

How Colombia Uses Education to Drive Its Healthy Longevity Work

<https://doi.org/10.26419/int.00051.025>

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Education is a fundamental pillar of our work at Fundación Provida Colombia. As we seek to address literacy, technology adoption, social-emotional supports, and healthy aging, we aim to educate not only older Colombians but also the entire population on the value of prioritizing longevity and framing it in a positive light. This is not without significant challenges. Discrimination, illiteracy, and isolation all threaten to upend efforts to create a society that embraces individuals at every life stage.

Fundación Provida Colombia was founded in the 1970s by visionaries Eduardo Garcia Jacome and Rita Duarte. As leaders of this organization, we strive to protect the rights of older persons in Colombia and to promote active and healthy aging in the country. These aims are not achieved overnight, and everyone shares the challenge of preparing new programs that will ensure all individuals, especially the next generations of seniors, can possess a strong sense of purpose.

To expand on this work to protect the rights and well-being of older adults, Fundación Provida Colombia hosted its first Conference on International Longevity with Purpose in October 2021. This conference identified challenges ahead and envisioned longevity

as a process that is important and relevant at all stages of life.

Providing Access to Education

Older Colombians remain at a disadvantage in the field of education as a notable portion of the adult population cannot read or write. Efforts to improve literacy after the implementation of Colombia's 2016 guidelines for formal education have had little impact on older persons. Adults between 60 and 64 years old have an illiteracy rate of 10.4 percent, and, for those over the age of 85, the rate is 30.5 percent. Illiteracy rates in the Caribbean region exceed 25 percent, while in other regions, it is between 16-18 percent, with Bogotá accounting for an illiteracy rate



of 8.2 percent.¹ Under the 2016 guidelines, the Ministry of Education's efforts focused on young people in particular areas of the country, thus deepening not only geographical gaps, but also generational ones.

On September 10, 2020, Colombia's Congress ratified the Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons, which was formally adopted by the Organization of American States in June 2015. This convention highlights the concept of active and healthy aging for all individuals and recognizes education as a key component of this process — not only because access to education is a human right, but also because access to education encourages personal growth, the acquisition

of new knowledge, social participation, and more.

Since the early 1990s, Fundación Provida has sought to improve education among older adults. By helping to enroll older persons in university programs of art, natural sciences, law, economics, agricultural sciences, business administration, gerontology, computer sciences, and other disciplines, we've focused on a comprehensive education program. In addition, we've helped more than 300 seniors to graduate from primary school.

Through Fundación Provida's additional Dream Maker and Dream Maker Silver programs, seniors and their families have found another way to connect, learn, teach, and share. In virtual rooms, the organization

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gathers children, young people, adults and seniors to collectively take classes about theater, cooking, creative writing, weaving, business development, empathy, history, English, and more.

Creating Virtual Community

This educational work has enabled our experts to identify tools that make learning more accessible to seniors and their families and played a critical role in our ability to respond to the severe isolation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, we launched the Universidad de la Longevidad (University of Longevity) to provide a way for older adults to maintain connections while the world stood still. Universidad de la Longevidad provides space for virtual communication and home learning during the weekdays.

The Universidad de la Longevidad envisions education as a means for creating awareness about how present society requires learning from life experiences, transitions to new stages of life, and recognizing each of our victories, defeats, challenges, and opportunities.

We have identified four action areas as part of this initiative:

1. Longevity: the basic aspects of active and healthy aging, which allow for the improvement of older adults' quality of life and promote their independence.
2. Socio-Emotional Competencies: building skills such as empathy, independence, gratitude, self-knowledge, self-control, and collaboration to strengthen the personal development of children, young adults, and older adults and improve wellbeing.
3. Life and Spirituality: embracing spirituality as a lifestyle that balances how we think, feel, and act with being in harmony with the surrounding world — fostering connection with a sense of life and purpose.
4. Healthy Lifestyles: promoting longevity of the mind, body, and soul by redirecting our habits and beliefs to achieve a meaningful life.

These action areas inform our efforts to engage with older adults and the

larger Colombian community, and they are especially critical in addressing some of the biggest challenges facing older adults in recent years.

Our work also confirmed that the generalization that older adults cannot manage or adapt to technology is false. Through Universidad de la Longevidad, Fundación Provida's community managed to stay connected virtually and, on average, 70 people joined virtual programs each week.

Even prior to the pandemic, older adults were navigating technology. In 2018, a Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE, National Administrative Department of Statistics) survey found there were more than 6 million older adults in Colombia, and some respondents reported using new technologies. According to survey results, 30.1 percent of older adults use the Internet. Of this group of individuals, 40.9 percent used computers to access the Internet, and 95.1 percent used smartphones.²

Establishing Healthy Longevity

To encourage healthy longevity, we need to value a person-centric education system by prioritizing personal development in a learning environment that nourishes the mind, soul, and spirit, as well as the establishment of a community mindset.

Our October 2021 Conference on International Longevity with Purpose set this in motion. During the four-day event, over 2000 people visited our website, and over 400 attendees gathered online to learn from experts from Spain, Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Brazil, and Cuba. Older adults were included as speakers as well as attendees in discussions on intergenerational solidarity, physical

activity, economic security, life-long learning and social and health services — all of which impact active and healthy aging.

As leaders of Fundación Provida Colombia, we believe healthy longevity is a matter of concern for all ages. Society must stop passing negative perceptions of old age to younger generations, because those visions inflict harm by increasing age discrimination against older and younger individuals. ●

¹EFA Global Monitoring Report 2000-2015, UNESCO Publishing, www.efareport.unesco.org

²Encuesta SABE Colombia. Ministerio de Salud y Protección social - Departamento Administrativo de ciencia y tecnología e Innovación COLCIENCIAS Universidad del Valle de caldas (2016)



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