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Attaining an Undergraduate Certificate on Older Adults: Examining Qualitative Experiences of Students

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Abstract. As life expectancy in the United States continues to increase, there is a need to enhance interest and competency in working with older adults. There have been efforts to do so in recent years, but research indicates that there are barriers, such as lack of awareness and negative perceptions of aging. This qualitative study examines the experiences of eight students who are pursuing or recently completed an interdisciplinary certificate focused on working with older adults. Personal experience is a strong motivator for professional interest in the older adult population. Students value interdisciplinary education on older adults, citing the opportunity to learn with those in different majors as an asset. Making students aware of course offerings on older adults is cited as a significant need. Suggestions for improving and promoting an interdisciplinary certificate on older adults have implications for strengthening the workforce to care for aging Americans, as well as faculty who want to design and implement certificate programs in higher education generally.

The total number of people in the United States (U.S.) aged 65 and older will rise profoundly as life expectancy increases. By 2060, the number of older adults is anticipated to increase by 69% to 94.7 million, and the number of people aged 85 and older is expected to almost triple, reaching 19.0 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). As the population grows older, more people will struggle with disabilities, chronic health conditions, and physical and mental illnesses (Kalogirou et al., 2021). Addressing these issues and maintaining the health of older adults will require more healthcare workers and care sites from which older adults can obtain services (Beltran & Miller, 2019).

Currently, the U.S. is grappling with a severe shortage of nurses, social workers, and occupational therapists willing or able to work with older adults (Galzignato et al., 2021). Research suggests that universities play a crucial role in influencing how students perceive working with older adults and in inspiring students to serve this often-neglected population (Wang & Chonody, 2013). For example, gerontological courses help dispel myths about caring for older adults, and internship placements give students practical experience in serving older adults, creating opportunities for positive interaction. Educators can further encourage students to work with older adults by introducing opportunities for innovative, supported, and favorable interactions with this population (Steward et al., 2020).

The need is dire for more healthcare professionals to be trained in the care of older adults and to serve this population (Galzignato et al., 2021). However, ageism and perceived stereotypes adversely affect the ability to increase healthcare for older adults (Beltran & Miller, 2019). In his seminal work, Butler (1969) looked at society's negative stereotypes and discrimination on older adults and coined the term "ageism" to describe societal discrimination against people because of their age. Expanding knowledge about older adults and creating opportunities for experiences with those who are older positively impact student attitudes towards careers in gerontological fields (Naughton et al., 2019). While healthcare has made enormous advances in extending the life expectancy of individuals, the general public—because of ageism—often fails to see the value in older adults (Sarabia-Cobo & Pfeiffer, 2015). The lack of interest by professionals in serving older adults may be impacted by an absence of awareness of the emotional and financial rewards associated with working with this group. Similarly, research has shown that faculty perceptions play an important role in student views about working with older adults. Negative views of aging and long-term care facilities by faculty may fuel student beliefs that working with older adults is simple work, primarily fit for the beginning or end of a career (Rahim et al., 2021).

This study examines the experiences of eight students who are pursuing or have received an interdisciplinary certificate in gerontology. The research evaluates the value and challenges associated with implementing and earning this certificate, as well as its reported impact on student views about working with older adults. This article provides tangible suggestions for educators interested in increasing student interest in working with older adults and/or developing and implementing a certificate program specifically focused on their care.

Literature Review

A review of the literature indicates that the healthcare system is ill prepared for a growing number of older adults, with shortages of graduates wanting to work with this population due to attitudinal barriers (Galzignato et al., 2021). There is a need to increase the interest of students in many disciplines as quality care for older adults relies on a comprehensive system that includes physical therapy, occupational therapy, social work, nursing, etc. Increasing the interest and training of students from these disciplines through interdisciplinary offerings on older adults is particularly important as studies indicate that graduates will be working inter-professionally with this population now and in the future (Gillis et al., 2017).

Aging in the United States

The U.S. population over 65 years old is expanding dramatically, and those over 85 years old represent the fastest growing segment (Shea et al., 2022). By 2030, the number of adults aged 65 and older is expected to be 20% of the U.S. population (Galzignato et al., 2021). This increase will produce new and challenging demands on existing healthcare systems. In 2010, older adults accounted for 65% of hospital stays and had four times the number of hospital admissions in comparison to adults younger than 65. Adults over 65 accounted for 25% of all physician office visits and 38% of emergency room visits (Duffy, 2016).

