AGE-FRIENDLY OXFORD: A QUALITATIVE STUDY CONDUCTED BY THE MIAMI UNIVERSITY FIRST YEAR RESEARCH EXPERIENCE (FYRE) CLASS OF 2017-18

May 2018

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Age-Friendly Oxford Initiative is to create a livable community for residents of all ages and abilities. The AARP, an affiliate of the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities and Communities Program, accepted the City of Oxford into its network as the third city in Ohio to commit to becoming a more age-friendly community. The World Health Organization describes age-friendly environments as fostering,

> *Health and well-being and the participation of people as they age. They are accessible, equitable, inclusive, safe and secure, and supportive. They promote health and prevent or delay the onset of disease and functional decline. They provide people-centered services and support to enable recovery or to compensate for the loss of function so that people can continue to do the things that are important to them.*[1]

The AARP defines a livable community as one that is "safe and secure, offers affordable and appropriate housing, diverse transportation options, and supportive community features and services."[2] Livability is determined by eight domains: outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information; and community and health services.[3] Worldwide, the population of people 65 and over has steadily increased; by 2020, there will be more people over age 60 than under age five.[4] Therefore, creating communities that are friendly to people of all ages and abilities is important. In Oxford, various groups of volunteers and researchers were recruited to accomplish this goal.

This report will begin with a brief description of the demographic and economic characteristics of Oxford, Ohio and will then describe the Oxford Age-Friendly Initiative specifically. Research methods, results and implications will follow.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CITY OF OXFORD

The city of Oxford is a mid-sized college town that houses Miami University which has almost 20,000 students, accounting for a large percentage of Oxford's population. In fact, the median age in Oxford is 21.2 years.[5] Still, Oxford is also home to a big community of middle- and older-aged adults. A recent count estimated around 1,000 adults age 55-65 and 1,200 adults (or 5.6% of the Oxford population) over age 65. These numbers are expected to grow in the upcoming years.[6] This suggests that the population of Oxford is rapidly aging. Consequently, it is important to conduct research to determine which parts of Oxford are and aren't age friendly so that the community can better target and address the needs of the aging population.

As a college town, Oxford has some unique features characteristic of most American college towns that must be taken into consideration when making efforts toward making the city more age friendly. According to Gumprecht[7], college towns are youthful places with highly educated populations. The residents of such town are less likely to work in factories and more likely to work in education. Unemployment is low, and family incomes are high. Such towns are unconventional, cosmopolitan, transient places where residents are more likely to rent and live in group housing.[8] Moreover, college towns are characterized by large campuses, fraternities, and shopping areas geared toward college students. Most of these features, shared by college towns around America, are also true of the city of Oxford.

In addition to being a college town, Oxford, Ohio is also historic. Miami University was founded in 1809 followed by the Village of Oxford in 1810.[9] Consequently, many of the buildings in Oxford are historic or were built before the mandatory Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant features were established in 1990 and later revised in 2011.[10] Due to this, several buildings in the city of Oxford are currently inaccessible to the wider population of the town, especially those that cater predominantly to a young student population. Moreover, uptown Oxford is closer to the college campus than to other residential areas of the city, making it difficult for many people to access stores and restaurants. The Mile Square area, traditionally the home of Miami staff, is also now increasingly inhabited by college students. This further pushes community residents out of a walkable distance from uptown - the hub of most community events and social gatherings.

Some other factors to consider while planning for an age-friendly Oxford include businesses, medical services, transportation, and housing. The labor force participation rate is expected to fall 1.4 percentage points to 65.8 percent from 2008 to 2018. In a slightly different perspective, data reported by the American Community Survey, suggests that the labor force participation rate for people 16 and over in Oxford (not Oxford Township) in 2017 was 44% and that 56% of the population of Oxford was not in the labor force[11], presumably because of the large student population. In addition, 16% of the households in Oxford reported having retirement income; 46.1% of the population in Oxford (6,556 people of all ages) earned less than the poverty level. Again, it is unclear whether these figures report an accurate picture of the non-student population or if students are included in these data. It is important to note that these data may be affected by high labor turnover as students regularly take up short-term employment. Frequent business closures (such as 45 East and Kona Bistro more recently), and temporary, seasonal closures during summer months and long university holidays may also affect the data. Nonetheless, data suggest that residents of Oxford represent a fairly wide income range and that almost half the population is unemployed at any given time. Such circumstances necessitate a closer look at the lives of residents of Oxford to determine steps that can be taken to make the city livable for all.

Medical services in the city are also limited given the large resident population. For those that exist, the services are primarily geared toward the younger population. Few specialists are available at the health care facilities in town; even fewer are available to specifically serve the general population of the city. This often causes challenges for people who need to seek specialized services and may not have access to areas outside of town (e.g., Cincinnati which is approximately 30 miles away). With a rapidly aging population in Oxford, it is necessary for the city to improve, expand, and diversify health care services to serve people of all ages.

Accessibility is closely tied to transportation. Oxford lacks adequate public transportation for the greater community area. Consequently, most people are required to be self-sufficient. For those who are able and willing to drive, the lack of parking spaces often serves as a deterrent. People feel that Oxford seems to have more cars than parking spots, and although students can make use of the bus system to avoid parking hassles, community members usually do not have that luxury due to the lack of bus routes. Consequently, even though most places in Oxford are short driving distances away, the lack of both public transportation and parking spaces poses problems for the local population. Additionally, it needs to be recognized that local taxi services may seem expensive to some people; some may not have smartphones to call for Uber and similar taxi services; and some may not feel comfortable riding the buses with only college students as fellow riders. While getting around Oxford itself is difficult for some people, traveling out of Oxford is significantly more expensive and difficult to arrange.

