having more age diversity in the classroom . . . helps each other understand the generations, the work ethic, et cetera.

Theme 3: recommended strategies

Participants were asked to offer strategies that could be effective in connecting with and supporting older students on WUSTL’s campuses in an effort to increase age-diversity. Some of these strategies are currently in use or partial use, and some were recommended for future development. The comprehensive list of ideas brought up by focus group members is shared so that a wide variety of options are available for university administrators to consider.

Student groups

There was a call for a student organization or university-wide social network to connect older students. While the benefits of intergenerational interactions are clear, it was noted that older students also want to build relationships with other students who have similar interests or backgrounds.

Non-traditional students want to identify with others like them the most. They want to talk with others like them the most. They feel the most like they’re spotlighted.

I like the idea of having that affinity group because they have things in common, and you can strategize different ideas and things to do to meet the needs of that population, which could look different from the younger students.

Supports for family members

Assistance for students with families was a common request from focus group participants. Structured resources for children (including discounted daycare and help with school district decisions) and support for spouses looking for jobs were brought up multiple times.

Typically, a higher percentage of our older students will have families or significant others, so sometimes we get questions about health care and housing issues and things like that. I think we have to be aware of it and address that. We just do it individually right now, but not really anything school wide.

Social opportunities

According to participants, there is a lack of family-friendly social programming. Activities targeting older students and students with families are needed so they can comfortably participate in campus life outside of the classroom.

We also looked at our social program to see if there is a variety of programming in terms of what it focused on and who it appealed to. So rather than Happy Hour, actually having programs like

soccer games and pumpkin carving, where it's more multigenerational and families can get involved.

More community engagement around job placement

There was a call for more active job placement of graduates through the development of local community partnerships and hiring pipelines. Participants wanted to see more graduates go to local organizations and benefit from community partnerships that may result in a job. They noted that older students tend to stay in the St. Louis area more often than younger students and would likely benefit from this type of arrangement.

Partnering with companies and corporations that are willing to do a pre-hire, knowing that this person is going to come and get some education, and the idea is pretty much that you'll have a job when you're done.

Financial aid

Focus group respondents frequently stated that older students would benefit from more robust and streamlined channels for financial aid. Many older students take advantage of tuition reimbursement or employer-paid tuition; however, it can be difficult to navigate these resources. Several suggestions were made about improving the processes to activate funds and simplify the administrative work around fund distribution. It was recommended that funds be available for not only tuition, but life circumstances as well.

If there are things outside that box that students need, but that don't qualify as educational expenses, then we need to be aware of that. With many loans, money is supposed to go towards certain educational expenses. It will include a computer, but not include a car breaking down. It may cover child care, but if you're caring for sick family member you can't borrow extra for that to help cover their medical expenses. There may be more that comes up for older students that the university can't provide, and falls outside what the university can provide for financial aid.

Additionally, most scholarships target younger students, so the prospect of increasing age-diversity via scholarship allocation was discussed. In some units of the university, students don't receive all of the financial aid and tuition cost information until after they've committed to coming. It was suggested that this process be altered so students know, in advance, exactly what the cost of attendance is.

More targeted outreach to older students

Participants stated that it is difficult to encourage students of a wider age range to enroll when there is little recruitment activity targeting this population. Older students don't see themselves on campus or represented in recruitment materials, so one suggestion was to increase the representation of older students in recruiting materials. Partnerships with professional organizations or other on-campus offices (such as with veterans) were also seen as promising opportunities to engage with older students. The one concern that surfaced about this suggestion was around the ethics of marketing to older students without a robust infrastructure to support them when they arrive.

On our website, the pictures are of actual adults, and most of them are of our own students. The idea is to see yourself there and to be seen there.

Increase flexible learning opportunities

Because many older students have significant obligations outside of the classroom, flexible learning options were seen as critical by focus groups participants. Class scheduling and formats are areas that require particular latitude. Suggestions included increasing options for on-line education, offering more night/weekend classes and developing more part-time programs. Other strategies included awarding academic credit for work or military experience and developing innovative opportunities for internships (such as online or “mini” internships).

I think generally, for adult students, one of the best things we can do is to be flexible. If we have flexible formats, if we can do things to help work around the challenges in scheduling restrictions that they have.