As the number of older Americans living with illness and disability grows, there will be an increased demand for providers and resources to meet their needs (Wang & Chonody, 2013). New healthcare models and ways to prepare the healthcare professionals to serve this population will be required. Increased demand for healthcare professionals, who understand the aging process and desire to work with older adults, comes at a time when the number of personnel serving older adults is inadequate and competency in the gerontological field is low (Naughton et al., 2019). These factors highlight the need to increase the number of graduates interested in working professionally with older adults, as well as to find innovative approaches to meeting the expanding needs of those who are aging.

Attitudes of Students Toward Older Adults

In healthcare, there is a general lack of interest in working with older adults (Naughton et al., 2019). A primary reason for the disinterest is the negative perception of older adults (Rathnayake et al., 2016). Older adults are often seen as less intelligent and more physically disabled than younger people (King et al., 2013). Research shows that it is challenging for some students to relate to a population much older than themselves (Galzignato et al., 2021). Students also view working with older adults as requiring less acute expertise than working with younger people (Kalogirou et al., 2021). Consequently, students see working with older adults as a place to learn beginning skills and then later to end careers, when they would want a slower pace (Kalogirou et al., 2021).

Ensuring the competency of healthcare workers, who will take care of this growing population group in the future, is essential (Rahim et al., 2021). Increased access to advanced courses that discuss gerontological subjects has been shown to positively impact attitudes toward older adults (Sarabia-Cobo & Pfeiffer, 2015). Knowledge helps students comprehend the aging process and learn about disease conditions that are more common in older adults, as well as assists in understanding the physiological aging process, which can counter negative stereotypes. Information, however, does not consistently alter student attitudes toward older adults (Wang & Chonody, 2013).

Past experience with older adults impacts student attitudes (Shea et al., 2022). Research indicates that prior experience in working with older adults in institutions decreases positive attitudes as does adverse interaction with older adults in work placements, which negatively impact student desires to work with older adults and decisions to specialize in geriatrics (Steward et al., 2020). Conversely, experiences with older community leaders and older relatives tend to improve attitudes (King et al., 2013). While the majority of students acknowledge having at least one older adult with whom they have experienced emotional closeness, those experiences did not necessarily correlate with a later desire to work with older adults (Wang & Chonody, 2013).

However, students who cared for older adults during their childhood cited the experience as a primary factor in selecting careers working with older adults. This early experience in conjunction with positive work placements, favorable impressions of aging, and supervisor support are important predictors of students choosing careers serving older adults. The skills and competencies of educators in the classroom and personnel at the internships are also significant factors in creating positive views of aging in work settings (Kalogirou et al., 2021). Attitudes drive work

preferences (Galzignato et al., 2021), and students with negative attitudes towards older adults often do not contemplate working with this population. As a result, universities need to examine whether faculty are exposing students to meaningful interactions with older adults in educational and internship settings.

Internships Create Valuable Learning Experiences

In recent years, a growing body of research has supported the value of internships and how internships can benefit both students and employers (Leahy et al., 2018). One of the primary benefits of internships is the hands-on experience that students can gain while working in a real-world environment (Binder et al., 2015). This experience can provide students with a realistic sense of what to expect in their chosen career and exposure to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Internships are a valuable tool for students seeking to gain practical experience, develop important professional connections, and acquire the soft skills necessary for success in their chosen careers (Leahy et al., 2018). With the growing demand for work-ready graduates, internships offer a unique opportunity for students to differentiate themselves and gain a competitive edge in the job market (Binder et al., 2015). The quality of internships is critical for fostering students' long-term interest in the field of gerontology (Cummings et al., 2003). By providing positive and rewarding experiences through high-quality internships, students can be motivated to pursue careers working with older adults. However, low-quality internships can lead to negative experiences, limited career growth, and reduced interest in gerontology (Cummings et al., 2003).