The fourth factor to consider is that of adequate and affordable housing. Like most things in Oxford, housing is also geared toward college students, making affordable housing difficult to find. According to DATA USA, 31.8% of housing units in Oxford were owner-occupied in 2015 compared to the national average for owner occupation which was 63.9%.[12] The mean property value in 2015 was $190,000. Unaffordable housing affects both students and community members. A rise in student enrollment at Miami University and the consequent demand for apartment-style housing with multiple amenities have driven up market prices for real estate and pushed community members to the fringes of the city in an effort to secure affordable, family-style housing. Those who own homes close to campus and choose to live in them are often required to put up with some unpleasant aspects of living around young college students. Students who lack resources to rent high-priced apartments are also significantly affected by the housing situation in Oxford.

OXFORD AND THE AGE-FRIENDLY INITIATIVE

The City of Oxford was accepted into AARP's Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities on November 3, 2017. It is not only the third community in this network in Ohio to commit to becoming more age friendly, but also the only community with a student population that overwhelmingly outnumbers permanent residents. To explore issues regarding age friendliness, leadership from the Age-Friendly Oxford Initiative partnered with the Scripps Gerontology Center to conduct research on various aspects of age friendliness. For one component, a First Year Research Experience (FYRE) class was recruited to conduct a qualitative study to learn the perspectives of various stakeholders in the city. The class was composed of nine first-year students, one fourth-year student, and a doctoral student. Students represented various disciplines - accounting, biology, engineering, pre-med, psychology, sociology, strategic communication, gerontology, and women's studies. Although one student was from Oxford, the others came from a range of small and large communities in Cleveland and Columbus in Ohio, West Chester, Indiana, and Lexington, Kentucky. None of the first-year students had prior experience in age-related issues or in qualitative research. This study, therefore, provided an opportunity for students to learn about the Oxford community and research methods, as well as provide useful information for the age-friendly initiative. As part of the FYRE program, students wanted to know how accessible Oxford is for people of different ages and abilities. They looked at various components of the eight domains of livability to learn about people's perceptions regarding the age friendliness of the Miami and Oxford community.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Oxford as an age-friendly city and to identify components of livability that could potentially be improved. The ultimate purpose of the study was to assist the city of Oxford with understanding perspectives of livability for people over age 65 from the viewpoints of several community stakeholders (e.g., students, residents, first responders). Information for this study was gathered through interviews, conversation with various stakeholders, and naturalistic observation.

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

Unlike quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, statistical analyses), qualitative research focuses on experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders/pertinent individuals through methods such as focus groups and interviews. Qualitative research allows for in-depth exploration of little-known areas and often yields important information from which future surveys can be developed. Another important feature of qualitative research is the use of small sample sizes. Whereas quantitative studies generally need

samples of 200 or greater to yield statistically meaningful results, qualitative research samples can be as small as 10 participants, depending on the depth of the interviews. Depth, or going beyond the actual question itself to learn more about attitudes or ideas that shape the individual's response, is what allows researchers to answer questions about "why" and "how" rather than just "what." Students in the FYRE program attempted to answer the "why" and "how" questions to help make Oxford more age- and ability-friendly.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This research project began with students compiling and reviewing outside research on age-friendly communities and conducting direct observations around the city of Oxford to look at the level of accessibility of buildings and streets. They also talked with key informants involved with the age-friendly initiative in Oxford. This allowed them to formulate interview questions as well as determine which demographics they wanted to target. Initially, the class started with a large pool of questions aimed at various aspects of the age-friendly domains. The class then categorized questions and prioritized them according to relevance to the primary research questions until consensus was reached. They then ordered the final questions to facilitate a more natural conversational flow during the actual interview.

Institutional Review Board

All members of the research team completed training in human subjects' research per Miami University guidelines. The class then completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application. This involved detailing steps of the research process, identifying and describing the level of risk that participants might be exposed to (e.g., personally identifiable information), and developing an interview guide. More specifically, information from the initial research steps (e.g., literature, direct observations and talking with key informants) formed the basis of the questionnaires. This study was approved by the IRB at Miami University. All participants provided written or verbal consent to participate in the research and agreed to be audio recorded prior to the start of the interview. To ensure confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts.

Participants

Local residents, visitors, city officials, business owners, students and alumni, university personnel, and first responders were recruited via online information, posters around the city, a press release about the study, and through word-of-mouth (i.e., snowball sampling). Interested participants contacted the team to volunteer.

Interviews

Students were trained in how to conduct interviews through readings, class discussions, and mock interviews. They also received training in focus group facilitation, although ultimately no focus groups were conducted for this research. One-on-one interviews were conducted either in person or via telephone depending on the participant's preference. In some cases, two people participated in an interview. The interviews were semi-structured (see the Appendix for an interview guide). However, it was important for the interviewer to be able to tailor questions to be more relevant for the particular participant (e.g., student, first responder), so not all questions were asked in the same way to all participants. Prior to the start of the interview, the student obtained verbal (for telephone interviews) or written (for face-to-face interviews) informed consent. Participants were also asked whether the interview could be audio taped.

Interviews were transcribed through Trint, an auto-transcription software. Transcripts were then verified by listening to the audio recording while reading the transcript. It was important also to remove all personally identifiable information such as names, titles, or locations to protect the identities of the participants. Verified transcripts were then uploaded into a qualitative software package called Dedoose.

