

LEGACY BUILDERS: CONNECTING GENERATIONS FOR IMPACTFUL COLLABORATION

University of Waterloo

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Higher education institutions continue to be called upon to adjust to the evolving student demographics and life experiences of an increasingly diverse student community. It is critical that educators consider the value of age inclusivity, a frequently overlooked element of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as a feature of these efforts.¹ Factors driving the need for age inclusivity in higher education include changing demographics, longer working lifespans, and a focus on engagement and well-being.² Amidst these factors, traditionally age-segregated universities and colleges are being called upon to evolve and serve students of all ages.³

The University of Waterloo is developing intergenerational work-integrated learning programming to explore the benefits and opportunities associated with age-integrated learning and collaboration. We're testing the concept of engaging students with what we refer to as "evolvers" – those transitioning out of the first chapter of their careers into a second chapter and/or into retirement. These evolvers are interested in exploring their purpose and learning from other evolvers as well as engaging with those in different generations in pursuit of common interests through work-integrated learning.

This programming is innovative because it offers the opportunity to leverage the capacities and expertise of different generations. With intergenerational collaboration and social innovation at its core, it ensures not only that the evolvers are positively impacted but also that students gain a new perspective about their elders and that communities are positively impacted through projects developed through the collaboration of evolvers and students.

Research tells us that for an aging population, there is a risk of diminished self-trust, the experience of a 'post-retirement void,' and anxiety. This demographic is also searching for meaningful engagement in society (Osborne, 2012). The goal of engaging evolvers in intergenerational programming is to ensure they effectively navigate the challenges posed by this transition, minimizing the risk of social exclusion.

Having a sense of purpose, building connections with peers and the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to one's community through intergenerational collaboration is an important factor when it comes to preventing social isolation and protecting against negative outcomes for all age groups (Dougherty et al., 2018). As evolvers navigate mid to late career transitions or into retirement, they face a loss of their identity as "workers" as well as a variety of other challenges including the experience of a 'post-retirement void' and anxiety (Osborne, 2012). As a result, ensuring that this cohort finds a new

¹ Finkelstein, R. (2021, October 13). *Future Proof: Age-Inclusive Education* [YouTube recording].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sT44mVyPZYA&t=14s>

² The Gerontological Society of America. (2019). Higher Education and Aging: The Age-Friendly Movement—Building the Case for Age Inclusivity. *What's Hot: A Newsletter of The Gerontological Society of America*.

³ Morrow-Howell, N., Lawlor, E. F., Macias, E. S., Swinford, E., & Brandt, J. (2020). Making the Case for Age-Diverse Universities. *The Gerontologist*, 60(7), 1187–1193.

sense of purpose and meaning, as well as establishes new social connections both during and after this time of transition, is essential for promoting healthy aging.

In addition to facing this time of transition, evolvers in Canada also experience overwhelming ageism. According to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s Global Report on Ageism, negative stereotypes about older people lead to their abilities being devalued as well as opportunities for meaningful contribution and having a sense of purpose being compromised (World Health Organization, 2021). As outlined in the WHO's report, the separation of seniors from those of other ages in our society, and a lack of opportunity for diverse age cohorts to collaborate only exacerbates ageism (World Health Organization, 2021).

It is increasingly being recognized that we will need to tap into the knowledge, expertise and lived experience of evolvers if we hope to ensure our communities thrive in this new era. We can no longer afford to leave the abilities and knowledge of this cohort on the sidelines. We need evolvers to meaningfully contribute to our communities in a time of rapid change and increasing complexity. The good news is that tapping into the unique abilities of evolvers not only benefits communities but also decreases social isolation, has long-term health benefits for seniors (World Health Organization, 2021) and has the potential to offer wisdom and mentoring for youth who are developing skills to successfully initiate their careers. Ensuring that there are opportunities for evolvers to contribute their knowledge and expertise and that these contributions are valued benefits an aging population and the communities they belong to.

Universities have traditionally been viewed as places where young people learn. But in an era where we now change jobs and careers multiple times throughout our lives and in a time when demographics are shifting, this needs to change. Rather than contributing to age segregation, which separates young people from adults and older adults and only exacerbates ageism while decreasing opportunities for meaningful contribution (World Health Organization, 2021), universities must reinvent themselves as places for lifelong, age-integrated learning which serves learners of all ages (Morrow-Howell et al., 2020). As the University of Waterloo has envisioned this programming, we have benefited from partnerships with organizations in the United States who have been engaged in this type of work for a number of years. CoGenerate (<https://cogenerate.org/>) is an organization that has been bringing generations together for over 25 years posing the question: "What if older and younger generations worked together to solve the problems that no generation can solve alone?". The Nexel Collaborative (<https://www.thenexel.org/>) is a global alliance of higher education institutions, primarily in the United States, that are offering midlife transition programs. Combining these two areas of focus and building on the strengths of the University of Waterloo, the programming we have envisioned focuses on bringing generations together for social innovation through work-integrated learning. The goal is to

build on Waterloo's long history as leaders in co-operative education and innovation with the goal of transforming the university into a place where evolvers and young people will come together in intergenerational teams to solve complex social problems.

