Symposium Information:

**Presenters:** Dr. Rachel Winterton, Dr. Elizabeth Russell, Dr. Rachel Herron, Amber Colibaba, and Dr. Mark Skinner

**Symposium Title:** Aging rural communities: Policies, practices, and discourses

**Symposium Theme:** Age-friendly environments

**Symposium Sub-Theme:** Age-friendly cities and communities

**Symposium abstract:**

Understanding the ways in which people grow older in rural areas, including access to health services and the influence of primarily volunteer-based age-friendly initiatives, contributes to an understanding of aging in rural populations – including the ways that people and communities may adapt to the challenges presented by aging rural populations. Rural communities are often compelled to provide environments conducive to aging, but given strained financial resources, they may face challenges. This symposium will provide a comprehensive overview of the policies, practices, and discourses surrounding rural aging, including rural age-friendly programming. Divided into three primary topics, the symposium will explore 1) age-friendly communities program development and sustainability, 2) new ways of researching aging rural communities, and 3) key debates in rural aging discourse. Within the context of age-friendly communities programming, Study 1 will show how community spatial and socio-demographic characteristics directly impacted older people’s experience of age-friendliness, discussed in relation to implications for rural age-friendly planning and policy. Study 2 will describe the limits to age-friendly programming sustainability within the context of volunteer burden and limited sustained funding, as well as creative approaches to facilitating sustainable programs in aging rural populations. Studies 3 and 4 describe two new ways of researching aging rural communities, including an innovative dance program for people with dementia, and exploring the role of voluntarism in a local rural library system. The symposium will be rounded out by a review of key developments within gerontology and rural studies, with Study 5 describing how competing policies, discourses and practices relating to healthy aging and aging in place, rural citizenship and governmentality, and social inclusion and inequality combine in particular ways to empower or disempower a diverse range of older rural adults aging in a diverse range of rural communities. Discussions of these five unique studies will integrate themes of rural aging and the complex ways in which older people, carers, municipalities, and volunteer organizations influence, and are influenced by, individual approaches taken to create supportive environments for people to age at home.

**Symposium overview:**

This symposium has been designed to be of interest to those interested in rural aging, including researchers, policy makers, and community members. Understanding the ways in which people grow older in rural areas, including access to health services and the influence of primarily
volunteer-based age-friendly initiatives, contributes to an understanding of aging in rural
populations – including the ways that people and communities may adapt to the challenges
presented by aging rural populations. This symposium will provide a comprehensive overview
of the policies, practices, and discourses surrounding rural aging, including rural age-friendly
programming. Divided into three primary topics, the symposium will explore 1) age-friendly
communities program development and sustainability, 2) new ways of researching aging rural
communities, and 3) key debates in rural aging discourse. The symposium will be rounded out
by a review of key developments within gerontology and rural studies.

**Individual Session Abstracts:**

*Note: Presenters have been bolded.*

**Sub Theme 1: Age-Friendly Communities Programming Development and Sustainability**

**Abstract 1:**

The role of rural socio-demographic, spatial and resource environments in determining age-
friendliness

**Rachel Winterton**, Ph.D., John Richards Initiative, La Trobe University, Wodonga, Australia
(r.winterton@latrobe.edu.au) & **Norah Keating**, Ph.D., Centre for Innovative Ageing, Swansea
University, Wales, United Kingdom

This paper investigates how older rural adults’ perceptions of their community as age-friendly
are shaped by demographic, spatial and resource-related characteristics. Qualitative, in-depth
interviews were conducted with older adults (n=60) aged between 64-90 years, from six diverse
rural regions in Australia. Findings demonstrate that while the resource environment plays a
significant role in determining age-friendliness for rural older adults, with over three quarters of
participants discussing this, spatial and socio-demographic characteristics also impact
significantly on rural older adults’ perceptions of age friendliness. These characteristics
impacted on rural older adults in two ways: by impacting directly on older people’s experience
of age-friendliness, and indirectly through their impact on the resource environment. These
findings are discussed in relation to implications for rural age-friendly planning and policy.