One other thing I've heard from schools who do a lot of non-traditional student work is that they're more academically flexible. U college is already more flexible, but if we could give credit for life experience, especially military experience ... if we can just be flexible about degree requirements.

More staff/administrative support

Older students often need significant support as they re-integrate into academic environments. Programmatic support as well as staff support were recommended. It was pointed out that levels of support services varied across departments and programs; and that current staffing might meet current needs, but will not be adequate to serve a growing number of older students. Program-related suggestions included offering a targeted orientation to introduce older students to campus resources and workshops to reinforce computer literacy.

I also think orientation, specialized orientation for the older student—especially if they've not been in a classroom setting in a while. Just kind of getting back into the mindset of writing APA style papers, or how to do online searching for certain things, how to use the library resources.

Examples of increased staff and faculty support involved scheduling office hours outside of normal business hours and training academic advisors so they are equipped to offer support around larger life circumstances and can serve as a “life coach” for students needing more support.

I think life coach type stuff could help them. Like, they have this over here, that's not really school, but they have to take care of a parent, or do this. So, I don't know if life coach is the right thing, but someone who professionally could say, 'to be successful in your education, we're going to have to make sure this stuff is dealt with.'

Discussion

Focus groups conducted with career services and admissions staff at WUSTL revealed that there is enthusiasm for and value in a more age-diverse campus, but there are also significant challenges associated with serving more older students on campus. This tension was expressed across all focus groups, and all participants acknowledged both the benefits and challenges of increasing the number of older students across campus. It is notable that when asked about challenges and opportunities of becoming more age-diverse, these staff

members put front and center the experiences of the students they worked with. They articulated the challenges that they witnessed or heard about in dealing with students on a regular basis; and they spoke of ways to mitigate these challenges. In our minds, these findings speak to the necessity and promise of working with administrative staff in our efforts to increase age-diversity on our campuses.

According to focus group participants, specific challenges faced by older students varied by degree and program type. These staff members reported that students in medicine, law and PhD programs reported various types of age discrimination. It may be that it is more atypical to be an older medical student, and thus they feel more ostracized than older students in the business school, for example. In the business school, work experience is highly valued and there are specific programs (i.e. Executive MBA program) that cater to people coming back to school later in their careers. Older PhD students face challenges on the job market; and it is interesting to note that universities as employers were identified as a source of age discrimination in hiring older doctoral students into faculty positions. The same institutions that recruit and train older persons as researchers and educators on one hand are hesitant to bring them into tenure-track positions on the other hand. Focus group participants indicated that in their staff roles, they try to be transparent about the challenges of being an older student when they are working with older prospective students. Sometimes, these conversations begin during the admissions process, and often, the older student is the first to broach the topic.

Findings are consistent with previous studies in several regards. Our main findings resonate with the current literature in regards to older persons bringing a clearer idea of motivations and goals to the educational setting than younger persons. Their return to the classroom is purposeful. Indeed, the encore career movement centers on the premise that adults in mid-life and beyond look for career options that are meaningful to them and that give them purpose (Halvorsen & Emmanuel, 2020). Also, as previously documented, older students often face larger life challenges as they reenter the classroom, and pressures from work, families, and finances pervade their educational experiences. The value of intergenerational exchanges as well as the reality of the digital divide are reiterated in these findings.

It is worth noting that these themes derived from perspectives of university employees while most of the previous literature derived from reports by students themselves. We observe that the findings remain largely constant across these two sources of information. This suggests that these staff and administrators recognize and respect the motivation and obstacles experienced by older students. They also amplified the challenges of ageism and the undervaluing of age diversity in sharing their own experiences with university colleagues, community contacts, and employing organizations.

Focus group participants were aware that older students needed targeted attention and support, given their unfamiliarity with current learning environments and digital mediums, as well as their different life stage. Currently, these staff members felt like they are able to support older students relatively well through one-on-one advising. However, they were clear that they are only able to provide this kind of individualized attention because the number of students needing those services is small. Their concerns about insufficient support for older students aligned with the idea that a passive approach to age-inclusivity was inadequate (Silverstein et al., 2019). As seen in the quote above, some admission staff members warned against more intentionally recruiting older students until support services

were more fully developed. When discussing the support needed by older students, we noted that some of the focus group participants used age-stereotypic language and expressed (even non-verbally) paternalism. Even as they recognized the ageist attitudes among students, faculty and staff at the University, they are not immune to the pervasive implicit ageism in our society (Levy, 2001).

