© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 7, Numbers 1&2, p. 127, (2001-02)

In Search of an Intergenerational Agenda for Cooperative Extension[1]

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Abstract

"Intergenerational programming" refers to the wide range of initiatives that aim to bring young people and older adults together to interact, stimulate, educate, support, and provide care for one another. In recent years, we have seen a groundswell of intergenerational program activity at the local and national levels, grounded in a variety of disciplines and taking place in a wide range of settings. Such initiatives represent a practical, effective means for enriching the lives of young people and older adults, promoting family cohesion, and strengthening community support systems. This article focuses on intergenerational programming from the perspective of cooperative extension, a national educational network linked to land-grant universities throughout the country. Discussion centers on how intergenerational programming strategies have been used and can be enhanced to strengthen and enrich extension programs, particularly in the children, youth, and family area.

Introduction

The National Council on Aging defines "intergenerational programs" as "activities or programs that increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations. They involve the sharing of skills, knowledge or experience between old and young" *(Thorp 1985, 3)*. Over the past twenty years, we have witnessed tremendous growth in the number and diversity of intergenerational programs; across the country, they are found in a variety of community settings, including schools, community organizations, retirement communities, hospitals, and places of worship.

At the root of this program activity is a conceptual framework that attributes societal significance to intergenerational programs and practices. For example, we are in the midst of what has been termed a "longevity revolution," a dramatic increase in the size of

[1] The authors would like to thank Marilyn Corbin, Program Leader, Children, Youth, and Families, Penn State Cooperative Extension, for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

the older population.[2] Whether this trend is viewed in positive terms (e.g., *Freedman [1999]* describes it as an "opportunity to be seized") or in negative terms (e.g., *Peterson [1999]* views it as a "demographic time bomb") depends to a large extent on the contributions older adults make to family and community life. Intergenerational programs mobilize the talents, skills, energy, and resources of older adults (as well as young people) in service to people of other generations *(Henkin and Kingson 1998/99)*. Intergenerational programs have also been characterized as an effective countermeasure to patterns of residential and social segregation of age groups *(Newman 1983; Stearns 1989)*.[3]

Cooperative extension is a national education system tied to land-grant universities and the United States Department of Agriculture. It was designed over eighty years ago to meet the educational needs of rural and urban citizens and help them lead better, fuller, more productive lives. Cooperative extension has contributed to the field of intergenerational programming *(CSREES 1999)*. In some states, there has been an effort to integrate intergenerational activities into extension program areas such as human development and aging, 4-H/youth development, horticulture, and community development. The intent has typically been to provide educational enrichment and additional social support in the lives of young people and older adults and to produce tangible benefits at the community level, such as through community gardens, 4-H curriculum materials or projects, reading programs, and murals.

Most extension programs are designed with a monogenerational focus; programs are usually developed as either a "youth" or "adult" program even when more than one generation may be involved. Extension staff tend to use the expertise they are trained in (i.e., adult development, youth development, or a content area) and, for the

[2] Whereas in 1900, 4 percent of the population, three million people, were age sixty-five or older, in 2000, nearly 13 percent of the population, 35 million people, reached this milestone. By 2030, it is estimated that 20 percent of the population, over 70 million people, will be over age 65 *(Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics 2000)*.

[3] Various negative consequences have been associated with the trend toward increased intergenerational segregation, including: a decline in senior adults' life satisfaction, an increase in negative stereotypes toward the aged and aging among younger people, and a reduction in the extent and quality of the social networks of children and senior adults *(Crites 1989; Henkin and Kingson 1998/99; Kalish 1969; Newman et al. 1997)*.

most part, they are not exposed to intergenerational programming concepts nor trained in the principals of intergenerational program design.

Though many extension staff have "discovered" the benefits of intergenerational programming and have provided leadership in developing model programs rooted in extension, these efforts tend to result in small-scale initiatives that are not easily sustained. To sustain such work, there needs to be a greater commitment—displayed at the local, state, and national levels—to systematically develop and support intergenerational approaches for delivering extension services.

