Diverse Generations Produce Innovative Results

By Kristin Goldthorpe

Age can become a barrier that separates generations. The beginning of age segmentation can be tied to the advent of formal education which organized and segregated individuals by age. Not so long ago, a student could spend their college years without interacting with another student over 25 years old. With the exception of faculty and staff, there were no "seasoned" adults on campus. Fortunately, that is no longer the case. Universities provide a unique context and perhaps the ideal setting for intergenerational interaction.

Intergenerational engagement has been happening for years at Stanford. "I believe that it's not just a matter of putting older and younger students together in a room (classroom or workplace) - that's not a new conversation. What's new is the degree to which mixing the generations changes the core of our motivation (need to perform) to showing a capacity to care and in turn, creates the opportunity to be innovative with others. Making it an emotional experience levels the playing field for an environment where all participants can be their genuine self," states Barbara A. Karanian, Ph.D. Lecturer and Founder, Design Entrepreneuring Studio.

Over the past five years a new type of student has appeared in Karanian's class. These individuals are noticeably older than the typical student, often wearing a charcoal grey vest with a black backpack marked "DCI" slung over their shoulder. These older students represent the [Stanford Distinguished Careers Institute (DCI)](#). Launched in 2015, this program brings a cohort of professionally accomplished people in midlife to the Stanford campus for a year-long program of building a new community, renewing their health and wellness, and discerning their purpose for the next phase of their lives. DCI seeks to foster intergenerational engagement in an academic setting to help create a new paradigm for the university of the future. Past DCI Fellows include the former US Ambassador to the United Nations, a conductor, artists, CEOs, several lawyers, journalists and medical professionals. As non-matriculated graduate students, Fellows take classes alongside undergraduate and graduate students. Phil Pizzo, DCI's founding director, former Dean of Stanford Medical School, and professor of pediatrics and of microbiology and immunology, states that one of the key goals of the DCI program is to give highly accomplished

individuals the chance to contribute their extraordinary expertise and wisdom to students just beginning their professional journeys, through intergenerational learning, teaching and mentoring. Fellows become colleagues in the classroom and beyond. A Knight Hennessy Scholar described it as a "wisdom relationship."

Tell/Make/Engage – Action Stories for Entrepreneuring (ME 378), is a big draw for DCI Fellows. Averaging 16-18 students per quarter, this engineering design methods class is taught by Karanian who incorporates the unexpected in her curriculum - having some uncertainty and not knowing exactly what will happen in the classroom mirrors the process of societal upheaval and innovation. Students work individually and in teams to create action stories for entrepreneurial ventures. Over the quarter a community forms. Trust and genuine relationships develop among the students. DCI Fellow Perry Karsen reflects "the class provided me the opportunity to experience the mutual rewards of intergenerational learning." This feeling was reflected on the student side. At the end of the quarter Karanian has her students write one sentence stories for each of their peers. Among the remarks Perry received - *"Unquestionably the caring dad of the room, with industry and leadership experience, is the most trusted of the group"* and *"A calm voice in the churning waters of life, his confidence was a beacon through the storm."*

As a Stanford alumna, Katie Connor (DCI 2018/19) relished the opportunity to return to campus as a DCI Fellow to take classes with undergraduate and graduate students, and collaborate with them side-by-side on interesting projects. This past spring Tulsi Desai (2020) was working on her capstone project in David Kelley's master design class. Working with Drew Skrainka (2020) and Stella Tu (2020), their original plan was to develop a mentoring platform. Through an earlier encounter with a DCI Fellow, they connected with Katie who had developed a successful mentoring program at University of Colorado Boulder. "I became their demographic representative," jokes Katie.

The new team used a human-centered design approach to do some user research and early prototyping, and eventually abandoned their original plan to build a mentoring platform. Instead, after hearing from users that the idea of retiring was outdated and unappealing, the team

created Act II, a platform that helps people who have recently left their primary career find the right opportunities to continue to learn, grow and contribute.

In order to develop their platform, the student team needed feedback from the older generation. As Stella Tu (2020) explains, "Older people have the experience of being young, as well as old. However, a young person has never had the experience of being older." Within a few weeks a large number of Fellows from the 2018/19 DCI cohort were recruited for additional feedback and beta testing of Act II. "DCI's involvement was priceless" comments Drew Skrainka (2020).

The key to this successful team was bidirectional - serving each other. "What I learned the most from developing Act II was how to be a good listener. This was easy to do since the DCI Fellows are wildly accomplished. It is so interesting to hear their stories," reflects Stella.

Value was received on both ends. "Seeing other perspectives gets you out of your comfort zone. The students were able to see my skills in ways I could not see myself and find opportunities I would have never thought of," comments Katie about the post-career possibilities curated by the younger students. During the academic year, Katie was deeply involved in Act II along with the other students. Katie and her teammates have now all graduated and gone on to pursue new careers – the students at a broad range of tech start-ups and Katie as the new Executive Director of DCI. While no longer on campus, or even in the same state, they have presented a workshop using their method to a group in Austin, TX and continue to stay connected via text and Zoom.

Before setting foot on campus, Mark Clapper, MD (DCI 2018) knew he wanted to participate in Paul Yock's Bio-Design class (BIOE 374A/B), a two-quarter course with the stated goal, "to understand and apply a repeatable process for identifying a significant unmet health need and inventing and evaluating a new technology to address it." Mark's group included two PhD students, a Taiwanese surgeon, an Army Captain (first year MBA student) and a masters in engineering student. Their assigned problem was the care of patients with ankle fractures. Using the course process, they chose to address delays in getting injured patients to surgery. Mark was impressed by the students' innovative thinking, technical skills and unwavering ability to share and then incorporate group insights. After 4 or 5 preliminary prototypes, the team developed a

working prototype, SwellStop, a medical device used to reduce post-traumatic ankle swelling, eliminate surgical delays and thereby improve surgical outcomes. The team was selected for and participated in the Cardinal Ventures program, the StartX Student-In-Residence program, and then went on to win first prize in the Bases $100K Startup Challenge of 2019.

The class experience and work that followed in the accelerator programs forged tight bonds among the team members. Connor Ludwig, now a fourth year PhD student remarks, "When I broke my arm last year in an on-campus bike accident, Mark, with neither hesitation nor prompting, immediately dropped what he was doing to bike over to where I was and offer support. When the team has difficult conversations, Mark always approaches the discussion with empathy. Without a doubt, working with Mark has enriched my Stanford and life experience, and for that I am immensely grateful to the DCI Fellows program!"

These are just a few examples of how intergenerational learning can enrich the Stanford experience for both traditional and mid-life students. It is generally accepted that diverse teams are more creative and have better outcomes as a result of bringing different perspectives to the table to solve a problem. Generational diversity, while not common on college campuses, brings its own set of benefits. While intergenerational teams may have initial challenges in terms of tech "savvy-ness" and communication styles, students and Fellows alike have found that these experiences provide unique opportunities for deep learning, enduring friendships and personal growth. These experiences all are part of the DCI program's mission to foster intergenerational engagement in an academic setting, helping to create new models for lifelong learning where the element of age enhances the learning experience and environment for all. Recent Stanford graduate, Marissa Luna highlighted the many benefits the DCI model can provide, "as I reflect on my last four years at Stanford, I wanted to acknowledge the transformative role that DCI Fellows have and continue to play. Thank you for designing and implementing a program that not only positively impacts the DCI Fellows and their partners but the Stanford community as a whole."