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in Social Work Curriculum:
Perceptions of Key Constituents

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SUMMARY. This mixed methodology study examines the perceptions of key constituents regarding methods for effectively integrating aging content into the foundation curriculum of the BSW and MSW program at the University of Georgia School of Social Work. Students were asked to complete a survey to determine their perception of geriatric content that existed within the foundation coursework. Following an analysis of the survey results, eight semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with a purposeful sample of students, faculty, field instructors, social work alumni, older adults from the community, and representatives from aging agencies. The intention of these focus groups was to find out what aging content should be infused within the curriculum. The focus

group meetings were held in various locations throughout Northeast Georgia and in one remote location in South Georgia. Participants were interviewed about the necessary skills and knowledge for social workers practicing with an aging population in the areas of: essential intervention skills, program policies and regulations, critical information needed to develop client service plans, strategies for addressing service delivery fragmentation, and community collaboration to support intergenerational family needs. The results of this study will be discussed to provide suggestions on how existing foundation courses can integrate aging content. doi: 10.1300/J083v48n01_07 *[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> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

The Administration on Aging ([AoA], 2000) has reported that by 2030 over 70 million persons living in the U.S. will be over age 65. In addition, the fastest growing age cohort is individuals over the age of 85 (Council on Social Work Education/Strengthening Aging in Gerontology Education for Social Work, 2001). With advances in medical technology, the influx of immigrant groups, and the baby boomer cohort on the verge of turning 60, in the future there will be a larger and more diverse group of older adults. Therefore, all human service professions are being challenged to reconsider how students are being prepared to work with older adults. Programs have to consider how to enhance training and increase exposure in and out of the classroom to issues affecting older adults. Social Work has been identified as a profession that will have a shortage of professionals skilled to provide services to a geriatric population. By 2010, it is estimated that there will be a need for 60,000-70,000 social workers to work specifically with older adults (CSWE SAGE-SW, 2001). Over the past 10 years, social work programs nationally have been increasing aging content within the curriculum. These initiatives were a response to demographic changes within the population, as well as opportunities and resources (e.g., John A. Hartford Foundation funding) to help schools increase content and capacity in aging (Kropf, 2001). In 2001, The John A. Hartford Foundation responded to the need to include aging knowledge in the social work curriculum by funding the Hartford Geriatric Social Work Initiative. One of the HGSWI projects, The Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work Education, provided funding to 67 programs to infuse additional aging content into the curriculum. This transformation was intended to be pervasive and sustainable (Hooyman, 2001).

While social workers are central to developing home and community-based services for our aging population, they often lack current gerontological knowledge and skills. Social workers have relevant foundation practice and policy content that includes a strengths-based emphasis on empowerment, capacity building, and health promotion. They are able to work with individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, and in public policy arenas. Yet, most social workers lack adequate gerontological knowledge and skills that can enhance older people's opportunities and quality of life (The John A. Hartford Foundation, 2002).

Recognizing this inadequate preparation, the field of social work must be proactive in planning for current and future needs in assisting persons who are aging. Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson, and Feldman (2000) assert that the social work profession is not yet prepared for this growing demographic. Longevity creates a complex web of intergenerational kin relationships of four or five vertical generations in a family system. In addition, life longevity is related to an increase of various chronic illnesses and social workers will need to work in this realm of practice to provide long-term healthcare assistance. Social workers must also expand knowledge about subsets of the aging population (e.g., adults with developmental disabilities or persons who are incarcerated), so that specialized assessment and intervention methods can be appropriately designed and used with diverse segments of the aging population.

Understanding gender and ethnicity will be important, as differences exist between the life expectancy of females and males within various cultural communities (CSWE SAGE-SW, 2001; US Census, 2000). Another challenge for social workers is the need to be well informed about the mental and emotional functioning of the aged. For example, being able to recognize differences between dementia and depression is critical for solid assessments. Further, it is essential that social workers are familiar with policies that affect seniors. Practitioners not well versed in policies, service delivery, and resources for seniors are putting their clients at a disadvantage.