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Importance of Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Education

Interdisciplinary collaboration is defined as the process of identifying solutions to issues and challenges in ways that transcend limits of individual disciplines (Moirano et al., 2020). Interdisciplinary education is becoming more common in higher education as it allows students to work past disciplinary confines and enhances vital critical thinking skills. Combining various knowledge streams in academic programs allows for the exchange and attainment of additional knowledge, as well as improves skills like self-awareness and broad-mindedness (Beltran & Miller, 2019).

Leaders in gerontology have long foreseen the mounting demand for care of older adults and the need to change the way universities provide gerontological education (Steward et al., 2020). To increase the number of students with plans to work with older adults after graduation, universities need to improve student perceptions of older adults and inform students about the personal and professional growth that can exist in working with this population (Beltran & Miller, 2019). Interdisciplinary programs can help by exposing students to critical biopsychosocial information required to meet the complex issues associated with aging and provide high-quality care to older adults within various healthcare and social settings (Galzignato et al., 2021).

This study helps to understand the experiences of undergraduate students who are pursuing or have achieved an interdisciplinary certificate in gerontology, as well as determine the benefits and challenges associated with completing requisite coursework. Specifically, this qualitative research examines student experiences, as well as self-identified learning needs, to better understand the formative and summative outcomes of interdisciplinary education focused on older adults. Student experiences are analyzed to inform pedagogy focused on older adults, as well as identify the challenges with administering an interdisciplinary certificate program generally and one focused on gerontology specifically.

Methods

Sample

The sample consists of eight undergraduate students at a mid-sized Catholic university, who are pursuing or who had recently completed the requirements for an interdisciplinary certificate in gerontology (see Appendix A). The certificate had been offered by the university for many years but had been defunct with no enrollees after the death of a faculty member responsible for marketing and administering the certificate. Additionally, many of the courses were no longer offered, preventing students from being able to complete the certificate. In September 2020, the certificate was revised to include current university offerings based on recommendations of a faculty steering group. The eight

students represented all those who had completed or were enrolled in requisite courses and fieldwork since its revitalization in September 2020.

Detailed demographic data was not obtained from students as this information was not used in analysis and reporting to protect student anonymity given the small sample size. Nevertheless, there is some information known about the sample. At the time of the interviews, six of the eight students had completed the requirements for the certificate. All students had one of two majors: social work or social and behavioral sciences. Five of the students had since graduated, three from the social work program (2020, 2021, and 2022) and two from social and behavioral sciences (2022). The remaining three students were currently enrolled and would graduate in 2023 with social and behavioral science degrees.

Data Collection and Analyses

Semi-structured interviews were conducted (see Appendix B) using an electronic platform that met university security standards. Interviews were video recorded and transcriptions were made of all sessions. Written transcripts were used for data coding and analysis. Videos were retained until transcripts could be verified in case there were issues with the transcription.

When analyzing the transcriptions, four tasks associated with content analysis—decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation—were used to reduce the impact of researcher bias and enhance the reliability and validity of identified themes (Bengtsson, 2016). Using an inductive approach, the same two independent raters—a social work faculty member and social work student—conducted all interviews and identified ‘meaning units’ or key theses while reading the transcripts and taking notes on latent and manifest content. The faculty member knew all of the interviewed students; the social work student did not. All interview questions were consistently asked by the faculty member to increase reliability in the data collection methods and reduce differences that could have been caused by different investigators. The use of two consistent coders also helped to achieve interrater reliability in identifying meaning units that were then grouped into themes. These themes were collapsed or expanded when appropriate to ensure that all substantive experiences were represented (decontextualization). When there was agreement that no more themes emerged, coding ceased. After key themes were identified, direct quotes from students were recorded for each theme (recontextualization). There were discussions between raters regarding the transcriptions to identify whether additional themes were needed.

This approach is consistent with using data as a classifier, a distinct lens used in data analysis and reporting (Konold et al., 2014). Viewing data as classifiers entails combining individual responses into thematic units. Clustering responses together recognizes that students may differ in some views but analysis looks for areas of convergence. Using data as a classifier looks for similarities, rather than differences, in experiences.

Both raters were educated on social work theory, placing identified themes within the levels of social work practice—micro, mezzo, and macro. Use of this social work lens is particularly appropriate as meaningful change requires intervention at all three levels. Micro explores individual student factors that influence the desire to work with older adults or to seek out education and experience in gerontology. Mezzo looks at certificate requirements and diversity of offerings and logistics that may impact participation. Macro examines how societal stereotypes and stigma about aging affect how older adults are viewed as well as educational policies that can impact the ability of students to pursue the interdisciplinary certificate in gerontology.

