Students learn to work together with faculties outside their own during three-day hackathon

Teams from diverse academic backgrounds design better homes for seniors at inaugural Calgary Interprofessional Challenge

By Shea Coburn, W21C

Imagine trying to build a house with just a hammer, some nails and a bit of wood. It could be done, but would it be built in the best way possible? A better house could be built with additional tools and supplies like windows, hinges, shingles, and a coat of paint. Essentially the best house would be built using a complete toolkit rather than just one or two tools.

The full toolkit strategy was the idea behind a three-day interprofessional collaboration about aging in place at the University of Calgary Nov. 4-6. Aging in place is becoming an important societal issue and as such, needs to be addressed in increasingly resourceful ways. Aging in place is traditionally looked at through a medical lens, but the Calgary Interprofessional Challenge (CIC) approached the issue more broadly.

Students from the faculties of Environmental Design and Nursing, the Cumming School of Medicine, the Haskayne School of Business, the Schulich School of Engineering, Biomedical Engineering Specialization, and the Faculty of Science formed six interprofessional teams as they developed ways to help seniors live in their homes longer.

"For all of us it was a matter of breaking down all of our ideas and working towards a goal using our combined strengths," says Rebecca Albrecht, a student in the Faculty of Nursing. "We had a ton of ideas so it gave us real-world experience — everyone has different ideas, and it's the process of figuring out how to whittle it down to find a solution."

Interprofessional research and teamwork brought together expertise from the beginning of the discussions, encouraging different ideas from the start. Much like having a full toolkit to build a house, having multiple backgrounds come to the same table allowed for full-picture concepts to emerge.

"Interprofessionalism takes the process away from just one discipline and engages people to solve problems in a more cohesive manner," says Barry Wylant, associate professor in the Faculty of Environmental Design.

The minds behind CIC, Drs. Rahim Kachra and Nishan Sharma from the Cumming School of Medicine, created the event because they realized there was a need to introduce students to the thought processes of other faculties. University students often train in silos, but after graduation, are expected to work with individuals from multiple educational backgrounds to solve real-world problems. Events like CIC simulate reality and give students the opportunity to train in an environment that better prepares them for careers after university.

The first CIC culminated in a first-place win for UpCare, a team made up of Rebeca Albrecht, Kevin Nguyen, Kaa Archbold, David Borkenhagen, Logan Armstrong, and Rooney Loo. They developed a ceiling-mounted mobility and medical assist system for seniors at risk of falling in their homes.

Ceiling tiles are replaced with a track system connected to a bar that features grips and support pads, wayfinding light, call-button and a medical section customized to each individual's needs.

Not only does the idea of UpCare provide a variety of necessary services to seniors in their own home, but it also frees up living space by using the ceiling for storage and track manoeuvrability. Creations such as this will only become more common as interprofessional projects become the norm.
Related Links

- June 13, 2017 Diana Joseph excited to see multiple sclerosis research contribute to better quality of life
- June 12, 2017 Master of Biomedical Technology students face off in Dragon's Den-style event
- June 9, 2017 University conference on autism and ADHD builds knowledge on how to help children thrive
- June 2, 2017 Remarkable story behind how new brain health knowledge was generated
- June 2, 2017 Common acne medication offers new treatment for multiple sclerosis