Scharlach and colleagues (2000) point out that the field of social work will be challenged because of the shortage of gerontological social workers, the lack of gerontological competence, negative attitudes toward older adults, inadequate social work curriculum in aging, lack of gerontological expertise among social work faculty, a cut-back in federal resources to train social workers in aging, and a lack of compensation for aging positions. Given this disturbing lack of preparation in the field of social work amidst the rising trend of elderly citizens and non-citizens, social work education must begin to increase the numbers of social work professionals who are competent to work with older adults and lead research in this national trend.

Researchers have identified several components necessary for preparing social work students including enhancing gerontology content (Lubben, Damron-Rodriguez, & Beck, 1992; Scharlach et al., 2000), training faculty (Kropf, Schneider, & Stahlman, 1993; Scharlach et al., 2000), building student interest in this area (Kosberg & Kaufman, 2002; Gorelik, Damron-Rodriguez, Funderburk, & Solomon, 2000; Scharlach et al., 2000), evaluative research (Scharlach et al., 2000), and improving prospects of vocational success in the field of aging (Peterson, 1990). Based on the findings of previous studies, it seemed the next logical step at the University of Georgia School of Social Work was to assess how to transform the learning experiences and strengthen the competence of both students and faculty via incorporation of aging content.

METHOD

In this study both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used. In the first phase of the study Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) students were asked to complete a brief survey evaluating gerontological content from their foundation social work courses. There were several reasons for conducting this survey. First, surveying first year students allowed the researchers to capture those who may not have sought out gerontological knowledge and therefore may not have noticed if it was lacking in their studies. Secondly, as current students had recently taken the foundation courses, they had a fresher perspective on what was currently happening within the school, as opposed to what may have happened in years past. Finally, the initial survey served as a baseline for the future evaluation of the gerontological content inclusion in the school.

In the second phase of the study key informants of the School of Social Work were asked to participate in focus group meetings. The purpose of this phase of the study was to explore what specific subject matter, skills, and material were needed to increase the aging content within the foundation curriculum.

Data Collection

A sample of first year MSW and BSW students were asked to voluntarily complete the questionnaire in their research classes. Second year students were excluded because the survey was only inquiring about the foundation year courses. Second year students might not have accurate recall of their experiences in foundation courses taken a year before. The instrument asked for

demographic information including age, gender, race, year in the program, status in the program (part time or full time), and desired area of future employment. No self-identifying information such as name or contact information was required. The BSW and MSW students were then asked to report how much geriatric content was included in their foundation courses (e.g., Human Behavior in the Social Environment, Policy, and Practice).

Results

A total of 96 surveys were completed out of a possible 107. Sixty-three of the students were in the MSW program and 33 of the students were in the BSW program. The mean age of the students who completed the survey was 26 years old ($SD = 6.8$). The youngest student was 21 years old and the oldest student was 75 years old. Of 10 male students only five completed the survey. Eighty-four percent of the students identified themselves as Caucasian, 10% as African American, 2% as Asian, 3% as Hispanic, and 1% as other.

The students answered eight questions about their experiences with aging issues in their classes. Table 1 illustrates how frequently aging content was the focus in foundation courses based on students' experiences in those classes.

TABLE 1. Geriatric Content in Social Work Courses as Reported by BSW (n = 33) and MSW (n = 63) Students

Course	Not discussed	Discussed very little	Discussed as much as other topics	**Most discussed topic**
BSW				
Human Behavior in the Social Environment	30%	67%	3%	**0%**
Research	52%	33%	12%	**3%**
Policy	6%	58%	33%	**3%**
Direct Practice	21%	52%	21%	**6%**
MSW				
Human Behavior in the Social Environment	5%	63%	30%	**2%**
Research				
Policy	32%	56%	13%	**0%**
Direct Practice	**50%**	**29%**	**9%**	**12%**

Overwhelmingly students reported that aging content was lacking across all foundation classes.

