



On Campus and in the Community: How Higher Education Can Inform Seniors Housing Models

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ABSTRACT

As baby boomers continue to define the aging population in the U.S., they are reshaping the independent living housing market. One new model is co-locating seniors housing on or near college campuses, which benefits seniors, students, and higher education institutions. No single model for university-based retirement communities exists; the diverse desires of the “young-old” population call for diverse design solutions. In addition, it is essential to understand the key economic drivers of both communities, and develop a range of financial and business models for the coexistence of senior living and higher education where all stakeholders benefit. Finally, building community does not always mean building buildings; we must also invest in infrastructure, amenities, and meaningful opportunities for connection.

INTRODUCTION

While nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and other senior-specific housing models play an important role in the maintenance of health and efficient delivery of care, they focus on a narrow aspect of the whole person. Senior living environments in the U.S. historically have not widely embraced the benefits of multigenerational interaction, continuing education opportunities, or meaningful community engagement.

“The distance and unavailability of leisure activities is a common challenge for retirees living in mixed-age suburban and exurban environments....because of this, it is not uncommon for retirees to find themselves socially and spatially isolated from others, and from other retirees, and from leisure opportunities with which to consume their time” (Simpson, 2015, p. 48). But as baby boomers start to define the aging population in the U.S., they are beginning to reshape the senior independent living housing market. They show a “definite trend toward more active and intergenerational living” (McCormick, 2014, p. 49). For a variety of reasons, higher education campuses are uniquely positioned to provide opportunities for each of these benefits.

Establishing a continuing care retirement community (CCRC) on or near a college campus has a long list of benefits for seniors. Evidence has clearly shown that cognitive stimulation improves overall health and longevity. We also know that social connectivity has many health benefits. This is particularly true for seniors who can become isolated quickly in environments where they do not feel part of a community or where there are physical barriers that make getting out a challenge (Buettner, 2008, p. 223). Co-locating seniors on college campuses enables them to continue their education, attend sports and cultural events, and access affordable university health care. Easy access to pedestrian-centric campuses and fitness facilities also helps seniors lead active, healthy lives.

On the other side of the equation, university-based retirement communities offer multiple benefits for higher education institutions as well as their students. Given that seniors have more life experience and, in

many cases, a deep understanding of the subjects being taught in the classroom, interacting with seniors—or, in some cases, living with them—can expand students’ educational experience (AFP, 2014). Students can learn from experienced mentors and connect with the university alumni network. The schools themselves gain an extra source of income, skilled volunteer labor, and stronger connections with community members and alumni.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Based on the growing influence of the baby boomer generation, we are beginning to witness a tectonic shift in how the next generation of seniors wants to live. According to Daniel H. Pink, the author of *Drive*, “Every thirteen minutes another hundred people—members of the wealthiest and best-educated generation the world has ever known—begin reckoning with their mortality and asking deep questions about meaning, significance, and what they truly want. When the cold front of demographics meets the warm front of unrealized dreams, the result will be a thunderstorm of purpose the likes of which the world has never seen” (Pink, 2009, p. 131).

Today’s aging population does not equate aging with “growing old.” The term “young-old” was coined by Bernice Neugarten to describe the growing population of active retirees who are several years away from needing care. This is a “society based on permanent leisure” (Simpson, p. 13). The young-old are seeking a place to live life in an age-friendly environment that is truly an extension of their active and best years. As an outgrowth of U.S. consumer culture and access via the Internet to endless health and lifestyle news, products, and advice, the young-old want more housing options that respond to their unique interests, desires, and locations. These diverse desires and needs call for diverse design solutions.

“This younger set of old folks—whose lives no longer revolve around work, school, and childcare but aren’t yet dependent on caretakers—presents a unique set of design challenges” (Ferro, n.d.). Just like their student counterparts, boomers want authentic, unique

experiences that integrate elements of the local environment, the community, and their culture. For example, the 2,000 or more CCRCs operating in the U.S. are particularly appealing to seniors who like to plan, according to Victor Regnier, FAIA, professor of architecture and gerontology at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. “These individuals value predictability. In Southern California, the University Village in Thousand Oaks (UVTO) is a CCRC located near California Lutheran University. Residents have privileges and take courses or attend events” (Regnier, 2015).

