

Aging and Ageism in Higher Education

Suggestions for Improving Learning Opportunities— Online and Otherwise—for Older Adults

Frances Chapman

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Abstract

By 2030, 72 million baby boomers will be reaching retirement age. Since people are living longer and healthier lives, some may want to continue their schooling. One major reason why older people decide against continuing their education is because of ageist attitudes. Administrations across the country must make changes, and quickly, so that older people feel comfortable and welcomed.

This article suggests ways to do that, such as training graduate assistants to address specific needs, technological and otherwise, of this new segment of the student population; include ageism in orientation materials, side by side with other types of discrimination that are not tolerated; and choose older adults who have already successfully navigated the educational system to be trained as mentors to new students.

When I was accepted into the Master of Arts in English program at Clemson University in 2020, I was 58 years old. My brother-in-law, a tenured professor at Virginia Tech who has served on committees that choose whom to accept and whom to reject in graduate programs, counseled me on how to write the application and warned me of what I might encounter if I was accepted. “Keep your head up,” George said. “Don’t let them hurt your feelings. Let your work speak for itself. Eventually, you’ll earn their respect.”

I earned that degree in May 2022, when I was 60, and immediately applied for admission into Clemson’s Rhetorics, Communication and Information Design PhD program. My two years in the master’s program, along with several years working in elder care, showed me that George had been right. I knew what I wanted to study and write about for my doctoral dissertation: ageism, with specific emphasis on how college campuses could be a focal point for changing life dramatically for older adults—changes that would ultimately be felt globally.

Growing older is not the issue. The issue is the pervasive, negative attitude toward people who are growing older. Ageism is an insidious prejudice that many have never heard of, even though it impacts more people than racism, sexism, and any of the other forms of discrimination we hear about daily. This is because every single person who lives long enough will be impacted by it. The situation is becoming more urgent as the baby boomer generation (those born between 1946-1964) are reaching retirement age. By the year 2030, there will be nearly 72 million boomers retiring (DiSilvestro, 2013). DiSilvestro further explains in the same essay that baby boomers will “constitute the largest segment of the population shift of adults 65 and older in the next 40 years. This group is projected to grow from 40.2 million in 2010 to 72 million in 2030 and a remarkable 88.5 million in 2050.”

This is important to higher education institutions because people are living far longer, healthier lives than ever before. When they reach retirement age, many do not want to retire at all, or if they do, they want to continue being active. For many, this may mean more schooling, either for work or for pleasure. For me, even though I was not retired, I was in a position professionally that I wanted to do something new, something that would bring me joy. I had already worked two full careers—one in public affairs and communications in the nuclear industry and the other as a writer of three faith-based creative nonfiction books—and I wanted to share my knowledge and skills with young people while learning new things myself and ultimately coming away with a Clemson degree and ring.

Five semesters as an older adult in a graduate program in a high-profile institution of higher learning have taught me some important things that other older adults might find helpful as they embark on this journey.

1. My brother-in-law was right. Ageism is alive and well on college campuses. Younger people’s initial impression of older adults overwhelmingly is, “What’s *she* doing here?” It takes time for them to know you as a person, not a person with wrinkles. They will avoid you. They won’t listen to you in class because they can’t imagine that you might say something important. This, unfortunately, includes both students and professors. Your grades may,

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in fact, suffer when young professors don't respect what you have to offer. Like my brother-in-law said, keep your head up and let your work speak for itself.

2. Technology will be a challenge. You will likely have both in-person classes and online classes, and at first it will seem overwhelming. For me it was even more so, because my admission to Clemson coincided with the COVID shutdown. I went from expecting to do nearly everything in person to doing absolutely everything online, including holding and attending classes using something called Zoom, which I had never heard of and had to learn from scratch. While Clemson's IT support staff were kind and helpful, they were understandably overwhelmed. And, as you continue in your studies, it will only get more challenging as you are asked to do things online that are completely new.