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The remainder of this paper will examine the rationale, note some past efforts, and suggest some new strategies for further infusing intergenerational work into Extension programming. Intergenerational programming is presented in a "value-added framework" rather than proposed as an additional program area; we suggest strategies for incorporating intergenerational program strategies into existing extension programs for young people, older adults, families, and communities regardless of their content area.

The Relevance of Intergenerational Programming for Cooperative Extension

The degree to which cooperative extension personnel embrace intergenerational program strategies has much to do with whether they view such approaches as consistent with extension's organizational culture and educational philosophy and vision. We argue that an orientation toward intergenerational programming is quite consistent with the organization's institutional values.

As one might expect, the focus of land-grant universities–generated research and extension-delivered education—has changed over the course of their long history. However, certain things have remained constant, such as the philosophy and commitment of cooperative extension professionals to help people through education, the involvement of local people in identifying extension and research program priorities, and the idea that educational programming

should maintain a sense of relevance in the context of current social issues *(Decker, Noble, and Call 1989)*. Cooperative extension also has a long-standing commitment to working with people of all races, religions, and age groups and a tradition of enlisting adults as volunteers to work with children and youth.

Keeping these points in mind, the following characteristics of the intergenerational programming field[4] are likely to have appeal for extension professionals:

- **Pedagogy:** Intergenerational engagement is an important pedagogical tool. The intergenerational literature contains many rich narratives about how program participants learn, find greater motivation to learn, and derive richer life perspectives from their experiences. Through intensive dialogue, participants learn more about themselves as well as others.
- **Relevance:** The emphasis on intergenerational (re-)connection is relevant to our times. Many intergenerational program models are designed to address specific needs of young people, such as the need for prosocial influences in their lives, as well as those of older adults, such as the need to maintain social connectedness and maintain a sense of purpose.
- **Creativity:** Intergenerational programs use creativity to draw on the strengths of one generation to meet the needs of another. Civic-minded senior adult volunteers are often called upon to make contributions to student learning; conversely, children and youth are increasingly being called upon to help train older adults in new technologies.
- **Cultural Diversity:** There are some effective intergenerational program strategies for helping to preserve elements of cultural heritage, promote a sense of cultural identity, and promote multicultural awareness and appreciation *(Kaplan, Henkin, and Kusano 2002)*. Such an emphasis on cultural appreciation is consistent with extension's emphasis on diversity education.

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[4]Intergenerational programming is often referred to as a separate "field" in and of itself. This makes sense insofar as it refers to a finite domain of inquiry and action, bounded by a clear set of approaches, questions, and skills that practitioners need in order to facilitate the sharing of skills, knowledge, and experience between the young and the elderly *(Henkin and Kingson 1998/99; Newman et al. 1997; Thorp 1985)*. Some professionals prefer the term "intergenerational studies" rather than "intergenerational programming" to emphasize that there is more to this area than intervention programs.

- **Partnerships:** Intergenerational programs are often done in partnership with other organizations within the community. Within the draft report of the "Extension Vision for the 21st Century" prepared by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy *(ECOP 2001)*, respect for partners is identified as an important component of an "engaged university." The report highlights the need for extension to expand its network of partnerships with public, private, and nonprofit groups. Developing partnerships with organizations that have a shared commitment to strengthening intergenerational relations at the community level is likely to help extension become a more engaged university (*ECOP 2001)*.

To illustrate how the adoption of an intergenerational framework can serve to enhance the work of extension professionals we turn to examples of current programs within the organization. An intergenerational component can be woven into virtually every extension outreach program area. Here are some examples and ideas.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Along with several other national agencies, extension has been in the forefront of efforts to provide support for grandparents raising grandchildren through local, state, and national initiatives. One in ten grandparents have been the primary support of a grandchild at some time in their lives. The 1998 U.S. Census Report indicates approximately 3.9 million children (5.6%) are being raised by 2.5 million grandparent-headed households. Many factors contribute to the dramatic increase in the number of families with grandparents raising grandchildren, including an increasing prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, incarceration, and divorce. These grandparents face a host of emotional, legal, and daily living challenges as they unexpectedly find themselves in the position of raising a second family.

