

Meeting the Demand for Gerontologists through Gerontology Education

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It has become common knowledge that the population of the United States is rapidly aging. By 2030, one in five people will be over the age of 65 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). With the aging of the largest cohort in American history, the Baby Boomers, the need for gerontologists is great and the demand is growing. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009), in just three years, the number of jobs in gerontology will increase by more than 36%. Unfortunately, the current need for gerontologists to attend to the special issues faced by older adults and their families is an unmet one. Despite a growth in the number of gerontology programs offered by community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, the profession must focus on continued recruitment of students interested in entering this field, partly because of a decrease in enrollment in some gerontology programs (Weiner, n.d.).

There is a great need for both gerontologists and professionals in allied fields with specialized knowledge about aging. At the very least, our nation's workforce should be familiar with the most basic needs of an aging population and aware of stereotypes older adults often encounter. Research has shown that some already working with older adults have limited knowledge regarding aging (Cowan, Fitzpatrick, Roberts & While, 2004). In addition to a lack of knowledge about gerontology, the field faces the effects of stereotypes and ageist beliefs as a barrier to drawing potential students to this area of study. College level educators are in a unique position to improve attitudes about aging, increase general knowledge about aging regardless of the students'

ultimate career choices, and build a force of gerontologists by attracting students to the field. Research (Gorelik, Damron-Rodriguez, Funderburk & Solomon, 2000) has shown that just one gerontology course can attract undergraduates to the field and improve attitudes about older adults (Claver & Horn-Mallers, in progress).

As an educator in the field of Gerontology, I see this situation as a challenge and opportunity to enhance my own teaching methods. We should all aim to meet the learning needs of today's student. Hopefully, we can attract students to take that one gerontology course that may shape a future career that may include working with older adults. It is important to experiment with newer instructional delivery methods such as online and hybrid instruction, service learning and global collaboration (which will be the topic of my next *Flash* article!).

Sources:

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