

A History of the KU Gerontology Center

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Gerontology, as the study of aging, is far from being a modern fascination. Observations about life change and longevity have been recorded across all of history. Classical and biblical sources abound with descriptions of long life spans as well as explanations for such good fortune. But it was not until longevity was “democratized” in the twentieth century that gerontology and geriatrics (the health care of older people) were formally organized as scientific and professional specialty fields.

Gerontology’s appearance in higher education, typically as an interdisciplinary endeavor, accelerated across the 1960s and 1970s, propelled by three developments: rising scholarly interests among faculty; increased student demand for instruction in age-related topics; and the availability of federal research and training funds from the new National Institute on Aging, created in 1975, and the Administration on Aging. The latter agency administered the Older Americans Act of 1965 which directed discretionary funds to higher education for the purpose of building knowledge, developing model programs, and training personnel for service in the field of aging (Achenbaum, 1995). This federal support had a catalytic effect on the development of interdisciplinary gerontology centers on U.S. campuses, including the University of Kansas, where a Gerontology Center was initiated in 1977. Nearing its thirtieth anniversary, the KU Gerontology Center hews to a constant set of objectives. The purpose of the Gerontology Center is to design, sponsor, and maintain programs of research, education, and service that address changes in structure, behavior, and function over the course of life. The Gerontology Center promotes aging-related activities within established departments; develops and sustains externally funded programs of research and training; encourages interdisciplinary collaboration among University faculty and staff interested in the study of aging; and assists professionals in the State of Kansas in meeting the needs of its aging citizens.

Reading three decades of documents pertinent to gerontology at KU, one often encounters a demographic rationale for promoting age-related research and training specifically in Kansas. Kansas is one of a tier of Midwestern states with a proportion of persons aged 65 and over that is higher than the national average. That was true in 1977 and it remains true today. Between 1977 and 2002, the population of the state increased by 16%, but the population of older Kansans increased by 22%. In 38 of the state’s 105 counties, one in five persons is aged 65 or older (Landon Center on Aging, 2002). Although these demographic arguments support the significance of gerontology as field of study and potential application, they are but a partial rationale. Even absent such numbers, inquiry into aging in all its dimensions is worthwhile because the passage from birth to death is a common feature of all life and fundamental to human culture. How and why aging proceeds are enduring questions with more contemporary relevance than ever.

The following organizational history focuses on the Gerontology Center. However, as will also

be noted, age-related research, education, and training was proceeding across and within many sectors of the University.

Early Years

The Center came into existence in September 1977, partly at the suggestion of the KU Chancellor and partly to meet the interests of faculty in such disciplines as Psychology, Sociology, Social Welfare, and American Studies. Supported by a state appropriation to the University budget specifically for that purpose, this Center was established as a free-standing unit reporting to the Vice Chancellor for Research, Graduate Studies, and Public Service. Walter (Hob) Crockett, Professor of Psychology and of Speech, Communication and Human Relations, was named the first Director and, until 1990, served longest in that position. Ron Harper and Brenda Crawley also had terms as Director. Consistent with the national pattern, early organizational support came from center and training grants of the federal Administration on Aging.

In the first years of the Gerontology Center, few faculty members were prepared to engage in research and teaching on problems of aging. Consequently, the Center instituted two programs to encourage such interest: (1) grants of aid to help faculty members attend courses and workshops that would bring them up to date on aging-related developments in their disciplines, and (2) small research grants, awarded on a competitive basis, to provide seed money for faculty research into gerontological topics. Beyond this, graduate and undergraduate stipends were provided to stimulate student interest in the study of aging. In addition, funds were committed to help develop interdepartmental training programs.

