Professionals in the Field of Aging

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Objectives

- Be able to describe the reasons that careers in aging are growing so rapidly.
- Be able to describe the relationship of several of the professional fields to that of gerontology.
- Be able to describe the positive and negative attributes of employment in the field of aging.
- Be able to describe the knowledge and skill that gerontological practitioners have acquired.
- Be able to describe your reasons for enrolling in education in the field of aging.

Introduction

As you have already learned, the population is aging worldwide. This population growth will result in a demand for professionals with knowledge and expertise in aging. Expanded career possibilities in gerontology and geriatrics are forecast in many professions. The relative newness of the field means that there are opportunities for innovative ideas and new programs and products. Secondly, the multiple needs of older persons lead to exciting opportunities for working side by side with other disciplines. Aging cuts across many professions. One must be aware of the contributions that various professions make in meeting the needs of an aging population. Third, professionals working with older people report great rewards in addressing the challenges of growing older and helping to maintain the quality of their lives. The problems, issues and situations that people confront as they age vary greatly. Sometimes their needs are simple, sometimes they are complex. Many professions play diverse and important roles in both serving and assisting older persons to maximize their independence and have a rewarding aging experience.
The "Field of Aging"

Gerontological specialists are already doing much that is beneficial for older persons. There exists a "field of aging," which includes a system of organizations, institutions, corporations, facilities, government agencies, and individuals that provide older Americans with services, educates professionals and the public, and carries out research on various aspects of aging.

While not comprehensive, the following list suggests some of the settings where gerontological specialists work.

Organizations

Senior Citizen Membership Groups:

- American Association of Retired Persons

Professional Associations:

- American Society on Aging
- Alzheimer Association
- Association for Gerontology in Higher Education
- Gerontological Society of America
- American Geriatrics Society
- National Council on Aging

Institutions:

- Hospitals
- Nursing Homes
- Churches
- Senior Living Facilities
- Colleges and Universities

Mental Health Facilities Corporations:

- Investment Firms
- Health Care Corporations
- Insurance Companies
- Retailers
- Travel Agencies

Government Agencies:

- National Institute on Aging
- Administration on Aging
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- State Offices on Aging
- Area Agencies on Aging
- Social Security Administration
  - Health Departments at the Federal, State and Local Levels
  - Health Care Financing Administration
  - Department of Veteran Affairs

Roles of Professionals in Gerontology

The major difference between other professions and those involved in gerontology is that gerontological specialists devote the major portion of their professional time to working with older people. These professionals have several different roles which fall broadly into the following categories:

**Direct Service Provision**

Gerontological specialists provide social, psychological, health, or legal services. They work with individuals or small groups of older people to determine needs, develop plans, find resources, and solve problems. They are primarily involved in assessment, counseling, case management, therapy, or rehabilitation.

**Program Planning and Evaluation**

Gerontological specialists design, implement, and evaluate programs to meet the varied needs and interests of groups of older persons. They often work in social service and community agencies.

**Management and Administration**

Gerontological specialists oversee the operation, staffing, expenditures, and evaluation of organizations, institutions, and agencies that serve the needs of older persons and their families. This management is carried out in a variety of social and health service institutions and organizations, in corporations, and in government agencies.

**Marketing and Product Development**

Gerontological specialists are employed by corporations, organizations, and institutions to develop and market new services and products. They assess needs and wants of various groups of older persons, seek niches that are unfilled, and design advertising and information dissemination to inform older persons of the new or improved product. Advocacy Gerontological specialists often carry the roles of community activists, encouraging government and private sector involvement with the needs of older persons. They often work for nonprofit organizations advocating for specific programs in health care, community services, and government policy.

**Education and Training**
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Gerontological specialists are active in the planning, teaching, and evaluation of instructional programs for older people and their families as well as degree programs and continuing education of practitioners in aging. Educators and trainers teach in noncredit workshops, institutes for older adults, job placement agencies, health promotion settings, nursing homes, and colleges and universities.

