

Learning About Alzheimer's Disease and Caregiving: An Intergenerational Program at NYU

Service Learning (SL) pedagogy combines credit-bearing academic study with community service and reflection. The NYU Service Learning: Alzheimer's Disease (Buddy) course matches a person with early-stage Alzheimer's and related dementias (the "mentor") with an undergraduate (the "buddy"). This brief provides information on the undergraduate course offered at NYU's Silver School of Social Work since 2019. We discuss Buddy's course design and learning outcomes, impacts on student career trajectories, as well as impacts on the mentors, their caregivers, and family members.

Service Learning: Alzheimer's Disease and Caregiving

In 2019 the NYU Langone Alzheimer's Disease & Related Dementias Family Support Program Buddy Program partnered with the NYU Silver School of Social Work to create a service learning course. The course provides an opportunity for students to spend weekly time with adults in the early stage of Alzheimer's and related dementias. Buddy was co-founded by [Dr. Peggy Morton](#), [Ann Burgunder](#), and [Thea Micoli](#). This program is modeled on the Buddy Program founded by Dr. Darby Morhardt at the Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine's Mezulum Center for Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer's Disease.¹ Buddy combines didactic course learning with weekly 2-hour visits throughout the semester.

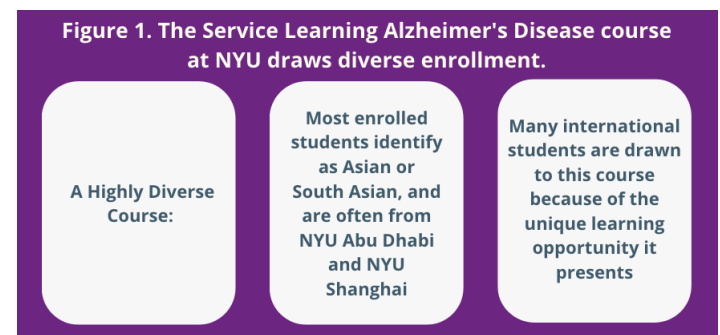
High Demand

Since its inception in 2019 (9 semesters):

- Buddy has consistently fulfilled maximum course enrollment (10-15 students) and drawn maximum NYU waitlists.
- 94 student buddies and 94 older adult mentors have completed the course
- The high enrollments, interest, and waitlists for this course demonstrate the demand for this type of intergenerational service-learning course
- A variety of majors are represented: pre-med, STEM, psychology, social work, economics,

computer and data science, global public health, business, communication and speech disorders.

Student enrollment in this course has grown increasingly diverse, with most enrolled students identifying as Asian and South Asian (Figure 1). Many international students are drawn to this course because of the unique learning opportunity it presents and is likely due to cultural factors (e.g., coming from a society with higher levels of intergenerational solidarity, filial piety, and living in multigenerational households). Almost every semester, students visiting from the NYU Abu Dhabi campus and NYU Shanghai campus have enrolled in the course.



Mutual Benefit: Intergenerational Reciprocity

Service Learning features the development of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship that leads to a greater understanding of various life experiences.² The Buddy program is unique in its benefits for students, older adults, family members, and caregivers. There are *primary impacts* to the paired buddy and mentor dyad as they find shared value in a relationship that fosters balanced reciprocity.³ Students gain direct experience with a person in the early stages of neurocognitive decline, an experience that challenges any preconceived ideas they may have had, especially stigma associated with cognitive impairment.⁴

It is clear students' motivations are to gain a deeper, and more humane, perspective on the dynamic interactions between cognitive health and family caregiving. Many students are pre-med and STEM focused, while some bring additional disciplinary perspectives to the subject matter, such as social

work, psychology, economics. Students report being inspired to find solutions to improve cognitive health and functioning. The course also disrupts misconceptions of older adults, particularly with AD and related dementias, especially around capacities and abilities given aging and/or disease; also, their attitudes and approaches to life. This finding resonates with other intergenerational programs that disrupt stereotypic attitudes on older adults and aging.⁵⁻⁶

Mentors benefit from the companionship of the program and the weekly engagement with a person outside of their family/care team. Caregivers receive respite because of the buddy. The win-win-win experience of benefits is possible because of this service learning course.

The Buddy program has key *secondary impacts* in the respite it offers caregivers and family members. Altogether, students provided over 2,000 respite hours since 2019 to families (Figure 2). Another secondary impact of the course is its influence on the professional and career trajectories of the student participants. Students of the course frequently report that taking this course encourages them to do gerontological and intergenerational work, thus impacting many more people in their professional careers.

Intergenerational Impacts

The following quotes highlight the experiences of Buddy students*:

“I used to believe that losing one’s memory is equivalent to losing one’s life. ‘Nick’ approaches the situation quite differently. Nick’s outlook on life— his ‘seeing the glass as half full’ attitude—has helped me connect and empathize with him even more profoundly.”

–Bachelor Student (2022)

“He didn’t fit the archetypal, fallen-genius patient I was used to seeing in popular culture...These movies, popular and critically acclaimed as they are, are not representative of the typical patient.”

–Bachelor Student (2021)

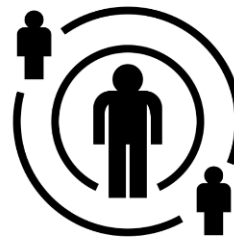
Figure 2: Primary and Secondary Impacts of Service Learning: Alzheimer’s Disease (Buddy) course.



**94 buddies,
94 mentors**

Primary Impact

Over 9 semesters, 188 buddies and mentors have directly benefited.



**2,000+ respite
hours**

Secondary Impact

Since 2019, the Buddy course has provided over 2,000 respite hours to caregivers and family members.

“I became inspired by my experience to continue work in the field.”

–Bachelor Student (2021)

The following quotes highlight the experiences of mentors and caregivers:

“I remain hugely grateful for the program...it’s a huge comfort and help to me.”

–Mentor and Caregiver (2019)

“‘Beatrice’ is truly a wonderful young person and ‘Nora’ really enjoys her visits. She has such a gentle but affirming manner. What a gift you have given us. Today I did ask her if she might help us in writing his memoirs.”

–Mentor and Caregiver (2021)

“We really like ‘Sam’! He is respectful and calm, just what ‘Gerry’ needs. I especially appreciated his concern for Gerry, helping him up and making sure he was okay.”

–Mentor and Caregiver (2022)

Conclusion

Clearly student's lives and professional careers are informed on the possibilities and nuances of care and cognitive health. Families overwhelmingly express gratitude and inspiration from students.

You can get involved by contacting Dr. Peggy Morton (peggy.morton@nyu.edu), or Ann Burgunder (ann.burgunder@nyulangone.org).

* Names have been changed to protect the identity of student, family, and mentor participants.

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