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Intergenerational Programs:  
Perspectives of Service Providers in One Canadian City

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to provide an overview of the current state of intergenerational programming in one Canadian city. One hundred and seven individuals in charge of programming in youth and seniors' organizations completed a telephone survey about intergenerational programs. More than one-third of organizations surveyed reported offering intergenerational programs, and the majority of these perceived their program to be successful. Participants added that there were no current overlaps in services, though a variety of gaps in and barriers to intergenerational programming were identified. There was also significant interest in and ideas for offering a diverse range of programs in the future. It was concluded that while interest in offering intergenerational programs was high, multiple barriers currently exist to offering such programs.

Keywords: intergenerational programs, service providers, seniors, telephone survey

Intergenerational Programs: Perspectives of Service Providers in One Canadian City

The aging population is growing faster than all other age groups, due in part to longer life expectancies and lower fertility rates (VanderVen, 1999; Wisensale, 2003). Increases in the aging population are expected to continue and it is estimated that older people will soon

outnumber the young in many countries (Greengross, 2003). Coupled with this increase in the number of older people are concerns about negative stereotypes and attitudes about seniors, as well as the growing isolation or segregation of older people and youth both within and outside the family context (Abrams & Giles, 1999; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000). Intergenerational programs aim to address this generation gap and promote positive interactions between the generations.

The purpose of this research study was to provide an overview of the current state of intergenerational programming in Calgary, Canada, a mid-sized North American city. To this end, a telephone survey was conducted to help identify existing intergenerational programs in the city, including types of programs, needs, gaps, and overlaps in service provision. Ultimately, the research aimed to provide information on intergenerational programs that may help facilitate and guide the future development of such programs. This research was sponsored by Friends of Seniors, The City of Calgary and Family & Community Support Services.

### Literature Review

The field of intergenerational studies first emerged in the 1960s, with an interest in programs that brought children and seniors together (Hanks & Ponzetti, 2004). Since then, interest has grown significantly and has resulted in the proliferation of intergenerational programs and an increased breadth and depth of the field (Kuehne, 1999; VanderVen, 1999). Currently, intergenerational studies is a multidisciplinary field, and a wide range of programs, organizations, forums, resources, and literature are emerging at local, national, and international levels (Newman, 2003; Pennsylvania State University, 2004).

Accordingly, the definition of intergenerational programs has expanded to include programs that bring together different or multiple generations within and outside the family

context (Larkin, 2004). While there appears to be no single agreed upon definition of intergenerational programs in the literature, some common characteristics can be found, including: 1) intergenerational programs are the purposeful bringing together of different generations in mutually beneficial, planned activities; 2) the purpose of these activities is to increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between the generations via sharing of knowledge, skills, and/or experiences; and 3) intergenerational programs can benefit both individuals and communities (Abrams & Giles, 1999; Greengross, 2003; Vernon, 1999).

A review of existing intergenerational programs found in the literature (e.g., *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*) reveals the broad scope, wide interest, and cultural variation in the field worldwide. Indeed, it appears that beyond the common purpose of promoting interaction and mutually beneficial contact between generations of people, intergenerational programs vary widely on aspects such as focus, goals, target populations, and context. For example, intergenerational programs can be found in a wide range of settings such as schools, child/adult day care programs, neighbourhoods, universities, community centers, organizations, and special events (Hanks & Ponzetti, 2004; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000).

Given the diversity of intergenerational programming, efforts have been made to classify programs according to typologies. One commonly used typology proposes four kinds of intergenerational programs, as follows: 1) older people supporting youth (e.g., mentors), 2) youth supporting older people (e.g., friendly visitors), 3) older people and youth collaborating to support their community (e.g., environmental projects), and 4) older people and youth engaging together in learning/social activities (e.g., singing) (Centre for Intergenerational Practice, n.d.; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000).

