

Cross-Sector Benefits of an Education in Gerontology

As the population tilts toward an older demographic, the many opportunities afforded by a degree in gerontology apply to a surprising number of career fields.

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Gerontology, the study of aging, is paradoxically a relatively young educational discipline. The word “gerontology” was coined by zoologist Ilya Metchnikoff in 1903 from the Greek γέρων, *geron*, “old man” and λογία, *logia*, “study of” (Harris, 1988). Over the past century, gerontology has grown into a wide-reaching, interdisciplinary field of research and practice that incorporates physical, mental, social, and historical influences as well as the implications of economics, politics, and policy on aging and longevity. This extensive education pairs well with a multitude of careers.

Gerontology: A Broad Foundation

Gerontology is a nascent field with approximately ninety-eight programs that offer an undergraduate major, minor, or certificate in gerontology, 112 offering a graduate degree or certificate, and fifty programs

providing doctoral-level, related degrees in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education, 2020). According to a study in 2013 (Gendron, et al., 2013), 58 percent of gerontology students had no experience working in aging-related positions while 42 percent were pursuing a gerontology credential after working in an aging-related job. Occupations of graduates included education, administration, social services, geriatric care management, occupational therapy, physical therapy, entrepreneurship, research, marketing, and pharmacy (Gendron et al., 2013).

The foundational core competencies of gerontology include the biology of aging, psychology of aging, and social gerontology; these are referred to as a biopsychosocial approach to aging. In addition to coursework, most gerontology programs incorporate an internship placement allowing students to practice

in an applied environment and gain practical experience while still receiving continuous support from gerontological mentors. Examples of the diverse range of practicum placements include non-profit organizations, social service organizations, long-term supports and services, independent businesses, and Area Agencies on Aging.

However, practicums can be highly individualized for students choosing a multidisciplinary path. Incorporating applied learning experience into the curriculum is invaluable to both the student as well as the aging services industry. The combination of foundational and applied components in the curriculum provide unique leverage to graduates and prepare them to work in a diverse range of settings including long-term services and supports, education, research, and the policy and advocacy sector. A gerontology degree can be equally applicable to high-growth areas in business and technology such as entrepreneurship, finance, and engineering that seek to provide opportunities for an aging society.

In recent decades, the discipline of gerontology has grown in breadth and depth and expanded core competency topic areas to include ethical decision making, research, critical thinking, humanities and arts, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Even more recently, the Virginia Commonwealth University Department of Gerontology paved the way to create a core curriculum that incorporates equity and inclusion by including ageism, elderhood, and longevity equity as foundational elements of research, teaching, and community engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the need to focus on equity and inclusion within the spectrum of aging education. The pandemic has shined a light on the normative acceptability of ageism with sentiments that minimize the impact of the coronavirus because it *only* affects older people, as well as a blatantly slow response to supporting long-term care communities with the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to contain outbreaks of the deadly virus.

Ageism, Longevity Equity, and Elderhood as Essential Core Competencies

A background in the study of ageism, inclusion, equity, and elderhood prepares future professionals with the skill set to deeply understand the holistic process of aging and to recognize barriers and discrimination older adults face in healthcare, employment, and institutional policies and procedures. Many older adults face longevity inequities (i.e. pervasive inequity that leads to higher rates of mortality and lower chances

at longevity) that are compounded by disparate treatment due to race, class, and physical environment. For example, cumulative discrimination is a risk factor that affects individuals of color as they reach old age, impacting access to physical and mental healthcare, economic stability, and psychosocial support (Williams et al., 2019).

In fact, a study by the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health (2016) demonstrated a shocking impact on longevity based on neighborhood location. Results of this study found that a baby born in a neighborhood in the western part of Richmond, in a predominantly White and middle-income neighborhood, has a life expectancy of 83 years, whereas a baby born in a neighborhood in a central part of Richmond, predominantly Black and low-income neighborhood, has a life expectancy of 63 years, or two decades less. This disparity is distressing, especially given that by 2030 older adults will constitute a more racially and ethnically diverse society and will outnumber children for the first time in U.S. history, with one in five people in retirement age (US Census Bureau, 2018). Education in gerontology that addresses the impacts of discrimination and mitigation strategies in the core curriculum will be critical to prepare professionals to recognize and ameliorate the consequences of widespread inequities due to racism, as well as ageism.

Ageism

In its most basic form, ageism refers to prejudice and discrimination against people because of their age. Yet, ageism is a complex phenomenon that manifests

- internally (i.e., attitudes about our own aging),
- externally (i.e., attitudes about older people),
- relationally (e.g., communication about aging within relationships),
- institutionally (e.g., policies, practices, and procedures), and
- ideologically (e.g., ideas, customs, and social behavior).

Ageism is insidious and ageist sentiments are often innocuous and communicated with the intent to compliment another, such as, “You look so young for your age.”

