

# Pickleball Transcends the Generations in Southwest Indiana: A University and Area Agency on Aging Partnership Changing the Face of Aging

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## Abstract

An Intergenerational Pickleball tournament was designed to create a setting where older adults interact with undergraduate students, generating an intergenerational learning experience. Teams of older adults were recruited through the local Area Agency on Aging and paired with undergraduate students to provide an opportunity for older adults to share their love and knowledge of pickleball with a younger generation. The students interacted with active, older adults, and came away from the experience with a positive view of aging and physical fitness. Interdisciplinary approaches to this intergenerational experience brought both academic and community partners together to create a successful event.

Key Words: Intergenerational, interdisciplinary, university students, older adults

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## Introduction

The older adult population, defined as 65 years of age and older, is a growing segment within the United States (U.S.). Between 2000 and 2010, this portion of the population grew by 15.1 percent compared to the 9.7 percent growth of the total population (Werner & U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). It is estimated that 20 percent of the U.S. population will be aged 65 or older by the year 2030 (Werner & U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The growth in the older adult population may intensify feelings of ageism among younger age cohorts. Ageism, a term coined by Robert Butler in 1975, refers to prejudiced behaviors against older adults based on inaccurate stereotypes leading to unnecessary pain and isolation among elders (Butler, 1975). The older adult population is often viewed more negatively than the general population (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005; Krout & McKernan, 2007) and this may limit undergraduate students' career choices in the field of gerontology (Lovell, 2006). Intergenerational learning experiences which provide undergraduate students with exposure to healthy elders have been found to be successful in changing students' attitudes about aging and older adults (Anderson-Hanley, 1999; Moody, 2002).

A mid-size public university in collaboration with a local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) to offer an intergenerational pickleball tournament for undergraduate students and older adults. Created under the federal Older Americans Act in 1965, the AAA is a nationwide network of services and programs promoting independence among older adults. Undergraduate students, most of whom were without prior pickleball experience, participated in a pickleball tournament with seasoned older adult pickleball players as a preliminary event to the Indiana Senior Games. This paper provides the rationale for the tournament, explains the cultural assumptions and

values for the importance of the intergenerational pickleball tournament, describes the program and its policy framework, and discusses relevance for replication and future implications.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for this intergenerational pickleball tournament is described below by highlighting the benefits of intergenerational learning projects. Then, the sport of pickleball is described and connected to the Senior Games. Finally, the authors identify a need to implement and study the benefits of intergenerational sport.

Intergenerational learning experiences bring young and old together for a common goal (Butts, 2003). In addition to positively changing undergraduate student attitudes about aging, participation in intergenerational learning experiences can reduce students' anxieties about working with older adults (Hutchison, Fox, Laas, Matharu, & Urzi, 2010). For example, positive attitudinal shifts in undergraduate student attitude about aging have been noted in intergenerational discussion groups (Penick, Fallshore, & Spencer, 2014), intergenerational oral history projects (Ehlman, Ligon, Moriello, Welleford, & Schuster, 2011; Ligon, Ehlman, Moriello, & Welleford, 2009) and arts-based photography projects (Atlock, Camic, Barker, Haridi, & Raven, 2011). Likewise, participation in intergenerational learning experiences have positively impacted the lives of elders in areas such as increased levels of perceived generativity (Ehlman, Ligon, & Moriello, 2014), in reducing loneliness and isolation (Newman & Smith, 1997), in strengthening engagement and expressiveness (Perry & Weatherby, 2011; Xaverius & Mathews, 2003), and in perceived caring among older adults (Hwang, Wang, Tu, Chen, & Chang, 2014). Exposure to healthy adults has been found to have a positive effect on student

attitudes about aging and promoting an interest among students in working in the field of gerontology (Cummings, 2003; Hwang, et al., 2014).

Encouraging appropriate levels of physical activity and promoting physical activity programs across the lifespan can be difficult, but it is especially difficult to engage college students and older adults together with meaningful levels of participation (Perry & Weatherby, 2011). The literature on promoting intergenerational learning experiences around sports is sparse (Powers, Gray, & Garver, 2013). Although Powers et al. (2013) find that undergraduate's attitudes towards older adults become more positive following intergenerational fitness related experiences, the researchers do not look specifically at sports activities. A distinction is made between fitness such as participating in an exercise class, and playing a sport such as pickleball. To the authors' best knowledge, no literature exists on intergenerational programming engaging college students and elders in sport related activities.

Pickleball is a relatively new game, created in 1965 by Joel Pritchard, William Bell and Barney McCallum as a way to engage their children. Pickleball is played on a doubles badminton court, with the net lowered to the ground as in tennis. The players use a pickle ball (which resembles a small whiffle ball) and a short-handled paddle resembling an oversized table-tennis paddle. The rules of pickleball are very similar to other racquet sports such as tennis, badminton and table tennis. Pickleball is played by people of all ages at schools, community centers, retirement centers, and more. The game has grown since the 1960s and is played worldwide. It is estimated that more than 100,000 people play Pickleball in the U.S (Pickleball, n.d.).