Creating sub-communities on campus is something higher education institutions are familiar with. College campuses are designed to foster impromptu gatherings and encourage interaction, and their students have virtually unlimited access to a host of classes, student organizations, and activities that encourage them to become part of communities that share their interests

and values. Many older people are looking for this as well, as evidenced by a growing number of university-based retirement communities that have emerged across the U.S. over the past few decades. One such example is Lasell Village, which is an independent and assisted living community affiliated with Lasell College in Newton, Massachusetts. “They encourage students to meet with an older resident and create a kind of story or assessment or analysis of their life, while relating it back to their academic interests,” Regnier says. “They utilize the wisdom and the perspective of these older people as part of the college assignment they carry out for credit. In doing so, they also create a relationship, which is a terrific side effect.”

Although university-affiliated retirement communities are often designed by the operator and the institution, they are often operated as independent not-for-profit CCRCs. See **Table 1** for some notable university-based retirement communities around the U.S.

Table 1. Notable University-Based Retirement Communities in the U.S.

Retirement Community	Type	Location	Year Established	Affiliated Institution	Of Note
Lasell Village	CCRC	Newton, Massachusetts	2000	Lasell College	Residents are required to take at least 450 hours of classes and fitness activities every year
Mary’s Woods at Marylhurst	CCRC	Lake Oswego, Oregon	2001	Marylhurst University	Seniors can take courses at Marylhurst at a discounted tuition rate
Vi at Palo Alto	CCRC	Palo Alto, California	2005	Stanford University	Formerly known as Classic Residence by Hyatt; offers regular shuttles to Stanford campus
Holy Cross Village at Notre Dame	CCRC	South Bend, Indiana	2010	University of Notre Dame	Also has close affiliations with Saint Mary’s College and Holy Cross College

Retirement Community	Type	Location	Year Established	Affiliated Institution	Of Note
Kendal at Hanover	CCRC	Hanover, New Hampshire	1991	Dartmouth College	Kendal operates several other university-affiliated retirement communities in Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia
Oak Hammock at the University of Florida	CCRC	Gainesville, Florida	2004	University of Florida	Residents also receive inpatient and outpatient health services at adjacent Shands Hospital
The Forest at Duke	CCRC	Durham, North Carolina	1992	Duke University	Duke brings several education programs directly to seniors on campus
The Village at Penn State	CCRC	State College, Pennsylvania	2003	Penn State University	Residents can attend classes for free and receive discounts on sports and theater events

Plan for a Generation, Build for Generations to Come

Sustainable housing solutions are essential. Developing a range of financial and business models for the coexistence of senior living and higher education where all stakeholders benefit involves understanding the key economic drivers of both communities and requires an appreciation of the larger cultural picture.

A long-term plan for financial independence and resilience will include creative financial structuring that takes into account everything from seniors' income sources to the ideological mission of the university. That is, the program must account for the volatility of all financial sources if the community is to thrive.

The design solution must factor in the key economic drivers behind seniors housing and higher education, and create communities that are both financially

independent and resilient. Creating adaptable residential units is a good example of this. Units in an apartment building, as opposed to a dormitory, should be designed to accommodate a person with varying levels of mobility. Providing communal spaces and services will also allow residential buildings to adapt to the changing needs of residents regardless of age.

Higher education systems are always looking for ways to grow their funding sources. Introducing a new demographic to the campus may bring limited income in the form of tuition from older students who are non-matriculated and not seeking a degree; however, senior students can make their financial contribution in the form of volunteer daycare labor, rental income, health care services procured from the university, and discretionary income spent on campus or in the adjacent community. In essence, they are potential customers for all the services the university provides its students as part of tuition, room, and board, or other optional products and services.

