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Chapter 4

# Strategies to Increase Student Interest in Aging

Nancy P. Kropf, PhD

**SUMMARY.** Due to changing demographics, all social workers will have experience working with older clients and their families within professional roles. Unfortunately, social work education continues to lag in preparing students to be effective in practice with aging clients. Several strategies are presented with the goal of increasing student interest in the field of aging. At the program level, initiatives include using experiential learning, infusing aging content into required courses, and enhancing faculty capacity in aging. In addition, social work programs can build collaborations within the university setting and practice community. Overall, the goal is to present aging as an exciting and rewarding field of practice, and ensure that all students have the knowledge and skills to be effective in practice with older clients. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "Strategies to Increase Student Interest in Aging." Kropf, Nancy P. Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* (The Haworth Social Work Practice Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 39, No. 1/2, 2002, pp. 57-67; and: *Advancing Gerontological Social Work Education* (ed: M. Joanna Mellor, and Joann Ivry) The Haworth Social Work Practice Press, an imprint of The Haworth Press, Inc., 2002, pp. 57-67. Single or multiple copies of this article are available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service [1-800-HAWORTH, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST). E-mail address: docdelivery@haworthpress.com].

http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J083
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10.1300/J083v39n01_06

**KEYWORDS.** Aging, social work education, student interest in aging, recruitment strategies

Over the next few decades, the increase in the number of older adults is expected to be dramatic. The Census 2000 reports that during the decade of 1990 and 2000, the median age for the population increased from 32.9 years to 35.3 years of age. In addition, the number of mid life adults, those individuals aged 45-54 years, increased 49% from the 1990 statistics (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). By 2030, the number of adults over age 65 is expected to climb to 70 million, or one in every five people (American Association of Retired Persons, 2000).

The number of older adults is rising rapidly, yet an important part of this "aging story" is the increase in the oldest segment of the population. In 2000, the number of Americans who were 85 years or older, which equaled four million adults, was 43 times larger than that cohort group in 1900 (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). While the number of older adults in our society has risen sharply, this trajectory is expected to be even more steep in the coming decades.

In spite of this major demographic shift, the profession of social work has been slow to prepare students to work with older clients and their families. In one of the first discussions about labor force trends, Elaine Brody (1970) admonished social work for the lack of responsiveness to the field of aging. More than thirty years ago, she described the lack of trained and sensitive gerontological practitioners as a situation of "crisis proportions." In a recent interview about the state of gerontology in social work education, these statements were echoed by Abraham Monk, a pioneer in social work education and aging. Reflecting about progress in enhancing curricula in aging, he suggests that students continue to avoid work with older adults for other "more glamorized fields of practice" (AGE-SW, Spring 2001, p. 2). Clearly, there continues to be challenges in preparing students for effective practice with the older population.

With the demographics trends being so clear and convincing, what are the reasons that few social work students receive education about and pursue careers with older adults? Several factors seem to be involved in this situation including inadequate faculty preparation (Damron-Rodriguez & Lubben, 1997; Kropf, Schneider & Stahlman, 1993; Wendt & Peterson, 1993), low student interest (Berenbaum, 2000; Kane, 1999; Mosher-Ashley, 2000; Paton, Sar, Barber, & Holland, 2001) and curriculum/organizational barriers (Lubben, Damron-Rodriguez, & Beck, 1992). To overcome these obstacles, strategies must be implemented to recruit students into aging at all curriculum levels.

The overall objective is to portray the field of aging as an important, challenging, and rewarding area for social work practice.

## *THE CURRENT LEVEL OF STUDENT INTEREST IN AGING*

By all accounts, student interest in working with the older population continues to remain low compared to other client populations. When compared to other fields of practice, gerontological social work ranked fifth behind the other contexts of mental health, child welfare, health, and family service (Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson, & Feldman, 2000). In fact, only about 10% of all MSW students select an aging course during their program of study (Damron-Rodriguez & Lubben, 1997). Student interest at the BSW level is also low, with about 5% of undergraduates reporting an interest in working with older adults (Kropf, et al., 1993). Regardless of the type of social work degree held, few students complete their education with a career goal to work with older adults, or identify themselves as gerontological social workers.