3. More training and support are needed. This is the gist of my argument here, and I will explain why in some detail. I suggest that as the population of older adult students grows, which it inevitably will, graduate assistants be trained to address the specific needs of this new segment of the student population. Second, I suggest that ageism be recognized in orientation materials as the widespread discrimination that it is, along with racism, sexism, and others. This way, as young adults make their way through their college careers, they understand better that this form of discrimination is as real and devastating as any other. This training should be mandatory for students and professors alike. Finally, I suggest that selected older adults who have successfully navigated the system be retained as mentors to new students who are feeling just as overwhelmed as I was in 2020.

Diana Amundsen spells it out clearly: "Higher education must attract and retain a mounting cohort of students who have typically been 'on the margins,' particularly indigenous and older students . . . meeting their needs calls for innovation and flexibility to address social justice issues of inclusion to serve their communities more fully" (2021). Later in the same article, she concludes, "To shift beyond the lag requires organizations to become agile, to train more higher education staff and to reduce attitudinal barriers." Finally, DiSilvestro cites attitudinal barriers, specifically ageism on college campuses, as a major reason why older adults do not return to school (2013). It is now within the power of those of us currently in academics to change all of that for the better.

A Baseline for Online Proficiency

Older adults who might wish to pursue additional education are, for the most part, already functioning online. In a 2014 study, Kerryellen G. Vroman et al. report that while most older adults are not as technologically accomplished as their younger counterparts, they routinely use email, smartphones, and social media. They successfully shop and bank online. These skills set them up well to be able to complete online processes and participate in online classes.

The biggest problem, Vroman reports, is that older adults tend to underestimate their own knowledge and capabilities, which is a sad result of the persistent, pervasive ageist attitudes in our society.

"Researchers . . . argue that the principal barrier to information communication technology adoption is not related to a skill deficit, but rather due to negative attitudes stemming from fear, anxiety, and a lack of motivation" (2014). She hypothesizes that those most likely to become proficient in use of information technology will be motivated by higher education, new pathways to social connections, and prior positive experiences.

All of these are descriptive of older adults who decide to further their education. To build on that foundation, universities need to meet older adults where they are and work with them to ensure they have, and are comfortable with, the online literacy they will need to be successful. Because no matter what program they choose or which classes they register for, online learning will be a part of it.

Progress is Being Made Toward Inclusion

Some institutions of higher education are making progress in establishing a friendly, welcoming environment for older adults, but most of those offer only audit programs or other non-credit options. This is a step in the right direction, but it needs to be broader to offer more support to those who wish to pursue programs for credit, toward a specific goal.

According to DiSilvestro, one of these is the Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, which is headquartered in San Francisco and operates on the campuses of 116 institutes of higher learning from Maine to Hawaii and Alaska (2013). It offers non-credit programs, many of which are organized by the students themselves. “Hundreds of older students have returned to education, and they learn about different topics, from English literature to political science and modern art,” DiSilvestro writes. Some programs have been operating for as long as 25 years.

Indiana University offers both a non-credit program called Mini University, which is a weeklong summer residential learning experience that sells out every year and a for-credit program in the form of a Bachelor of General Studies Degree (2013). The degree program is offered at a different campus, away from Bloomington. It has no major; it is an interdisciplinary degree that allows students to develop their own plans of study to meet their individual goals.

A third example is the overarching Age Friendly University (AFU) initiative, which was launched in 2012. The AFU began its groundbreaking work when partners met at Dublin City University “to discuss and identify how institutions of higher education can positively respond to the needs of a growing older adult population” (Dauenhauer et al., 2021). The group came up with ten principles for an AFU, which are listed on Dublin City University’s website at <https://www.dcu.ie/agefriendly/principles-age-friendly-university:>

1. To encourage the participation of older adults in all the core activities of the university, including educational and research programs
2. To promote personal and career development in the second half of life and to support those who wish to pursue second careers
3. To recognize the range of educational needs of older adults (from those who were early school-leavers through those who wish to pursue masters or PhD qualifications)
4. To promote intergenerational learning to facilitate the reciprocal sharing of expertise between learners of all ages
5. To widen access to online educational opportunities for older adults to ensure a diversity of routes to participation
6. To ensure that the university’s research agenda is informed by the needs of an aging society and to promote public discourse on how higher education can better respond to the varied interests and needs of older adults

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7. To increase the understanding of students of the longevity dividend and the increasing complexity and richness that aging brings to our society
8. To enhance access for older adults to the university's range of health and wellness programs and its arts and cultural activities
9. To engage actively in the university's own retired community
10. To ensure regular dialogue with organizations representing the interests of the aging population (2020).