In the education practitioner literature, pickleball has been recommended as a novel activity to engage students and to teach offensive and defensive strategies that can be easily transferred to sports such as tennis or badminton (Subramaniam, 2010). Laurson, Brown, Cullent, and Dennis (2008) compared secondary students' target heart rates when participating in various sports including pickleball. Researchers found that pickleball participants spend 68percent of class time in their target heart rate zone with an average heart rate of 115 (Laurson et al., 2008). These averages were higher than other activities such as resistance training, volleyball and golf, but not as high as dance, ultimate Frisbee, and running (Laurson et al., 2008). Regardless, the game of pickleball has potential health benefits at any age, not only for getting into the target heart rate zone, but to build and/or maintain muscle mass and bone density.

Pickleball was introduced at the Indiana Senior Olympic games in 2008 as a "demonstration" sport. "Demonstration" sports are suggested by the National Senior Olympic membership (Heo & King, 2009) and will be considered for inclusion in future National Senior Olympic games. The National Senior Olympic games is the largest multi-sport event in the world for seniors and were first held in 1987; however Senior Games at the state level have been in existence since before 1987. Individuals who are 50 or over are eligible to earn a spot in the Senior Olympic Games. The games are held every biennium and currently there are 19 sports included in the Senior Games. The first national competition had a total of 2,500 athletes, while the most recent games in 2013 had 10,881 (National Senior Games Association, n.d.).

The “Age of Champions” film documents older adults as they compete in the National Senior Olympic games. In this documentary, the athletes are fit, competitive, determined, and socially connected (Ochwat & Rufo, 2011). Research indicates that senior Olympians have or develop the following characteristics: a) perseverance through injury, fatigue, and anxiety, b) career development because of the independence, leadership, and empowerment gained through participation in sport, c) increased personal and social benefits such as networking, developing fitness, and an enhanced self-image, and d) being proud to identify as a senior athlete (Heo, Culp, Yamada, & Won, 2013).

While the benefits of sport among the young adults and older adults are clear, little to no literature on intergeneration sport exists. This paper provides a project description of an intergenerational pickleball tournament providing a footprint for future projects intergenerational sports-related activities.

### **Project Description**

In spring 2014, an intergenerational pickleball tournament took place at a mid-sized public university in Indiana as a preliminary event to the upcoming Senior Games to be held three months later at the university. The Senior Games were planned and coordinated by a local AAA and hosted by the university in the summer of 2014. In an effort to promote the Senior Games among undergraduate students, an interdisciplinary team of university faculty from gerontology, health services, and kinesiology partnered with staff from the local AAA to coordinate opportunities to connect the generations around the sport of pickleball.

The day-long event, held on the university campus, began with a registration period where undergraduate students and older adults signed in to play and then completed a waiver. Then, a member of the faculty team created tournament brackets. Activities began with a pickleball demonstration led by the older adults. Then, the older adults were paired with undergraduate students to offer individual instruction. Finally, participants, both young and old, played in a series of pickleball doubles matches. In some cases an undergraduate student was paired with an older adult to form a mixed-generation team. In other cases two undergraduate students competed against two older adults. The intergenerational pickleball tournament was designed to create a setting where older adults interact with university students, creating an intergenerational learning experience for both age groups. The goals of this project were three-fold. The interprofessional faculty team, in partnership with the AAA staff, intended to: a) create a unique intergenerational student learning experience for undergraduate students in an environment where older adult pickleball players teach undergraduate students the techniques of the sport; b) expose undergraduate students to the sport of pickleball and its potential health impacts; and c) strengthen the university and the local AAA partnership around the Senior Games.

Planning for the intergenerational pickleball event took place over the period of three months, requiring several meetings among the interprofessional faculty team and a representative from the AAA. These meetings enhanced a feeling of shared responsibility among disciplines while allowing for brainstorming between the faculty team and the AAA.

Twenty-four undergraduate students from at least seven different disciplines (Health Services, Gerontology, Food and Nutrition, Liberal Arts, Physical Education, Kinesiology, and

Engineering) voluntarily participated in the pickleball tournament. Twenty-four older adults participated. Bringing together participants of various values, expertise, and background, created a rich teaching environment and opportunity for student growth, as shown in the qualitative comments below from student participants.

"I learned that the stereotypical old non-moving senior citizen is by far [from] the truth. They were some feisty people! They kicked my butt in pickle ball and I also learned that the old wise tale is true...don't judge a book by its cover. With this knowledge and experience, I will now go to more functions with senior citizens if applicable. I LOVED every moment of the event...I felt it was an experience everyone should go through an learn."