The roots of ageism are multifarious and encompass a view of aging as a dominant biomedical process of disease and deterioration. This limited and often singular view of aging as decline-based is often predominant in education programs that prepare professionals to work with older adults in all sectors,

including healthcare, social services, psychology, recreation, and leisure as well as business, finance, and industry professions. Unfortunately, unchallenged ageism that perpetuates stereotypical, misinformed views of older adults and the aging process creates barriers that can influence career choice as well as job satisfaction (Gendron et al., 2016). It is therefore imperative that education on ageism, which requires us to recognize and analyze our own internalized predispositions, attitudes and biases, be incorporated into core curriculum across multiple, if not all, disciplines.

The concept of elderhood provides a framework for the necessary anti-ageism work needed to reimagine a society that understands the contributions of older adults and the opportunities of an older society. The term elderhood is used to denote older adulthood as an important developmental stage that provides unique opportunities for growth and development. Through the complex lens of elderhood, we see growing older as a multidimensional, multi-causal, and multidirectional process that is experienced both universally (in that everyone ages) and individually (in that everyone ages differently). Incorporating elderhood as a core competency into gerontology core curriculum provides the resulting professionals with the knowledge base and skills to go above and beyond providing *care* for older adults and instead actively create environments to *empower* older adults to *thrive*.

The Growth of Career Opportunities in Gerontology

Due to widespread and unchallenged ageism, the population growth of older individuals is often viewed as a problem that needs to be fixed. In reality, the growing demographic of older people creates rich and varied opportunities for multiple job markets and economic sectors. Older people themselves are the fastest-growing age bracket of the labor force (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2015) and it is evident that older adults represent essential roles in our communities as employees, caregivers, and consumers. Simultaneously, there is a critical shortage of professionals trained in gerontology to meet the increasing demand for products, services, and health care for a growing and diverse population of older people.

The “longevity economy” is a term that is illustrative of the opportunities of this growing demographic shift and provides a framework and a data-driven case for actively pursuing careers in the aging service network. The book *The Longevity Economy* (Coughlin, 2017) describes barriers to reaching the current market of older adults as well as promising prospects for growth and innovation, such as focusing on the

GERONTOLOGY SYNCS WITH BIOMEDICAL ENGINEERING

Fourth-year biomedical engineering PhD student Lucas Olson of Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is one of a new wave of tech students adding a gerontology degree to his professional credentials. Olson is investigating the regeneration of musculoskeletal (MSK) tissues with a specific emphasis on how the random aging of extracellular matrix negatively impacts skeletal muscle stem cells. So how does gerontology fit in?

“In the Biological Aging class offered by VCU’s Department of Gerontology, I discovered that the aging process is highly individualized, and there are a multitude of variables to consider (e.g., depression, discrimination, access to healthcare, social and economic disparities),” Olson writes. “Understanding which of these variables are most important to MSK aging, and why, could have explanatory power that is relevant to work with human subjects, whether it be human-derived cell lines or large-scale clinical trials. Furthermore, studying how the negative aspects of psychosocial aging perturb biological mechanisms could integrate a higher understanding of the sometimes nebulous comorbidities found in MSK aging.”

Olson feels that the hard sciences, while providing excellent depth in the STEM-related fields, lack the “human variable” that can be addressed by classes in the gerontology field. He has learned, for example, that depression and musculoskeletal pain are closely related (Melkevik, Clausen, Pedersen, Garde, Holtermann, & Rugulies, 2018). By adding a degree from VCU’s Aging Certificate program, Olson hopes to be a step ahead of his lofty peers.

needs of older adults for self-esteem and self-actualization. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) AgeLab is illustrative of the growing innovation in gerontology research and education. The MIT AgeLab conducts multidisciplinary research to develop and apply consumer-centered systems approaches to maximize opportunities of increased longevity and to catalyze business innovation across markets, and is paving the way for emerging careers

that integrate business, technology, and aging. A quick search of careers in gerontology demonstrates the broad scope of potential paths to address this new and emerging demographic that expand beyond healthcare and include intersecting fields such as law, policy, business, and engineering (American Psychological Association, 2017). Given that there remain a relatively small number of degree programs in gerontology at the levels of bachelors, masters, certificates, and doctoral degrees in the United States (The Gerontological Society of America, n.d.), the market is amenable to an increase in professionals trained in gerontology. Gerontology careers are expected to remain in high demand due to overall increases in life expectancy.

Conclusion

Gerontology-trained professionals understand that, relative to former stages of the lifespan, elderhood is multidimensional, idiosyncratic, and full of potential. Not only are there an abundance of growth opportunities for professionals currently working in aging fields, but there are also a plethora of opportunities for professionals working in intersecting industries who would see their work enriched by an education in gerontology. A grounding in the core competencies of biopsychosocial gerontology yields a unique position on issues and provides a robust knowledge base to make educated decisions that reflect the needs and desires of a diverse aging population. Graduates with training in emerging core competency areas such as ageism, longevity equity, and elderhood have the unique ability to recognize how their work can close longevity gaps, challenge the perspectives of colleagues, and create opportunities to enhance their profession using the growth mindset of elderhood. As the aging industry expands, gerontologists continue to diversify, challenge, disrupt, and innovate career paths. •CSA



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