Informed Consent and Institutional Review Board Approval

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (ID# 2022-314) with separate written consents by students for participation and to record their interviews. All consent forms had to comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act ([HIPAA] of 1996) as the faces of the students were seen in the videos. HIPAA protects individually identifiable health information, including faces and names of study participants, requiring special written permission from individuals when these identifiers are known.

Results

Review of the transcripts from the eight interviews led to the identification of nine themes which are listed according to their relevance to the three levels of practice: micro, mezzo, and macro (see Table 1). There were three

themes associated with students' individual experiences; four themes related to program implementation, coursework, and internship offerings; and two themes linked to broader policy issues.

Table 1

Micro, Mezzo, and Macro Themes Based on Student Experiences Attaining the Certificate on Older Adults

Micro

Past Relationship with an Older Adult
Professional Goals Important but not a Primary Motivating Factor
Courses Did Not Initiate Interest in Working with Older Adults

Mezzo

Value of Interdisciplinary Offerings
Course Offerings
Internship Quality
Lack of Gerontology Content in Other Courses

Macro

Logistics
Lack of Awareness

Micro Level

When analyzing each student's lived experiences and the events that helped shape their desire to work with older adults through the micro lens, some commonalities were noted. Each student had a past relationship with an older adult and was motivated to pursue the certificate program by a desire to expand knowledge and obtain a deeper understanding of the needs of older adults. The coursework did not influence their decisions to pursue a career in the field of gerontology.

Past Relationship with an Older Adult

All students reported close, caregiving relationships with older family members and expressed positive attitudes toward aging and an interest in working with older adults. All students cared for older adult relatives in childhood, which they identified as critical to their decision to want to work with older adults. Students noted that exposure at a young age to the benefits of helping older adults, as well as an understanding of the challenges older adults face, were factors in their decisions. Students unanimously stated communication and patience were key to working with older adults and something they had learned from caregiving. One student, when asked to reflect on what influenced the decision to work with older adults, stated that the illness of a grandfather was a significant influence.

My grandfather was unfortunately diagnosed with pancreatic cancer when I was around 11 or 12, so I would go visit him in the hospital. I would speak with his nurses, speak with the social workers at the hospital, and I've just realized that I have a passion for working with older adults and that kind of really sparked it.

All eight students cited a correlation between time spent with older adults and feeling a sense of understanding and connectedness with them.

Professional Goals Important but not a Primary Motivating Factor

While all students viewed obtaining the interdisciplinary certificate in gerontology as an opportunity to boost their resumes, increase their marketability, and enhance their careers, six students stated that the primary reasons for pursuing the certificate were to expand their knowledge about older adults and to obtain a deeper understanding of the needs of this population. By completing the requisite courses, students felt that they gained an increased understanding of the difficulties older adults face, such as ageism and elder abuse. When asked about the motivation

to pursue the certificate, one student stated, “Honestly, to explore more, I mean I thought about the credential rather minimally because I mean, of course credential helps. But truthfully, I’m doing it for the exploration, the experience.”

Courses Did Not Initiate Interest in Working with Older Adults

While all students had an interest in and some knowledge of working with older adults, only one student knew of the career opportunities in the gerontological field prior to taking courses and speaking to an advisor. For all students, courses increased their knowledge of older adults and enhanced their skills and aptitude, but the interest in working with older adults existed prior to taking the courses. All eight students stated that the coursework and the internship experience required for completion of the certificate program expanded their understanding of the unique needs of older adults and helped them develop practical skills such as listening, compassion, patience, not rushing to complete tasks, and allowing older adults to proceed at a pace comfortable for them. When asked if the desire to work with older adults came from the coursework, one student stated:

I remember I took Introduction to Gerontology ...and at that point, I knew I wanted to work with older adults. [The professor explained] ...different areas I could work in, different laws and legislations that need social work, advocacy, and justice.

Mezzo Level

When analyzing student experiences linked to mezzo issues, several themes emerged. These narratives focused on course offerings and internship opportunities linked to the certificate that enhanced or challenged student learning. Understanding institutional or mezzo issues is important for educators and administrators charged with designing and operating successful interdisciplinary certificate programs so student insight on university assistance and barriers was seen as paramount.