After graduation, however, many practitioners become aware of the importance of understanding aging-related issues. Most practitioners do not hold roles in settings where they primarily work with older clients, as less than 5% of NASW members have expertise in gerontology (Gibelman & Schervish, 1994). A more typical experience is working with older clients in age–integrated settings such as health care, mental health and other social welfare settings (Peterson & Wendt, 1990; Reed, Beall, & Baumhover, 1992). In a survey of NASW members, 62% of practitioners who did not work with older adults specifically reported that gerontology content was needed in their jobs (Peterson, 1990). Even social workers who hold gerontology or geriatric practice roles report inadequate preparation to work with their older clients (Gleason Wynn, 1995). Taken together, these findings suggest that after graduation, most students need to have some education and experience in working with issues involving older adults and their families, yet most do not study this content during their social work programs of study.

If student interest continues to remain low, what are the factors that motivate those students who do select aging courses and careers? One significant factor appears to be close contact with older adults. Relationships with older persons seem to promote a sense of caring that leads to a decision to work with this population (Kane, 1999; Paton et al., 2001). However, the type or meaning of the experience also must be examined as increased exposure to older adults does not necessarily translate into positive impressions (Cummings, Kropf & DeWeaver, 2000; Mosher Ashley, 2000). Similar to other stereotypes, nega-

tive experiences, such as only working with the very ill or functionally impaired, may promote a distancing between younger and older cohorts.

The expertise of faculty also is a factor in recruiting students into practice with older clients. When faculty convey excitement and experience working with older adults, students may select this field of practice and become energized to work with the older population. However, most social work programs have limited faculty resources in aging. At the MSW level, 75% of programs have no faculty member who is identified with aging (Damron-Rodriguez & Lubben, 1997). A similar situation exists at the baccalaureate level, where about 50% of programs have no faculty member who has expertise in gerontology (Kropf et al., 1993). Across the curriculum, few faculty are available to work with and develop student interest in the field of gerontology.

The limited number of faculty with gerontological expertise influences the type of content that is taught within the curriculum. As few students select aging electives, the opportunity to educate students about older adults is through infusing gerontology content into required courses. Given the fact that few faculty have expertise in aging, content on older adults is often sporadically covered or omitted entirely within required course sequences (Kropf et al., 1993). A striking fact is that most practicing social workers report that they received little to no prior knowledge or skill development in gerontology during their programs of study (Klein, 1996).

In summarizing the current status of gerontology in social work education, it appears that a significant proportion of students do not receive adequate instruction about aging. Compared to other client populations, the desire to work with older clients remains low in spite of demographic trends that indicate all social workers will face issues of aging within their practice. Unfortunately, low student interest is compounded by a lack of expertise in many social work faculty. Therefore, attempts to change this situation need to address multiple factors that currently exist within social work programs.

## *INCREASING STUDENT INTEREST*

Clearly, social work educators and administrators need to implement more aggressive and creative strategies to better prepare students to work with the increasing number of older clients. On a positive note, several encouraging changes have recently taken place. The John A. Hartford Foundation is funding several initiatives to enhance gerontology capacity-building within the social work profession. These projects are targeted toward implementing field internship experiences in aging, strengthening curriculum options, supporting mid career faculty in gerontology, and recruiting and developing doctoral students in

completing dissertation research in aging. The ultimate goal is to promote faculty development and increase program resources for student learning.

These initiatives alone, however, are insufficient to meet the expected labor force needs in gerontological social work. At the program level, departments can develop student interest through curriculum innovations and teaching methodologies. In addition, faculty development can be undertaken in several possible ways. At the institution level, programs can maximize the resources that are available within the college or university, as well as seek partnerships with community agencies that serve older adults. While major funding opportunities certainly enhance the ability to increase student interest in aging, most strategies can be implemented that are not contingent upon extramural funds.

### *Programmatic Initiatives*

*Teaching methodologies.* Social work programs can use various approaches to increase aging content within the department and curriculum. Since exposure to older adults can provide students with an opportunity to dispel negative stereotypes of aging, one strategy is to have assignments include contact with the older population. Examples of course assignments could be visiting an agency that provides service to older adults (e.g., senior center, adult day care) or an interview with an older clients from a different cultural background. In order to prepare students for these types of assignments, the curriculum should be assessed to determine if course content represents the broad array of issues with the older population.

