

WHAT IS GERONTOLOGY?

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 informal 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.
- 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.

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.
- Studying aging also gives you a perspective on your own aging and insight into the aging of your family members.

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.

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.

Some professionals devote themselves full-time to the field of aging; others divide their time between aging and other areas of interest within their disciplinary, professional, or clinical areas.

WHERE DO PROFESSIONALS IN AGING WORK?

Professionals in the field of aging work in a variety of settings, including:

- Community, Human Service & Religious Organizations
- Health Care & Long Term Care Institutions
- Federal, State, & Local Government Agencies
- Retirement Communities
- Academic, Educational, & Research Settings
- Professional Organizations
- Business & Industry

For more information:

Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE): <http://www.aghe.org>

Gerontological Society of America (GSA): <http://www.geron.org/>

AGEWORK.COM: <http://www.agework.com/agework/>

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