



Four Generations: Building Relationships and Community

**David R. Colburn
Lynn Leverty
University of Florida**

That Florida continues to change dramatically in the 21st century does not surprise anyone who lives in the state or visits it. That Florida has emerged as a national and international laboratory in which residents representing four generations¹ interact with one other in the workplace and in the community is probably news to most. Author and business professor, Greg Hammill, writes, "This is the first time in American history that we have had four different generations working side-by-side in the workplace."² The vast migration of seniors into Florida, their greater longevity and the migration and immigration of young families and young adults have positioned Florida as a testing ground for how these four

generations interact with one another and the consequences it has for both the workplace and the community.

Migration, Immigration, and the Emergence of Modern Florida

Between 1940 and 2005, Florida rose like a phoenix from the depths of poverty and racial division to the most dynamic state on the east coast, among the most diverse states in the nation, the state with the largest percentage of seniors (those over 65 years of age), and a place where a diverse array of age groups interacted and competed for resources. Leading this metamorphosis was a massive migration and immigration that saw the state's population increase from 1.9 million people in 1940 to an estimated 18.349 million people in 2006.³

But these numbers tell only part of the story, because embedded in them are the experiences of people of various

¹ There is considerable confusion about those who constitute the four generations. To make it simple, we have divided them in age groups: those younger than 25, those 25 to 49, those 50 to 69, and those over 70. The Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida also uses this age-grouping to make its population projections.

² Greg Hammill, "Mixing and Managing Four Generations of Employees," *FDU Magazine*, Winter/Spring 2005, p. 2.

³ Stanley K. Smith and Stefan Rayer, "Population Projections by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for Florida and Its Counties, 2006-2030," *Florida Population Studies*, Volume 40, Bulletin 148, June 2007.

ages, races and ethnicities who embraced the Florida Dream. Leading the migration were senior citizens who felt they had found paradise and longevity in the state's salubrious climate. Seniors constituted less than 6% of the population in 1940, but they are estimated to be 17.2% of the population, or 3.148 million in number, in 2006.⁴

In the 1960s, seniors were joined by a massive wave of Hispanics, who fled Communist Cuba, and who were subsequently followed by Hispanics from the Caribbean and throughout the Americas. Florida's Hispanic population expanded dramatically from less than 1% of the population in 1940 to an estimated 19.7% of the population in 2006, as many were attracted by the political freedom, economic opportunities, and diverse cultural environment of southeast Florida.

Less discussed, but no less significant, the African-American population increased as a percentage of the total population, from 13.8% in 1990 to an estimated 15.4% in 2006, after having declined steadily throughout the 20th century (in 1940 the African-American population was 27% of the state's population). The growth and consequential economic expansion of the state, together with the rejection of the racial policies of the past, convinced African Americans to join the throngs of whites and Hispanics who descended on Florida. Broward County attracted more black residents than any other county in the nation between July 2004

and July 2005. Black immigrants from Haiti and Jamaica sparked this trend, but African Americans joined them in this increasingly polyglot area of southeast Florida.

No state changed more than Florida during the post-World War II period. Massive population growth has transformed Florida from a rural, southern state to one that is vastly more complex, more urban, encompassing four generations that cross all ethnic and racial lines.

According to the most recent projections from the Bureau of Economic and Business Research (BEBR) at the University of Florida, Florida's population will continue to expand dramatically. BEBR projects that the age cohort 0-24 will increase by 28.8% from 2006 to 2030, the workforce-aged (no longer in college) adults 25-49 by 23.6%, workforce and retired-aged workers 50-65 by 55.7%, and seniors 70 and up by 118%.⁵ Moreover, of the state's 18 million residents, 16.7% or just over 3 million were born in a foreign country.⁶

More People, Greater Diversity, and Different Lives

As a result of the post-WW II affluence, many white families initially relocated to the suburbs, seniors generally resided with family members, and young, working adults moved into city apartments until marriage.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Bureau of Economic and Business Research, University of Florida, Population Program, unpublished data, June 2007.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 2000. Florida Quick Facts.

Retirement generally occurred on or before age 65.

Today, many factors have dramatically changed these trends and brought the oldest and youngest Floridians closer together. Extended families are the norm for many of the Florida's newest residents, especially immigrants from nations in the Caribbean and Latin America, where grandparents often care for children and the home while the parents work. Three hundred thirty thousand Florida seniors – immigrants and non-immigrants – are now the sole caretakers of their grandchildren, while many others take care of other young family members when their parents are not able to do so. More than half of the seniors who are sole caretakers of their grandchildren are also still in the workforce, and 16% of these seniors live in poverty.⁷

Ensuring Opportunity for All Floridians amidst the Needs of an Aging Population

Are there ways that Florida can avoid intergenerational competition, develop approaches to strengthen its communities, and capitalize on the talents and wisdom of all age groups? Hammill observes, "Research indicates that people communicate based on their generational backgrounds. Learning how to communicate with the different generations can eliminate many major confrontations and misunderstandings..."⁸

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2003 Data Profile.

⁸ Hammill, "Mixing and Managing Four Generations of Employees," 2.