Experiential learning can also increase student interest in aging. In social work education, internships are one forum where students have the opportunity to practice with older clients. Through practicum experiences in aging placements, students become socialized as geriatric social workers and learn knowledge and skills specific to the older population. An even greater number of students complete practicum experiences in age integrated settings such as adult protective services, hospitals, and hospices. Although these settings provide services to individuals of all ages, a significant percentage of clients are older adults. Even though students may not have a particular interest in gerontology, internships in placements that serve older adults can foster an appreciation for the field of aging.

Service learning is another method to provide students with opportunities to work with older adults. Although service learning has been used extensively in other disciplines, this instructional methodology is relatively rare in social work education (Forte, 1997; Kropf & Tracey, 2000). Service learning has been defined as "structured learning" (Burns, 1998), a method to "participate in organized service activities to meet community needs" (Brandell & Hinck,

1997), and an opportunity to "engage students in real life experiences" (Morton & Troppe, 1996). Service learning typically involves collective learning where students and instructor partner with agencies around real needs within the community. Examples of service learning projects might be helping organize a community conference on some issues of aging (e.g., dementia, caregiving, spirituality) through the local senior center, or structuring a program for participants of an adult day care center.

Service learning has positive outcomes for both students and faculty members. For students, the opportunity to work with classmates can provide a "safer" environment in which they can challenge the myths of aging. In an evaluation of service learning in a long term care facility, for example, 90% of students reported that this project was useful in their education. In addition, significant positive changes were found in attitudes toward older adults from pre- to post-test (Hegeman, 1999). If service learning is sequenced early in programs of study, students might be more motivated to enroll in electives, pursue a specialization, or select their internship in aging.

Technology also provides an opportunity to enhance curriculum content in aging. Some evidence exists that older students are more motivated to pursue gerontology content than younger classmates (Kropf et al., 1993). Non-traditional students often struggle with issues which can create barriers within their education, (e.g., full time employment and family responsibilities) that can delay or stall their programs of study. Web-based or distance education courses provide a flexible method to meet the needs of these students and a survey elective on social work with older clients seems especially adaptable for web-based form. In addition, this type of format may also fulfill a continuing education function for current practitioners who need to enhance their knowledge and skills in this area.

*Curriculum infusion.* The changing demographics of the population indicate that all students should have some understanding about older individuals and their families. Instructional methods that isolate aging into discrete content (e.g., such as electives or aging concentrations) limit the potential audience to students who enroll in those courses. Several models exist that promote infusion within the curriculum (cf. Bogolub 1998; Cummings & Kropf, 2000; Kropf, 1996) and provide all students with exposure to the content area. In addition, aging resources that are currently available can be useful for infusion initiatives. Content from syllabi on aging courses (cf. Richardson, 1999), such as readings, activities, or audio visual material, can be extracted and introduced into other courses. Infusing aging content across the curriculum promotes the principle that all students will address gerontology-related issues in their roles as social workers.

In applying an infusion strategy, aging can be conceptualized in various ways. Some infusion models highlight the diversity within the older population, such as content on older adults who have developmental or psychiatric disabilities (Cummings & Kropf, 2000; Kropf, 1996). This type of strategy provides students with an understanding of the breadth of issues that older adults present to social workers, and can broaden student's perspective on mental health issues. Other population groups that are included in the curriculum, such as persons of color, women, gay/lesbian individuals, also present an opportunity to infuse aging content as issues about older members of these groups should be included within courses.

A different strategy is to conceptualize aging as an aspect of diversity (cf., Harrison, Wodarski, & Thyer, 1996). As with other forms of oppression such as racism, sexism or homophobia, older adults experience discrimination as a result of ageism in our society. Content that highlights the negative impact of stereotypes based upon age can be included in courses, and is especially relevant for practice, policy, and human behavior content.

*Faculty development.* An organizational barrier in teaching aging content is the low level of expertise that many faculty possess. Research indicates that many social work departments have few, if any, faculty members with interest in gerontology (Kropf et al., 1993; Lubben et al., 1992; Scharlach et al., 2000). A factor in enhancing aging content within the curriculum is developing faculty members' abilities to teach this content.