Our prototype for this programming includes five components:

1. Partnership development and setting a common agenda among collective impact partners;
2. Program and action research design and development;
3. Program and action research implementation;
4. Innovative solutions implementation; and
5. Knowledge dissemination and program sustainability.

Building on the expertise of University of Waterloo's Co-operative and Experiential Education, Work-Learn Institute (<https://uwaterloo.ca/work-learn-institute/>), GreenHouse social innovation incubator at United College (<https://uwaterloo.ca/united-college/greenhouse>), and the Youth & Innovation Project at the University of Waterloo (<https://uwaterloo.ca/youth-and-innovation/>), the goal is to design a program bringing together evolvers and Waterloo students to foster meaningful relationships, learn and develop real-world relevant solutions.

One of the opportunities to build on existing programming at Waterloo includes expanding on the WE Accelerate program, which helps undergraduate university students looking for their first co-op work term develop in-demand skills and gain experience through team-based real-world problem-solving. Originally created as an alternative to a first work term co-op job during the pandemic, WE Accelerate proved highly successful in increasing students' work readiness, career clarity, and a sense of purpose. The program was so successful that it has continued and been expanded post-pandemic.

In fall 2023, a pilot was run where Co-operative and Experiential Education and GreenHouse's [Changemaker Labs for Green Youth](#) program at United College teamed up to host a design sprint to encourage intergenerational collaboration on social innovation challenges. The area of focus for the pilot was selected with the Region of Waterloo as part of its climate action strategy. The six-week design sprint engaged post-secondary students and evolvers to collaboratively build solutions to tackle food insecurity for youth and culminated in presentations with Waterloo region stakeholders. The expected benefits of the pilot include fostering lifelong learning; enabling powerful collaboration across generations and disciplines with bi-directional mentorship; making real change through the curation of immersive social innovation challenges within the community; and encouraging self-discovery for both students and evolvers in ways that support their path for impact.

The pilot worked to build meaningful connections united around common goals, bring equity to the interactions across generations, catalyze solutions to problems that will have meaningful local impact, and embrace the perspectives of past, present and future. We found that participants in the pilot demonstrated an openness and generosity of spirit, were willing to learn and make space for each other, and connections across generations that wouldn't have existed otherwise. In multiple cases, student teams considered aspects of intergenerational collaboration as part of their solutions even without the direct influence of an evolver present in their group. These building blocks for the pilot were a result of a research partnership between the Work-Learn Institute, CoGenerate and the Youth Innovation Project.

Through a Participatory Action Research approach, a framework for intergenerational collaboration was developed. The goal of the work was to identify key elements important in the design of programming that bring together intergenerational teams. While numerous frameworks describe best practices for building effective teams, the intergenerational collaboration framework (<https://uwaterloo.ca/associate-provost-co-operative-and-experiential-education/harnessing-power-intergenerational-collaboration-social-good>) is intended to isolate the elements specifically related to bringing generations together for social good. This framework aims to build upon the established principles of collaboration and group dynamics by adding practical principles tailored specifically to support age-diverse groups in coming together to make a positive impact in the world. It is designed to assist individuals who recognize the potential of cogeneration and seek practical principles to apply this powerful methodology in their social impact work. There are four key principles in this framework to design collaborative experiences that harness the power of generations coming together for social impact:

- **Unite around common purpose:** a shared purpose sparks genuine interest in collaborating across generations to make a positive, collective impact.
- **Build meaningful connection:** an openness to connect with others in a meaningful way and willingness to be vulnerable as relationships are established across generations.
- **Strive to equalize power:** with the widespread existence of systemic inequity, it is crucial to establish supportive settings in which all participants have a share of the group's collective power and that facilitate the exchange of experience, knowledge and expertise across generational boundaries .
- **Embrace the perspectives of past, present and future:** create an environment in which participants can perceive themselves, others, systems and the world on a wider time scale than their personal experience.

Our current work is focused on testing this framework in intergenerational collaboration spaces and developing the tools and practices to support each of these four pillars.

