



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 16, 2021

Department of Aging Expands Program to Enrich the Lives of Students and Older Adults

Intergenerational University Connections Now Offered at Four PA Universities

West Chester, PA – The Pennsylvania Department of Aging (PDA) was joined by students and faculty from West Chester University (WCU) and Widener University along with older adults to announce the expansion of the department’s Intergenerational University Connections program.

First launched as a pilot at Slippery Rock University (SRU) in the fall of 2020, the Intergenerational University Connections program offers students real world experience by completing service-learning projects that include engaging with older adults. WCU and Widener University, along with Penn State Harrisburg, have joined the program for the 2021 fall semester.

Local Area Agencies on Aging connect older adults with PDA to take part in the program. Undergraduate and graduate students earning degrees in programs for various helping professions are then assigned to engage with a participating senior, either over the phone or virtually. Older adults either have access to their own videoconferencing technology, or they can utilize a loaner iPad with internet connectivity for the duration of the semester thanks to a [PA Link grant program](#) with [TechOwl](#). The students will earn service-learning hours, gain skills working in a telehealth environment and implement interventions while participating in a variety of activities with their assigned older adult.

WCU joins SRU as the second school within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) to take part in the program.

“The Graduate Certificate in Gerontology and Master of Social Work program is very excited to have the opportunity to partner with the Department of Aging on this important service learning opportunity. Not only as a gerontological social worker but also as someone who has researched elder abuse and neglect, I feel passionately that addressing social isolation is critical not only to health and quality of life but also in helping older adults be less at risk for financial exploitation and other forms of elder abuse and neglect,” said Dr. Angela Lavery, professor and co-leader of the project at WCU.

Another goal of the program is to get more young people interested in fields that involve working with and supporting older adults.

“I am so excited we are participating in the service learning experience for class. I wrote a previous paper on the impact of visitor restrictions on older adults in nursing homes during

COVID, and I was struck by this ethical dilemma and the detrimental effects of social isolation among the residents. This health risk warrants continued intervention and advocacy,” said Krystal Harbaugh, WCU Master of Public Health program graduate assistant.

“West Chester University considers itself a partner in our community and we take great pride in extending ourselves to area citizens in whatever way that we can,” said Chris Fiorentino, WCU president. “The University is particularly proud to join an extraordinary collaboration that benefits older adults who are receiving various services from agencies associated with the PA Department of Aging. I am grateful to the department and to Doctors Angela Lavery, Stacie Metz, and Erin Knight for developing an interprofessional service learning program that is making a significant difference in the lives of many, while advancing the human spirit.”

Students participating in the Intergenerational University Connections program at Widener University are undergraduates in social work majors.

“I enjoy when conversations with my aging friend drift into hobbies, like cars. He shares life lessons with me that make me think and are impacting my character,” said Milo Jones, Widener University freshman and social work major. “I won his praise for being in a good relationship with my parents, and one of the most memorable things he shared with me were his regrets that he did not realize how much he loved his father growing up. This program is designed to benefit aging adults, but I'm growing as a person because of my involvement.”

“This project has allowed students in our Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare class to weave their intergenerational conversations with course content, which improves their understanding of aging and appreciation of older adults. These conversations have helped them recognize myths and stereotypes associated with aging, highlighted the strengths and talents of older persons, improved their ability to be insightful and reflective and increased their positive attitudes toward pursuing careers in aging,” said Robin Goldberg-Glen, Widener University associate professor. “The interactions have had unintended outcomes too, such as decreasing the loneliness and isolation students may experience during their first year in college.”

“Widener University is delighted to partner with the Pennsylvania Department of Aging on this initiative. It has provided our students a valuable hands-on learning experience while extending meaningful service to the aging community,” said Julie E. Wollman, Widener University president. “We look forward to making this opportunity available to even more Widener students this spring, when the program grows to include our graduate and undergraduate students from Phi Alpha Nu, the national honor society of social work. This expansion will allow Widener to make an even greater impact on the lives of our aging neighbors, in the spirit of service learning.”

PDA first discussed the Intergenerational University Connections program as a pilot with SRU following PDA's presentation of the idea to PASSHE in early April 2020, when PASSHE shared the department's interest with the 14 universities in the state university system. The increased risk of social isolation among seniors as a result of the pandemic put the program on the fast track.

“The Department of Aging received a lot of positive feedback from both faculty and students at Slippery Rock University following the pilot program. We also learned what worked and didn’t work in order for us to improve on the program for SRU and future participants. We are pleased with how quickly we were able to expand the program with the inclusion of three additional universities this fall semester,” said Secretary of Aging Robert Torres. “This program offers a valuable opportunity for older adults to engage with students in meaningful ways, and for the students to learn from their experiences. I look forward to seeing continued positive growth as we continue to build and expand this program.”

PDA has been in talks with additional universities throughout the commonwealth to explore inclusion of the program in their curriculums.

As the Intergenerational University Connections program expands in Pennsylvania, it is starting to receive national attention. PDA and SRU discussed the program during the Gerontological Society of America’s 2021 Annual Scientific Meeting online on November 12.

Learn more about the various programs offered by the Pennsylvania Department of Aging [here](#).

Note: Photos and video from the event will be available at [PACast.com](https://pacast.com).

MEDIA CONTACT: Jack Eilber: agingcomms@pa.gov