Age-Friendly Action Plan for the University of Calgary

PROPOSED BY: Brenda Strafford Centre on Aging

OVERVIEW:

In 2018, the University of Calgary joined the growing Age-Friendly University (AFU) Global Network, becoming Canada’s sixth Age-Friendly designated University. The AFU Global Network is an international consortium of post-secondary institutions dedicated to fulfilling 10 principles that foster an age-inclusive culture for students, faculty, staff, alumni, and retirees. Endorsement of these principles will create a welcoming campus for older persons, promote research and scholarship to support an aging population, lead to mutually beneficial community-based partnerships, and position universities to inform public policy that speaks to the needs of older persons. With the approval of the Cumming School of Medicine and support from the O’Brien Institute for Public Health, the Brenda Strafford Centre on Aging led in developing the membership application. Dr. Dru Marshall (Provost) acknowledged the University of Calgary’s acceptance into the AFU Global Network in a February 22, 2019 UToday article. While the Centre on Aging is well positioned to advance the initiative, high-level institutional commitment is required to ensure significant progress is achieved in addressing the following prioritized AFU principles:

- Encouraging participation of older adults in core activities of the university, including educational and research programs (Principle #1);
- Fostering opportunities for intergenerational learning (Principle #4);
- Increasing understanding of students of the longevity dividend, complexity, and richness that aging brings to our society (Principle #7);
- Enhancing access for older adults to the university's health and wellness programs and arts and cultural activities (Principle #8);
- Engaging actively with the university's own retired community (Principle #9).

An action plan that aligns with our local context and capabilities is proposed in “Next Steps”. 
BACKGROUND:

In an effort to support the well-being of older adults the World Health Organization supports age-friendliness within communities (broadly defined). This involves more than addressing issues of physical accessibility alone. It also incorporates both the social and emotional inclusion of older adults. Achieving these socio-cultural shifts can present unique challenges within university settings.

To inform how the University of Calgary might most effectively become more age-friendly, we examined the experiences of three Canadian universities (i.e., University of Manitoba, McMaster University, and Université de Sherbrooke) that became members of the AFU Global Network prior to our joining. They were selected because they offer a similarly broad range of research opportunities and Ph.D. programs, as well as having medical schools. Each university confirmed that support for age-friendly initiatives was present at a high leadership level. This was necessary in creating the intra-institutional collaborations required to maintain progress towards raising awareness and fulfilling their AFU Global Network commitments. Examples of specific projects conducted by one or more of these universities include: participatory research projects (e.g., utilizing photo-voice methods); campus-wide surveys (e.g., on campus accessibility); and community consultations. While each university prioritized different principles and adopted their own strategies for achieving age-friendliness, one common activity across all three institutions was the introduction of a speaker series bringing community members and academics together to discuss aging-related issues.

University of Calgary Data

The University of Calgary calendar describes students over the age of 65 as senior citizens while undergraduate students 21 years or older when they enrol in their first year are considered mature students. Data from the Office of Institutional Analysis (OIA) factbook indicates that ~400 students/year aged 50 and over attended the University of Calgary between 2014-2018. They made up ~1% of the entire population of undergraduate and graduate students (~40,000/ year during the time period).

Undergraduate tuition is waived for any full-time University student over the age of 65. Graduate students do not have fees waived regardless of age. The University of Calgary currently offers 16 undergraduate awards designated for mature students (note: just one specified that the applicant must be older than 24). These awards comprise roughly 1% of the total awards offered.

The Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning reports that student enrolment directly out of high school is declining while the enrolment of mature students, often seeking second careers, is rising. There are now fewer students enrolling directly out of high school compared to those entering university three or more years post-high school graduation.

NEXT STEPS:

The numbers quoted in the preceding section suggest that the face of the post-secondary student is changing. As a community leader, we believe that the University of Calgary should foster an age-inclusive culture. To achieve this, the Centre on Aging has identified several short and mid-range opportunities:
Short-Range (1-2 years)

- Strike an AFU Advisory Council including community members and/or representatives of relevant groups (e.g., Calgary Association of Lifelong Learners; LinkAGES; Age-Friendly Calgary)
  - Addresses Principles #1 and #4
- Conduct an accessibility and age-friendly survey including a review of University of Calgary documents for inadvertent off-putting terminology and an audit for cognitive, sensory, and mobility impediments to participation for older adults
  - Addresses Principle #8
- Launch a Healthy Aging Speaker Series (2-3 events/year)
  - Addresses Principles #1 and #4
- Create a new student orientation brochure specifically for older students
  - Addresses Principle #1
- Support student-led partnerships and activities that increase their understanding of aging
  - Addresses Principles #4 and #7
- Engage with retired faculty (including emeriti), staff, and alumni to investigate areas of mutual interest and opportunities for collaboration
  - Addresses Principles #4 and #9
- Explore multicultural aspects of aging (e.g., work with ii’taa’poh’to’p to connect AFU initiatives with the University of Calgary Indigenous Strategy)
  - Addresses Principles #1 and #4

Mid-Range (3-5 years)

- Establish opportunities for students to receive co-curricular credits for intergenerational and aging-focused program participation
  - Faculties of Kinesiology, Social Work, Nursing, Sociology, Medicine, and others
- Create an online hub to assist with:
  - Navigation for older students (e.g., training on D2L and other new technologies; mature student mentoring program)
  - Identify community partnerships (e.g., intergenerational housing opportunities)
- Active engagement of older adults in advisory capacities and as prospective research participants, students, and community partners
  - Listing of older adults (50+) with an interest in becoming research participants
- Develop a robust series of intergenerational activities