

SILVER LININGS: THE SOCIOLOGY OF AGING CO-CREATING A SERVICE LEARNING COURSE



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SILVER LININGS: The Sociology of Aging

Co-Creating a Service Learning Course

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the co-creation of a Sociology of Aging: Service Learning course at Wingate University. The course was created to *help serve the Eastern Union County older adult population through service learning and education focusing on seniors.*

Nine students helped Dr. Ritter create a course that will allow for the development and continuation of service learning projects with older adults in Union County for years to come.

Bringing students into the experience allowed the course to be created organically by those most impacted by undergraduate courses, while also allowing these students to spend time with both older adults and the organizations serving them during the semester, allowing us to assess seniors' needs within Union County.

Overall, both the students and Dr. Ritter had an amazing experience creating the course. We were able to create a course that integrates students' perspectives while also maintaining the instructional curriculum, all while finding important and senior-focused ways to serve our aging population in the future.



Want to learn more?

Contact Dr. Ritter at:
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 the CCG website at:
[https://www.wingate.edu/
 around-campus/common-good](https://www.wingate.edu/around-campus/common-good)



What are the benefits and drawbacks of taking a service-learning based course like this?

"I believe the benefits far outweigh any drawbacks in this course. Now that I have an understanding of what service learning truly is, I feel more connected with the class and the lasting impacts it will have on future students. Not only does this course engage students with the community, but it gives a sense of action to students to feel the need to conspire change for our environment." – KC, senior



"I think a major pro for students that participate in this course will be the experience they get. This is a great opportunity to become involved in the community and it will also look good on resumes for jobs, internships, or graduate school. Also, it is will be good for forming relationships with community partners. This could open up doors for internships and job opportunities. Another pro is simply the feeling of helping older adults and knowing that you are making a difference." – MS, senior

BACKGROUND

We, as Americans, are steadily aging as a population. While this is partly due to lower birth rates, it is also due to extended life expectancy. Though our demographic numbers are steadily progressing toward these later years, our social attitudes are lagging behind the times. America is still an ageist society, meaning that we place little to no value on older adults, often ignoring them and segregating them away from younger populations. We also are more likely, as a society, to focus on making social change happen for *younger* generations, often ignoring our older counterparts or redirecting funds and support to younger generations.



Above: several community partners came to Wingate University to attend our Senior Luncheon and address the gaps in service for our Eastern Union County seniors.

Thus, older adults are often ignored – left out of the story. Courses like *Sociology of Aging* aim to change these attitudes by showing both the value in older adults and addressing the gaps in service they receive.

Dr. Lacey J. Ritter, as a gerontologist, spends much of her time researching these gaps – and trying to find solutions. Along with Dr. Candace Lapan, Ritter transformed one of her undergraduate courses into a service-learning based model to fill these gaps close to home.

During the Spring 2020 semester, Dr. Ritter and nine undergraduate students teamed up to revamp *Sociology of Aging*, an upper-level elective course in the Department of Sociology. This course, while focusing on the aging process as a whole, also emphasizes the importance of social connections for quality of life in later years.

While remodeling the course to incorporate service learning lectures, senior panels, and even field trips to local community organizations helping seniors, Ritter’s students also learned what courses are like from the instructor’s perspective. They were able to help construct the course from start to finish, using the insight they gained from going out and surveying various seniors in Eastern Union County about their needs and ways we can help (data available by request). Students in Dr. Ritter’s course also connected with various community partners, gaining valuable insight during our Senior Luncheon in the fall.

Through these experiences, Ritter and her students created a fun, insightful, and practical course that will allow for students to create – and implement – service learning projects with senior-based community partners each spring. Our goal is to host additional luncheons every spring, celebrating our “super seniors” and those who love and support them. At these luncheons, students will present on their service learning projects as both evidence of their experiences and as a tool for consciousness-raising and greater acceptance and visibility of older adults.

What is surveying seniors like?

“A lot of the elders loved that we were surveying they because they do want their voice heard in this big community. ‘I’m so glad you took the time to ask me what I want out of Union County.’” – TC, junior

CONCLUSIONS

How important is a class like this?

“I think being able to learn the sociology of aging while also going out into the senior community is going to help students retain the information better and doing so while collaborating with the community.” – GZ, *senior*



“Students will be able to build relationships with professionals and students could build connections with different associations. Also, students will get out of their comfort zone and they will learn to communicate with a multitude of different people.”

– KK, *senior*



Above: One of the requests from our senior surveys and focus groups was for more connection with the university, particularly fitness training and access. Elaine is pictured here at our first Golden Bulldogs major event at the McGee Center, where older adults could sign up for gym access. Senior Alex Ashley was on hand to survey additional attendees and see firsthand the fun and long-lasting implementation of our survey data.

In conclusion, Dr. Ritter and her students:

- Revamped *Sociology of Aging* into a service-learning based course
- Surveyed various seniors across Eastern Union County on their community-based needs
- Met and connected with various local partners primarily helping older adults, establishing locations for service learning projects that can be continued and improved upon over time

Overall, we were able to lay a solid foundation for future semesters in which seniors will be recognized and appreciated through a service-learning-based approach to gerontology. Our hope is that, through continued course offering, our seniors will form impactful, meaningful connections with university students that build bridges between these two age groups while breaking barriers related to ageism.

Future goals include:

- Spring Senior Celebration Luncheon in which students showcase their service-learning projects for older adults, community partners, and other university members to raise awareness and celebrate accomplishments
- Continuing to survey Eastern Union County older adults to determine their needs and gaps in service
- Bring greater understanding of—and respect for—our seniors, in Union County and beyond!