Intergenerational programs are increasingly being developed to address a range of issues, particularly those that impact youth and seniors such as poverty, violence, and isolation (Newman, 2003; VanderVen, 1999). Intergenerational programs can contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities, for example, by facilitating mutually beneficial relationships, volunteering and community building; increasing social cohesion, integration, and collaboration; and strengthening family relationships (Greengross, 2003; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000; Mercken, 2003; Thang, Kaplan, & Henkin, 2003; United Generations Ontario, n.d.).

Intergenerational programs have also been found to relate to positive outcomes for both seniors and youth (VanderVen, 1999). For example, they have been found to reduce negative stereotypes and attitudes; increase knowledge, skills, personal and social development; and contribute to the health and well-being (e.g., increased self-esteem, reduced isolation) of both populations (Abrams & Giles, 1999; Kuehne, 1999; Seefeldt, 1989; Stanton & Tench, 2003; Vernon, 1999).

### Current Study

In short, it is clear that there is a great deal of excitement about the potential of intergenerational programs for the benefit of individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole. Given this, the current study aimed to explore the extent to which intergenerational programs are being delivered in one Canadian city. Further, gaining insight into the delivery of intergenerational programs from the service providers themselves is important in understanding the reality, addressing the need, and overcoming barriers to intergenerational programming.

To this end, a telephone survey of current intergenerational programs in Calgary, Alberta, Canada was conducted. The research aimed to identify existing intergenerational programs, gaps and barriers to the development and implementation of such programs, as well as ideas or

plans for future programs. It is hoped that this research will provide important information that may help guide future intergenerational programming efforts in Calgary. While the findings are generalizable only to the city of Calgary, others may learn from this city's experience.

## Methodology

### *Data Collection*

An eleven item questionnaire was developed and implemented to conduct a telephone survey of intergenerational programs in Calgary, which has a population of approximately one million people. The telephone survey was selected as an effective and efficient method for reaching the sample, which consisted of representatives from both youth and seniors organizations. Surveys are a commonly used and effective method for obtaining information from large numbers of participants at a low cost (Salahu-Din, 2003).

The survey included questions on a range of issues relating to intergenerational programs, including definition of intergenerational programs, current program offerings, ideas and/or plans for future programming, awareness of other programs, overlaps and gaps in programming, and barriers to offering programs. The survey also asked participants if they were interested in becoming part of an intergenerational programming network being developed by the sponsors of the study.

The definition of intergenerational programs used in the survey was an amalgamation of those found in the literature (Abrams & Giles, 1999; Greengross, 2003; Larkin, 2004; Vernon, 1999). The definition developed for this study conceptualized intergenerational programs as *the purposeful bringing together of seniors and children or youth in mutually beneficial, planned activities. The purpose of these activities is to increase cooperation, interaction, or exchange between the generations via sharing of knowledge, skills and/or experience.*

It should be noted that the original definition adopted for the study characterized intergenerational programs more broadly as *the purposeful bringing together of different generations...* However, after the completion of approximately 15 surveys, it was found that participants were identifying a wide range of programs as intergenerational. Because the primary interests of the sponsors were programs that brought seniors and youth together and resources were limited, the definition was amended to provide a more manageable scope for the study.

### *Sample and Procedures*

A contact list was compiled which included a total of 253 organizations and groups serving seniors (77%) and youth or children (23%). The majority of these contacts were seniors groups and organizations, including lodges, assisted living centres, care centres, outreach services, day programs, drop-in centres, sports and recreation clubs, and other groups or societies. Youth organizations also varied widely in the kinds of services offered, and included mental health, recreation, personal and community development, and volunteering opportunities. While it was recognized that schools play an important role in intergenerational programming, they were not included in the sample due to limited time and resources.

As approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board, University of Calgary, phone contact with potential participants started with a script designed to introduce the study and obtain informed consent. Once consent was obtained, the survey and a template seeking details of any intergenerational programs being offered were completed. Surveys were conducted by trained research assistants and each took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Individuals in charge of programming were targeted as participants for the study, and two attempts were made to contact each participant. A total of 142 of the 253 agencies (56%) were

successfully contacted for the study. Of these, 107 (75%) completed the survey, while 31 (22%) declined to participate and 4 (3%) withdrew from or did not complete the study. Participants who completed the survey represented a range of organizations. Consistent with the original contact list, about one quarter of completed surveys (28%) were from participants in youth serving organizations, while the majority (72%) were from participants in seniors' organizations or groups.