Research

Gerontological specialists design and conduct basic research on the mechanisms of aging as well as applied studies on program outcomes and the needs of older persons. They secure external funding, collect information, analyze the data, and report the findings. These researchers, whether working in the biological or social sciences, are increasingly in demand because of the need to understand aging and the desire to make each program as effective as possible.

Critical Thinking E-mail Exercise I

Glossary of Professionals

Read the descriptions of each professional listed in the Glossary of Professionals. Choose 3 professional descriptions. Write 3 to 4 paragraphs explaining: (1) which broad category they fall into; (2) what other disciplines are important to the professions you chose; and, (3) describe what would you do if employed in these professions on a day to day basis

Submit your response via Email to renold@usc.edu

Jobs in Emerging Areas

Some gerontological specialists work outside the boundaries of traditional professional fields as listed in the above exercise. Several thousand persons have earned a degree in gerontology, and most have found jobs that do not require certification or licensing. Examples of these roles include entrepreneurs, geriatric care managers, and marketing specialists.

Entrepreneurs

Self-employment is relatively common in the field of aging. Often referred to as consultants, these persons typically have extensive experience as well as education in gerontology. Some do program evaluation, offer management assistance, write or speak on related subjects, and offer a variety of services for a fee. Many write proposals to secure money from federal or state agencies while others work extensively for one or more corporations or organizations.

Geriatric Care Managers

This is a new category of professionals who assess an older person's living environment, help families with planning, and act as a liaison with service providers. The care manager is often hired when caregivers live a
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Managers

Organizations, agencies, institutions, and programs are overseen by managers. They carry out the day-to-day functions of supervising staff, planning, reporting, budgeting, and problem solving in numerous types of human service agencies. Since no standard educational preparation is required, managerial roles are open to persons with interest and some experience.

Marketing Specialists

This recently developed employment area involves the advertising and sale of products and services for the elderly. Marketing personnel identify needs of the older population and help banks, continuing care retirement communities, hotels, nursing homes and hospitals, retailers, securities dealers, social service agencies, travel companies, and many others become more effective in selling products and services to older people.

Program Planners

Human service agencies and corporations employ persons to assess the needs or potential of specific groups or areas and to design initiatives that will improve the situations. Planners are often responsible for writing the proposals that request funding or government approvals for the new project.

Trainers

Because many persons gain employment in the field of aging without formal gerontological education, many organizations find it necessary to have in-house training programs for staff who need additional information and skills to do their jobs effectively. Thus, workshops are regularly offered by professionals with experience and insight into working with the aging.

Critical Thinking E-mail Exercise II

Entrepreneur of Products for Seniors

Assume for the moment that you are an entrepreneur involved in developing and marketing products for seniors. Your assignment is to think of a household product that could be specifically redesigned for use by an older person. Write a 1-2 paragraph essay explaining your product and how and why you would redesign it.

Submit your response via Email to renold@usc.edu
## Advantages of Careers in Aging

The field of aging is considered a good place to work by the professionals who are associated with it. Eighty-four percent of them plan to continue their employment in the field of aging (McLeran, 1989), and over 60% said that they expect that their next job will be in aging.

People in the field of aging have found that they are able to secure promotions, increases in responsibilities, and larger salaries with experience and education. However, most found it necessary to move out of direct service and into administrative roles in order to move up in rank and salary.

## Job Availability

It is expected that there will be more jobs in the field of aging in the future. There have been a number of studies which have attempted to predict future manpower supply and demand for practitioners of the field of service to the aging. They have focused on one or more professional areas rather than attempting to cover all facets of personnel serving older people.

The National Institute on Aging has responded twice to Congress' request for a statement on manpower needs in the field of aging. The most recent, published in 1987, was titled Personnel for Health Needs of the Elderly Through the Year 2020 (1987) did provide a number of conclusions and recommendations that are relevant to our interests today.

