On Thursday April 5, 2012 the East Asia Institute hosted the “Korean Aging Issues” event. Dr. Seok Kang of UTSA’s Communication Department gave a presentation to showcase his findings from a recent study. Over 20 people were in attendance to this lecture.

Dr. Kang began the lecture by explaining that there is a large and rapidly increasing elderly population in the world. In particular, South Korea is home to the fastest growing rate. He stated that 15 to 20% of the population is elderly and predicts that in the future it will increase expeditiously. The retirement age is 55, but average life span is 80 years in Korea. This poses problems when considering life after retirement.

Many elderly citizens live alone, which makes it difficult to stay social and active. To answer these concerns, Dr. Kang showed a video illustrating various activities for senior citizens. For example, a senior citizen’s cinema was shown. The cinema offers very inexpensive tickets ($2 USD) to seniors and provides food and entertainment. There is also a community center that held a “date night” social mixer. Some senior citizens have also created a puppet theater troupe. They make the puppets and write the plays themselves. Activities such as these are good for the well being of the elderly population.

In addition, Dr. Kang mentions that some seniors who volunteer become active in standing up for their rights, while others just want to make neighborhood connections. He examines welfare centers and programs, questioning their effectiveness. With all this in mind, he looks at the issues in terms of communication that encourage community engagement. He poses the following questions:

**Dr. Kang researcher poses these questions:**

- How does communication encourage community engagement?
- Does communication facilitate Korean elders’ community engagement?
- Why is community engagement important?
-How does communication encourage community engagement?

-Does communication facilitate Korean elders’ community engagement?

-Why is community engagement important?

Such questions are important because “community engagement enhances elders’ quality of life, health, and well-being.”

Dr. Kang conducted the study while focusing on the levels of communication infrastructure, which is defined as “a neighborhood storytelling network set in its communication action context.” The first level is the storytelling network or communication-taking place in the neighborhood or community. This can include news media, local organizations, and neighborhood conversations. The second level is contextual factors or social-geographical factors. For example, length of residence or homeownership can impact community engagement. In addition, other factors such as ethnicity or language can be considered, but were not used in this study.

The study was conducted May through June of 2011 in the city of Daegu, the third largest city in Korea. “I chose this city because it was more local,” stated Dr. Kang, “It is a very preservative city. They have a better possibility of having a neighborhood community.” Students from the Elderly College, aged 65 and over, were asked to participate. He explained that the college is a good communication hub and he can “find how they communicate.” He received 255 valid responses.

Dr. Kang examined their use of media for local news, membership in local organizations, and conversations with neighbors. Length of residence and homeownership were also taken into account. Through these factors, Dr. Kang was able to measure the citizens’ sense of neighborhood belonging, collective efficacy, and their want to help others.

As expected, length of residence has a direct impact on neighborhood belonging. The longer a citizen resides in one place, the more intimate they become with others in the area. Homeownership has an impact on collective efficacy. Elderly homeowners try harder to protect their private property. Neighborhood belonging and collective efficacy are highly affected by media use, connections to organizations, and neighborhood conversations. “It’s all about the interaction and exchange between people,” mentioned Dr. Kang, “That’s just how communication works.” In addition, he found that media use, connections to
organizations, and neighborhood conversations also impact a citizen’s economic behavior intention. However, this connection is weaker when compared to other community engagement elements.

The study concluded that communication does help the elderly population. There are also differences in what the news media covers and the issues that the elderly population faces. For example, it is excessively reported that elderly citizens are looking for jobs. However, many citizens are simply looking for ways to stay active in the community. Dr. Kang noted that senior citizens who actively utilize communication are more likely to be involved with community activities, especially volunteering.

From these conclusions, Dr. Kang believes the government should offer communication programs to help elderly citizens. He feels they focus too much on job creation when many seniors are looking for good community involvement. He proposes “Social Enterprise” which would become a combination of volunteering and employment. Elderly citizens would make a bit of money while spending their day performing a service or volunteering.

There are a few limitations on this study. The sample of Elderly College students may not be completely representative of the entire elderly population. The students may have more money and be more socially motivated than other elderly citizens. There could also be citizens who value a job over alternative activities. “Generalized with caution,” stated Dr. Kang.

Following the lecture there was an opportunity for a Q&A session. The students who were very interested in the study had many insightful questions. For instance, one student asked “Since you did the study during the summer, do you think the data would have been different if it had been done during autumn or winter?” Dr. Kang responded by saying it is possible and that he is interested in conducting the study again during another season. He also went into detail about the process of conducting his research. “We had to offer them [the elderly] incentives like candies or pens,” he laughed, “It was a bit tough and my...