Residential patterns in Florida, however, have created substantial obstacles to improving communication between age groups. When seniors choose to reside in enclosed towns like The Villages or in gated condominiums like those that dot the landscape in southeast and southwest Florida, and when many minorities find themselves isolated in largely segregated urban neighborhoods, finding common ground can be difficult.

Compounding this situation is the fact that most retirees, especially those that are well-to-do, are white, while those with young families are increasingly Hispanic and African-American. The 2000 Census, for example, revealed that whites constituted 83.2% of those over 65, while Hispanics constituted only 9.9%, and African-Americans but 6%, and these percentages are not forecast to change in the next two decades.⁹ The potential racial and ethnic divide between the four generations poses a major challenge to Florida and its political leaders as they seek to address the needs of all groups. This becomes especially true in difficult economic times.

Moreover, the priorities of seniors are principally health care, low taxes, financial security, the environment, and transportation, while for most young families the priorities are education, job growth and opportunity, housing, and

⁹ Smith and Rayer, "Population Projections by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for Florida and Its Counties, 2006-2030." *Florida Population Studies*, Volume 40, Bulletin 148, June 2007. These percentages change little when projections are taken out to 2015.

health care.¹⁰ Although there is some overlap, there is often a sense of competition for Florida's resources and legislative priorities.

But an AARP/University of Southern California survey in 2004, *Images of Aging*, asserts that we may have less to be concerned about than these factors suggest. It found that "most Americans (85%) felt that older residents help to improve the quality of life in their community, and half (49%) felt that the economic benefits older residents bring to their community make up for the amount local government spends on them."

Indeed, many of Florida's recent retirees are well-off financially, and projections for the Baby Boom retirees suggest that they will be even better off financially than those born before World War II. The wealth of seniors has also advantaged the state significantly. Between 1985 and 1990, for example, seniors transferred \$8 billion in assets to Florida. Seniors have also taken on many important volunteer roles in society. All these factors, as well as a strong state economy until 2007, have been instrumental in the general harmony between the age groups. With a weakening economy since 2007, one cannot help wondering if this will change.

Challenges and Opportunities

What can we, as Floridians, do to maintain and build upon intergenerational harmony? What should we be prepared for as the current four generations face their respective opportunities and challenges – for example, as more seniors opt not to retire or to re-enter the workforce because of financial pressures (erosion of traditional pension plans and health care) and the need for self-fulfillment? And what steps can society take to help middle generations juggle the needs of both older and younger generations for care and support; as parents demand quality education for children and youth; as communities seek to incorporate newcomers from around the country and around the world? These developments will occur at the same time that Florida continues to experience fiscal pressures and the temptation to cutback on its public services.

The challenge and opportunity for society generally and Florida in particular is to think more holistically about the issues that confront society. While many analysts are concerned about intergenerational conflict, which pits seniors against the other three age groups in Florida, especially those with young families, others note that they share many interests in common. Organizations such as Generations United point out that even programs such as Social Security, which many think addresses only the needs of seniors, also serves millions of children and disabled workers under age 65.

¹⁰ David R. Colburn, *From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans: Florida and Its Politics Since 1940* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 149-152.

Perhaps the first step to improving communication is to make the four generations aware of the commonalities that exist among them. No matter what age, race, ethnicity or income status, all Floridians want safe, vibrant, and livable communities in which services and transportation are readily accessible.

A growing number of resources exist to help states and local leaders build sustainable communities and improve communication among residents. In recent years the definition of a sustainable community has been

expanded to include intergenerational developments and community building.¹¹

The reality is that all four generations are dependent on one another for their economic well-being and general prosperity. It is in the interests of all Floridians to find ways to enhance relationships and mutual understanding among the four generations and to pursue initiatives that recognize the interdependence of our citizens. Florida and its future will be the richer for it.

¹¹ One of these resources is the Viable Futures Toolkit focused on “Sustainable Communities for all Ages,” developed with the support of the blue moon fund and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

About the Authors

David Colburn is Professor Emeritus and Provost Emeritus at the University of Florida, where he serves as Director of the Reubin O'D. Askew Institute on Politics and Society. Colburn teaches and writes about state and national politics, and organizes conferences focusing on critical issues confronting the state of Florida. His most recent book is *From Yellow Dogs to Red State Republicans: Florida and Its Politics since 1940*, published in 2007 by University Press of Florida.

Lynn Leverty serves as Associate Director of the Askew Institute on Politics and Society and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida. Her major areas of interest include public administration, ethics, immigration, women in politics and public policy. Current research focuses on gender and ethics, community building and immigration policy.

Before coming to the University, Leverty served as policy advisor to Governors Mark White and Ann Richards of Texas, was the founder and executive director of the Texas Health and Human Services Coordinating Council, and a national consultant on immigration issues. Leverty has published studies in the public sector on service integration, strategic planning, community service, indigent health care, women's health and refugees, and co-authored a book with Professor David Colburn on the relationship between state government and public universities in 2000.

Questions about this *Florida Focus*? Contact David Colburn, 352-846-3570, email colburn@ufl.edu or Lynn Leverty, 352-273-2392, email llevarty@polisci.ufl.edu.