

Fostering Academic Leadership in Gerontology and Geriatrics is Vital to the Future of Social Work Programs

Numerous Resources, Options Available for Developing the Faculty Needed to Respond to Demographic Changes

Deans, directors, administrators, and faculty can foster faculty development and recruitment to aging topics by adopting a variety of approaches:

- *Administrators can assign one or two interested faculty members to become in-house “gero” experts, or reach out to gerontologically-knowledgeable faculty in other departments.*
- *Universities can provide junior faculty with mentors for guidance on geriatric research or establish distance mentoring to raise the visibility of promising faculty members and their research.*
- *Deans can extend the influence of geriatric social work by providing junior faculty and doctoral students with leadership training.*
- *To counter the isolation faced by students and faculty working in an emerging area, schools can foster systems of peer supports.*
- *Though many activities can be financed with existing resources, universities may be able to tap new sources of funding by looking to foundations, local businesses, and research institutes.*

As a practice-oriented profession, social work has made major contributions to the health and well being of older adults and their families. But with the expanding older population comes the need to make sure every social worker is prepared to work with older clients. The first step in that preparation is faculty who can teach gerontological social work and develop the evidence-based research needed for effective interventions.

Social work education programs need to create a cadre of faculty leaders to prepare the profession for the rising demands for aging-related services. Acting as mentors, teachers, and role models, these faculty would increase the number of well-trained geriatric social workers while raising the visibility of geriatric social work among policymakers and experts in other fields. Deans, directors of doctoral programs, and other administrators can develop this new generation of leaders by encouraging junior faculty members to specialize in gerontology and guiding doctoral students to research in areas related to improving the care of older adults and their families and caregivers.

The JAHF Contribution



Starting in 1999, the John A. Hartford Foundation initiated two programs to expand academic leadership in geriatric social work. The Faculty Scholars Program, funded with \$13.4 million, provides major financial and career support for over 60 outstanding junior faculty committed to academic careers. The Doctoral Fellows Program, inaugurated in 2000, seeks to increase the number of future faculty focusing on geriatric social work by providing dissertation support, mentoring and career guidance. \$7.4 million has been dedicated to the program, supporting 125 doctoral students nationally.



Meeting the Demand for Gero-Faculty

Despite the growing need for social workers with geriatric knowledge, less than 10 percent of faculty members in 117 master's programs have formal training in aging. Of the 300 social work doctoral dissertations produced each year, less than one in 10 are in geriatric social work.

Historically, a dearth of funding in gerontology diverted social work scholars to other fields. Since the 1980s, federal and foundation grants have flowed into stipends for education and research focused on child welfare issues. As the money for gerontology slowed, so did the prestige of geriatrics in academic social work institutions, along with the system of faculty role models, peer networks, research assistance, and other support that universities often provide to nurture careers.

Academic institutions can reverse this cycle of neglect by developing a program of supports for junior faculty and students interested in teaching and research careers in geriatric social work. Many of the Hartford programs' components—mentoring, career development, skills-building, educational institutes—can be emulated on a smaller scale and do not cost universities much in additional resources. On the contrary, universities are likely to reap returns on their investments when nurtured faculty members receive public and private grants.



Hartford Faculty Scholars attend development workshops focused on research, communications, policymaking, and leadership skills development.

Promoting Gerontology's Stature

To signal that geriatrics and gerontology are priorities, administrators can assign one or two interested faculty members to become in-house "gero" experts. These scholars can conduct an initial review of existing geriatrics curriculum offerings and then gather and disseminate data reflecting the growing demand for well-trained geriatric social workers.

After seeking the imprimatur of the university president, administrators can also establish an advisory board and ask faculty from the school of social work and from other disciplines in gerontology to become board members. Representatives from community agencies and executives from aging-focused grant makers could be invited as well.

Mentoring

Universities can provide junior faculty with a mentor who provides guidance on geriatric research. The dean can invite a professor at the school to become a research mentor or create an alliance with an expert from another university's school of social work. Deans at schools of social work could establish a long-distance system of mentoring for their young faculty, as well.

In addition to a research mentor, the university can select an “institutional sponsor” who could be drawn from any school in the university. The sponsor would introduce the faculty member (or doctoral student) to experts across the campus in order to develop interdisciplinary research approaches. The sponsor also can provide guidance on career strategies and university politics.