Qualitative Phase

Based on the results of the survey the researchers moved forward with exploring what specific aging and lifespan content should be included within the foundation courses, with the goal to increase students' exposure and awareness of the geriatric population. Information was also being sought about the types of resources needed to prepare students for working with older adults and which resources might be useful for faculty to use in their classes. Research questions included (1) what are the essential practice skills social workers need to acquire to work with older adults? (2) how can the curriculum be enhanced to address the social needs of older adults? and (3) in what way can the UGA School of Social Work participate in serving the needs of older adults in the community?

METHOD

Subjects

A critical component in considering how to change the curriculum in the School of Social Work was the inclusion of key informants in the process. For any proposed change to be successful it is important to recognize that all constituencies must support the idea of increasing the aging knowledge base of the school. By including representatives from both within the school and outside in the community, the direction can be more reflective of what changes are needed at the school from the perspective of all invested parties.

Participants in this study included students, faculty, field instructors, social work alumni, professionals from local aging agencies, and older adults from the community. The students were recruited from one BSW, one MSW, and one MSW part-time class. Community representatives included administrators from local senior centers, home health agencies, hospitals, and resources centers, School of Social Work alumni, and older adults who have an affiliation with the local senior center. The participants from the community were given an honorarium for their participation, but students were not.

Data Collection

Eight focus groups were conducted and facilitated by the researchers in classrooms and conference rooms. Each focus group had eight to twelve

participants, with the exception of one group of 22 part-time students. Faculty and student group participants were first given a brief description of the project before being asked to participate. Those who volunteered to participate signed a consent form and received a copy of the questions to be discussed during the focus group. The researchers facilitated the semi-structured focus group meetings with the written questions guiding the open discussion among participants. The focus group meetings each lasted approximately one and a half to two hours. This process was also used with the community focus groups, except that participants were also asked to introduce themselves and the organizations represented.

The focus group questionnaire consisted of six questions covering the areas of practice knowledge and skills for working with older adults, as well as community strategies for improving services to this population. The questions can be found in Table 2.

Sufficient time was allocated to each question to allow participants to become immersed in the discussion and to think through responses. Through this method, a level of saturation was met as participants built off of each other's comments, confirming emerging ideas and perspectives until comments became repetitious. After the group progressed through the written questions, researchers asked participants if there were areas not addressed that pertained to the study as a means of obtaining any additional information that the questions may not have captured.

Responses were recorded for each focus group by use of microphones, tape recorders, and hand-written notes. Recorded data were transcribed. Hand-written notes were documented inside the transcribed reports.

TABLE 2. Interview Questions for Key Informant Focus Groups

1) When considering the expansion of aging content as a priority in the foundation curriculum at the University of Georgia School of Social Work, what are important themes and ideas that must be included?
2) What are the essential practice skills social workers need to acquire to work with older adults?
3) What knowledge of policies, regulations, and programs for older adults living in Northeast Georgia are necessary for social workers to have to be effective when working with this population?
4) What information is critical for social workers to know about developing service plans that address the needs of older adults and their families?
5) What are some strategies the School of Social Work can develop to address the fragmentation and barriers within the aging service delivery system in Northeast Georgia?
6) As CSWE/SAGE-SW have identified integenerational approaches as a priority to addressing the needs and strengths of older adults, their families and loved ones, how can the School of Social Work utilize the community to accomplish this goal?

Data Analysis

Transcribed data were analyzed for each focus group and across all focus groups to delineate major categories of response types. After major categories were found for each focus group, these categories were then compared across all focus group. Those categories that were found over two or more focus groups were reported as major categories in this study's findings. Emerging themes inside these categories were also identified and reported.

Findings

During data analysis, three major categories were identified: resources, curriculum content, and community partnerships. The resources category contained responses that pertained to the materials needed to facilitate the process of increasing aging content in the current social work curriculum. The themes for this category were faculty materials, student funding, and practicum placements.

RESOURCES

Faculty Materials. Respondents reported that existing faculty has had little preparation in teaching in depth aging topics. Content regarding older adults are the last chapters in textbooks and therefore are generally covered at the end of the semester. Faculty without expertise in the area often find themselves using guest speakers, either gerontologists or older adults from the community. A major theme that came from the groups was the need of faculty for need support in preparing their course plans to incorporate aging content. Faculty without a research interest in gerontology felt that they were at a great disadvantage when preparing lectures and discussions in this area. Specific requests included packages of classroom reading materials, video recommendations and activities that would facilitate discussions among students. Also, speakers and media presentations that would engage students in the dynamics of the older adult lifestyle are important. In addition, faculty reported needing assignments and classroom techniques in delivering the material using interesting methods.