Many extension initiatives have brought together agencies and organizations that serve either children or older adults. For example, the University of Wisconsin–Extension Cooperative Extension Service and Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service worked with AARP, the Brookdale Foundation, Generations United, the Child Welfare League of America, and the National Association of State Units on Aging to offer two national satellite programs that examined some of the legal and policy issues that grandparents face, and highlighted ways to improve relationships with agencies and professionals who provide services to grandparents. Participants' evaluations highlighted how the satellite program added momentum

for bringing together agencies that have not traditionally worked together. Those working in youth-related agencies appreciated being introduced to resources and organizations for older adults and vice versa.

Several extension-based programs are now emerging that involve working with grandparents and their grandchildren together. For example, the grandparent support retreats facilitated by Allegheny County Extension (Pennsylvania) are now organized for grandparents *and* their grandchildren, whereas previous retreats were focused only on the grandparents. Extension professionals who are developing support groups have found it easier to get grandparents involved when there are also activities for the grandchildren. Grandparents will attend if grandchildren are interested in participating. Multigenerational support group organizers indicate that grandchildren like these groups (and activities) because they interact with other children who are like themselves.

"Several extension-based programs are now . . . working with grandparents and their grandchildren together."

Grandparents University: To further illustrate some of the differences between monogenerational and intergenerational approaches for working with grandparents, it is useful to examine the University of Wisconsin–Extension and the University of Wisconsin–Madison Alumni Association's Grandparent's University summer program. This program was organized in 2000 primarily as a "grandparents only" model, though it included some attempts to provide joint educational offerings for grandchildren and grandparents. In 2001, it was organized solely as a grandparents and grandchildren together model.

The programs for both years were very different even though organizers started with the same overall objective: to provide an opportunity for grandparents and grandchildren to have a shared learning experience that would enhance their relationship. As noted in Table 1, the second year resulted in a better intergenerational program because the planning committee focused entirely on including learning and recreational activities that served to develop and enhance the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. In essence, participants created their own "history" and "memory," which had the potential to positively enhance their relationship. This fact was reinforced in the program's evaluation, with over

Table 1. University of Wisconsin–Extension and the University of Wisconsin–Madison Alumni Association's Grandparents University Initiative

Objectives:	To provide an opportunity for grandparents to explore, enhance, and celebrate their grandparenting role	To provide an opportunity for grandparents and grandchildren to develop and enhance their personal relationship
Type of class offerings:	Had three tracks to select from; one for grandparents raising grandchildren, one for traditional grandparents, and one for grandparents and grandchildren together Offered a variety of different classes individuals could select from Individuals took several different classes during the two-day conference Grandparents and grandchildren participated in separate classes	Grandparents and grandchildren had four majors to select from They were in the same major for the entire conference Participated in one class together for the entire conference Classes designed so grandparents and grandchildren would work and learn together
Results:	Very few grandchildren Grandchildren of a variety of ages Small number of participants; had to cancel several class offerings due to low numbers Evaluation comments had few remarks about relationship building between the two generations	Had to limit number of participants; limited age of grandchildren so classes were age appropriate Courses designed to foster interaction between the generations More focused on providing opportunity for intergenerational communication Evaluation remarks often referenced building the intergenerational relationship and creating memories for future revisiting

98 percent of the participants planning to return for Grandparents University in 2002.

Weaving intergenerational engagement into other extension programs:

1. **4-H and Youth Development:** There are many examples of intergenerational curricula developed through the extension 4-H program. Some are created as community service/service-learning projects. Programs such as Walk in My Shoes (Illinois; *Rund 1994*), Generation Celebration (Pennsylvania; *Rodgers, Scholl, and Davis 1992*), Youth Exchanging with Seniors (Texas), and CyberSeniorsCyberTeens (multistate; *Tate 2001*) outline various activities through which young people can learn about aging, and interact with and provide a service for older adults in their neighborhoods. There are also examples of 4-H club members bringing their pets with them on visits to long-term care facilities (e.g., Affection Connection, Kansas). The animals are used to begin discussion and share experiences with the residents. Though such activities are typically conducted as one-time or occasional events, with additional planning, such visits can be extended into longer-term programs, with follow-up activities centering around shared interests in learning about and playing with animals.