Support groups for older students are not established fixtures on campus. At WUSTL, groups for older students have historically been student-led, meaning that they form and dissolve based on the availability of students to find faculty sponsorship and serve as leaders (a demanding position for a student who is likely already juggling classes, work, and a family). To ensure stability in these support groups and provide older students with a consistent space to connect with their peers, WUSTL would need to find structured, meaningful ways to invest in these groups. Other examples of larger-scale strategies include supporting requests for familial supports, offering flexibility in learning, and engaging in intentional outreach to older students. These recommendations indicate that if WUSTL is going to become a more age-diverse campus, steps need to be taken from the top down.

The stressors identified by focus group participants related to three arenas of student life: in the classroom (such as acclimating to being a student), on campus (not fitting in and being unable to access support staff), and in their general life (finances and family roles). Although younger students might experience these same stressors, they may be more frequent and overlapping for older students. Due to all these stresses, admissions staff noted that recruiting older students is a challenge. Administrators have a keen understanding that the goal is not simply to bring more older students to campus, but to sufficiently support them during the course of their study. Without the larger institutional supports they recommended, it does not seem like there is adequate infrastructure to support a large influx on older learners.

Overall, focus group participants were adamant about the value of having an age-diverse campus. They had positive things to say about older students and the diversity they bring to the classroom. Simultaneously, they did not shy away from the significant challenges that exist for both older students and the university. They were clear that steps could be taken to increase support to older students and improve the practice of administrators working with older students. The substantial number and the wide range of suggested strategies made by focus group participants come from various units and departments of the university, and we acknowledge that administrators will find some recommendations more feasible and attractive than others.

Several limitations of the current study are notable. First of all, WUSTL is one of a variety of types of educational institutions in this country – a private, medium sized, research institution. The age distribution in this type of institution is more limited than other types, like public, community-based, teaching institutions (Grawe, 2018). It will be useful to gather information from admissions and career services staff across a wider variety of institutional types in this country and abroad to understand the generalizability of these findings. Second, while it is a contribution to the literature to focus on the perspective of admissions and career services staff, these are their perceptions; and it is important to recognize that their observations *about* students, faculty members and administrators may diverge from what these specific stakeholders report. In our future work, we will seek to document where staff perception and other stakeholders' perceptions converge and diverge. Finally, the sample included only a self-selected group of staff.

Despite these limitations, we think these findings can guide actions to increase age-diversity throughout the curriculum and campuses at WUSTL and other universities across the country. Future research directions include expanding focus groups to other stakeholders on campus, including deans and department heads, as well as younger and older students. More systematic inclusion of every academic unit will be important, as well as a vetting and prioritization of the strategies enumerated in this effort. In our experience, and as mentioned by focus group participants, age diversity has not been a high priority at most colleges and universities in this country. Current demands associated with the COVID pandemic and the racial justice movement may further delay attention. Yet these current pressures also represent opportunities to consider how age intersects with both of the issues, in terms of employment needs, technology advances to increase inclusion, and equal opportunity across the life course. We hope that this study will raise awareness and motivation for increasing age-diversity on college and university campuses.