Data Analysis

To start the analysis, the students read through several transcripts to develop codes (i.e., descriptive meaning units). They coded a few transcripts as a class to make sure everyone was interpreting the codes in a similar manner and to make any needed corrections to the codebook such as adding new codes or modifying definitions of existing codes. After the class reached consensus on the codebook, remaining transcripts were coded by individuals.

The class then divided itself into small groups to focus on each of the eight domains of age-friendly cities. By extracting codes, students then developed over-arching themes for each domain, which are included in the results.

RESULTS

Twenty people participated in the study. Participants consisted of students, residents, people who worked in or visited Oxford, and first responders. The average interview length was 26 minutes. Following is a breakdown of participants by age:

Data not available	18-24 years	45-54 years	55-64 years	65-74 years	75+
5	5	2	2	5	1

The findings of the study have been categorized under the eight domains of livability to understand how Oxford fares in each category and to determine which domains need further attention to create an age-friendly city. Each domain is composed of several themes to indicate common thoughts/concerns/insights shared by the participants of the study.

DOMAIN 1: OUTDOOR SPACES AND BUILDINGS

This domain assesses the availability and accessibility of indoor and outdoor public spaces. These include parks, walking trails, outdoor seating, and availability of elevators, ramps, hand rails, and other similar features that make public spaces easy to use for all. We found that people have mixed feelings about the accessibility of outdoor spaces and buildings, as explained below.

Theme 1: Physical accessibility of public spaces

The optimal use of public spaces is greatly dependent on people's ability to get to their desired destination without much struggle. In this respect, participants agreed that outdoor spaces in Oxford were fairly easy to navigate. According to one participant,

> *The community park and the baseball fields up there…[there's] plenty of room, there's accessible parking there. You know the community park and stuff…I don't know that there's a real issue there for anybody. Obviously, when there's big events like the Fourth of July and stuff, there's not enough parking, but I mean that's a once-a-year kind of thing. Maybe a couple of sports tournaments here and there, but I think it's fairly easy for everybody to get around, there're sidewalks through it …the walking path… if you've got mobility problems you can get around the majority of that park without getting in the mud or into uneven ground…that kind of stuff like for older people. So yeah, it's in pretty decent shape.*

This participant seemed satisfied with the way the outdoor spaces of Oxford have been built to allow most people access to activities and events that take place in the university and in town. Some other participants, however, mentioned issues such as inadequate lighting in alleys, brick streets, old buildings, and long walking distances from parking spots to buildings/businesses as some factors that challenge the otherwise easy accessibility of public spaces.

Theme 2: Wide variety of public spaces

Participants were of the view that Oxford, although a small town, offers its residents a fairly wide range of public amenities including indoor facilities like the community library and the university recreational center, and outdoor spaces such as parks and walking trails. According to one participant,

> *…especially during the summer months when it's not crowded at all, there are a lot of people who are like 60 or older who go to the rec center but I've seen them during the school year too. I think the little park on High Street is really nice. They do a good job taking care of it and I've seen people with their families everything go out there. [The public library], it's really nice. I think it's accessible to those who may be disabled…so I think it's they do a pretty good job with their public spaces.*

This participant emphasized the indoor public amenities of Oxford and seemed impressed by the maintenance and accessibility of some of the newer buildings. Other participants seemed especially enthusiastic about the outdoor amenities of Oxford. As one participant shared, "I'll tell you the reason I chose Oxford is so that I could go walking in the grounds of Miami because it has 14 miles of trails. I like being rather close to nature." This participant, like some others, finds the walking trails in and around the university a highlight of living in Oxford. His view was echoed by another participant who mentioned the upcoming Oxford Area Trails System (OATS) trail around Oxford as something that he was looking forward to. He believed that the OATS trail would enhance residents' access to even more green areas and natural spaces.

Theme 3: Social accessibility of public spaces

Being a college town, the social environment of Oxford is believed to experience frequent, temporary variations. Consequently, irrespective of the physical accessibility of places, social accessibility plays a defining role in how and when people use public spaces. According to one participant,

> *I think it depends on the day of the week. I think Monday through Thursday… you could be any age and go about anywhere in Oxford. But I would say Thursday night through Saturday night you just don't want to because the streets are flooded [with] college kids who are drunk and stuff…*

This participant, like others, is wary of visiting some areas of Oxford on certain days of the week. Another participant thought that specific times and days should be avoided by children and older adults, or "basically anyone not the demographic of college student" if they wish to steer clear of unpleasant experiences. Some also expressed a wish for more adult-friendly gatherings and less drinking and loud, youthful music. Most participants agreed that summer and other university holidays allow community residents to partake fully in the amenities that Oxford has to offer.

DOMAIN 2: TRANSPORTATION

Many participants expressed concerns about transportation in and around Oxford. There seem to be many issues with finding ways to commute around and outside of the

city during the school months as well as the summer months. This can create difficult living situations for anyone who does not have a car, while those who do have cars may still experience difficulties in transporting themselves around the city of Oxford.

Theme 1: Lack of transportation services

A common problem seemed to be that of finding suitable transportation for older adults to get to stores or appointments in and outside of Oxford. It also seemed that some people believe Miami University to be a big contributor to the transportation problems in Oxford as public transportation operates on university schedule and only on specific routes, neither of which meets the needs of the community residents. Although there are taxi services available in the city, many feel that they are not safe or suitable for transporting older residents. According to one resident,

> *When you need to go to a specialist that's not here…I mean right now I'm fine; I can drive myself, I have friends, whatever. But what I'm worried about is when I can't drive. It would be nice to have some kind of a routine or regular, reliable, dependable transportation system that I would feel comfortable going to Cincinnati with. Not Uber, not Wreck'em [Swerve'em Taxi] or whatever they're called. I just don't feel like I would really want to do that.*

This participant expressed views shared by many others who are concerned about Oxford residents' current and/or future inability to drive. It also reflects the opinions of first responders who often receive calls requesting for transportation-related services (buying medicine, grocery shopping) from residents due to lack of affordable and available public transportation.