Talmage et al. (2016) correctly and astutely point out that “achieving a university that is age-friendly in practice would be nothing less than a cultural transformation at most higher education institutions.” Many universities take it one step at a time, working toward meeting one or two of the 10 guiding principles rather than trying to do them all at once (Dauenhauer).

These steps are all positive and promising, but much more needs to be done at every college and university to make them a reality. Consistent progress needs to be made, as with all areas where shortcomings exist, and ground needs to be made up. Somewhere in their policy statements, most institutions of higher learning state that the university is committed to equal opportunity for everyone, and go on to list a litany of traits including race, sex, color, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Somewhere in there they might mention age. Every university should say it, mean it, and stand behind it. They should do their due diligence, just like they would with any other segment of the population, to ensure older adults suffer no discrimination and feel welcome and safe.

But to fix it, we have to understand how deep it goes and how damaging it is.

The Issue Goes Deep

The reality is that ageism goes very deep into our culture, bedrock deep. So deep we do not even realize it is there. It is common to make gentle fun of older people, to tease them and tell them they are “over the hill,” or joke about having “senior moments.” You hang black balloons and crepe paper when they reach milestone birthdays, and you buy them cards that joke about their failing eyesight and gastrointestinal issues. It is easy for them to be persuaded that they are over the hill or worse, as they are constantly subjected to ads and programming that make being an older person something to be dreaded. With its constant ads for wrinkle creams, hair dyes, and anti-aging masks, mass media is not only making mature adults feel somehow “less than,” but it is also steering the entire population to think ignoring, belittling, or even overtly mistreating older adults is acceptable. Worse, older adults do not even realize that they are being discriminated against because it has all been so gradual. Even they believe the stereotype that older people are sick, weak, or senile (Palmore, 2015), and this self-imposed degradation can ultimately contribute to a decline in their emotional, mental and physical health. What you believe has a dramatic effect on what actually is.

Even the greeting card you choose can have a drastic effect. Becoming a year older is a bad thing, a step closer to the grave. And, evidently, it's funny.

Todd Nelson draws the parallel that there are no cards expressing sympathy that you are a mother, or that you are a woman, or that you are eighteen. “Older people,” he writes in *The Age of Ageism*, “are told they are not valued, they are leeching off society, they are useless, and that they should just die already” (2016). In a 2020

article in the *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, Stuart Goosey proposed that ageism be listed as a hate crime with the same status as racism and misogyny.

Cultural critic and ageism expert Margaret Morganroth Gullette, a writer and researcher in the field of age studies, and a resident scholar at Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center in Massachusetts, calls tasteless jokes and unfunny greeting cards a form of microaggression. She cites a 2001 survey by Erdman Palmore in which it was reported that the most frequent kind of prejudice, reported by 58 percent of respondents, was being told a joke that pokes fun at older people (Gullette, 2017). Gullette explains that aging is not the issue. Ageism is. "Aging," she says in *Ending Ageism, or How Not to Shoot Old People*, "is the process that serves as the trigger for ageism."

Gullette reports in her blog, "Fight Ageism by Retiring the Offensive Metaphor, 'Getting Old,'" that a study on Facebook groups about aging, with a combined 25,000 members, found that "74 percent 'vilified' elders, and 37 percent would like to ban them from public activities like driving or shopping." On election night, in response to a friend's Facebook post, a young person said that people with gray hair shouldn't be allowed to vote.