### *Data Analysis*

Surveys were divided into organizations that offered intergenerational programs and those that did not offer such programs. Then, responses from each group were analyzed. Descriptive statistics were conducted for nominal level data and a content analysis of qualitative responses was completed. The aggregate results of these analyses are presented below.

## Results

### *Familiarity with the Term Intergenerational Program*

Participants were asked if they were familiar with the term intergenerational program. Although it was found that the majority (74%) of all respondents were familiar with the term, less than one quarter (23%) of those familiar with the term defined intergenerational programs as those that bring together seniors and children/youth. Indeed, most participants (73%) who were familiar with the term understood intergenerational programs in the broader sense of bringing together different or multiple generations or age groups.

Furthermore, only 18% of all participants articulated the purposeful nature or goals of intergenerational programs. These respondents stated that intergenerational programs: connect generations for the mutual benefit of both generations; have shared goals; respond to the needs of multiple generations; foster mutually beneficial relationships; allow for each generation to

contribute; facilitate communication; create bridges or bridge gaps; and promote socialization, mutual understanding, learning, sharing knowledge/information, and having fun.

In addition, more participants who were from agencies that offered intergenerational programs were familiar with the term (84%) and articulated the purposeful intent of intergenerational programs (30%), than participants from agencies that did not offer these programs (67% and 10%, respectively). In short, staff from organizations that offer intergenerational programs appeared to have more general awareness about such programs.

#### *Existence, Success and Awareness of Programs*

Participants were asked if they currently offer intergenerational programs which bring children or youth together with seniors. A total of 71 different intergenerational programs were identified by 43 (40%) of the 107 organizations surveyed. Table 1 shows that about one half of the programs identified (51%) were found to be ongoing programs in which the main focus or goal was intergenerational in nature. These included programs with: 1) youth supporting seniors, such as visiting seniors at care facilities on a regular basis and engaging with them, and helping seniors in the community with tasks such as snow shovelling; 2) seniors supporting youth, such as seniors visiting schools and helping children to learn to read; and 3) seniors and youth engaging together in learning activities such as oral history projects. No programs were identified with youth and seniors working together to support their community.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

In addition, about a quarter (22%) of programs identified had some intergenerational component, but intergenerational goals were only a secondary purpose or focus of the program.

This included practicum placements completed by post-secondary students at care centres and youth camps that included visits to care centres. Another quarter (21%) of programs identified were not ongoing programs, but occasional intergenerational events such as special holiday activities. Often, more than one special event was identified, and these typically involved visits to care centres by children/youth groups to sing, dance, do crafts and interact with seniors.

More than half of participants (61%) stated that their intergenerational program was successful or very successful. This evaluation of the success of the programs appeared to be based primarily on perceived participation and feedback from program participants. For example, respondents stated that both youth and seniors receive joy and satisfaction from participating and value the time they spend with each other. Participants also perceived that their intergenerational programs reduce isolation, improve health and confidence, and build the capacity of participants. Only a couple of programs mentioned more measurable indicators of success, such as increased reading skills in children.

Furthermore, over one third of participants (41%) stated that what could be improved in their program was to expand the program or recruit more participants. This included doing more outreach and relationship building with the community and potential participants, offering programs more frequently, and developing new opportunities for existing participants or volunteers. A second commonly cited need for improvement (25%) related to having more resources to do this outreach and expansion of programs. This included obtaining more funding, staff, space, and resources on intergenerational programs (e.g., tips, best practices, and materials); as well as providing more training for staff and doing more advertising about their program. Finally, some respondents (11%) stated that networking, connections, and relationship building with other organizations and community groups could be improved.