Theme 2: Parking

The lack of adequate parking spaces emerged as a common concern among participants. A large number of students at the university own cars and use them to get around Oxford. This significantly reduces the availability of parking spots for community members and makes it difficult for them to get to places and enjoy the city. As one participant shared,

> *Parking is a big one for people that drive cars, you know. Obviously in our town we have a lot more cars than we have parking so it's difficult getting a parking place close to the business that you want to frequent.*

This participant was of the opinion that better public transit facilities for residents may help reduce parking-related problems and allow residents to frequent businesses and buildings. Another participant suggested "congestion pricing" or disincentives tied to parking as a way to encourage people, especially students, to walk or use the bus system.

Theme 3: Miami University events

Driving in Oxford is often difficult due to the large number of pedestrians around campus. University events further increase traffic in the city, making driving difficult during the school year. According to one participant,

> *One time they had a concert here, a really big name and then it was also parents' weekend. And Josh Grobin was performing and then I think there was a couple of games, a football game maybe…anyway, there were too many things going on and the traffic could just not come into town and a lot of people missed the concert. Oh man, it was all over the news. But what used to happen back in my early days at Miami was coordination between the city and the university of what they called 'significant events.' And so that would be caught before it happened.*

Most participants interviewed for this study wanted ease of accessibility in the city; it seemed like better communication between the city and the University could help with a lot of the concerns and inconveniences in Oxford.

DOMAIN 3: HOUSING

Most people prefer to age in place, and housing needs change as people grow older. Basic modifications to homes can help people to age in their homes. Similarly, the availability of ADA-compatible affordable housing facilities can also help older adults to live in their communities for as long as possible. Most participants in this study identified a strong need for affordable housing for community members, especially for older adults.

Theme 1: Affordability of housing

Chief amongst the concerns expressed regarding housing in Oxford was the astronomical cost associated with renting apartments and homes. All participants felt that housing should be a lot cheaper given the location and size of Oxford, but that costs have been driven up by companies who rent to students. According to one participant,

> *I think [the housing situation is] garbage. I think it's overpriced for everyone. I think the fact that a house can rack up $40,000 rent in a year is ridiculous because that's what a house should cost…a little more than that, but I think it's really outrageous. And I attribute a lot to the companies that own houses…and I think the only reason college students afford it is because we cram more people in there than there should be. So like a normal family of four where there's two parents cannot pay the same where there's six students living there….it's unfair to any families or especially people who aren't working anymore like retired people. It's just not worth it.*

This participant, like all others, feels that renting individually to students is a lot more profitable for companies but that it deprives families and retired individuals of living in newly-built homes/apartments and within close proximity to the city, events, businesses, and public places. The participant also wondered if housing rent across properties could be capped to make the renting process fair and affordable for all.

Theme 2: Accessibility and ADA compliance

Close on the heels of high housing cost was the issue of accessibility of buildings. Although many public buildings have undergone renovation in recent times to make them ADA-compliant, private homes and rental properties have not made much of an effort in that direction. Sometimes, even newly-built/renovated apartments are said to have cut corners in order to renovate cheaply. According to one participant,

> *There are buildings without elevators. There are fairly new ones that they've skirted the building code just enough to get out of doing it. Oh, there was one in particular that I can think of. They went to the board of building standards and appealed…I can't remember what the reason was they used…they came up with some reason why they didn't want to put an elevator in the building. They did. It's a four story building with no elevator.*

In a housing market that already excludes family and older residents to varying degrees, a deliberate effort to make rental properties inaccessible to a certain section of the population is certainly problematic. Moreover, it is possible that some companies aim to cater to students exclusively, and therefore do not feel the need to meet ADA requirements. Additionally, sometimes older residents may also be deliberately discriminated against. One older participant mentioned that he wanted to rent a home near the university campus and was willing to pay the market rate, but the company was unwilling to rent to somebody planning to live alone, and specifically wanted student tenants.

Theme 3: Need for specialized housing

Although lower rents and better accessibility may help older adults to rent a home in Oxford, the homes may not necessarily be suitable for them. Participants mentioned that a set of apartments built specifically for older adults would be most beneficial to the city's senior population. According to one participant,

> *There is no common housing for seniors…what I would like to see is an apartment complex where people could interact with others. Have your own place, be independent, but interact with others without having to go out in maybe the hot sun in the summer or in a snowstorm in the winter.*

According to the participants, living close together helps people to share information and resources; combats social isolation and loneliness; and allows people to look out for each other. The same participant went on to say that,

> I think our city council and planning commission have got to look at low income housing and low income housing for senior citizens who are on fixed incomes, and that ought to be considered in Uptown where they have access to the stores or, for example, over by Stewart Square where they have access to Kroger and the public library.

Walkability or easy access to resources is especially important in Oxford because it lacks public transportation. Building homes closer to resources may help mitigate some of the problems that people encounter while living on the outskirts of town without transportation services.