   Some extension 4-H and youth development programs have an environmental education thrust through which the infusion of an intergenerational component can heighten the educational and service dimensions of program activities. Older adult participants have important values to share (e.g., the importance of having a sense of stewardship over the environment), and they bring valuable skills and energy that can strengthen environmental improvement efforts.

   From a 4-H and youth development perspective, expanded intergenerational activity options may help to enhance the public image of 4-H[5] and provide additional direction for youth activity.

[5] In a research study conducted by Cornell Cooperative Extension, it was noted that despite various benefits associated with participation in 4-H clubs (i.e., young people build life skills, make better career choices, and develop communication and conflict management skills), some youth participants were concerned about the stigma attached to 4-H by people unfamiliar with the group who erroneously associate it with cooking and cows *(Rodriguez et al. 1999)*.

2. **Nutrition and Food Safety:** There are various ways in which an intergenerational component can be woven into extension work in the nutrition and food safety program area. Existing efforts typically entail one group cooking for the other; e.g., older adults teach cooking classes for young people, or children and youth cook and serve meals for older adults. Activities can also bring young and old together to share recipes, cook together, and, of course, eat together. For example, in Pennsylvania, the Lancaster County Extension office hosts the Jams and Jellies with Kids program in which children and their adult family members learn about and take part in local traditions for making jams and jellies. This is an example of how food can be used to heighten awareness of cultural traditions as well as to promote understanding and sharing between the generations.

"The [Master Gardener] program has created a skilled cadre of gardeners who . . . are highly motivated to do community work."

3. **Horticulture:** There are several good examples of horticulture initiatives which incorporate an intergenerational component. Lalli, Tennessen, and Lockhart *(1998)* share a range of gardening activities that work well with intergenerational groups, including: designing gardens, selecting sites, arranging plants, preparing garden soil, and planting and maintaining plants. The Master Gardener extension program lends itself to all sorts of intergenerational programming possibilities.[6] In return for receiving instruction in horticulture, adult volunteers (many of whom are older adults) assist others who need gardening help and advice. The program has created a skilled cadre of gardeners who, in addition to having a strong interest in horticulture, are highly motivated to do community work. As one might expect, Master Gardeners often end up working with children and youth who have gardening interests. This often takes place on an informal level, however. By formalizing and expanding the intergenerational component of the Master Gardener role

[6] The program was initiated by King County Cooperative Extension (Seattle, Washington) in 1972 and is now active in 48 states.

through extension, we anticipate several benefits, including improvements in the sustainability of community gardens and the attainment of additional educational objectives. Planned dialogue between young and older gardeners can be structured to facilitate learning about how produce has changed over time (including changes in types of items grown and how they are used), awareness of the aging process (parallels can be made between aging plants and aging humans), and learning about each other's community concerns.

"[Extension professionals] need access to program planning resources, ideas, and information and training in the underlying intergenerational concepts."

An example of an intergenerational gardening initiative is the Florence County Food, Fun, and Fitness Program, a ten-week summer gardening program in northern Wisconsin in which children in grades 1–5 and older adults living in a housing complex donate the vegetables they grow together to the local food pantry. The project won a national USDA award.

4. **Community Development Programs:** Cooperative extension educators with community and economic development skills generally aim to educate the public about the community development process and work to help people participate more fully in community decision making. Penn State Cooperative Extension has recently developed a Futures Festival curriculum. Through murals, models, photographs, theatrical displays, and other communications media, community residents of all ages and public officials come together to share ideas about community development. This intergenerational visioning program has begun to elicit interest and experimentation from community development educators in other states.
5. **Literacy Initiatives:** Cooperative extension has some programs designed to build the literacy skills of children and adults. In the First Book Project, a joint project of the Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service, Wisconsin Public Television, and the Wisconsin Association for Home and Community Education, adult volunteers read to children who have limited access to books and provide them with books of their own and activity sheets they can share with their families.