Faculty members responded:

> Since I started teaching, when I hear from students what they wanted to do and who they want to work with, they are not interested in working with the aging population…And how do we present the material in a way that will interest students and not really scare them?

> Somebody should analyze if there are certain (aging) chapters, or can be such coursework and the idea of having modules to be able to make sure we are integrating it in would be very helpful.

Students pointed to other resource possibilities:

> In working with older adults there's a couple of things that we need to learn how to do and one of them is to give out…mini mental status and then there's an Alzheimer's assessment. And I know, I'm aware that we can't learn this in the classroom but even show a video or something just to give us some kind of idea of how these assessments are done and what they involve; assessments for dementia and a few of the tests that we are going to need to know how to do.

> I think that certain professors like _____ brought in the Council on Aging to talk to our class…the little bit I learned, it, it, has me wanting to know more about that population because I mean, like he said, it's inevitable we are going to be that population…And I would like to know more about that, um…but yeah, I think the professor has to be comfortable with it first.

A frequent concern regarding available teaching material about aging was the focus tended to be on disease, disability, and death. Participants felt that students are only exposed to the negative consequences of aging and therefore see it as a depressing time. Limited attention is paid to healthy and active aging. One older adult commented:

> Old age is not a disease. You need to get rid of the stereotypes. Older people are sexually active. Students should have a mandatory assignment of reading an article about sexuality and the older adult. Older adults are thriving people. (community participant)

Student Funding. Another resource identified was funding for students as an incentive for them to learn and participate more in the aging field. Respondents expressed that financial incentives have generally sparked interests in other neglected fields like child welfare and substance abuse. As funding in aging placements is limited, potential students are drawn to other areas of interest. With funded placements in agencies servicing older adults, it is likely that students will begin to recognize this field as a viable career option. Participants pointed out:

> … the only reason there are so many students involved in child welfare right now is we're paying their tuition; … money is a great motivator… reward people for doing it. (Faculty member)

And think of that as a connection [to] the first job that they get out of graduating from the BSW, MSW program. It might set their career for the rest of their lives. So, perhaps the notion of, of perhaps getting some stipend money to attract them into the aging areas. (Faculty member)

Practicum Placements. Focus group respondents reported a need for better promotion of existing practicum placements to students, as well as improved selection of students for community placements. The experience has been that placements for working with older adults are often turned down or selected last because of students' disinterest in working with this population. Also, there is at times a mismatch between the student selected and the placement because of the student's discomfort, lack of knowledge, and inexperience in working with older adults. Or, the problem may rest in the practicum supervisor having to invest an extended amount of time orientating and training the student on basic intervention methods because of the student's lack of practice readiness with this population.

… Students have a great concern about what to say to the clients. They become too focused in what they have to say rather than listening to the clients… (Service provider)

Exposure/Contact. Personal contact with older adults was a priority for many of the groups. The general feeling was that students who have living grandparents are more comfortable around older adults. Getting students connected with older people in the community may increase their interest in this population. Some tips on how to do this included guest panels, life reviews with seniors from local agencies, and site visits of local facilities.

Curriculum Content

Biophysical/Pharmaceutical. There was great concern among the student, faculty, and agency groups that students are not familiar with commonly prescribed medications for seniors. Students were concerned that without this knowledge they would have difficulty with licensing exams and securing positions in health care facilities. One graduate student commented,

I think it might be helpful to know what they (clients) are taking and what kind of symptoms they are going through, especially if they are taking pills and if they are having some type of reactions to the medications…

Another student commented on the different medications that the older adults in her agency were prescribed and expressed her frustration about not knowing what the medications were for.

> Some (clients) are on 15 medications where I work…It's incredible.… you wonder how you even talk to them because you do not know whether what they are exhibiting (behaviors) is due to the medications or due to some problem that they are having. You have no clue.