**Abstract 2:**

**Title**

**Elizabeth Russell**, Ph.D., Trent University, Canada (elizabethrussell@trentu.ca) & **Mark Skinner,**
Ph.D., Trent University, Peterborough, Canada

Volunteers are a crucial strength in building age-friendly program capacity, but they are not
enough to ensure sustainable implementation. As such, many age-friendly organizations quickly
lose momentum, becoming defunct within a few years. In rural communities, these challenges
are exacerbated. This presentation will examine results of a community-based, mixed method
project that examines current policy approaches taken in age-friendly programming, factors that limit and strengthen programming sustainability, best practices in program implementation, and aims to contribute a theoretical framework to the academic, policy, and community understanding of age-friendly program sustainability. Pilot results, based on key informant interviews with age-friendly program coordinators in Newfoundland and Labrador, indicate that sustainability was inhibited by limited community and financial capacity, specifically an overreliance on volunteers, paired with a lack of long-term funding. Rural communities experienced these barriers more keenly, struggling with limited services and personnel, a spread-out population, overburdened volunteers, and more restricted budgets. Recommendations for age-friendly sustainability will be discussed, including facilitating community capacity development, and solidifying municipal partnerships.

Sub Theme 2: New Ways of Researching Aging Rural Communities

Abstract 3:
Connecting rural communities and older people with dementia through dance

Rachel Herron, Ph.D., Brandon University, Canada, HerronR@BrandonU.CA, & Skinner, M., Bar, R., Kontos, P., & Menec, V.

People with dementia and their carers experience barriers to meaningful participation and connection across a range of settings. In particular, rural communities face challenges resourcing and sustaining targeted programming for people with dementia who are often few in number and geographically dispersed. In this presentation, we examine the potential of an innovative dance program, Canada’s National Ballet School’s Sharing Dance Program for people with dementia, to enhance opportunities for expression, engagement, and sociability at the community level and across geographic jurisdictions. Drawing on a multi-method study employing observations, diaries, focus groups and interviews we examine the experiences of people with dementia and their carers participating in the program and we assess the effectiveness of delivering such a program in a group setting in Brandon, Manitoba with a live-to-tap program from Toronto, Ontario.

Abstract 4:
Older Volunteers and Rural Community Sustainability: Insights from Community-Based Research with Rural Libraries

Amber Colibaba, M.A., Trent University, Canada, ambercolibaba@trentu.ca

Population aging has become a fundamental process of change in the 21st century, predominately in small towns and rural regions around the world. With regards to building knowledge about aging in rural areas, there is a call for a greater understanding of the diversity of older rural people’s experiences and the interaction between older people and the development trajectories of aging rural communities. One way to understand these
experiences and interactions is through voluntarism (the role of volunteers and voluntary organizations) as a dynamic component of rural aging and aging rural communities. This paper reports on a community-based case study of a volunteer-based rural library to understand the experiences of older volunteers, to determine the challenges of sustaining rural voluntarism and to determine how volunteers and volunteer programs contribute to rural community sustainability. Through surveys, interviews and focus groups with volunteers, staff, board members and community leaders in the Selwyn Public Library, the findings explore the connection between the individual volunteer, the volunteer program and the community, and how they are mutually transformative. The findings also provide insight into the opportunities and challenges associated with volunteering in rural areas and how experiences of older volunteers impact rural community sustainability.

Sub Theme 3: Key Debates in Rural Aging Discourses

Abstract 5:

Contested Spaces of Rural Aging: Implications for Research, Policy and Practice

Mark Skinner, Ph.D., Trent University, Canada (markskinner@trentu.ca), & Rachel Winterton, Ph.D. La Trobe University, Australia

Informed by a critical turn underway in rural gerontology, this paper explores how the intersection of global and local trends relating to population aging and rural change create contested spaces of rural aging. The aim is to build our understanding of rural as a dynamic context within which the processes, outcomes and experiences of aging are created, confronted and contested by older adults and their communities. A review of key developments within gerontology and rural studies reveals how competing policies, discourses and practices relating to healthy aging and aging in place, rural citizenship and governmentality, and social inclusion and inequality combine in particular ways to empower or disempower a diverse range of older rural adults aging in a diverse range of rural communities. The article provides a contextually-sensitive perspective on potential sources of conflict and exclusion for older adults in dynamic rural spaces and further enhances our understanding of how rural physical and social environments are constructed and experienced in older age. A framework for interrogating emergent questions about aging in rural contexts is developed and implications for advancing research, policy and practice are discussed.