However, extension can do more in the intergenerational literacy programming area. In the CSREES *(1999)* report on extension-based intergenerational initiatives, it was noted that literacy training can be further woven into extension programs that aim to help young people become more aware of aging issues, explore careers, learn about arts and culture, and gain values such as respect for property. Also, other organizations have piloted many promising intergenerational literacy initiatives. Cooperative extension would benefit from partnering with some of these organizations or at least drawing upon these established models for improving the literacy skills of children and adults.[7]

Program Development Lessons From the Intergenerational Field

Thus far, this article has aimed to create an awareness of how intergenerational program strategies can be used to strengthen and enrich extension programs. For larger numbers of extension professionals to begin incorporating intergenerational methodologies into their existing lines of work, however, they will need access to program planning resources, ideas, and information and training in the underlying intergenerational concepts.

Although the intergenerational studies field is still in its infancy, there is abundant information on how to create intergenerational programs (e.g., *Brabazon and Disch 1997; Gambone 1998; Hawkins, Backman, and McGuire 1998; Kaplan et al. 1998; Kuehne 1999; Newman et al. 1997; and Winston et al. 2001*). Some program development themes and considerations are highlighted below. Extension professionals need access to this body of knowledge. (Interestingly, most of the following program planning principles have clear parallels with those used to develop any type of successful extension outreach program.)

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[7] One impressive model is that of the Experience Corps, an initiative coordinated by Civic Ventures in San Francisco which operates in seventeen cities. Older adults devote fifteen hours/week to enhancing the reading and writing skills of students in elementary schools. There are also successful program models for students helping older adults improve their literacy/language skills. An example is Project SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders), a national program coordinated by the Center for Intergenerational learning at Temple University. College students are enlisted to help elderly immigrants and refugees learn English and prepare to become U.S. citizens *(Henkin and Butts 2002)*.

1. *Involve existing and potential participants in the program planning process*. Typically extension programs are developed with people of one generation in mind and the focus is only on these individuals when considering questions of program participation and impact. However, the programs could be strengthened when considering how to involve a broader spectrum of participants (and potential participants) in the planning process. An example is parenting education. Extension programs are usually designed with parents as the main participants and the focus is on the roles of parents. Extension parenting programs could be enriched by including some discussion on the roles of grandparents and perhaps pursuing efforts to further involve them and other adults in activities with children.
2. *Prepare participants before the program begins: orient them to how people in the other groups think and experience the world.* Even before youth and older adult participants of an intergenerational program meet each other, orientation sessions can be developed to promote understanding about generational differences regarding views about education, money, recreation, and so on. In the realm of agriculture programming on estate planning, for example, family members might take part in educational sessions designed to expose them to different generational views about work, family, and farm life before they take part in discussions focused on addressing estate planning concerns.
3. *Design developmentally appropriate activities.* This includes taking into account competencies (e.g., readiness to create and explore) as well as limitations (e.g., those involving mobility and cognitive functioning).When working with very young children and older adults it is important for the children to experiment or "play" with wheelchairs, canes, or other support equipment they might see in a nursing home before they visit. On the other hand, older adults might need a course in terminology used by youth so they can understand what is being discussed.
4. *Design activities in a culturally appropriate manner.* It is important to pay attention to cultural differences regarding expected patterns of intergenerational communication. In some cultures, for example, young people are more encouraged to share their views and ideas than in others. Also, it is important to plan activities in a manner that is consistent with cultural norms in terms of things like touch, humor, and dealing with illness and loss (including death).

5. *Aim to instill greater levels of depth in the intergenerational interaction.* Once people meet each other and get the chance to break the ice, the notion of deeper levels of involvement in the project will seem more natural to the participants. In recruiting participants, this means making an attempt to get people involved in steps, starting with small commitments and experiences.
6. *Design activities that relate to participants' real-world concerns.* In other words, activities need not be contrived or irrelevant to people's day-to-day concerns; they can be designed to address personal and community needs. When people's concerns are being addressed, they are more likely to pursue further opportunities for intergenerational exchange.

It is also important to consider what happens to intergenerational programs after they are planned and implemented. Sustainability is the current catchword in intergenerational programming circles. Although excitement is typically high, sustainability tends to be low. In Pennsylvania, for example, many of the intergenerational programs developed, even in recent years, are no longer in operation. Agency administrators estimate that of the five hundred intergenerational programs identified in a survey conducted by the Pennsylvania Department of Aging *(1993)*, less than one-third are still in operation today. This also seems to be the case with many of the extension-based intergenerational programs.

