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Promoting Participation in an Aging Society: The IMPACT project

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Given Canada's aging population, it is essential that all segments of society be attuned to the needs of older people. The IMPACT project (Interdisciplinary, Meaningful, Practice, Applied, Community, Transformative) is pedagogical framework that involves three university faculties: Engineering, Health Sciences, and Science with approximately 1200 students from undergraduate (Biology, Engineering) and a graduate program (Occupational Therapy). Objective: To increase student awareness about aging and how better design can promote participation. Approach: Students from across faculties work together to design a solution to a unique problem experienced by an older person. A case study will be presented to illustrate this collaboration. The case in question was a woman with longstanding rheumatoid arthritis. She identified accessing her automobile as a key factor in maintaining her independence. However, due to physical limitations she experienced problems with "pumping gas" and "paying for fuel." Students were divided into design teams; each tasked with solving this real-world design problem. They participated in a series of collaborative lectures and tutorial activities, including "think tanks" and critical feedback sessions. Results: While the winning design produced was highly effective, it was the learning that occurred through this dynamic and highly interdisciplinary process that was most compelling. Data from course evaluations were analyzed alongside qualitative comments from both the participant and students. Conclusions: Our occupational lens brings enormous value to the design process. This project illustrates how we can rise to the challenge when it comes to developing innovations that consider the needs of our aging population.