References

- Andreoletti, C., & Howard, J. (2018). Bridging the generation gap: Intergenerational service-learning benefits young and old. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 39(1), 46–60. doi:10.1080/02701960.2016.1152266
- Barbour, R. (2007). *Doing focus groups*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi:10.4135/9781849208956
- Butrica, B. (2020). Making a case for working longer at older ages. *Public Policy and Aging Report*, 21(2), 22–26. doi:10.1093/ppar/21.2.22
- Camera, L. (2019, March 22) *The higher education apocalypse*. US News and World Report. <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2019-03-22/college-closings-signal-start-of-a-crisis-in-higher-education>
- Gerontological Society of America. (2018). *Longevity economics: Leveraging the advantages of an aging society*. <https://www.geron.org/images/gsa/documents/gsa-longevityeconomics-2018.pdf>
- Gonzales, E., Morrow-Howell, N., Daftary, D., Stafford, R., & Echols, J. (2013). Career transitions in mid-life: Pursuing an MSW as an older student. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 35(2), 134–151. doi:10.1080/02701960.2013.764870
- Grawe, N. (2018). *Demographics and the demand for higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Halvorsen, C., & Emmanuel, E. (2020). An encore in social work? How our schools can become more age inclusive. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 1–12. doi:10.1080/10437797.2020.1762269
- Hansen, R., Talmage, C., Thaxton, S., & Knopf, R. (2019). Barriers to age-friendly universities (AFU): Lessons from osher lifelong learning institute demographics and perceptions. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 40(2), 221–243. doi:10.1080/02701960.2019.1572003
- Lakin, M., Mullane, L., & Porter, S. (2008). Washington DC: *Mapping new terrain: Older adults in higher education*. American Council on Education.
- Lakin, M., Mullane, L., & Robinson, S. (2007). Washington DC: *Framing new terrain: Older adults in higher education*. American Council on Education.
- Levy, B. R. (2001). Eradication of Ageism requires addressing the enemy within. *The Gerontologist*, 41(5), 578–579. PMID 11574700. doi:10.1093/geront/41.5.578.
- Merz, C., Stark, S., Morrow-Howell, N., & Carpenter, B. (2018). When I'm 64: Effects of an interdisciplinary gerontology course on first-year undergraduates' perceptions of aging. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 39(1), 35–45. doi:10.1080/02701960.2016.1144600
- Montepare, J. (2019). Introduction to the special issue-age-friendly universities (AFU): Principles, practices, and opportunities. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 40(2), 139–141. doi:10.1080/02701960.2019.1591848

- Montepare, J., & Farah, K. (2018). Talk of ages: Using intergenerational classroom modules to engage older and younger students across the curriculum. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 39(3), 385–394. doi:10.1080/02701960.2016.1269006
- Morrow-Howell, N., Galucia, N., & Swinford, E. (January, 2020). *How Old is WashU?* Friedman Center for Aging. <https://publichealth.wustl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/FCA-Infographic-3.4.2020.pdf>
- Morrow-Howell, N., Lawlor, E., Macias, E., Swinford, E., & Brandt, J. (2019). Making the case for age-diverse universities. *The Gerontologist*, 1–7. doi:10.1093/geront/gnz181
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). *Digest of education statistics: 2018*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_303.40.asp
- O’Kelly, C. (2015). Age-friendly university annual report. www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/agefriendly/afu_annual_report_complete.pdf
- Padgett, D. K. (2008). *Qualitative methods in social work research (2nd ed. ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CAL: SAGE.
- Penick, J., Fallshore, M., & Adrian, S. (2014). Using intergenerational service learning to promote positive perceptions about older adults and community service in college students. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 12(1), 25–39. doi:10.1080/15350770.2014.870456
- Pstross, M. C., Corrigan, T., Knopf, R., Sung, H., Talmage, C., Conroy, C., & Fowley, C. (2017). The benefits of intergenerational learning in higher education: Lessons learned from two age friendly university programs. *Innovations in Higher Education*, 42(2), 157–171. doi:10.1007/s10755-016-9371-x
- Saldanña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers (3rd ed. ed.)*. Los Angeles, CAL: SAGE Publications.
- Sanchez, M., & Kaplan, M. (2014). Intergenerational learning in higher education: Making the case for multigenerational classrooms. *Educational Gerontology*, 40(7), 473–485. doi:10.1080/03601277.2013.844039
- Selingo, J. (2014, March 24). *To reach the new market for education, colleges have some learning to do*. Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/To-Reach-the-New-Market-for/145499>
- Silverstein, N., Hendricksen, M., Bowen, L., Weaver, A., & Whitbourne, S. (2019). Developing an Age-Friendly University (AFU) audit: A pilot study. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 40(2), 203–220. doi:10.1080/02701960.2019.1572006
- Steitz, D., Tan, Y., & Priyanto, A. (2018). The teaching of gerontology: Seven years of course design, redesign, and assessment in a multigenerational classroom. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 1–27. doi:10.1080/02701960.2018.1505616
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (August 22, 2019). *Number of jobs, labor market experience, and earnings growth: Results from a national longitudinal survey*. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsoy.pdf>
- Van Noy, M., & Heidkamp, M. (2013). *Working for adults: State policies and community college practices to better serve adult learners at community colleges during the great recession and beyond*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers NTAR Leadership Center.