Participants were also asked if they knew of other agencies offering intergenerational programs or intergenerational programming resources in the city. Awareness of other intergenerational programs varied from not at all, to guessing what other agencies may offer, to specific knowledge about other intergenerational programs. Over half of participants (59%) had at least a general idea of groups or organizations that may offer other intergenerational programs.

#### *Overlaps, Gaps, and Barriers*

When asked about current overlaps in intergenerational programming in Calgary, the majority of participants (68%) stated that they did not know enough about intergenerational programs to respond. Table 2 shows that of those participants that responded to the question, the theme that emerged was that there are no overlaps because there is a need for more intergenerational programs in the city (i.e., not enough programs currently exist to overlap). Interestingly, participants in agencies that offered intergenerational programs were more likely to answer this question, and to identify a lack of overlap in existing programs, than participants in agencies who did not offer intergenerational programs.

[Insert Table 2 About Here]

Table 2 also shows that four themes emerged pertaining to gaps in intergenerational programming. First, a lack of awareness, information or knowledge about existing intergenerational programs and resources was perceived to exist among both organizations and the general public. This includes a need for more communication, advertising, and promotion about these programs and their benefits; as well as more access to resources related to intergenerational programs.

Second, participants identified a need for a more diverse range of intergenerational programs (e.g., involving seniors who live independently) offered in a wider range of settings (e.g., daycares). Respondents added that there is a need to expand on current intergenerational programs, and to explore new possibilities and opportunities for intergenerational interaction. Finally, participants perceived that the need for intergenerational programs will increase in the future, particularly as the Baby Boomers age.

Third, there was an identified need for more seniors, youth, and children (particularly young children) to become involved in intergenerational programs. Specific groups of youth and seniors were also identified as needing to become more involved in intergenerational programs, such as immigrants, children with disabilities, grandparents, and seniors in care facilities. In addition, respondents identified a need for programs to promote meaningful, purposeful, and mutually beneficial activities, such as those that facilitate interaction and relationship building among seniors and youth.

Finally, participants wished for more communication, networking, sharing of resources, building connections, and partnerships among seniors and youth agencies, and communities - particularly those offering or interested in offering intergenerational programs. This includes the establishment of an agency, facility or hub for intergenerational programs, as well as increased networking opportunities.

Unlike the identification of gaps and overlaps, Table 2 shows that the majority of participants were able to identify barriers, and often identified multiple barriers to offering intergenerational programs. Three major types of barriers were identified by participants: resource barriers, accessibility barriers and barriers relating to knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Resource barriers included difficulties in finding funding, staffing, time, and facilities to develop, implement, and sustain intergenerational programs. In regards to funding, participants reported that it is difficult to obtain sustainable funding, and suggested that funding allocations need to be established for intergenerational programs. Respondents added that with short-term or project funding, it is difficult to network, collaborate, and nurture the partnerships and relationships that are crucial to developing successful intergenerational programs and to expand current programs. Related barriers include the need for staff, volunteers, time, and adequate facilities to effectively develop and implement intergenerational programs.

Additional barriers were identified that relate to the accessibility of intergenerational programs for participants. First, transportation to the location of the program can be difficult, whether seniors are transported to where children are or vice versa. Related barriers include the costs of transportation, the lack of seniors/youth facilities in nearby locations, and the reluctance of some participants to travel long distances in order to attend the program. Second, the timing or scheduling of intergenerational programs can be problematic, since youth are in school during the daytime, which is when seniors are most available to attend such programs. Third, language or culture can be barriers when connecting participants from different cultures. Fourth, the safety of both youth and senior program participants, including liability and insurance issues, is a concern to organizations. Finally, the physical and/or emotional health of seniors, including mobility, may impact their ability to participate in intergenerational programs and activities.