Click here to view statements about projections made by the National Institute on Aging.

There are a number of specific projections made in the NIA report:

- In 1984, there were 92,000 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) RNs in nursing homes. By 2000, this number could range from 260,000 to one million.
- In 1984, there were 750 nurse practitioners specifically prepared in geriatrics. By 2000 there would be a need for 19,000 of them.
- Approximately 5,000 social workers currently consider care of the elderly to be their primary field of practice. By 2000, there will be a need for 40,000 to 50,000.
- It is estimated that 5,000 FTE occupational therapy personnel are engaged in the treatment of the population 65 and over. By 2000, there would be a need for 11,800 to 13,300.
- It is currently estimated that 8,800 physical therapy personnel are involved in treating individuals 65 and over. By 2000, 12,600 to 18,000 would be needed.
- By 2000, 8,300 FTE audiology personnel would be required.
- By 2000, 10,900 speech-language pathologists would be required.
- Fewer than 200 doctoral-level clinical and counseling psychologists have older persons as the majority of their caseload. 5,000 would be needed by 2020 to keep up with the demands of the changing demographics.
Credentials in Aging

In most professional fields, professionals are licensed, certified, or registered. This is not the case in the field of aging. There is no professional credentialing. There is educational credentialing, i.e., a person can earn a degree, certificate, or specialization in an instructional program. There is also related credentials, i.e., a person in social work can become a geriatric social worker. Most people who work in the field of aging today do not have either educational or related credentials.

In a 1990 survey, it was found that gerontology training was required for only a minority of professional jobs in Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) and State Units on Aging (SUA). A much smaller percentage of jobs required a credential.

However, professionals who are now working in the field of aging recommend gerontology education for persons entering the field. Even though a credential is not required, these professionals report that knowledge of aging is very important and should be expected of new people entering the field.

Gerontology Knowledge

Respondents to the 1990 Aging Network study by Peterson and Wendt were asked to indicate which of fourteen knowledge statements they used in their daily work activities. Nine of the items were marked by over 50% of respondents as being used daily, while all of the items were marked by at least 30% of the respondents.

All categories of respondents ranked "knowledge of aging policies, legislation and administrative regulations" as the knowledge of aging used most often. Other highly rated topics were:

- "the local service delivery systems and means of accessing them;"
- "available community resources and funding sources;"
- "alternative approaches to meeting needs of older people;" and
- "the effect of illness, finances and family status on services."

Likewise, faculty were asked what they thought people entering the field of aging should know. Content recommended by faculty included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualizations and theories</th>
<th>91.3%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stability and directions of change</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Issues</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship and research</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Approximately two-thirds of all respondents strongly agreed that in the future professionals in the Aging Network will need more training in aging, and overwhelmingly recommended that prospective employees obtain education in aging while in college. The most common recommendations were to take specialized aging courses and participate in an internship in the field of aging. Sixty-seven percent of respondents strongly agreed that future professionals will need knowledge of aging.

The more formal education in gerontology respondents had, the more likely they were to recommend that future employees obtain a degree in gerontology in college.

## Employment Experiences of Graduates of Gerontology Education Programs

A 1992 national survey reported that nearly 8,000 students were graduating from Gerontology programs annually, and nearly 20,000 students studying gerontology. The greatest number of graduates and students were at the bachelor's level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Graduates</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate level</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>1,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors level</td>
<td>2,279</td>
<td>7,611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters level</td>
<td>1,505</td>
<td>3,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral level</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined levels</td>
<td>1,107</td>
<td>2,938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-doc/Other</td>
<td>1,926</td>
<td>2,566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,707</strong></td>
<td><strong>19,476</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When these numbers were compared with those from the 1985 survey (which included a larger number of campuses), it was seen that the number of students and graduates had approximately doubled:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Graduates</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>3,096</td>
<td>9,897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>7,707</td>
<td>19,476</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A 1992 survey supported this conclusion, finding that 20% of the programs culminated in a degree, while 26% resulted in a certificate, and 54% awarded some other designation.
Graduates Have Found Jobs in the Field of Aging

Each of several studies of gerontology graduates has shown a reasonable percentage of gerontology program graduates to be working in the field of aging. This suggests that training in gerontology is a useful undertaking as it leads to a career in the field of aging for the majority of graduates. However, this approach does not provide much insight into the future needs for professionals in the field of aging because most people working in the field of aging do not receive a gerontology credential before assuming their job.