Ageism. Understanding discrimination against seniors and how it impacts their quality of life was reported by all groups as essential information for future social workers to receive. The faculty was honest about their own misconceptions about aging. In addition, the importance of acknowledging cultural and gender differences among older adults was noted. Making assumptions that all people over 65 are alike discounts unique cultural experiences that contribute to how a person functions as an older adult. As one older adult commented,

> Need to get rid of stereotypes about being older.
> More people rust out than wear out.

Intergenerational Family Support. There was concern in all of the groups that by separating older adults from other content areas, there is a lack of awareness that older people are a vital part of families. How families are defined needs to be broad and inclusive. In addition, recommendations were made to include curricular content on alternative family lifestyles, such as grandparents raising grandchildren, intergenerational households, gay/lesbian families, and single parents families.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Service Learning Projects. A common theme in the groups was the lack of exposure to aging agency settings. Unless a student's field placement was at an organization that served older adults, there was very little opportunity to visit such agencies. One recommendation was to incorporate service learning projects in aging agencies into foundation courses. Service learning connects life experiences with scholastic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility. Creating partnerships between the school and area aging agencies would be a means of building linkages within the community. The agency representatives who participated in the focus group reported a willingness to have students come and volunteer at their agencies for service learning projects.

Incorporating activities and assignments in foundation courses where students are expected to contribute their time would provide additional exposure to work opportunities and local aging resources.

DISCUSSION

Developing Curriculum: Considerations

From the results of this study, it is clear that increasing aging content in the BSW and MSW curricula is essential for preparing effective and competent social work practitioners. At the time of the survey it was evident that students perceived that there was very little content focused on older adults in the social work foundation curricula. The greatest concern noted in the focus group discussions was the need to ensure that students in the social work programs are exposed to content on aging. In addition, the exposure must be adequately incorporated in generalist theoretical paradigms and infused in practice skills classes. Further, classes on community development and policy analysis must incorporate the issues relevant to the elderly, such as housing options, social security, and Medicaid/Medicare procedures, for students to learn effective intervention strategies in working with older clients and their families.

Students can also gain exposure to members of this demographic by the in-class pedagogical use of elder speakers, personal kinship assignments, service learning projects and examination of later adulthood stages earlier in the life cycle presentations. Training materials for educators should be developed to provide innovative methods to include aging content in subject area lectures. Web-based course modules would also increase the likelihood of instructors including aging material in their course preparation. Faculty buy-in is critical to the success of the infusion of aging and lifespan content so materials must be designed with faculty in mind.

Community agencies and representatives would like to see practicum students and graduated professionals come into their agency settings with practical knowledge and skills that enhance interventions with elderly populations. The social work curriculum must prepare students for competency in filling out patient chart paperwork, common pharmacology usage, interpersonal communication and assessment with elderly clients. In addition, students must overcome fears of working with older people and become confident and comfortable in agency settings with these clients. Students need to acquire more hands-on skills both in the classroom and in their agencies.

Finally, students and faculty must be aware of and dispel common misconceptions and stereotypes about the aging population. They must recognize that all elderly citizens do not age exactly alike. Therefore, assessment of life situations (e.g., physical health, income, sufficiency, sexual orientation and activity, mental health, subjective well-being) must be conducted on a case-by-case basis. Students should also be sensitive to the impact of ageism, policy decisions, and family relationships on the emotional and social health of an aging client.

For Schools of Social Work to successfully integrate aging content throughout the curriculum it is essential that all of the stakeholders have a voice in how the knowledge and skills are transferred to students. Just as older adults are diverse, so are Schools of Social Work. Each organization has its own culture and structure. Having buy-in from the constituents of the school increases the likelihood that products developed to infuse aging content across the curriculum will be utilized and sustainable. It is also essential to remember that change is a slow process. Not all of the stakeholders will immediately embrace transformation of the curriculum. Regardless of the resistance to change, it is imperative that Schools of Social Work ensure that future professionals are prepared to meet the needs of society's aging population.

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