**THE ROLE OF THE CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY IN GERONTOLOGY HIGHER EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA**

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The Gerontology Summit on Excellence in Teaching, sponsored by a grant from the California State University Institute for Teaching and Learning, is the first official gathering of California State University (CSU) gerontology leadership, recognized by the CSU Chancellor’s Office, since the landmark CSU Workshop on Gerontology was held in San Francisco 22 years earlier. The Summit attracted Gerontology Program Directors and faculty representing all CSU campuses currently offering gerontology instruction, including four who had participated in the original 1980 workshop, as well.

**The Demographic Imperative**

The CSU faces a challenge imposed by demographic trends in the state of California that require institutions of higher learning to prepare qualified professionals and other personnel for employment in an aging society. By year 2040, California’s age 65+ population is projected to increase by 172 percent. Most of the growth will occur by year 2020 when Californians over age 65 could number more than 6.5 million (California Department of Finance, 1998; Scharlach et al., 2001).

Responsibility for gerontology instruction in California falls disproportionately to the CSU, which grants over 50 percent of bachelor’s degrees and 30 percent of master’s degrees in the state. It is incumbent upon the CSU to educate students to be well-informed about their own and others’ aging, to be sensitive to the spectrum of characteristics and needs among the diversity of older persons, and to be prepared to take leadership positions working with, and on behalf of, older adults and their families.

In considering the role of the CSU in gerontology higher education in California, we first review a series of statewide circumstances that have influenced the development of gerontology as an academic area of instruction. Second, we examine results of a longitudinal study of gerontology instructional programs within the CSU and their implications for carrying out the mandate to provide gerontology education and training. Finally, we offer recommendations for actions the CSU can initiate in order to increase the number and competency of CSU graduates we prepare to work in the field of aging.

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Influential Circumstances

The need for gerontology instruction and research in California was recognized as early as 1965 by Dr. James Birren. When he came to Los Angeles to establish a center for gerontology, geriatrics, and aging studies and research at the University of Southern California, he found that not a single institution of higher learning in California offered a single course in gerontology (personal communication, January 15, 2002).

By 1972, the California State Legislature recognized the responsibility of public higher education institutions with regard to education and training in gerontology. California Assembly Concurrent Resolution No. 127 called upon Regents of the University of California, Trustees of the CSU, and the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges to cooperatively examine the adequacy of programs and curricula in social gerontology, medicine, adult education, and other areas critical to the well-being of California’s older citizens. In addition, these higher education representatives were to discuss the validity of establishing Institutes of Gerontology as focal points of research and expanded knowledge, and to plan coordinated procedures to obtain federal funds for research and programs.

In 1975, a report on the work mandated by the 1972 legislation was released as the California Higher Education Study for the Aging (CHESA) (California Office on Aging, 1975). It made 26 recommendations for cooperation among higher education institutions, the state legislature, and community agencies regarding education, research, and service activities for improving the well-being of older Californians.

Finally, in 1980, Dr. Donald Fletcher, Dean in the Office of the Chancellor of the CSU, invited 30 CSU faculty, administrators, and state officials to a Workshop on Gerontology in San Francisco. Charged to consider ways to achieve a coordinated system wide effort in gerontology, the group made 36 recommendations. These related to assessing the current status of gerontology programs, positive ways that programs can take advantage of and share existing and future resources, and actions for the CSU to assist in developing and maintaining academic program performance.

It is striking that the above goals and objectives are still pending, and that leaders in the field of gerontology are still striving to accomplish them (e.g., SB 953, 2002).

Longitudinal Trends in Gerontology Programs within the CSU

The first systematic in-depth longitudinal study of gerontology instructional programs and curriculum in the CSU (Gilford, in press) has produced data on trends from 1988 to 1997 that show:

- The total number of gerontology programs offered on all campuses of the CSU increased by 16 percent, from 37 in 1988 to 43 in 1997.
The increase was greater in master’s level programs than in bachelor’s level programs. The number of master’s programs increased about 160 percent, from 5 in 1988 to 13 in 1997, while the number of bachelor’s programs decreased slightly.

The increase in gerontology programs occurred in degree programs; the number of bachelors degrees doubled and the number of master’s degrees increased three-fold.

Distribution of gerontology instructional programs across the CSU has narrowed. In 1988, each of the then-19 CSU campuses offered at least one of the 37 gerontology programs, whereas, in 1997, only 18 of the now-23 campuses offered at least one of the current programs. Moreover, the 6 degree programs now being offered are concentrated on 5 campuses (Gilford, in press).

Implications

The findings appear promising in that the number of gerontology programs has increased, and the increase has occurred among the gerontology bachelor’s and master’s degree programs that are offered. The nature of the increase implies that the CSU is preparing more students to work in the field of aging than previously, and that students are being prepared at higher levels of competency to fill the demand for paraprofessional and professional workers in an aging society. Other data, however, are less positive. A survey recently conducted by Dr. Cheryl Osborne (2001) at CSU Sacramento showed fewer gerontology programs than were reported in 1997. This discrepancy carries important implications because the number of gerontology programs is related to the number of graduates who are prepared to join the workforce. Moreover, the program development that was observed from 1988-1997 took place on campuses that already offer extensive instruction. Thus, gerontology instruction is becoming concentrated on fewer campuses across the CSU, leaving many students across the state without reasonable access to basic gerontology education and training. Those who seek advanced or professional education in occupations that serve the aging may be forced to relocate to these centers of education or to abandon their career goals altogether. This operates to exacerbate workforce needs in aging to the disadvantage of elders and their families throughout the state who are growing in numbers and need.

Recommendations

Longitudinal research on gerontology instruction within the CSU demonstrates the significant function that the CSU performs in preparing citizens for an aging society (Gilford, in press). The research also points out limitations in the number and distribution of gerontology instructional programs that constrain CSU effectiveness in meeting the demand for workers in the field of aging. In light of the findings, the following recommendations for action by the CSU and the California State Legislature are proposed:

- New gerontology instructional programs should be developed and access to existing programs increased in order to prepare the necessary personnel in sufficient numbers and at appropriate professional levels to work with, and on behalf of, older persons.
Development of cooperative programs, including distance learning in gerontology, geriatrics, and aging studies should be supported in order to accommodate the learning needs of a wide range of students.

Student financial support, including fee waivers, stipends, loan forgiveness, and travel funding, should be provided to encourage participation in educational programs and to facilitate professional involvement in this career area.

Fiscal support is needed for administrators and staff of community based programs to participate in continuing education programs in gerontology and geriatrics in which the biological, social, and psychological aspects of aging are studied, and promotion of the health and welfare of older adults is emphasized.
References

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