Rural aging and age-friendly rural communities: Insights from Trent University

Elizabeth Russell & Mark Skinner
Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario
Introductions

- Elizabeth Russell, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology
- Mark Skinner, Ph.D., Professor of Geography and Canada Research Chair, Director, Trent Centre for Aging & Society
Presentation outline

- Trent University & Trent Centre for Aging & Society (TCAS) - Mark
- Rural aging, health, and social care research – Mark
- Rural age-friendly communities research – Elizabeth
- New ways of researching aging rural communities – Elizabeth & Mark
- Concluding comments – Mark & Elizabeth
Acknowledgements
Trent University

CHALLENGE THE WAY YOU THINK
Trent University: Canada’s Premier Small University (est. 1964)

- #1 undergrad University in Ontario; #2 undergrad Research University in Canada
- Highest enrolment growth in Ontario, despite sector declines and intense competition
- Comprehensive range of undergraduate programs, and strong graduate programs in key disciplines
- Strong research focus in all program areas
- 8336 students, two campuses:
  - 6854 undergraduate (Peterborough); 1000 undergraduate (Durham)
  - 482 graduate students
  - 718 international students (including ESL)
- 18:1 student to faculty ratio
- High student satisfaction scores
Trent Centre for Aging & Society (TCAS)

- Established in 2013, funded by SSHRC Aid to Small Universities Grant
- Home to two Canada Research Chairs, more than 30 faculty members, students, visiting scholars and community leaders
- Promotes innovative research, education and community engagement that challenges ageist policies and practices, and is responsive to the issues facing older people and aging communities
- New graduate program (2017), Collaborative Specialization in Aging Studies

www.trentu.ca/aging
Canada Census Aging Communities:
Peterborough, Kelowna Among Top Spots For Seniors In 2011

The latest census figures from Statistics Canada show nearly one in five people in Peterborough was aged 65 or older in 2011 -- 19.5 per cent, the highest ratio in the country among municipalities. Trois-Rivières, Que., was next on the list at 19.4 per cent, followed by Kelowna, B.C., St. Catharines, Ont., and Victoria, B.C.

"We can be kind of a pioneer in showing that an aging population is nothing to be afraid of," said Jim Struthers, a professor of Canadian studies who examines the impact of aging from his perch at Peterborough’s Trent University.

"We can actually show the way for innovation which will be necessary for the rest of the province and the rest of the country."
Rural aging, health, and social care research
Rural aging trends

- Globally, rural populations are aging faster (proportionally) than urban populations
- Demographic shift due to youth out-migration (for employment, education), ageing in place (of older residents), and retiree in-migration (for retirement living)
- Increasing vulnerability (health status) and strained support networks (distance)
There is a gap in understanding the diverse experiences of older rural people and the complexities of aging rural places...and what this means for the sustainability of rural communities.
Rural aging Canada Research Chair program

10 year research program, three essential questions:

1. How to account for the diversity of older people’s experiences of volunteerism?

2. How to account for the complexity of volunteerism in support of aging in place?

3. How to ensure the sustainability of volunteerism in aging communities?
Rural aging approach

Rural aging themes

Learning from older volunteers:

“I’m only one step away from needing the meals that I am delivering…”

Meals on Wheels volunteer driver, rural Canada
Rural aging themes

- Learning from rural service providers:

  "Volunteering is all we have, but it may not be enough..."

  Community Care Coordinator, rural Canada
Rural aging themes

- Learning from rural community leaders:

“If you retire here, you better be willing to volunteer here…”

Community leader, rural Canada
Rural aging themes

- Learning from the frontiers of rural aging:

  “SENIORS SAVED TUMBLER RIDGE AFTER THE MINES CLOSED”
Rural aging projects

- Diversity of older peoples’ experiences
  - Community-based research with older rural volunteers (new municipal partnership)

- Complexity of rural volunteerism
  - Community-based research on volunteer arts-based health interventions for social inclusion (new CIHR/Alzheimer Society of Canada grant)

- Sustainability of aging rural communities
  - Community-based research on rural age-friendly communities (new SSHRC Insight Development Grant project)
Rural age-friendly communities research

- Project background: Experts’ perspectives on building sustainability into age-friendly programming

- Objectives:
  1. AFC sustainability limiting & strengthening factors
  2. Recommendations to support AFC sustainability
  3. Develop methodological research framework
Method

- Study site: Rural & small town Newfoundland and Labrador
- Participants: 8 age-friendly program coordinators
- Procedure: Telephone interviews
- Materials: Interview protocol
- Data analysis: Qualitative thematic content analysis
Materials: Interview Topics

- **Challenges, successes** of planning & implementation
- **Key ingredients** of developing sustainable AFCs
- **Community-specific factors**: Rurality, transportation, weather, sense of community
- **Marginalized** populations
- **Lessons learned** to share with new AFCs
- And, **what motivates you** to keep doing this work?
Results: Key Themes

- Challenges to sustainability:
  - Volunteer burnout
  - Limited funding

- Factors strengthening sustainability:
  - Municipal collaboration
  - Generating broad community support
  - Targeted volunteer recruitment
Challenges: Volunteer burnout

One of the questions we asked [during our needs assessment] was, would you want to form a seniors club in Partridgeberry Cove. And pretty well overwhelmingly the answer is no because we’re involved with enough organizations already. We don’t want to start something else just to have another organization.