As a research organization, the Center had funded projects on such topics as attitudes toward aging, geriatric psycholinguistics, long-term care and its financing, and the needs of Native American elders. A bimonthly national newsletter for professionals assisting family caregivers, Parent Care, was produced out of the Center. Launched by an AoA grant and later sustained by subscriptions, it reported research summaries, model programs, policy, and resources. There was collaboration with Kansas State University in the training of service providers. Another initiative provided gerontological training for faculty of American Indian colleges and other technical assistance to those institutions. From 1985 to 1990, the Center hosted the Midwest Council for Social Research on Aging, an inter-university training program of the National Institute on Aging. This consortium of Midwestern universities coordinated training in social gerontology for pre- and postdoctoral fellows. MCSRA eventually placed more than 100 alumni in teaching and administrative positions around the U.S. Regionally, the Gerontology Center provided service or technical assistance to such entities as the Kansas Department on Aging, offices on aging in Douglas and Johnson Counties, and the Topeka Veterans Administration. Throughout this period the Center had informal ties to KU's Bureau of Child Research, the KU Medical Center's Long-Term Care Gerontology Center, and its successor, the Center on Aging.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Gerontology Center coordinated a Graduate Concentration in Gerontology on the Lawrence campus for graduate students enrolled in any master's or doctoral

level program at the university. The course of study included a proseminar, core gerontology courses, electives, and practicum or field placement. The Concentration was designed to prepare students to apply their specialized knowledge of the social, psychological, demographic, and biomedical aspects of aging to their own professional disciplines. [SEP:SEP]The story of the Gerontology Center next pivoted upon its affiliation with the Institute for Life Span Studies (LSI). The LSI, inaugurated in 1990, arose out of the realization that many of the important problems related to human development required a life-span perspective. The Gerontology Center joined other programs of the large, well-funded Bureau of Child Research (with its special focus on developmental disabilities and language) to complete the LSI. At this point in time, Richard L. Schiefelbusch was Acting Director of Gerontology, and the staff had two doctoral-level research associates, along with Susan Kemper of the Department of Psychology who served as curriculum coordinator. An outside search for a new Director of the Gerontology Center brought Rhonda Montgomery to KU in 1992. This began a period of growth that has continued to the present.

Expansion

The Gerontology Center has experienced remarkable growth since 1990 in the capability of its professional staff, the scope of activities, and the amount of research support. Great credit is due to Rhonda Montgomery who directed the Center from 1992 through 2002. Within the supportive environment of LSI, the program was able to build a strong faculty that eventually consisted of six research scientists whose appointments were shared with academic departments. The Center gained its own space for operations within the Dole Building. A doctoral program in Gerontology, one of only several in the nation, was launched in 1997.

Research activities

Across this period, the Gerontology Center summarized its research foci under four themes that reflected a primary emphasis on social and behavioral research. (The major awards that supported these projects are listed in the source chapter.)

Long-term health care and housing alternatives. Projects:

- Nursing home programs and units that provide special care to persons with Alzheimer's disease; effects of environmental design features on staff and residents of special care unit
- Modular apartment units as an alternative to long-term care
- A legal and policy analysis of statutes that regulate assisted living facilities
- New technologies for controlling wandering
- Evaluation of a treatment program for dementia patients that promotes engagement and independent functioning
- Elders' disposition of possessions when moving to smaller quarters

Communication and aging.

The Gerontology Center has had an internationally recognized program of research in

geriatric psycholinguistics. Projects:

Service utilization. Projects:

- Respite care use by family members who care for impaired elders
- A national study of volunteer home-repair programs
- Evaluation of a large, multi-state service demonstration program for Alzheimer's families; studies of service utilization and client satisfaction
- Use of managed care systems to link caregivers with appropriate, timely services
- Evaluation of a multi-site family education program for caregiver families
- Accessibility issues in consumer cooperatives
- Training for caregivers to reduce the incidence of incontinence
- Sequential decision making for retirement among American workers

Aging among minority populations. Projects:

- Training home-care workers to serve American Indian elders
- Long-term care of Navajo elders
- Cultural differences in the use of nursing homes
- Ethnic differences in elders' evaluation of their quality of life

Education and training

As far back as 1982, Gerontology Center faculty had discussed the formation of a program to offer a doctoral degree in Gerontology. In 1997, the University of Kansas became one of only several universities in the U.S. to do so. This free-standing program within the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is governed by affiliated faculty drawn from various academic units including the Departments of Sociology, Psychology, Human Development, Communications Studies, Occupational Therapy Education, and Health Sport and Exercise Sciences. It is administered through the Gerontology Center. The program in Gerontology is interdisciplinary in structure and is designed to provide a relatively broad, but advanced educational experience. It provides a common focus for all students, yet allows each student to select a course of study most appropriate for his or her career objectives. The university conferred the first Ph.D. in Gerontology in 2001, with two more to date.