In a second pilot, we offered a virtual workshop intended to support a cohort of evolvers in exploring what their next chapter might look like with intention and purpose using a framework⁴ adapted from the work done with Waterloo's undergraduate and graduate students. The two-part workshop allowed participants to:

- Articulate their values and the needs for their next chapter and take stock of their values to establish boundaries that help maintain them as they move forward into their next chapter.
- Evaluate their skills and experiences, identify which skills they enjoy using and applying, and explore what motivates their interests.
- Take what they learned about their values, needs and skills and draft a blueprint for their next chapter in life.
- Reflect on their interests, skills and values and consider how they might align with the possibilities they're exploring for their next chapter.
- Test the waters with a short-term experiment to see if your blueprint for your next chapter brings you joy.
- Explore meaningful opportunities to connect with and contribute to the learning journey of students at the University of Waterloo as well as the broader community.

In addition to the time for reflection and planning, participants noted that they appreciated the opportunity to connect with people they wouldn't otherwise have had the opportunity to meet and who are also exploring what's next for them.

There is a significant opportunity for higher education institutions in Canada to contribute to intergenerational volunteerism. In the case of the work that we are doing, it involves three pillars: Purpose, Proximity and Problem Solving. Through an investigation of *purpose*, traditionally aged students as well as evolvers are able to identify the skills and experiences they have and consider the areas where they would like to make an impact. *Proximity* means bringing generations together for them to learn from one another and be exposed to topics of mutual interest. And the final pillar of *problem solving* is where generations collaborate to solve problems with social impact that one generation alone cannot solve. The vision we have is to deliver programming that unlocks the untapped

⁴ McRae, N., & Woodside, J. (2023). Learning ecosystems: Enhancing student understanding and agency through work-integrated learning. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Work-Integrated Learning* (pp. 381-394). Routledge.

human capital of evolvers for social impact and volunteerism while at the same time engaging the youth population in volunteerism in a new way.

Summary of recommendations

The type of programming being envisioned at Waterloo can be scaled but will require funding to do so. Post-secondary institutions have limited funds to invest in building new programs, so recommendations for funding include:


- development and evaluation of programs like the one being developed at Waterloo which includes elements of “purpose” programming to create pathways into higher education programs for evolvers and then enables them to engage in intergenerational collaboration with younger generations in support of social impact that is personally meaningful.
- building a collaborative in Canada, like the Nexel Collaborative for higher education institutions to learn from one another to build their own versions of this programming; Canada is viewed as a global leader in work-integrated learning, and there is an opportunity to build on that leadership with programming that supports a wide range of ages in pursuit of social impact.
- supporting research to examine the longer-term impacts of this programming on the participants and community organizations.
- building a better understanding of how post-secondary institutions can engage with the non-profit sector. One key area is identifying current issues and innovation challenges with the non-profit sector. This would require convening and building a collaborative with groups such as Volunteer Canada and Ontario Non-Profit Network where the work of students and evolvers can have a more direct impact on meeting some of the innovation challenges facing the sector.
- aligned with Imagine Canada’s policy priorities, there is a need for one area of government to provide oversight and data for effective decision-making:

<https://www.imaginecanada.ca/en/policy-priority/home-in-government>.

Organizational description

The University of Waterloo, located in Waterloo, Ontario, is a leading global research-intensive university, renowned for entrepreneurship and innovation, providing co-op and work-integrated learning at scale with impact. We are a community of curious, collaborative, innovative and entrepreneurial problem-solvers and leaders who seek to understand and identify equitable and sustainable solutions for the future of humanity and our planet. More information can be found at

<https://uwaterloo.ca/waterloo-100/>.



What sets the University of Waterloo apart is its world-renowned co-operative education (co-op) program, which allows students to integrate work terms into their academic studies. This cooperative education model is one of the largest and most successful in the world, providing students with practical experience and industry connections that enhance their employability upon graduation. This emphasis on experiential learning is a key factor in the university's reputation for producing graduates who are well-prepared for the workforce.

With a vast alumni network exceeding 230,000, the University of Waterloo has a global reach, and its graduates have made significant contributions in various fields. This network provides valuable connections for initiatives such as this, ensuring a broad and influential support base.

The Youth & Innovation Project, GreenHouse @ United College, Work-Learn Institute, and Co-operative and Experiential Education at the University of Waterloo all have a strong history of partnering with not-for-profit and for-profit organizations, working together with these organizations to prepare students for the future of work. These organizations include over 8,000 employers who are actively recruiting co-op students to work with them from the University of Waterloo. Those leading this programming also have experience working directly with the Federal government in a variety of forms including as the leads on grants, contribution agreements and consulting projects with a variety of government departments including Employment and Social Development Canada, Global Affairs Canada and Environment and Climate Change Canada.