The people that you see here in volunteer roles, they aren’t only involved in one committee, they’re involved in all of them. And it’s getting to the point now, like some people have said to me, next year is where it is our 50th anniversary, that will be my last year. I speak for myself and the ones that are often volunteering with me, we’ve been at it since we were about 18 years old. And we are 70.
Challenges: Limited funds

Start-up funds:
We need to do some promotion, like print some flyers, we need to do some engagement, we need to host some meetings, we need to... you know. And all of that is going to cost some money. So, there really has to be, I think the initial, and then some follow-up. And then, hopefully after that, after 1-2 years, possibly 3, but maybe after 2 years, this committee is either going to fly or it’s going to die.

Operating funds:
With the community support and funding that we can get from other agencies, a small amount of funding, we can sustain the program, the whole thing. However, we need a coordinator. We cannot do it without a paid coordinator, so that is our biggest challenge right now.
Strengthening factors: Municipal collaboration

One of the greatest step that can be taken on this age friendly journey is to get buy-in from the municipality. And it's an ongoing challenge; we had everybody all geared up, every council member was onside. And then we had an election, and some of the old council members disappeared, and then it became a case of reacquainting and getting buy-in from the new councillors.
Strengthening factors: Community support

Well it’s a matter of just talking to people, and getting them engaged. Fostering the idea that this is community, community matters, we all live here, we all have family that, in some way, shape or form, is connected to living in the community, and we all have older people.
Strengthening factors: Targeted volunteer recruitment

From skilled community members...

We’re constantly recruiting good people at the table. We had a retired nursing manager [...] she was able to bring her expertise and leadership in health care issues relevant to the age-friendly transportation. So, that kind of expertise you really need, and you can only get at that, really, when you have good people around the table. And, you know, lots of people like to be invited to share into a successful program.

To older adults...

There was a lady who was very isolated. She didn’t get involved in the community. But because they were able to connect with her, she then volunteered to be a contact for other people. For example, if I needed to advertise tomorrow that we’re having a social tomorrow night, then she will agree to phone those who probably wouldn’t see the notices in the post office or in around town.
Project Implications and Discussion

- Successful, sustainable AFC programming must include:
  1. Municipal support
  2. Community support
  3. Strategies to avoid volunteer burnout
  4. Follow-up funds

- Limitations
Next steps in our collaboration: Developing rural insights for building sustainable age-friendly communities initiatives

- SSHRC Insight Development Grant (2017-19)
- Objectives:
  1. To document policy approaches in age-friendly programming,
  2. To investigate factors that limit and strengthen programming sustainability,
  3. To understand best practices in program implementation, and
  4. To contribute a theoretical framework to the academic, policy, and community understanding of age-friendly program sustainability.
- Method:
  - Ontario-based case study of ~5 rural communities
New ways of researching aging rural communities

- Improving social inclusion for Canadians with dementia and carers through sharing dance (CIHR/Alzheimer Society Canada)
New ways of researching aging rural communities

- Older voluntarism and rural community sustainability: A case study of a volunteer-based rural library (M.A. Thesis, Trent University)
A COMMUNITY BASED APPROACH TO RETIREMENT LIVING DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

- Objective: To determine the feasibility and community preferences toward future development of an Abbeyfield house (surveys & focus groups)
- Themes: Affordability, companionship, independence
- Strong support for the model, with nuanced recommendations to incorporate key themes.

"I think there's a great need for affordable housing for seniors."

"Being somewhere within the village is an important thing."

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Introducing our Trent symposium at IFA in Toronto this summer:

- Presenters: Mark Skinner, Elizabeth Russell, Rachel Herron, Amber Colibaba, & Kara Rutherford

- Themes: Rural aging discourse, age-friendly sustainability, new ways of researching aging rural communities
Concluding comments

- Invitation to consider implications for research, policy and practice
- Broader applications of rural aging and aging rural communities research
- Value of rural research at Canada’s small, research intensive universities
Invitation to TrentAging2019 – International conference

TRENT AGING 2019

MAY 28-31, 2019
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www.trentu.ca/aging
Further information – thank you!

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