DOMAIN 4: SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Social connectedness is an integral component of healthy aging. It helps people to develop a sense of belonging to their community and contribute to it in whatever capacity they can. This domain explores opportunities for socialization in Oxford as well as at Miami University. It also explores whether or not residents of the town feel connected to the student body and the university in general.

Theme 1: Social clubs

Participants mentioned the availability of a variety of opportunities for social interaction throughout the year. According to one participant, "We have a lot of activities - our public library, our knitting groups…there are reading groups, there are the clubs…lots and lots of activities." Participants frequently mentioned that joining social groups and clubs had helped them to make friends and find a place within the community. Some of the popular events and activities that people reported enjoying and socializing at include the farmers' market, the community arts center, the senior center, the public library, the restaurants of Oxford, Kroger and other stores, and through volunteering activities.

Theme 2: Entertainment brought in by university

Participants shared their appreciation for the activities that Miami University organizes that are open to the public. They agreed that the exposure to a wide range of events would not be possible in Oxford if not for the university. They felt that the university adds "diversity," "culture," and "vitality" to the city of Oxford. According to one participant,

> There are athletics, you know, you can go see a game. For a very reasonable price you can attend the theater, you can attend a musical performance. Many of those types of activities are of interest to older adults as well.

This participant, like others, credited the university with inviting local residents to enjoy the entertainment that it brings into Oxford. Participants particularly enjoy watching the performing arts series, attending orchestra performances, and special events such as "buddy night at the opera."

Theme 3: Feeling disconnected from students

Some participants mentioned feeling disconnected from the student body as they felt that students did not understand the needs of the larger community. According to one participant, "I guess the conflict between college students and the town people …taking up parking places, don't know how to drive…restaurants…it's much nicer in the summertime when they're gone. You can go to places where you want to go."

This participant's feelings are reflective of other citizens who often report enjoying times such as spring break and summer when students are gone and the residents feel as though they have their town back. Some residents may also feel unseen and unheard by the student population. One participant, talking about his wife mentioned,

> She [wife] feels they [students] don't recognize or they don't take you
> [older adults] in; it's almost like you're invisible. I mean it is okay that
> you're there, they're not going to do anything to hurt you, but it's not like
> you feel like you want to approach them if you don't know them.

This experience may be common among a lot of residents, especially those who live on the outer perimeters of the city and may not meet students very often.

DOMAIN 5: RESPECT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

This domain explores aspects of intergeneration interaction, cultural diversity, respect for older persons, and opportunities for social inclusion. It recognizes the importance of feeling included in one's own community and the benefits that such a feeling has on the well-being of residents.

Theme 1: Multigenerational interaction

While talking about inclusion and multigenerational interaction, multiple people mentioned the benefits of Miami University to the community. Several people mentioned how the university increased diversity in the town. Programs such as "community service days" provided through the university were also mentioned for increasing multigenerational interaction. One specific program mentioned was the lectures offered to non-students in the community. One Oxford resident stated that the university is a major part of "the essence of age combination and that is one really nice thing that

Miami does - include or allows anybody to walk in the door." The openness of the university can increase inclusion in the community and provide a welcoming environment. On the other hand, some participants felt that there was little integration between community residents and university students. According to one participant, "[at] Miami as a school there is like a big divide between residents and students and for the most part students and residents don't really interact… the limited space where they do interact, it's mostly for business." This participant believes that interactions between the students and residents only taken place when circumstances bring them together rather than on a voluntary basis. Some members also felt that it is difficult to get students to "see themselves as a member of this community – temporarily - but a member of a community of people." Overall, people expressed a need for opportunities that encourage diversity and interactions between age groups. The places where people have such opportunities currently are at Walmart and Kroger.

Theme 2: Ageism

Ageism entails discrimination against older adults based of their age. It can be displayed through words, actions, attitudes, or policies. It is widely prevalent and may affect not only the self-worth of an individual, but also their quality of life. Upon being asked about ageism in Oxford, most people responded they had not seen any instances of ageism in the community. According to one participant, "I don't think we have ageism and I would say that I don't feel it from the students either…whether or not the students are local, i.e., local Ohioans or even the Chinese." Most older participants felt that they had not been disrespected or discriminated against solely due to their advanced age. One participant, however, felt that Oxford was very youth-oriented. According to her, "The 20-year olds are favored and everything is kind of geared towards them…the culture here just totally is like for the students." Although people did not mention experiencing ageism directly, they may still feel left out of events and activities that primarily cater to the student population.

DOMAIN 6: CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYMENT

An important aspect of an age-friendly city is the opportunity for civic engagement that enables residents to give back to their community. Civic participation may include holding a job, volunteering services, or being actively engaged in community life. Oxford provides its residents several opportunities to contribute in different capacities.

Theme 1: Variety of initiatives

Most participants agreed that Oxford offers a range of choices in terms of the types of community work that residents could be involved in. According to one participant, "We have a League of Women Voters which is a very active…we have a City Council…Civil Rights Commission, the Police Relations Commission. There are so many. We have active Girl Scout and Boy Scout leagues…" These are some avenues for community involvement for residents of Oxford. Other opportunities mentioned by participants include the Oxford Village Network, the Oxford Planning Commission, Audubon Society, the Oxford Housing Commission, and the Oxford Community Arts Center. Residents may also take up other types of volunteer work to stay busy. For example, one volunteer shared that,

> *It's amazing we've got so many volunteer groups that anybody who decides to retire they're busier now than they ever were even when they were working … I think the combination between the university and a very active community volunteer community is very helpful.*

Some people make financial contributions, some volunteer labor, and some help with writing grants. However, not everything runs smoothly all the time. According to one participant,

> *Sometimes we stretch ourselves too thin and don't have enough depth in terms of our volunteer base being able to move [things] forward at a better pace or a more sustainable pace. We kind of go in fits and starts, depending on who has interests and skills in doing what and when they're available. We see some opportunities pass us by because we don't have someone who has the ability to jump in and try to take advantage of whatever the opportunity is as fully as possible.*

Participants acknowledged that community work requires great amounts of "time and money and energy," and that not every opportunity can be utilized as people are generally busy with various things.