"College students and older adults played together in intergenerational teams. I was sure the older adults would beat me because they practice but I was not expecting them to move fast to go after the ball like they did I learned that age doesn't matter and you can do anything you want if you practice and keep in shape. I will no longer judge people by their age and assume they cannot move as fast as I can because in fact they can and they are very competitive."

### **Theoretical Framework**

The design of the intergenerational pickleball tournament is grounded in the Social Exchange Theory. This theory has been used widely as the theoretical framework for examining various relationships (Geurtis, Poortman, & Tilburg, 2012; Sprecher, 1988; Weiss & Stevens, 1993). As this theory suggests, individuals participate in relationships and activities as long as there are positive rewards or there is enjoyment (Guilett, Sarrazin, Carpenter, Trouilloud, & Cury, 2002). Lave and Wenger (1991) identified a community of practice consisting of *old* and *new* members who share a common passion. *New* members are those members that gain



valuable experience and knowledge when interacting with others and modeling older members. *Old* members are identified as those who have evolved (Polsgrove & Frimming, 2013). When we apply this theoretical practice to a community of individuals playing pickleball, it is thought that the *new* members, whom we will call the undergraduate students and the *old* members, whom we will call the older adults, interact for a common purpose. The older adults are considered those who have gained knowledge and have more experience playing pickleball and undergraduate students are those students who have little to no experience playing pickleball. Ideally, this positive social interaction of the undergraduate students and the older adults help the undergraduate students overcome any barriers or “cost” to playing pickleball because they would have access to the seniors’ knowledge and experience; therefore leading to a positive relationship for both the undergraduate student and older adults.

### **Relevance**

The relevance for this intergenerational pickleball tournament goes beyond the day-long event. This project provided the opportunity for organizations with different population groups to come together to provide intergenerational learning experiences for both older adults and undergraduate college students. Researchers consistently find that students who participate in intergeneration learning experiences form more positive views of older adults and aging (Kalisch, Coughlin, Ballard, & Lamson, 2013; Penich, Fallshore, & Spencer, 2014). Yet, placing these two groups in an environment where interactions may occur does not just benefit the student. Interaction with the students participating in service learning also produces beneficial outcomes among the older adults (Hwang, et al., 2014). While the typical intergenerational

service learning project may pair student learners with older adults in a senior center or assisted living situation, this project paired students with active older adults in the student's environment, giving students the opportunity to experience firsthand the benefits of exercise for aging adults (Lokon, Kinney, & Kunkel, 2012; Penich et al., 2014). This event provided a new, active, intergenerational learning opportunity focused on a sport.

### **Implications**

The intergenerational pickleball tournament has implications for educators, practitioners, and researchers. From the perspective of the educator, this project offers students and faculty from Health Services, Gerontology, and Kinesiology wellness activities beyond what is taught in the classroom to gain firsthand experience with older, active adults. The need for undergraduate students to choose careers in aging is outlined in the 2008 Institute of Medicine Report entitled *Retooling for an Aging America*. The report points to a lack of healthcare professions by the year 2030 in the following areas: registered nurses, physicians, licensed practical and vocational nurses, pharmacist, dentists, and other providers. These health care providers will be needed to serve the growing older adult population (Institute of Medicine, 2008). With the expanding population of adults working beyond the traditional retirement age of 65, students in many disciplines will have to implement wellness programs that help the aging working population to stay healthy and fit. This project allows students to witness older adults maintaining their fitness.

For the practitioner, implementing sport across the lifespan is important and this type of event helps to address physical activity and sport with both the older and younger generations. The lack of physical activity and poor nutrition have been linked as major factors regarding the

astounding increases in overweight and obese U.S. children and adults over the past two decades. Seventeen percent of children and adolescents aged 2-19 and 34.9 percent of the adult population (aged 20 and over) are classified as obese in the U.S. (CDC, 2014). The importance of exercise for people of any age cannot be understated. Physical activity can not only benefit youth but can benefit older adults as well.

From a research perspective, epidemiological studies, primarily utilizing a cross sectional design, have shown that physical activity tends to decrease with age (Klein & Becker, 2012). There are many factors impacting a person's choice to be physically active such as: demographics, health variables, convenience, occupation, and support from family and friends (Klein & Becker, 2012; King, 2001). Research concentrating on methods to keep older adults active will be increasingly important as the population continues to age and educators and practitioners look to implement evidence-based programs. Research analyzing the benefits of intergenerational sport is still needed to fill a gap in the literature.

### **Conclusion**

This event created an opportunity for older adults to share their love and knowledge of pickleball with a younger generation unfamiliar with the sport. The intergenerational pickleball tournament connected the generations around the sport of pickleball, appeared to have a positive impact on both young and old, and created a model for future intergenerational sport activities.

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