Several barriers were also identified related to the skills, attitudes and knowledge of organizations, staff, and participants in relation to intergenerational programs. For example, creating interest in intergenerational programs among organizations, staff, and potential youth/senior participants is an ongoing challenge. In addition, organizations need to be aware of

and believe in the potential benefits of intergenerational programs, as well as be willing to commit to the development of such programs. Organizational preconceptions about such programs, such as the belief that intergenerational programs don't work, as well as fear (e.g., of failure, of the unknown), need to be addressed. Additional organizational issues include the need to network, collaborate, and/or partner with other organizations to offer intergenerational programs; being informed about programs and resources that currently exist; and creating awareness of intergenerational programs offered by the organization. Participants concluded that both youth and seniors' organizations need to recognize the potential benefits of intergenerational programs.

Furthermore, participants reported that myths and negative attitudes towards youth and seniors exist among staff and organizations, which can act as barriers to offering intergenerational programs. Such negative attitudes include the belief that youth are irresponsible, noisy, lack respect for elders, and need close supervision. In a related vein, successful intergenerational programs require the knowledge, skills, comfort, attitudes, and commitment of staff to work effectively with different generations. For example, staff need to be creative in developing programs that can engage and be manageable for both children/youth and seniors, promote purposeful interactions, and value the contribution of both seniors and youth.

Finally, negative attitudes among participants themselves can act as barriers to their motivation, willingness, and commitment to participate in intergenerational programs. This includes myths and stereotypes; fear; and a lack of mutual understanding, comfort, and respect. Fostering awareness, understanding, skills, and confidence among youth and seniors in interacting positively and effectively with each other is also needed. In short, it is clear that there

are multiple barriers to implementing intergenerational programs at organizational, staff, and participant levels.

### *The Future of Intergenerational Programs*

Forty-one percent (41%) of all participants reported that their organization is planning to offer additional intergenerational programs in the future. However, only about half (52%) of these participants articulated specific plans for offering intergenerational programs. A wide range of ideas and plans for intergenerational programs emerged, including recreational and educational programs. Furthermore, participants from organizations that already offered intergenerational programs were more likely to report that their organization planned to offer additional intergenerational programs in the future than organizations who did not offer such programs (66% compared to 24%). Over half (53%) of participants also said they would like to see additional intergenerational programs offered in the city. Again, participants articulated a wide range of ideas for what they would like to see in terms of programming.

Finally, there was considerable interest among participants in being part of an intergenerational programming network. In fact, 81% consented to be contacted at a later date by the sponsors about networking opportunities. These participants represented a wide range of youth and seniors' organizations.

### Discussion

Current literature suggests that there is an increased interest in intergenerational programming around the world as the elderly population grows and the generation gap between youth and seniors increases (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000; Newman, 2003). This interest in intergenerational programming was evident in the current study. First, participants were found

to be generally knowledgeable about what intergenerational programs are. The broad understanding of the term as programs that bring together different or multiple generations of age groups (e.g., children, youth, adults, and seniors) is consistent with the evolution of the term and the current definitions found in the literature. However, there may be a need for increased awareness about the particular goals of intergenerational programs in promoting cooperation, interaction, or exchange between the generations.

Second, the interest in intergenerational programs was evident in the high percentage of organizations which were already offering intergenerational programs, program components, or events at the time of the study. While these programs were diverse and appeared to represent three of the four types of intergenerational programs identified in the literature (Centre for Intergenerational Practice, n.d.; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000), efforts to categorize specific programs were not made due to the difficulty in doing so with the limited information gathered about existing programs. Still, these programs were perceived by participants to be successful in engaging and benefiting both seniors and youth.

Finally, there was a perceived need for, or at least recognition of the potential benefits of, offering additional intergenerational programs. For example, a number of participants reported that not enough intergenerational programs currently exist in the city. Respondents also called for a more diverse range of intergenerational programming in a wide range of settings, as well as increased involvement by seniors and youth. Many of the participants also expressed interest in becoming involved in intergenerational programming in the future. This was evident in participants' ideas or plans for future program offerings, as well as their interest in networking, building connections, developing partnerships, and sharing resources with others interested in intergenerational programming.