Value of Interdisciplinary Offerings

The required courses to complete the interdisciplinary certificate in gerontology are open to students with majors other than social work and social and behavioral sciences. All eight students commented on the numerous benefits of their exposure to students from other disciplines. Two students highlighted the importance of learning together with students from other disciplines as they expected to work on interdisciplinary teams in their careers. Three students believed that exposure to students from other majors helped them see issues from different perspectives and improved their competencies. The coursework often explored alternative views on topics of importance to older adults and compared and contrasted concepts beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. Five students also commented on work opportunities outside their field of practice, which helped them to connect the classroom to real world experiences. This experience increased their understanding and interest in those fields—promoting greater creativity and problem solving. None of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the interdisciplinary offerings or felt uncomfortable in courses in which the majority of students were from other fields. When asked to reflect on their interdisciplinary experiences, one student stated:

I mean in my course, there were social behavior science majors, psychology majors, finance majors, and law majors. They were people from all over the place there and everybody had different input.

Course Offerings

All three social work students believed that the certificate curriculum was adequate and achievable, while two of the five social and behavioral science students wished there had been options that focused on neurological aspects of aging and related healthcare. Six students commented that students are more likely to fit the requisite courses into their schedules if they learn about the certificate early in their academic careers. Three students suggested creating more elective options; for example, one student voiced an interest in a course that focused more on the scientific biological aspects of aging.

Internship Quality

The interdisciplinary certificate in gerontology requires 80 hours of working with older adults. Seven of the eight students had completed the internship requirement, and six found their internship experience beneficial. Students noted that the internship improved their professional behavior and communications skills. However, one student, who was a social and behavioral science major with future plans to be an occupational therapist, felt that her internship was lacking in direct contact with older adults and wished that internships could be geared more to students' desired fields of study. Her internship was focused on program development and administration of new resources for older adults and offered no opportunity for direct contact with the clients.

There was days there where they couldn't give me things to do and it was just not very organized. I wish that we were able to actually set up events and see older people and it just didn't get there.... they didn't have a budget, they didn't have money to start a program, but they took interns to start a program.

Lack of Gerontology Content in Other Courses

All students agreed that courses, outside of the ones specifically required for the interdisciplinary certificate in gerontology, spent little time discussing older adults. When asked about content related to older adults in other courses, one student said, "Not as much as I feel they could have." All students agreed that while older adults may have been discussed in other courses, it was not integral, with one student saying, "Not really. I think we may have watched TED talks that kind of thing...but not anything that has stuck out for me." Two students thought that having older adults as academic mentors generally would enhance learning for all students—especially students who have no prior personal experience with older adults.

Macro Level

When analyzing students' experiences in taking the required courses for the certificate, several structural factors emerged as themes. These programmatic or policy issues serve as barriers to participation in the interdisciplinary certificate program in gerontology, preventing increased enrollment in the future.

Logistics

Courses for the certificate are offered at two different campuses which was deemed inconvenient by two students. The need to travel to another campus for some courses limited student options when attempting to fulfill the requirements. One student said, "There wasn't that many course options for me, so I had to actually go into [the professor's] course because there [were] no options other than going to [the other campus] for nursing courses, which wouldn't have been beneficial to me." While the aim of the gerontology certificate program is to be interdisciplinary, the distance between the two campuses (about a half hour commute) created increased hardship which could result in a silo effect, in which students are more likely to take courses in their own discipline to avoid having to travel to another location.

Lack of Awareness

All students interviewed stated that other students are typically unaware of the interdisciplinary certificate program in gerontology. One said, "Nobody knows about [the certificate program] or not many people in my program field of study." Seven students heard about the certificate program from their advisors or professors. When asked what was keeping more students who were interested in working with older adults from pursuing the certificate, one said, "Unless you have an advisor, I guess nobody really promotes it. I told a lot of nursing roommates that I was doing this, and they said, 'Oh I don't know what that is.'"