One method to increase faculty expertise is structuring co-teaching arrangements that provide instructors with an opportunity to develop a more solid skill base. For example, agency personnel who are gerontological social workers can be invited to co-teach courses with faculty. In addition to strengthening academic and practice-based relationships, this strategy promotes an integration of aging content within the course. An alternative model is to partner with other programs that have a higher degree of aging expertise represented on the faculty. One example of this type of arrangement is the Distance Learning Partnership in Gerontology developed within the State of Georgia (Malone, Schmidt & Poon, 1998). In this program, distance learning sites are paired together between schools that have various levels of expertise. "Lead instructors," or those faculty who have a greater knowledge base, partner with schools that are beginning to develop gerontology content. As instructors teach with "master teachers," they also enhance their ability to teach content within their own programs.

Research collaborations also develop faculty competence in aging, as well as attract students to gerontology. Projects that have an intergenerational focus are especially fruitful opportunities as faculty partner with colleagues who specialize in other practice contexts. One example is the Project Healthy

Grandparent Model™ that provides support to grandparents who are raising grandchildren. This university-based intervention model brings together faculty and students to implement a legal, health, and psychosocial program within the community (Gaines, Kelley, & Spencer, 1997). In addition to being multidisciplinary, faculty with expertise in child welfare, health, and gerontology collaborate to implement and evaluate interventions with custodial grandparent families. As issues of aging are often central to the families' needs, this project expands the number of faculty and students who become involved with interventions for an older population.

Institutional support can also be provided to encourage faculty to become involved in gerontology associations. For example, the Association of Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) and the Association for Gerontology Education–Social Work (AGE-SW) both offer institutional memberships which allow multiple faculty from a program to join. In addition to receiving information that can enhance teaching, these organizations provide a forum for faculty to build a professional network of others who are interested in aging and education.

### *Environmental Modifications*

*Institutional collaborations.* In addition to changing the internal structures of social work programs, initiatives can be mounted to expand aging education by fostering collaborations with other units within the university. University gerontology centers or departments are especially fruitful units with which to connect, as these programs often offer courses, continuing education, and faculty development opportunities. In addition, affiliated faculty may be resources and provide a network for professional development in aging.

Social work programs can evaluate various strategies that involve sharing resources with other units within the university. Building collaborations across programs can enhance course content, generate additional student credit hours, and serve as a method to recruit students into major courses or graduate programs. A fairly easy method to establish these collaborations is to cross list courses with other programs. A course on older families, for example, could be cross listed in social work and sociology. Cross listed courses are a mechanism to attract students from other departments, as well as provide a strategy to mount content that may not attract enough students from a single department.

Students may also be attracted to aging if there is some formalized "incentive" which can provide an additional advantage when pursuing jobs or graduate programs. Examples are establishing a minor or a certificate program which involves completing a series of aging-related courses. Depending on the

level of support at the university, completion of these formalized courses of study may be part of a student's transcript or diploma.

*Building community partnerships.* Programs can also benefit by establishing partnerships with agencies in the community that have particular expertise in aging services. As already noted, service learning programs provide one opportunity to have students and faculty partner with community practitioners. Likewise, agency personnel are also valuable resources as co-teachers, adjunct faculty members, and guest presenters within social work courses.

Collaborative relationships can also create other avenues to enhance content and increase student interest in aging. Close working relationships between social work program and organizations may increase the likelihood that graduates will compete favorably in hiring decisions. Administrators that understand the curriculum and hold a favorable evaluation of the program overall, may be inclined to select job applicants who are alumni. If current students learn that graduates are obtaining jobs, they hold perceptions that jobs in aging do exist. In addition, faculty that have a grasp of service agencies can include content that is relevant to practice, and keep current with policy and practice developments that are taking place within the field.

In summary, demographics indicate that baccalaureate and graduate social work students will be faced with challenges that are a result of an increasingly older population. Unfortunately, social work continues to lag in educational preparation of students for this professional context. Although initiatives are developing that can assist in augmenting aging content, programs can be more responsive and proactive. Several methods are presented to increase the number of students and target alternative teaching methodologies, infusing content across the curriculum, and enhancing faculty expertise in aging. In addition, opportunities to partner with other university units and the practice community can stimulate both faculty and student interest in aging. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that graduates in social work programs leave with an adequate knowledge and skill base to practice with older clients.

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