Considering the transitory nature of many intergenerational programs, it is important to rely on the basics when developing new initiatives, particularly when the intention is to establish sustainable endeavors. Drawing again from the intergenerational programming literature, here are some themes to keep in mind when working to enhance program sustainability:

- *Materials should be designed to be accessible, flexible, and easy to use*. In terms of flexibility, curricular resources should enable practitioners to mix and match activities as they see fit in light of their interests, circumstances, client group characteristics, and organizational imperatives.[8]

[8] A good resource for learning more about the intergenerational work conducted by extension staff is the Intergenerational Connections resource list posted on the Cooperative Extension System's CYFERnet (Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network) Web site, http://www.nnfr.org/igen/rgb.htm.

- *Create numerous opportunities for dialogue and sharing between program participants.* An effective way to heighten a person's interest in something new, in this case the lives and experiences of people of other generations, is to weave in something that they care deeply about. As human beings, we have a need to be understood "as we are" rather than as the groups to which we belong are portrayed in the media. Intergenerational programs provide participants with an opportunity to clear up misunderstandings associated with misguided age-related notions. For example, an academically oriented young person is likely to find personal enrichment when convincing a misinformed older adult that not all young people are involved in drugs and gangs. In much the same way, an elderly person who has an active lifestyle is likely to attain personal benefit when convincing a younger person that it is erroneous to assume that all older adults are feeble. Accordingly, in terms of program design, it is important to incorporate activities that allow participants to share their knowledge, motivation, abilities, and personalities.
- *Start light.* Drawing from communications theory, Angelis *(1996)* notes that intergenerational communication is a sequential process that most naturally begins with the type of superficial contact that is generated by ice-breakers (or warm-ups), where interaction occurs in a scripted manner. Warm-up activities can give way to additional activities designed to yield more intensive, in-depth communication. Before attempting to begin a one-year program, start with a special event. The experience of this first meeting will help everyone feel more comfortable and hence more open to the prospect of engaging in additional activities. As in any relationship—it takes time.

Conclusions

Cooperative extension, with its multifaceted service delivery system and broad-based clientele, is very well positioned for having a significant impact improving intergenerational relations in this country. Extension staff have demonstrated effective leadership skills as educators, service providers, and organizers, and they have experience working in a wide variety of community settings, including community centers, schools, retirement communities, clubs, hospitals, and places of worship. Furthermore, as noted in this article, many have worked with multiple generations and established innovative intergenerational programs. There are several ways to build upon and strengthen these efforts.

First, we suggest greater recognition of extension personnel who are thinking differently about programming, taking into account the perspectives and experiences of different generations, and working successfully to promote intergenerational support and engagement as a component of their extension-based programs. This might involve establishing some sort of an awards program and providing encouragement for people with intergenerational experiences and perspectives to serve on national planning committees and work with the national leadership.

We also suggest implementing training programs that will provide extension staff with a stronger foundation in intergenerational programming concepts, principles, and approaches. Such training will serve to extend the education of extension staff with previous training in either adult education or youth (child) development. Those already involved with intergenerational programs would benefit in terms of gaining additional program planning, implementation, and evaluation skills. Such training can be conducted in partnership with organizations that effectively promote intergenerational programs and policies such as Generations United (GU), a national membership organization that includes more than one hundred national, state, and local organizations representing more than seventy million Americans.

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This brings us to our final point—the partnership-building significance of intergenerational programs. In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis in cooperative extension on reaching out to new partners and expanding into new content areas. One effective approach is to seek ways to bring the generations together to explore areas of common concern, build consensus, and work collaboratively to address emerging needs within their communities.

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Purdue colleague Dr. Dena Targ, to two national satellite programs on grandparents raising grandchildren. These programs received national recognition and awards from the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, AARP, and the American Distance Education Consortium. She has also provided leadership to the development of the Wisconsin Alzheimer's Institute and the Wisconsin Family Caregiving Alliance.