

WHAT IS GERONTOLOGY? GERIATRICS?

Aging is a multidisciplinary field. This means that the study of aging combines or integrates information from several separate areas of study. Biology, sociology, and psychology are the "core" or basic areas, along with content from many other areas of study such as public policy, humanities, and economics.

Gerontology is the study of the aging processes and individuals as they grow from middle age through later life. It includes:

- the study of physical, mental, and social changes in older people as they age
- the investigation of the changes in society resulting from our aging population
- the application of this knowledge to policies and programs. As a result of the multidisciplinary focus of gerontology, professionals from diverse fields call themselves "gerontologists"

Geriatrics is:

- the study of health and disease in later life
- the comprehensive health care of older persons and the well-being of their family caregiver

WHY STUDY AGING AND OLDER PERSONS?

Expanding Career Opportunities:

Populations are aging worldwide. This means that people are living longer, and the number of older persons is increasing. These trends are evident in American society, as well as in many countries around the world. In the U.S., of those born in 1900 nearly half died before they were 50 years old. People born today can expect to live beyond their 75th year. In 1900 about one in 25 Americans was over 65; today one in eight is over 65. And the age group growing fastest in our society and in many other countries is the "very old," people aged 85 and over.

The growth of the elderly population will continue into the future. By the middle of the 21st century, one in five Americans will be over 65, and there will be 15 to 18 million persons over the age of 85.

These growth trends will result in a demand for professionals with knowledge and expertise in aging. Expanded career opportunities in gerontology and geriatrics are forecast in many disciplines and professions.

A Stimulating, Challenging Field:

The field of aging is very diverse, offering many different employment opportunities. This diversity exists, in part, because older persons are very different from each other in many ways. As we age, our experiences, needs, resources, and abilities vary according to such factors as gender, race, ethnicity, and economic status.

For example, many older persons are very healthy and active. Persons working with these older people might be providing educational opportunities, recreation and leisure programs, and volunteer activities.

Some older persons are frail and less active. Jobs which relate to these more vulnerable elders might be in long-term care or other health care settings or in certain agencies that deliver services to older persons.

The relative newness of the field means that there are opportunities for innovative ideas and new programs and products. Many people have started their own businesses, such as coordinating home health care or consulting with businesses and corporations about how to develop services or design products that would attract older consumers.

Multidisciplinary Opportunities:



The varied needs of older persons lead to exciting opportunities for working side by side with professionals from other disciplines.

As a service provider, you may be coordinating information from housing agencies, lawyers, transportation providers, nurses, and family counselors. As a health professional, you might serve on a health care team providing hospital care, day care, or home care to older persons.

As an educator, you might teach a course on work and retirement to students from several university departments. As a researcher, you might study the relationships between the maintenance of friendship networks and the mental and physical health of older persons.

Potential to Make a Difference:



People working in aging report great satisfaction in addressing the challenges of those who are growing older, helping to maintain the quality of their lives, and enjoying the wit, wisdom, and creativity of the older persons with whom they come in contact.

Even as a student you can make a difference; your community can benefit from volunteer work you do with older persons. Later, as a professional in the field, you can continue to serve the community as a volunteer, for example, by speaking about various aspects of aging to civic and community groups or teaching in pre-retirement programs.

Working in the field of aging provides an opportunity to influence positively the agencies and organizations serving older persons and the legislation and policies that affect their lives.

WHAT JOBS AND CAREERS ARE AVAILABLE?



Some professionals work directly with older persons. Their activities may include

- developing programs such as health promotion, senior theater groups, or intergenerational activities for older persons in senior centers, community agencies, or retirement communities;
- providing direct care to frail, ill, or impaired older persons in hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, or through adult day care or home care programs;
- counseling older persons and their families about issues of caregiving, employment, death and dying, or mental health; and
- advising older clients about estate planning and investments, financing long-term care, or housing options.

More Opportunities:



Other professionals are less directly involved with older persons, but work on their behalf, educate others, or investigate issues in the field of aging. Examples of their activities include

- conducting research on the aging processes and diseases associated with aging such as Alzheimer's disease or osteoporosis;
- analyzing issues related to older persons such as retirement opportunities, income maintenance, the health care system, and housing alternatives;
- planning, administering, and evaluating community-based services and service delivery systems for older persons;
- teaching courses on aging to college and university students, health care professionals, and older adults;
- advocating with or on behalf of older persons before legislative bodies or in institutional settings;
- designing products to meet the special interests and needs of older persons; and
- advising business, industry, and labor regarding older workers and consumers.

HOW DO I BECOME A PROFESSIONAL IN AGING?



There are three educational avenues to becoming a professional in the field of aging. The first two involve enrolling in a formal credit program at a college or university.

1. Some students choose aging as a **specialty area** within one of the traditional disciplines or professions (e.g., anthropology, architecture, biology, political science, psychology, sociology, medicine, nursing, social work, health-related professions).
2. Others opt for a **degree or major in gerontology**. For those seeking formal training in aging, there are over 500 colleges and universities that offer more than 1,000 credit programs in aging. Over 1,000 additional schools offer course work and adult or continuing education programs that provide information on aging to older persons and others in the community for personal use and/or upgrading specific skills. Programs are available to meet different individual interests and objectives

Instruction in Gerontology is Available at all Educational Levels.



Associate level -- Community college programs train people through specific courses in gerontology and skill training experiences. The courses can lead to an A.A. degree or a certificate or emphasis in gerontology. Credits earned in these community college programs can usually be used toward a four-year degree. Students in these education and training programs generally seek entry-level jobs or advancement in their current employment.

Bachelor's level -- Many colleges and universities offer a major or bachelor's degree in gerontology or a certificate, minor, or specialization in aging to complement a traditional academic major. A field experience usually is required. Graduates are qualified for entry-level or mid-level jobs as practitioners and planners in local and state agencies offering programs and services to older persons.

Graduate Educational Opportunities



Master's level -- Nearly 100 universities offer a master's degree in gerontology. Master's-level training prepares professionals to become skilled administrators, planners, and practitioners. Many universities offer graduate specializations which permit students to major in another academic or clinical field with a specialization in aging.

Doctoral level -- Some universities offer doctoral level specializations in aging within other academic and clinical departments. A few universities offer a Ph.D. in gerontology. Doctoral programs prepare students for careers in research, teaching, administration, or clinical practice.

Postdoctoral level -- Postdoctoral training programs or fellowships are available in gerontology and geriatrics. Many of these are funded through federal agencies and can be completed in academic or clinical settings.

Outside the Box



For some, **continuing education** is the logical choice. Non-credit programs may be designed for those preparing for new careers, for people already working who want additional knowledge about aging, or for individuals seeking to enrich their lives. Continuing education is offered by colleges and universities, professional and aging associations, hospitals, training firms, and businesses. In some professions, such as social work, counseling, and nursing, continuing education is required to maintain a license or certificate.

Careers in Aging Information from the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE)