Imagine walking into a doctor’s office, but instead of addressing you, the doctor asks somebody else for your symptoms. Or going to the bank, and the manager provides a torrent of information, using only jargon and not caring how well you understand. Imagine telling a story but being constantly interrupted. Now recall the times over the past few years when you have had a hard time understanding someone because of face masks, and imagine how much harder it would be with a hearing impairment. Older adults face this every day. For elders to feel valued, these issues need to be addressed and the difficulties met with patience and understanding. This issue becomes even more prominent with the aging of the world’s population. Fifty years ago, life expectancy worldwide was less than 60 years; today it’s more than 72. In the US, this number is even higher, around 77 years. According to the WHO, the population aged 60 years and older will double by 2050. People are living longer, and the number of older adults is increasing. We need to make sure these people are being understood and valued.

In addition to the social responsibility of caring for every person, effective and respectful communication with elders has multiple practical benefits. In the medical setting, for example, good communication is associated with higher adherence to treatment, greater satisfaction with the therapy, and better outcomes (NIA/NIH). In other scenarios, respectful communication increases trust and collaboration, and avoids issues that arise from disagreements, such as planning a routine or ranking the importance of certain tasks.

My goal is to promote and foster a culture of care, respect, and understanding through effective and respectful communication with older adults. By addressing the lack of respect and understanding, I hope to bring peace to intergenerational relations. To do so, I will create a training program, in which the general population and those who interact with elders will learn more about respectful and effective communication. My desire is that all people will be valued, regardless of their age.

Project outline

The project consists of virtual and in-person components. The online module will consist of webinars, with recorded lectures. We will explore topics that increase understanding of the reality of aging and provide respectful and effective communication skills. Examples of classes are:

- Physical, cognitive, and psychological changes faced by older adults
- Proper forms of address versus terms and topics to avoid
- Effective communication (speed, use of jargon, how to phrase questions)
- Active listening skills and conducts to promote comfort, empathy, and trust
- Strategies to keep older adults engaged and support their goals and wishes

The in-person component involves workshops to further develop communication skills. Participants will watch the content (available online) together, with the benefit of discussing and sharing their view. Participants will practice the skills learned with activities, such as role playing. The workshops will promote community building, so people can share struggles, which is especially relevant for caregivers. The project will be offered to the general population at no cost, to guarantee accessibility. I want all those who interact with older adults (family members, caregivers, colleagues) to be part of a culture of care and acceptance. However, the project will be specially advertised to those who interact with seniors professionally, such as health-care professionals, senior homes’ employees, and volunteers for active life programs. We will provide certification as a way of encouraging participation from the perspective of professional development. Participants will mainly be recruited from doctors’ offices and other institutions (such as aging offices) focused on the elderly population. I expect 50 people to participate in the first in-person trainings over summer, and more people to engage with the content through the online platform.

I am a Psychology and Biology (Neuroscience) student, focusing on cognition and aging. I am also one of the leaders for the “Legacy Storytellers” project at Colby, a program where students connect with elders to learn about and document their life stories. The training curriculum will be developed taking into consideration topics I explored in different courses, such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience, medical ethics, and lifespan development, on extensive research, and on my experiences as a volunteer for “Legacy Storytellers”. Besides the theoretical content from classes and research, I plan to interview the elderly about their preferences and experiences with communication. To add more value to the curriculum, I will invite specialists to record talks on their topics of interest. I have already contacted two professors (Dr. Coane and Dr. Raag), who agreed to give talks on the cognitive changes associated with aging, developmental goals accompanying a fulfilling aging, and drawbacks of benevolent encounters (insulting behaviors resulting from good intentions) if the project goes forward. I will develop the course materials
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Colby College
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(videos for online component, and handouts for in-person workshops) before summer. Besides recording certain lectures, the partnering specialists will give feedback in the whole curriculum.

The online platform will increase accessibility regardless of physical location and beyond the end of summer. The initial curriculum will be exclusively in English. Nevertheless, I plan to partner with language departments at Colby and international institutions to translate the material and increase accessibility, after summer. Even though some struggles faced by the elders and some communication practices are common across cultures, this step will involve additional research to account for cultural sensitivities and norms. We will also work to make the in-person component continuous, expanding workshops to multiple locations. During summer 2023 the funds will be used to develop and launch the online platform, and to establish the first two in-person workshops as a model project expansion. Besides platform development costs, the funds will be used to cover costs of in-person trainings (e.g., meals, training materials, project divulgation). I will implement the first in-person workshops at Lehigh Valley, PA. More than 25% of Lehigh Valley’s population is aged 60 and older (Census, 2020), and the county is working on the wellbeing of its aging population. An Aging and Adult Services office was established, and a four-year plan developed to provide help, promote active-life, and improve access to healthy-living initiatives. This shows the county’s commitment to foster a culture of respect, which will facilitate the project’s initial phases. Besides the demographic rationale, I spend my college breaks at Lehigh, giving me continued access to the center and the possibility of collecting feedback and maintaining the program. I will stay in family-friends’ houses, reducing personal expenses and maximizing the resources directed to the project itself.

The costs to maintain the online platform and in-person training will be minimal after the initial establishment over summer. These costs can be covered through participants’ free-will donations, and through partnerships with senior homes, retirement villages, and other institutions. To guarantee the continuation of the in-person workshops after summer, and to enable expansion (i.e., conducting multiple workshops in distinct locations), we will model the trainings after a successful program established at Colby: Sexual Violence Prevention Training (SVP). All students are required to participate in in-person SVP training facilitated by other students. After completing the training, students can become certified facilitators. In our program, participants of the training will be able to sign-up to be a facilitator. After signing up, they will receive access to additional online modules on how to conduct workshops and how to establish the program in their preferred location. After completing these additional modules, participants will receive a “facilitator certificate,” and will be included in the facilitators network. This network will be in continual contact (through a group chat and monthly video-calls) to guarantee the widespread quality of the training and to help members with possible struggles. I will manage the trainings from a distance after summer, with the support of partnering organizations.

I expect to improve communication skills, leading to more positive interactions. I expect 50 people to participate in the first trainings over summer. Each person will interact with more than one older adult, so I expect at least 100 elders to feel more valued. I expect more people to do the online training, increasing the impact. I expect the population in general to collect benefits of learning from others. My aim is to bring peace to intergenerational relations, by encouraging respect, understanding, and care. By learning to value others, I expect each participant to bring peace to their relationship circle.

Project timeline

● Before summer: Curriculum development (online and in-person content), content recording, online platform development, establishment of partnerships, design of continuing recruiting and marketing, and organization of first in-person workshops (event planning, marketing, etc.). By starting before summer, I can address possible issues, such as low attendance, or higher development costs.
  ○ The Lehigh County Aging and Adult Services office expressed interest in the project, and we are working to define the structure of our partnership. I am also in contact with Lehigh’s Active Life institution, Health Network, and senior homes to work on possible partnerships.

● Week 1: Final adjustments with partners (in person), marketing efforts
● Week 2-4: First in-person workshops (spread through the 3 weeks, different groups)
● Week 5: Feedback and long-term improvements (Participants will be able to fill anonymous surveys to share the impact of the training and their suggestions. Their feedback will be
analyzed together with our partners, and the necessary adjustments will be made to ensure the sustainability of the project).

● After summer: Continual contact with partnering organizations about in-person workshops, oversight of online platform (number of users and feedback), and administration of anonymous surveys to elderly impacted by the project. Expansion of the program (different locations and languages).
  o One of the first expansion locations will be Maine, during the 2023-2024 academic year, because the state has a high aging population and I have the advantage of being on-site for college.