“One of my interests in this topic is to get the assets and the social capital of the universities invested in aging,” says Ruth Finkelstein, ScD, associate director of the Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center at Columbia University. “There isn’t enough investment into the lives of old people and helping them keep on doing what has been good about their lives for the rest of their lives” (Finkelstein, 2015).

For every higher education business model, there must be a unique business plan to incorporate the senior population. Some universities may be in a position to expand their housing to include multigenerational homes and educate their staff to serve this new demographic. Other universities may want to partner with a senior services provider to renovate existing housing stock, on campus or immediately adjacent, to meet multigenerational needs. “There have to be incentives that go both directions,” says Regnier. “The place needs to be really attractive to older people because of the context or the reputation of the institution. There also has to be an incentive for the university. Having a teaching and research mission is sacrosanct to most universities, so if you can dial into that, it’s very powerful.”

One possible financial opportunity is for federal and state funding of retiree health care to be channeled through a university, allowing university health care systems to grow their client base, have a more steady stream of patients through the calendar year, and provide a higher quality of health care at a lower cost to seniors, making their limited Medicare funds go further. And when almost one-third of older adults are living solely on social security, affordability, both in terms of health care costs and housing, must be part of the equation. “The point of our organization is to help people who are vulnerable, who don’t have the resources,” says David Grunwald, president and CEO of Affordable Living for the Aging, a not-for-profit based in Los Angeles. “But in order for us to continue to do that, there is a giant market of people who have resources who are going to start demanding all kinds of services, all kinds of resources, and they’re going to have buying power.”

Building Community Doesn’t Always Mean Building Buildings

Particularly in dense urban environments, making physical changes to the existing building stock is not always feasible or desirable. The web of community is made up of many strands, not just residential buildings. There are also amenities, the community infrastructure, and opportunities for connection with neighbors. Where the robust presence of higher education has embedded itself in a community, the result is a seemingly endless flow of passions, interests, and talent. These are places where students, faculty, and visiting experts congregate to learn, research, and share ideas. Allowing senior students to audit classes and attend lectures allows them to expand their knowledge and stretch their imagination.

Urban planning plays a key role in setting a community up for success. Providing public transportation, appropriately scaled and walkable streets, areas for gathering and socializing, and the right mix of amenities supports both seniors and students alike.

The opportunities for the university campus to positively influence the entire community abound. From infrastructure such as late-night shuttles that safely bring students home, to the state-of-the-art auditoria and fitness centers that exist in the midst of private residential communities, there are numerous opportunities for the educational community to share their resources with the long-term residents to positively influence each other. The idea of sharing this physical and intellectual capital also helps to alleviate the friction that can exist between universities and their surrounding communities. They become a recognized partner in the building and maintenance of the long-term well-being of the neighborhoods they inhabit. “One of the huge challenges of these big high-prestige universities in these big dense urban centers...is that there’s this really big tension,” says Finkelstein. “Could the university be a contributor to the well-being of the community by putting senior services and good senior living out into the community, for community residents, and bridge that gap with the most non-threatening populace that there is?” The end goal may not always

be to co-locate seniors directly on campus, Grunwald says. The big question is, “How can we use the assets of a college campus and bring seniors in, or older adults, and have a benefit to the university, whether it is financial or other, and also create an active lifestyle for older adults?”

CONCLUSION

The needs and desires of the aging population are changing rapidly. Innovative solutions to meet the housing needs and provide meaningful experiences for seniors should include regular socialization with all ages. This interaction provides social connections, welcomes intellectual challenges, a sense of relevance, and a genuine *plan de vida* (Buettner, 2008, p. 223). Together, these create the most supportive and healthy environment for a generation who knows that with resources and resourcefulness they can have what they want and need.

Higher education communities offer a number of these benefits to students. With some creative thinking and financial planning, developers and institutions leverage these benefits and share them with the aging population. The organizational structure is already in place; it is a question of expanding the view to include a larger, more diverse spectrum of higher education institutions, and determining how they can help the educational system deliver on its educational and social goals.

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