Theme 2: Collaboration with university

In addition to having interested and dedicated residents who wish to improve the local community, Oxford also has the advantage of having its own pool of experts in various fields who work and teach at Miami University. Having a diversely qualified resident population enables the city to work in collaboration with individuals, academic departments, and research centers at the University. According to one participant discussing the Oxford Age-Friendly Initiative, "We're very lucky Scripps Gerontology Center does in-kind work for us through research and supporting a graduate assistant. So we're very lucky in that regard." The University being the largest

entity in the town of Oxford, it is often invested in the betterment of not only the university and its campus, but also of the larger town and its local population.

DOMAIN 7: COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

An age-friendly city functions with the knowledge that people have varying levels of access to information depending on their financial resources. Therefore, it is understood that not every resident may have access to mobile phones, internet, or phone plans. Consequently, information dissemination must be carried out in a way that it reaches as many people as possible. Generally, this requires multiple types and levels of communication strategies.

Theme 1: Communication within the city has become challenging since local newspapers were removed from production

A concern within the population of Oxford that has been growing steadily over time is the fact that Oxford does not have its own community paper anymore. According to one participant, "We used to have Oxford Press and The Hamilton Journal… communication's changed in nature so much…it did used to be easier. I think that it could be improved." While some people have access to the online news and information that is so widely used today, many people are in a lower economic bracket and may not have access to online information. This could cause a divide among the residents that do and do not have access to important information about community events and programs, which can decrease involvement of community members in community events.

Theme 2: Poor communication between the large entities in Oxford can cause problems in many different areas

In the past, there have been occasions in which traffic, both foot and car, has been too much for the city to handle all at once. It causes backups on roads and could potentially even be dangerous. After describing an occasion in which this happened, one woman said,

> I would just hope… that there's coordination between the university and fraternities, sororities, all the big entities with the big events, that they coordinate their endeavors, week to week or month to month or something to control the amount of traffic that comes in.

The residents are concerned with this communication issue because it disrupts their day-to-day life. The lack of effective and timely communication may not only disrupt traffic and everyday activities, but also adversely affect community involvement.

Theme 3: Residents have an obligation to seek communication

While it is important that communication be readily available and accessible, it is not always possible for these to be disseminated among all community members. Sometimes, people may be required to seek out the information that they want. In doing so, many opportunities may open up. One participant shared,

> *I think there are a lot of opportunities to be included and the ones I've noticed are the causes like Audubon Society [and] the Oxford Arts Center. I think seniors can find ways to be active if they're looking and I think they can find their area of interest and find their group.*

Opportunities for involvement are available in Oxford, but lack of communication or lack of interest in seeking information can be a roadblock in that process. On occasion, in Oxford's current state, residents must occasionally seek out communication for themselves.

DOMAIN 8: COMMUNITY AND HEALTH SERVICES

Good quality health care is a requirement in any age-friendly city. As people grow older, they are more likely to use a range of specialized health services. Therefore, the local health care system must have the capacity to address the varying needs of an aging population.

Theme 1: Accessibility

Participants provided mixed reactions when asked about the accessibility of health care services in Oxford. Some participants felt that all their needs were being adequately addressed in Oxford itself while others differed in their opinions. According to one participant,

> *I have never had a problem with it personally. Usually getting appointments is pretty fast and they are what I expect for a smaller town. I know it's not going to be the equivalent of having multiple hospitals and all that.*

This participant highlighted the ease of getting appointments as a benefit of living in a small town. Not all participants agreed, however. According to another participant, "The biggest thing is that they just need more people and they need to offer more services to the people that they have instead of being like, 'Hey, we'll see you in two months.'" The difficulty in making recurring appointments was cited by some as a demerit of the health care facilities in Oxford. Some participants also complained about the student health center which is open only during fixed hours and on fixed days, in addition to the lack of 24/7 urgent care within the city.

Theme 2: Quality of health care

Participants also provided mixed reactions when asked about the quality of health care services in Oxford. Some were satisfied with the service that they had received while others were not. According to one participant,

> *At least where [the health care facility is] located is great…right in the center of everything. …they do a pretty good job for how much stuff they have to go through every semester so I have no complaints on that one. The facilities are nice.*

This participant was appreciative of the services that are offered by the local health care facilities which are centrally located. Other participants, however, expressed a poor opinion of the quality of services that they had received. One participant, recalling an incident when he had broken a body part, upon being asked if the quality of services were good remarked,

> *No, absolutely not…I broke my [body part]; the doctors told me it was fine and then called me four days later and told me that it was broken… so I had to go see a specialist in Cincinnati. I mostly think [the local health care facility] is only good for like pumping stomachs and the bare necessities. Not really well equipped for anything major that could happen, anything besides alcohol.*

This participant made the decision to seek medical advice and treatment outside of Oxford because he had lost faith in the service here. Some other participants also mentioned that, on the whole, the health care facilities of Oxford were "doing a poor job and not improving."

