



WORK & PURPOSE

Taking Classes With Your Grandchild at Grandparents University

A cool summer program where two generations learn and have fun together

- By [Judy Colbert](#)
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Credit: Winona State University Grandparents Weekend Winona State University

“How many of you children know everything?” asks Scott Olson, president of Winona State University in Winona, Minn. Then, he asks, “How many think your grandparents know everything?” He’s addressing the opening ceremony of grandparents and grandchildren for the start of the school’s annual Grandparents University summer program. Oh, and the children think they know more than their grandparents.

Over the next few days, the grandkids will delightfully realize just how much their grandparents know.

Every summer, thousands of grandparents from around the United States and around the world sweep in and take their grandkids (age 7 or 8 up to age 13 or 14) to one of several college campuses for [Grandparents University](#) (GPU). Classes are taught by professors, faculty members, teaching assistants or professionals in a specific field.

You don’t even necessarily need to be a grandparent to go to Grandparents University.

Each family unit stays in a dormitory room or suite and must attend classes together. It’s a one-, two- or three consecutive-day getaway packed with fun, learning and intergenerational bonding.

Grandparents University: Classes, Trivia and Dorm Food

I speak from experience, having just returned from the West Chester University GPU program. (My grandkids are in their 20s and 30s, so they were too old to attend.) I went to classes about TV production and DNA, caught some of a movie and part of a Disney trivia contest and ate in the dining hall. I had a ball.



Credit: MSU Alumni Office

Lemonade stand business lessons at Michigan State University GPU

You don’t even necessarily need to be a grandparent to go to Grandparents University. Almost all the GPU programs allow grandfriends (aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews or other close relatives or friends) to participate, instead of grandparents or grandkids. Some, like Kansas State, let parents attend. It’s usually a one- or two-to one ratio (either grandparents to grandchildren or vice versa).

Started in 2001 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Grandparents University was so successful it has since been licensed to universities including Purdue, Michigan State, Kansas State, Oklahoma State, West Chester, Western Washington, Winona State and other branches of the University of Wisconsin.

3 Purposes of Grandparents University

The triple purposes: [forging connections between generations](#), helping children learn about potential careers and raising the possibility that the kids will want to attend the university when they hit college age.

But Grandparents University offers other charms for both generations.

Ana Lucia Mendonca, GPU coordinator at Kansas State, thinks “the best part is being on campus and experiencing the life in a dorm.” And at her program, she adds, “It’s getting to know members of the KSU (Kansas State) community, the professors and everything that they do.”

Many attendees enjoy the program so much they come back again. In fact, roughly 80% of attendees return the next year. At Purdue, one grandfather who attended in 2018 was so pleased he attended this year with seven grandchildren and other adults.

How the GPU Programs Differ

There are a few key differences in the programs, besides the length of stay.

Wisconsin, Purdue, Winona State and Oklahoma State have majors where participants focus on a specific field of study. It might be anything from veterinary medicine to astronomy to computer science to archery.

Other schools have a menu of classes that might feature the theory of flight, producing a TV show, fashion design, how DNA studies work, robotics or even making a recording of the grandparent reading to a grandchild.



Credit: Winona State University

Winona State GPU Legos workshop

Jessica Kauphussman, director of the Winona Retiree Center, says its GPU Legos course is “very, very popular — with the children helping the grandparents more than vice versa. Then, the grandparents see the technology of it and find practical solutions to problems.”

Ray Drago, a gear technologist who started Drive Systems Technology, has attended every GPU at West Chester, starting with his third-oldest grandson, Steven. He was impressed, but realized the program didn’t offer an engineering class. So he offered his services and has been a “visiting professor” since 2013. Says Drago: “Steven liked GPU so much that he came with me for the first session that his sister attended to act as my assistant in my [robotics](#) course. Each grandchild-grandparent team built a robot from a kit that I provided and then we raced them!”

When GPU participants aren’t in class, they might have their picture taken with the school mascot, attend an ice cream social, compete in a Disney trivia competition, rope climb, team build, tour the campus or create a special secret project for the kids to give to the grandparents.

Some schools (Wisconsin-Madison, Purdue, Oklahoma State) require the grandparents or their children to have attended the school and possibly be a member of the alumni association. At the others, no former association with the university is necessary.

Grandparents University Costs and Housing

By definition, the institutions are on a campus and, while they are considered accessible, the classes and the meal hall are a walk from each other. Most schools provide shuttle service if you let them know you’ll want it when you register. If you use medication that needs refrigeration, that should also be arranged ahead of time.



Credit: Courtesy of West Chester University

Ray Drago teaching a Theory of Flight class at West Chester U. GPU

GPU fees for room, board and classes vary by school and the length of the session, but generally run from \$100 to \$300 or more for the first adult and \$100 to \$150 for the first child. Some schools (Wisconsin, Michigan State and Oklahoma) offer a limited number of scholarships.

Generally, applications are due in January or February, with class selection at that time, or a month or so later. The University of Wisconsin-Madison and Michigan State sell out within minutes.

To those who haven't been on a college campus in a long time, it may come as a pleasant surprise that many dorms now have rooms and suites with a private bath (shower, toilet, sink) or two rooms may share a bathroom. Also, dorms tend to be air conditioned, often with individual room controls. If warm temperatures (it is summer) bother you, you might want to take a fan.

Sometimes, pillows and linens are provided (perhaps for an extra fee), or you may bring your own. The mattresses? Well, they don't quite date to when the grandparents went to college, but they're probably not what you sleep on at home.

If you don't want to spend nights in a dorm, you can stay at a hotel or your home if you live nearby and want to commute. There may be a discount if you don't sleep in the dorm.

The Best Part

While the classes are fascinating, the ultimate high comes from the interaction between the generations.

Pamela Stokes, senior events coordinator at Purdue University, says one GPU grandparent told her, "My grandchildren live fifteen minutes away from me, but the alone time was the best. The parents always want to answer the questions. They always get in the way."

By [*Judy Colbert*](#)

Judy Colbert is the author of [100 Things to Do in Baltimore Before You Die](#) and numerous other books. She is passionate about cruising.