Discussion

The results of this study support many of the findings in the scholarly literature, as well as have implications

for interdisciplinary certificate development in the future. Specifically, close relationships with older family members are directly linked to students' attitudes towards older adults and their future professional goals. All students noted that having previously provided care to an older adult family member influenced their decision to pursue the certificate and to dedicate their lives to working with older adults. Prior positive experience with older adults was key in overcoming ageism and the stereotypes associated with working with older adults. For many students, the desire to work with older adults was strengthened by positive internships. Quality internship experiences were positively related to strong commitments to working with older adults in this study as they were in prior research (Cummings et al., 2003). In addition, all students stressed the benefits of an interdisciplinary education and getting to know students from other majors, supporting the value cited in the literature of such offerings.

Interestingly, students commented that the curriculum and coursework did not impact their decision to pursue careers serving older adults or their attitude towards working with older adults as suggested by the literature review (Beltran & Miller, 2019; King et al., 2013). Students were predisposed to working with older adults based primarily on past experience with older adults. However, students viewed coursework positively and used the requisite course offerings to expand their knowledge of older adults and deepen their understanding of gerontology, which they expected to employ when serving this population. Some students desired more content on neurobiology of aging as they hope to increase their understanding of the science that causes neurological changes.

Also noteworthy were several findings specific to the university's promotion and administration of the certificate, as well as incorporation of content on older adults into university courses more broadly. Students noted that there is a general lack of knowledge of the certificate in gerontology. The program is not well known or publicized. In addition, the program is spread across two campuses located approximately 10 miles apart. The geographical distance deterred students from taking courses at the alternate campus, which reduced opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. Nursing students and courses were underrepresented as some of the requisite offerings for the certificate were not offered on the health science campus. Finally, courses outside of the certificate program in gerontology made little mention of working with older adults. The topic was often discussed only briefly—depriving students of the opportunity to learn about working with this population. The feedback provided by students offered a greater understanding of their motivations for pursuing the certificate and choosing a career working with older adults. This feedback could be used by the university to strengthen the curriculum and the promotion of the certificate. Further research on pedagogical approaches to include and expand gerontological content in all coursework is needed to help inform the teaching of faculty responsible for coursework not required for the certificate.

Limitations

The study is not without limitations that threaten its external and internal validity. The sample is a small undergraduate student cohort at a single university that was conveniently selected, limiting the generalizability of results. The homogeneity of the participants in this study could also be considered a limitation, as the views of others at different universities may be different. The lack of demographic data is also a limitation. Without comprehensive information on the sample, it is difficult to determine the extent to which findings of the study can apply to other college students in similar programs. However, qualitative studies with similar size samples that were purposively selected have provided valuable information to inform the educational literature (Guetterman, 2015). Both researchers operated from a social work lens, which potentially introduces bias into the data analysis and results. However, the researchers believe this bias does not discount the value and insights that can be gained from the study.

Conclusion

To encourage students to pursue career paths that focus on working with older adults, universities should aim to promote programs that increase the interaction between students and older adults, attempting to reach students as early as possible at freshman seminars and ensure the advisors promote gerontological content. This approach requires advisors in all disciplines to understand the requirements of any formal certificate program. Universities may need to employ more vigorous and innovative approaches to interest students in working with growing numbers of older adults. The university could email students, utilize advertising campaigns such as flyers, and attend career fairs to educate students. Current students or alumni, who have completed the program, could discuss the benefits they received, both professionally and personally, by participating in the program. Early engagement allows students enough time and opportunity to fit the requirements into their academic schedules. Educating faculty and advisors is

important but can be challenging as universities develop more offerings and increasing demands on advisors become burdensome. Turnover and retirements result in the need to make education efforts ongoing, which can also challenge those charged with administering the certificate.

An important first step is to increase the number of faculty with knowledge about gerontology. Faculty expertise and experience with older adults is essential as it impacts the kind of content that is developed in the overall curriculum. One method for increasing professors' proficiency is creating co-teaching arrangements that pair faculty without aging expertise with those who are knowledgeable. An example would be including gerontological social workers to co-facilitate courses. This approach could advance course integration of aging content. Specifically, content that identifies the harmful effect of stereotypes based upon age needs to be incorporated into lessons on practice, policy, and human behavior. Since few students select electives that focus solely on aging, integration informs students about older adults by infusing gerontology content within all required coursework.