Palmore suggests actions aimed at eliminating microaggressions, although he does not call it that. His suggestions:

- Educate oneself and others on the facts on ageism
- Avoid ageist jokes and birthday cards
- Avoid ageist terms such as "old coot" and "old maid"
- Avoid ageist language, which equates old age with sickness and senescence or equating youth with vigor and health
- Write letters to editors protesting ageist articles and policies
- Vote for candidates who oppose ageism (873) (2015)

A recent example of doing something like this appeared in a blog written by Gullette, in which she noticed an employee in a café was wearing a shirt that said, "Fresh never gets old" (*Fight Ageism by Retiring the Offensive Metaphor, 'Getting Old'*). She wrote to the firm that owns the café, a firm that she says is known for its social justice agenda, which claims to be wholesome in its stance against racism, sexism, homophobia and trans bias, and said that the same stance ought to be extended to ageism as well. They responded that the shirt was being pulled off the company's ordering website and thanked her for bringing the issue to their attention. "One down," she writes in her blog. "But, Whac-A-Mole."

The Insidious Danger of Microaggressions

The danger of microaggressions, other than they are devastating on an older person's confidence and mental health, is that they turn into macroaggressions, which can be physically dangerous. Gullette tells stories about a woman walking on the sidewalk and being called an "old hag" by a young man riding his bicycle past her, plowing his way among the pedestrians. He deemed it her fault that she nearly got run over because he, of course, had more right to the sidewalk on his bike than she did on her feet (2017). Women as young as fifty, professional women who are as physically fit and spry as anyone, find themselves having to get off the sidewalk because younger people, mostly men, bump into them. A male friend of Gullette's, she writes, found himself plowed into from behind in a subway stairwell.

This is where microaggressions—small, hurtful things like tasteless jokes and birthday cards—turn into

macroaggressions. “Ageism,” Gullette says, “can no longer be ignored when it threatens people with palpable violence” (2017).

Further insight is provided by Robert M. Butler, who first coined the term “age-ism [sic]” in 1969. “Ageism,” says Butler, “reflects a deep-seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, uselessness, and death” (Butler, 1969). Butler also notes that “ageism is reflected in the taunting remarks about ‘old fogeys’ [which we now know is a microaggression], and the special vulnerability of the elderly to muggings and robberies [which we now know are macroaggressions], in age discrimination in employment independent of individual competence, and in the probable inequities in the allocation of research funds.”

Butler wrote this in 1969 and it is eerily and sadly still accurate. Only in the last seven or eight years has serious work begun to be accomplished on the issue. Books are being written and studies are being done. New scholars have emerged. Physicians specializing in geriatrics are desperately needed to keep up with the burgeoning influx, with more and more piling on in the next few years, but that will take time. And time is short.

Why Should We Care?

We should care because this affects everyone on the planet, in one way or another. Older people are already being profoundly affected and change will be slow. Middle-aged people are in the position of caring for both the young and the old, which is burdensome and stressful. Too often, younger people are the worst perpetrators. But they are the ones who have the power to make a difference if they are educated properly to weed out ageism where they see it. In her blog “Ageism Ignores and Insults the Competence of Adults,” Gullette calls these people “Young Judges,” and describes them as having “absorbed too much of the magnificent, imaginary power conferred on them by the Western world’s cult of youth and masculine domination” (2018). Effective education, from elementary schooling on through undergraduates in college, can help. This is where my suggestions for the role of colleges and universities as agents of change come in.

We should care because these are our parents, our grandparents, our history. We are their legacy. We should care because when they are gone, they are gone, and regret is a terrible thing. And then the next generation will step into this awful, repeating cycle.

We can begin to rectify this situation by being more cognizant of how we are treating older people and how it comes across to them. By being more sensitive, we can slowly improve their perceptions of themselves, improve their health situation, and—gradually—address the large situation in which we find ourselves.



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Meet the Author

Frances Chapman is a PhD student in Clemson University's Rhetorics, Communication and Information Design program. She is a current copy editor for Parlor Press and has additional past experience ghost writing, editing and proofreading books for her own company, Write Right Communications. She also has nearly thirty years of experience in journalism and in communications for the nuclear industry and has written and published three creative nonfiction books.

Fran holds a Bachelor of Arts in English, Writing Emphasis, from Columbia College; a Master of Arts in Teaching, English emphasis, from the University of South Carolina; and a Master of Arts in English from Clemson University. In her role as a PhD student at Clemson, she teaches composition and rhetoric to thirty-eight students per semester, with a goal of teaching them writing skills that they will use for the rest of their lives, not only for college.