Theme 3: Need for specialists

The lack of specialists was a common complaint shared by the participants. One participant, otherwise satisfied with the health care services in Oxford, felt that, "The health services that are here… I think they're fine. I think they're great. But it's when you need to go to a specialist. That's not here." The lack of specialists requires people to travel out of the city for medical care. According to participants, the hardest thing is,

> *getting [people to] medical services…a lot of them have to travel outside of our area and Oxford, maybe down to [neighboring cities] and there's just no way to get them there. They don't have a family member or somebody that can take them. They don't have access to that.*

The problem surrounding the lack of specialists is compounded by the lack of transportation in Oxford. However, one participant felt that "There's alternative medicine doctors here," and that their presence expands the health care options of the residents. She herself, however, visits a neighboring city to see a dermatologist.

It has also been recognized that a geriatrician is needed urgently in Oxford. According to one participant,

> *I would really like to say that we have consensus that getting a geriatrician in our community is an important thing. We don't seem to have buy-in from a hospital about that or from the medical community that that is valued or needed. I remember it being brought up at a community forum at one point and…[the] leadership from that hospital that was there in the community representing the hospital, started talking about that really, you know, that there's no special need for a geriatrician. And then as people were pressing them, you know, they were kind of equating it to hospice care, palliative care which really shows a lot of misunderstanding about what the question even was regarding a geriatrician.*

The need for a geriatrician has arisen due to the rapidly aging population of Oxford. However, the need may only end up being addressed with greater awareness about the role of such a specialist.

Theme 4: Community health workers

Community-based health care services are provided in various ways and for various needs. One way is to engage home health care workers. However, this has proved difficult in Oxford as home health care agencies are located in neighboring cities. According to one participant,

> *We have a hard time getting home health care for people who need it in Oxford. And some of that has to do with the fact that Oxford's kind of out of the way. It's a little bit of a drive. So a lot of home health care agencies that are in Cincinnati or even Hamilton, they don't pay their workers travel time. And it's an investment of time to get to Oxford. And so oftentimes it's hard to find home health workers.*

While this aspect of health care provision may be affected by long distances from cities, it could be created into an opportunity to train more health care workers in the city of Oxford and help them to open agencies or branches of existing agencies. This is something that the Health Committee of the Oxford Village Network is exploring for the near future.

Another way to take health care services to the people could be with the help of community health workers who could make regular home visits. According to a first responder whose department receives numerous calls for things such as "I need help with my pills, my meds," it would help to have,

> *Somebody that was available to somehow inventory these people and keep aware of them…maybe some of them are a stop a month just to make sure they're doing OK. Maybe some of them are a stop every other week, maybe once a week, maybe twice a week. There's a lot of…people in town that would benefit from something like that.*

Such visits would also help prevent calls that people make to emergency services because they are lonely and want some human interaction. Such a desire was also expressed by a participant who mentioned that "[she] would really like to be able to have somebody meet with [her] maybe once a week or something just to make sure that [she hadn't] overlooked something." According to her, such a service when she is aged 90 or 102 would allow her to age in place in her own home.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was undertaken to interview a representative population of Oxford residents - permanent and temporary - to understand how age- and ability-friendly the city of Oxford currently is, and what areas need to be improved upon for it to become an inclusive community for all. The participants expressed mixed opinions about the livability of the city of Oxford. While opportunities for learning and social interaction were appreciated by most, problems such as the lack of housing and transportation were also mentioned frequently. Most participants understood that large-scale improvements would be difficult to make due to the high costs associated with the same. They also agreed that the geographical location of Oxford may serve as a disincentive for businesses and companies to establish themselves here. Moreover, participants seemed aware that the various leadership groups of the city were making efforts to bring about improvements in the community, and they expressed their appreciation for the same.

The positive aspects about living in Oxford highlighted by the participants included those that facilitate and enable socialization, learning, access to nature, opportunities for entertainment, and volunteering activities that allow people to give back to their community. Participants agreed that the range of activities and opportunities in Oxford are unmatched by other neighboring cities, more so because everything is a short distance away and mostly inexpensive.

The participants also highlighted areas that need improvement. These are listed along with some recommendations/ideas for consideration.

PARKING

The shortage of parking spots makes places inaccessible to those who are unable to walk long distances from parking spots to buildings/businesses and prevents people from going where they need to go.

- There needs to be improved communication between the university and the city to come to a compromise to resolve the transportation and parking issue, especially during university events when traffic backs up and parking spots become unavailable.
- New and bigger garages may need to be built to accommodate the large number of vehicles in the city. Old and unused land can be reclaimed to build these.
- High-traffic areas such as High Street could be rezoned to shift parking from streets to communities, especially for residents of apartments on High Street who own cars and use up parking spots for days on end.
- Student parking could be discouraged in high-traffic areas.

HOUSING

The cost of housing, especially close to campus and to High Street, is unaffordable for students as well as community members. However, there are many older adults who live in large homes on their own. In order to foster intergenerational and close relationships between the students and the community, co-housing may be considered as an option.

- Homestays – Older adults who have rooms to spare could host one or two Miami students in their homes. The students could help with cleaning, grocery shopping, driving their host around in exchange for reduced rent. This program may be particularly beneficial for international students who wish to learn about American culture and practice speaking in English.
- Affordable and accessible housing – the city may need to start a dialogue with developers and offer incentives to build affordable housing for students as well community members. One incentive could be that of a package deal – if a developer builds apartments for a certain number of older adults, it could get additional land at a discounted rate to build student housing or open up a business or engage in other economic activity.