Critical Thinking E-mail Exercise III

Future Career Prospects in Aging

Given what you have learned about the changing demographics of both the United States and the professions in the field of aging, what are the 3 most important aspects of a good educational program in gerontology?

Submit your response via Email to renold@usc.edu

The Making of a Gerontologist: Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes and Commitment

Current professionals in the field of aging have formulated a series of criteria for developing educational programs and goals for students and professionals in the field of gerontology.

Knowledge of aging essential for professionals:

- Accurate knowledge of human development, major theories of aging, and the conditions of older people in contemporary society in order to overcome the negative stereotypes about aging and older people
- Familiarity with the diversity of older persons and the attributes of various ethnic, racial, and national groups
- Awareness of the interrelationships of physical, emotional, and social variables and their impact on assessment and treatment
- Ability to distinguish between normal aging, usual aging, and pathology
- Familiarity with the physical and mental impairments common to older persons
- Knowledge of the rapidly developing literature on aging and the ways to access it
- Knowledge of the organization of the community, the special service delivery system for the elderly that has been developed, and the means of accessing this system
- Knowledge of the structure and roles of governments and organizations affecting policy and programs for the aging

Skills that are critical for professionals:

- Interpersonal skills which facilitate developing relationships with persons of all age levels.
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- Skills in designing, implementing, managing, and evaluating community-based programs.
- Skills needed to function in administrative roles in a bureaucratic organization.
- Skills in adapting current treatment procedures to fit the needs and wants of older clients.
- Skills and commitment to function in multiple roles such as service provider, program planner, administrator, and advocate.
- Skills necessary to critically read current academic and professional literature.
- Skills in applying scientific knowledge to an understanding of individual older people and practice on their behalf, communication.
- Skills so that they can successfully work with professionals from complementary fields.
- Skills in articulating what they know and can do.

Attitudes and commitments:

- Appreciate the roles and competencies of other professionals.
- Accept an orientation that knowledge is not permanent, and that current information is of great importance.
- Be committed to continue working in the field.
- Have their professional identify with the field of aging.
- Have developed a set of attitudes and beliefs which facilitate professional service and encourage continuing growth of the older client.
- Have developed a philosophy which will guide professional practice and personal life.
- Commitment to provide care that will allow maximum functioning of the individual.
- Develop more positive, wellness enhancing attitudes toward the elderly.
- Overcome the tendency to provide services inappropriate to older people.
- Understand the real needs and situation of older people.
- Attitude of acceptance of people whose beliefs, ideals, and values are different than theirs.

Conclusions

There are many and diverse roles for professionals in the field of aging. Job roles cut across many professional fields and are open to people with numerous backgrounds. Career paths are developing within existing professions and apart from these professions. Gerontology graduates and employed professionals report satisfaction at work, and they frequently report promotions based on their gerontological expertise. Professionals who work in the field of aging use knowledge of aging daily.
### Key Points

- Population growth will result in a demand for professionals with knowledge and expertise in aging
- Professionals working with older people report great rewards in addressing the challenges of growing older and helping to maintain the quality of their lives
- Gerontological specialists provide social, psychological, health, or legal services
- Self-employment is relatively common in the field of aging
- It is expected that there will be more jobs in the field of aging in the future.

### Website

![American Society on Aging](http://www.asaging.org/)

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**Click here to go to Lecture Part II: Community and Government Resources**