When possible, course assignments need to include contact with older adults, which will reduce negative stereotypes about working with older adults and can elevate interest in gerontology. Work and volunteer exposure that enhances interactions with older adults is important. Universities may also profit by forming partnerships with community agencies that serve older adults and their employees with aging expertise. These cooperative relationships can potentially strengthen content and boost students' interest in working with older adults. Focusing on curriculum and research exposure that develops and broadens gerontological coursework through all levels of academia is vital for individuals already motivated to work with older adults and to increase the proportion of those who may become interested.

This research study clearly supports the value of education on older adults but it will take more than a "build it and they will come" philosophy by university personnel to sustain the offerings and graduate more students interested in working with this population. Personal experience caring for older adult relatives is the most salient motivator for pursuing the certificate so it is important to identify college students with these caregiving experiences early in their academic careers. Typical lecture-based coursework does not appear as meaningful as internship and discussion-based courses, according to students, when increasing competency related to older adult care. Creating age-conscious college students has never been more important with a certificate offering as one valuable method for doing so.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interdisciplinary Certificate in Gerontology Requirements

Requirements: Two of the following - 6 credits

SOWK 1911 Introduction to Gerontology
SOCI 2511 Growing Older: The Sociology of Aging
NUTH 3102 Gerontological Nursing

Electives: Two of the following - 6 credits

PSYC 1214 Adult Development
RELS 2316 Theology of Death
SOWK 2912 Psychosocial Aspects of Aging
NUTH 4440/ CORE3912 Care of the Dying- Healthcare Interventions for Body, Mind and Soul

Internship

An internship (practicum or clinical) in direct service or research is required of all students. Students in majors that have internship requirements need not do another internship but must complete their required clinical or practicum in aging. Students in majors not requiring an internship must complete an internship. Contact the director of the gerontology certificate to plan for satisfaction of the internship requirement PRIOR to the start of the internship. 3 credits minimum

Additional electives (not required) – May be substituted for an elective with prior permission.

Students wishing to supplement the required courses should consider the following courses:

ANTH 2224 Health and Medicine: An Anthropological Approach
PSYC 2212 Developmental Psychology
RELS 2511 Christian Values and Health Issues
SOCI 2813 Self and Society

Appendix B

Attitudes Toward and Interests in Working with Older Adults Interview Schedule

1. What is your current major and what motivated you to pursue this major?
2. What was your motivation for pursuing the certificate in gerontology while at Seton Hall—specifically was it primarily motivated by personal interest or career goals or both?
3. How if at all does the certificate in gerontology align with the values and mission of your academic major?
4. Please describe the type of work that you want to do after graduation.
 - a. Does it directly involve older adults in any way?
5. Now I am going to ask you about the certificate in gerontology.
 - a. Can you first summarize some of the most critical knowledge that you learned about older adults as a result of your coursework?
 - b. In your internship with older adults, did you learn skills in working with older adults that are important? Were these skills that you had before the internship experience?
 - c. What do you think are the most important skills and attitudes needed when working with older adults?
6. Have you worked with older adults for pay since graduating (or while pursuing the certificate if still a student)?
7. The certificate in gerontology courses is designed for students in varying majors—how did this interdisciplinary nature enhance and/or detract from the learning experience?
8. Did you take courses for the certificate in gerontology which were outside your academic discipline—for example, nursing if you are a social work major or social work if you are a nursing major?
9. What suggestions do you have for improving the certificate in gerontology?
10. What do you think are some of the strengths of the certificate in gerontology?
11. What do you think are some of the challenges associated with the certificate in gerontology?
12. What suggestions do you have for improvement in the certificate in gerontology with regard to administration, offerings, etc.?
13. What course offerings related to older adults do you wish had been included in the certificate in gerontology?
14. Why do you think that more students do not take the certificate in gerontology (probe: major requirements, availability of offerings, value to profession, misconceptions, lack of awareness)?
15. If you had to identify one tangible action that could be taken to increase the number of certificate holders, what would it be?
16. How, if at all, did the certificate change your perceptions about older adults—good or bad?
17. Besides in the courses required for the certificate in gerontology, were older adults mentioned when appropriate to the subject matter in other courses required or not required for your major?
18. What did I not ask about that you think is important for me and others to know about the certificate in gerontology?

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