LINK BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND CITY

Most students do not feel a connection to Oxford but rather only to the university. It is unclear whether students want more of a connection with Oxford and if they would actually engage in programs involving older residents. Even then, efforts can be made to bring students in closer contact with the community through intergeneration activities.

- Workshops/classes - Older members of the community could offer to teach students skills that are hard to learn in present times. For example, students may want to learn woodworking, knitting, sewing, arts and crafts, and other such skills. These could be conducted one-on-one or in small groups. These could also be done in exchange for a few hours of help with things that the older adult needs.

TRANSPORTATION

The lack of transportation is a common problem for community members who are unable or unwilling to drive. It was acknowledged that the costs to expand the route of the current bus system would be very high and therefore the idea not feasible.

- A taxi service, paid for by the city, that only serves older residents of the community would be a great help to many people. A vehicle with disability accessible design would be able to serve a fairly large number of older residents who are unable to get out of their homes for long durations.

COMMUNICATION

Many people are unaware of what the university offers to promote connections between the students and community members. Some people may not have access to the internet to look things up. Therefore, information could be disseminated in a variety of other ways.

- A newsletter that is emailed to a listserv and also distributed through the town.
- A wider distribution of the Miami Student – preferably with added sections about community-related information.
- Information, such as a weekly/monthly list of events, distributed through places like Kroger or stores where people shop for groceries or visit pharmacies.
- A dedicated Facebook page that is updated regularly with relevant information. It could be developed in conjunction with a university club. It may be an open or closed group. Models from other cities could be used to create this.

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER SERVICES

A number of older adults live alone and feel socially isolated. So much so, that they sometimes call emergency services just to be able to talk to somebody. They also often need to help with tasks such as grocery shopping, picking up medication from the pharmacy, and so on.

- One-on-one volunteerism – a group of volunteers could be recruited to serve the residents who are alone and need social interaction. One volunteer could be assigned one community member with whom to build a long-term relationship

and help out as necessary. This would take up very little time of the volunteers but could help reduce social isolation among older adults.

COMMUNITY EVENTS

There are a handful of public spaces where community members and students have the opportunity to interact. A few modifications to current activities and the addition of a few new activities could help increase intergenerational interactions.

- Farmers' Market – the farmers' market is open on Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. However, this time slot is unsuitable for most students on a weekend. If the market could be set up in the late afternoon/evening or could stay open till around 3:00 p.m., more students would be likely to visit it.
- Farms as tourism spots – Many students have never been to a farm or worked on one. Since the area around Miami is surrounded by farms, activities like tractor rides, hay baling, feeding animals, and so on could be attractive options for increased student-community interactions.
- Festivals – festivals like county fairs with rides and carnival food could be another attraction for student-community interaction.

FOOD OPTIONS

Oxford has many restaurants but it does not have a wide selection of foods. The options are dominated by fast food and pizza. Having more varieties of cuisines would provide the community choices and possibilities.

- Out-of-town restaurants could be invited to have small takeaway facilities or food trucks in Oxford a few times a week/during the weekend. This would not incur huge costs, would provide a range of food choices to people, and encourage community interaction.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

- May I ask how old you are?
- How would you describe your current occupation? For example, are you working full time, part time, retired, volunteering?
- What is your gender?
- What is your favorite thing about living in Oxford?
- What is your favorite thing to do in Oxford? (e.g., eat in restaurants, shop, walk in the park?)
- Are these things accessible to people of all ages and mobility levels? If so/if not how?
- What made you want to live in Oxford?
- What issues in general do think need to be addressed in Oxford?
- How do you feel about living in a college town? What are the good things/challenges?
- How well included do you think people age 65 and over are in Oxford?
- What about Oxford do you think makes for a livable city? For example, are the buildings accessible? Is it easy to get around? How so? Can you give me an example?
- Do you think the buildings in Oxford are age-friendly? In other words, do you feel that you can conduct your business in these buildings without too much difficulty (ex. opening doors, navigating between floors)?
- What do you think needs improving?
- What do you think is the most important aspect of an age friendly community?
- How do you envision going about making Oxford an age friendly community?
- What do you envision the long term outcome of this project being?
- What are you most concerned about having fixed?
- Do you think that ageism is prevalent in Oxford? Do you think that it will be an issue that we face? In what ways?
- What businesses or places in general do you think are age friendly in Oxford? Can you tell me why?
- What businesses or places in general do you think are NOT age friendly in Oxford? Can you tell me why?
- How accessible do find places in Oxford to be?
- What do you think about the quality of the services (e.g., transportation) currently in Oxford?
- Are there any other services that would be beneficial for people in the demographic that the city of Oxford should offer?

- What are your thoughts on the public spaces offered in Oxford, such as the Library or the parks? Are they age friendly? Why or why not?
- Do you think that the local health centers in Oxford are adequate enough to handle your health problems/concerns should they arise?
- What are your thoughts about the community in Oxford? Do you feel connected to the Oxford community? In other words, do you feel that you can easily communicate and interact with others in your demographic or those in other demographics?
- What are the biggest challenges you face?
- Can you usually find a parking spot that works for you in uptown Oxford?
- Would you be more likely to go uptown if there were changes made?
- What would be an example of a business that 100% accommodates your needs?
- Do you have access to transportation? (Also for 65+)
- Did you know of (these accommodations such as the bus or other things I am unaware of) that Oxford already provides to you? If so, are they satisfactory?
- If you were to retire anywhere, where would it be? What about the selected location made you choose that area, such as services available or the communities in the location?
- Would there be any services/activities/communities that would increase your chance to retire in the city of Oxford and the area around it if the city of Oxford offered it?

ENDNOTES

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