Bolstering Research

Besides offering mentors, institutions can provide financial and skills-improvement resources to encourage and help doctoral students and junior faculty undertake geriatric research projects.

University-sponsored research and doctoral grants can be viewed as an investment. Doctoral students and junior faculty in gerontology who pursue important research are more likely to receive tenure-track appointments, win additional grants from public and private sources, and generate published articles that will elevate the field of gerontology and university prestige.

To strengthen research skills, the university can provide teaching release time so that junior faculty can attend specialized programs in social work research methodology. The dean of social work can cooperate with deans of other schools on campus to design a one-semester seminar or a faculty retreat that includes gerontology faculty from social work, nursing, medicine, and public health. The university also can conduct workshops on grant writing and research funding.

Raising Public Recognition

Academic institutions can extend the influence of geriatric social work by providing junior faculty and doctoral students with leadership training in public policy and communications. Universities have numerous tools for honing leadership skills, for example, inviting state legislators and aides to meet with social work faculty and students specializing in gerontology. Deans can use their relationships with national and local organizations and government agencies to arrange meetings with faculty, thus facilitating possible appointments to review boards, task forces, and other policy-making bodies.

Developing communications skills is vital if faculty members are to disseminate their research to a broader arena. Universities can sponsor communications workshops or send faculty and students to off-campus conferences to learn how to translate findings for the public and policymakers.

Peer Networking

Because of their small number on campus, junior faculty and doctoral students who specialize in gerontology usually work in isolation. By developing a system of peer supports, universities can help scholars build self-confidence, share ideas, elicit feedback on research, keep energies high, and make career-path contacts.



Aloen L. Townsend, PhD, Associate Professor of Social Work at Case Western Reserve University, provides a tutorial on Structural Equation Modeling for Hartford Doctoral Fellows at their November 2003 orientation. The technique, becoming widely used in the behavioral sciences, allows researchers to test relationships between multiple variables, compare effects across groups, and analyze longitudinal data.

Despite the need, less than 10% of social work faculty members in 117 master's programs have formal training in gerontology or geriatrics.

Over the past decade, less than 10% of doctoral dissertations in social work involved research on older adults or their families.

Deans and directors of doctoral programs can explore and develop opportunities for cross-university collaboration. Universities can organize professional conferences and invite scholars from other educational institutions, or they can work with other universities in a region or state to conduct joint meetings. Universities may also look to national social work organizations to conduct special networking conferences for gerontology scholars.

Raising New Funds

Though many activities can be financed with existing resources, universities can tap new sources of funding by looking to foundations, local donors and companies, and research institutes. Some grant makers could be targeted to pay for and sponsor individual conferences, workshops, and colloquia. Possible donors could be asked to sit on an advisory board for the school's new geriatrics program.

Local donors are also good targets for fundraising. For example, a nursing home might be willing to sponsor the cost of providing lunch and related costs for a seminar, or a local donor could provide a grant to hire a consultant for communications training. A community foundation, which makes donations to new local programs, can be asked to finance a specific component of the overall social work leaders program. The university's development office needs to be brought into the process, as well. As planned giving becomes more widespread, alumni would be willing to consider bequests for gerontology.

For More Information

www.GSWI.org

This site provides a wide range of information about all of the programs of the Hartford Geriatric Social Work Initiative, including the Faculty Scholars and Doctoral Fellows programs. In addition to applications for the programs, there is a wealth of resources on other funding and career opportunities in social work education.

"Social Work Gerontological Practice: The Need for Faculty Development in the New Millennium"

Barbara Berkman, DSW, Barbara Silverstone, PhD, et al.

Journal of Gerontological Social Work, Volume 34, Issue 1, 2000

"Strengthening Geriatric Social Work Through a Doctoral Fellowship Program"

James E. Lubben, DSW, MPH and Linda Harootyan

Journal of Gerontological Social Work, Volume 39, Issue 1/2, 2002

"Mentoring New Social Work Faculty: A Gerontological Perspective"

Peter Maramaldi, PhD, Daniel Gardner, PhD, et al.

Gerontology and Geriatrics Education, Volume 25, Issue 1, 2004

This pamphlet is available at the Web site of the John A. Hartford Foundation at www.jhartfound.org/IDEAS/swleaders.

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