

The History of Gerontology at UNCG
1983 - 1995
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Although no formal interdisciplinary gerontology program was established at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro until 1984, gerontological research had been on-going since 1969 and a variety of courses had already been offered in various departments. In the Fall of 1983, triggered by a realization that some coordination of course scheduling was needed, a small group of faculty met to discuss the possibility of an interdisciplinary program. Virginia Stephens (Social Work) chaired the Gerontology Program Planning Committee, on which Rebecca Adams (Sociology), Vira Kivett (Human Development and Family Studies), Harriet Kupferer (Anthropology), Tom Leary (Economics), Gracia McCabe (Nursing), and Dan Price (Sociology) served. They established an undergraduate second major and minor through the Interdepartmental Studies Program in the College of Arts and Sciences. Rebecca Adams developed the two introductory courses, Perspectives on Aging (GRO 301) and Contexts of Aging (GRO 302), and Harriet Kupferer developed the capstone course (GRO 501). The rest of the curriculum consisted of courses offered by various departments, including both foundation courses and courses focused specifically on aging.

This program was one of the first in the University of North Carolina system. From the beginning, involved faculty were proud of the lack of turf disputes and the high degree of cooperation across disciplines and schools. The members of the Committee agreed that gerontologists needed a thorough grounding in the liberal arts, especially in sociology, psychology, and biology, in addition to specializing in research or practice areas. The curriculum was thus designed to introduce students to the many aspects of aging. Students prepared for a specific career path in the context of their primary major. (Later when the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education developed guidelines for certification, they reflected this same philosophy).

The Program was immediately successful. During the first semester, GRO 301 attracted 28 students. GRO 302 was offered in the Spring semester and attracted 37. (These enrollments were typical of those in subsequent years.) The students in these classes were exposed to the teaching of 26 guest lecturers, both faculty and community representatives. The Committee viewed service as coordinator of the course as an opportunity for faculty development. By the end of the year, five students had declared a gerontology second major and five had declared a minor. Sandra Powers (Education) started a journal club which was attended by about 20 faculty, students, and community members. By the end of the second year, two second majors and four minors had graduated, and 19 students had actively declared second majors or minors. The Journal Club continued to meet and the Committee sponsored a highly successful conference on Mental Health and Aging. Over 125 people registered for the entire conference and twice that many attended the keynote address.

In the years that followed, the Program gained strength. The Committee sponsored conferences equally as successful as the first one on Social Aspects of Aging and on Nutrition and Aging (co-sponsored by the Institute of Nutrition). In other years, they invited eminent gerontologists in fields in which UNCG had no one interested in aging to speak. In the Program's peak year, 33 students were second majoring or minoring in gerontology and 10 additional students graduated.

Virginia Stephens (1984-85), Rebecca Adams (1985-89), and Mariana Newton (1989-94) served as chairs of the Interdepartmental Studies Gerontology Program Committee. The following faculty also served on the Committee at various times: Steven Anderson (Department of Biology), Laura Anderton (Department of Biology), Hillary Applestadt (Music), Gay Cheney (Department of Dance), Karen Hogarth (Office

of Continuing Education), Keith Howell (Public Health Education), Thomas Leary (Department of Economics), William Karper (School of Health and Human Performance), Laurie Kennedy (School of Nursing), Vira Kivett (Human Development and Family Studies), Jesse Mann (Department of Leisure Studies), Gracia McCabe (School of Nursing), Jane Meyers (School of Education), Virginia Newbern (School of Nursing), Ed Powers (School of Human Environmental Sciences), Sandra Powers (School of Education), Angela Staab (School of Nursing), Rebecca Taylor (School of Nursing), and Herbert Wells (Department of Psychology). In addition to these faculty members, two members of the community who served the elderly in some capacity served on the Committee each year. Currently over 25 UNCG faculty members have expressed gerontological research or teaching interests. In the past five years, UNCG faculty garnered over 1.5 million dollars in gerontology grant and contract funds.

In 1987, Mariana Newton headed a subcommittee which requested permission to plan a gerontology certificate program. This program was intended to supplement either an undergraduate or graduate degree in a primary discipline. In 1988, UNC General Administration gave us permission to plan such a program. Mariana Newton chaired the Gerontology Certificate Proposal Committee and Rebecca Adams (Sociology), Steven Anderson (Biology), Peggye Dillworth-Anderson (Human Development and Family Studies), William Karper (School of Health and Human Performance), and Virginia Newbern (Nursing) served on it. The Committee developed and submitted a proposal, but Provost DeRosa neither responded to it nor forwarded it for review on or off campus, and thus it was never submitted to General Administration for approval.

Throughout the history of the Undergraduate Program, its success depended on the cooperation of the Department Heads and Deans. They released faculty in their units to teach the courses carrying the GRO hegis code, allocated money for conferences and guest speakers, allowed faculty to teach courses focused on aging rather than courses that were more central to their curricula, and so forth. As budget pressures on the University increased, it became increasingly difficult and eventually impossible for the program to garner the resources it needed to operate. After 1991, the core courses were no longer offered and except for library funds and support for one graduate student, the Program had no budget. Faculty continued to work with students interested in gerontology, encouraging enrollment in courses offered through the departments in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Schools. In the Spring of 1994, Dean Beale officially terminated the program.

The termination of the program did not mark the end of faculty interest. During the 1993-1994 academic year, led by Edward Powers, faculty met to discuss the possibility of submitting a proposal for a Gerontology Center as part of the Social Science Center initiative on campus. During the subsequent summer, the Committee learned that the legislature had granted 50,000 dollars in start-up money to University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for such a center. The UNCG faculty stopped developing their proposal.

Despite this discouraging outcome, faculty are still interested in coming together to discuss their common interests. During the 1994-1995 academic year, Jane Meyer's graduate students organized several brown bag discussions of gerontological topics. This year (1995-96), Edward Powers has taken responsibility for announcing the meetings of what has become known as the UNCG Aging Network.