The findings also suggest that despite this high level of interest, there exist multiple barriers to intergenerational programming that need to be addressed in order for such programs to flourish. For example, greater awareness about existing intergenerational programs and the benefits of such programs is needed among organizations that offer services to seniors and youth, and among the general public. Barriers related to resources; accessibility; and knowledge, skills and attitudes among staff, participants, and the general public also need to be addressed. In addition, there appears to be a need for leadership in the area of intergenerational programs, particularly in supporting organizations to overcome barriers and to develop the skills, commitment, connections, and resources to successfully offer intergenerational programs in the future.

#### Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

While a great deal has been written about the nature and benefits of intergenerational programs and information is available about specific programs, very little research has been conducted about the availability of programs in particular communities or cities. As a result, service users and providers have little knowledge about what programs are currently available. This lack of knowledge can result in consumers under-utilizing services and providers duplicating services. One of the ways in which this study contributes to practice is by developing a public resource list (available from the authors) which can be updated annually. This idea could be replicated in other cities to increase awareness of and access to intergenerational programs.

In addition, the results of this study provide insight into barriers, facilitators, success indicators, and gaps which can help to inform future programming decisions and better ensure that a best practices approach is taken to program development. This study also set the stage for creating an intergenerational programming network. Indeed, the majority of participants

consented to be contacted at a later date by the sponsors about networking activities. In response to this demand, the first Calgary based network event was held in 2006. Such a network can help enhance practice through knowledge exchange and transfer and by facilitating collaboration.

Participants' reference to various barriers at the community and government level as well as the organizational level suggest that policy makers need to have a better understanding of the benefits and identified challenges related to intergenerational programs to help create an environment which fosters the development and delivery of such programs in the community.

Finally, two major limitations can be identified in the current study which can provide the basis for further study. First, it is clear that the scope of the study was limited in the definition that was used (i.e., only included programs for seniors and children/youth), the lack of inclusion of schools in the sample, and the focus on only one city in Canada. Future studies are needed in different parts of the world to identify both unique and common issues related to the development and implementation of intergenerational programs. In addition, future studies should explore issues such as barriers and gaps in more depth to increase the knowledge base in this area. Both quantitative and qualitative studies are needed, as well as evaluations of existing programs. It is hoped that this knowledge will help intergenerational programs thrive and thus contribute to fulfilling the potential for such programs to benefit seniors, youth, and communities.

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Table 1

*Identified Intergenerational Programs*

Intergenerational Programs Identified by Participants	Programs (n=71)
Ongoing programs with a primary intergenerational focus or goal	36 (51%)
Programs which have an intergenerational component as a secondary focus or goal	16 (22%)
Intergenerational event(s), but not ongoing programs	15 (21%)
Not intergenerational programs according to the revised definition of the study	4 (6%)

Table 2

*Overlaps, Gaps and Barriers to Offering Intergenerational Programming (IGP)*

	Organizations that offer IGPs (n = 44)	Organizations that do not offer IGPs (n = 63)	All organizations (n = 107)
<i>What are the overlaps in IGP in the city?</i>			
Don't know/no answer	24 (54%)	49 (78%)	73 (68%)
No overlaps exist	14 (32%)	8 (13%)	22 (21%)
Overlaps identified	6 (14%)	6 (9%)	12 (11%)
<i>What are the gaps in IGP in the city?<sup>a</sup></i>			
Don't know/no answer	12 (27%)	28 (44%)	40 (37%)
Awareness of existing IGPs	10 (23%)	9 (14%)	19 (18%)
Need for more IGPs	9 (20%)	12 (19%)	21 (20%)
More involvement by seniors and children/youth in IGPs	3 (7%)	8 (13%)	11 (10%)
Networking among organizations	6 (14%)	4 (6%)	10 (9%)
<i>What are the barriers to offering IGPs?<sup>a</sup></i>			
Resources	21 (48%)	23 (37%)	44 (41%)
Accessibility	14 (32%)	16 (25%)	28 (26%)
Knowledge/skills/attitudes	21 (48%)	38 (60%)	59 (55%)
Don't know	3 (7%)	4 (6%)	7 (7%)

<sup>a</sup> Multiple gaps/barriers were identified by some respondents