In 2002 efforts were initiated to convert the interdisciplinary Graduate Concentration in Gerontology into a Certificate Program in order to place it on a common footing with other interdisciplinary certificate programs at KU. The Certificate was approved in 2004. Between 1992 and 2004, the Gerontology Center hosted a NIA-funded Research Training Program in Communication and Aging, directed by Dr. Susan Kemper. The program supported four pre-doctoral and two post-doctoral students training in gerontology, psycholinguistics, communication studies, and speech pathology. Trainees pursued a program of coursework, research participation, workshops and tutorials under the supervision of faculty members from a variety of academic departments.

The Gerontology Center has had a monthly faculty colloquium series since 1999, and has also co-sponsored occasional conferences and visiting lecturers with other departments and schools of the University.

Service to Profession and Community

Faculty members have had prominent roles in their respective disciplines. Three have recently served on standing study sections to review grant applications at the National Institutes of Health. Two major research journals have been edited out of the Center, *Research on Aging* and *The Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*. Faculty members also raise the national profile of the KU gerontology program by their service on several editorial boards and as officers of service organizations and scientific societies. Center members have collaborated on projects with Kansas State government and with Douglas County.

Other Programs in Aging at the University of Kansas

The portrait of Gerontology at KU is not complete without the acknowledgement of other centers and programs that enrich the university. On the Lawrence campus, these include, the Office of Aging and Long Term Care in the School of Social Welfare; the Elder Law Program of the School of Law; and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. In addition to these units, the vitality of campus interest in aging is also shown by research programs within departments that are led by members of the Center's Associated Faculty.

The Gerontology Center has a complement at the University of Kansas Medical Center in Kansas City, Kansas. The Landon Center on Aging is a state-funded interdisciplinary center that conducts, sponsors and supports the development of educational, clinical, and research programs related to aging. Most Center activities are carried out in partnership with other academic units of the Medical Center campus, including the schools of Allied Health, Medicine, and Nursing, and with affiliated institutions, such as area geriatric care centers, VA Medical Centers in Leavenworth and Kansas City, the Wichita branch of the School of Medicine, the University of Kansas in Lawrence, state agencies, and service organizations.

Conclusion

The Gerontology Center does not conduct all of the research and educational activities in aging at the University of Kansas, but it has always aimed to be a nexus of these efforts. Operating from the supportive environment and infrastructure of the LSI, the Center bridges the research and academic sectors of the University and bridges its campuses. The Center maintains a list of KU faculty members from Lawrence and Kansas City who have research or educational interests in gerontology. This university-wide faculty now numbers over 60 individuals from 11 schools of the University and over 30 departments, programs, and centers.

Looking ahead, there are three developments that will compel further opportunities for the study of aging, basic and applied, in the years ahead. The first is population aging. Although population aging, as noted earlier, is not an exclusive rationale for gerontology, the growing number of older adults in America and worldwide will challenge the sustainability of welfare-

state arrangements that were the context for aging in the later twentieth century. Oncoming cohorts of elders will also present new markets for the economy, and new possibilities for participation in civic and community life. Second, today's elders are facing demands to cope with an increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized world. The simplest practical tasks and transactions can be confusing. Successful encounters between the individual and social structures require new knowledge and skills (literacy about health, finances, legal matters, and technology) in order to negotiate complex systems. Research that sharpens the everyday competencies of older adults can make immediate contributions to practice.

Third, the conceptual frameworks of gerontology are converging with those used in the study of growth and development. Where science once balkanized life into young, middle-aged, and old, scholars now invoke principles that address change in structure, function, and behavior at all stages of life. Explanatory frameworks in biology, psychology, and the social aspects of aging now embrace the entire life span and biographical life course. This is all the more reason why the Gerontology Center's location with the Schiefelbush Institute for Life Span Studies some dozen years ago is proving to have been a fortuitous event.

References

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