

**GERONTOLOGY
PRACTITIONER
CERTIFICATE: NEEDS
ASSESSMENT AND
PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT**

**FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS
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ISSUE OVERVIEW

West Virginia is aging. With the second largest population of older persons in the nation, the Mountain State's older residents face unique challenges in older adulthood, including poverty, obesity, and disability, as well as limited access to medical and social services.¹ The West Virginia Long Term Care Partnership (WVLTCP) Workforce Working Group concluded in its June 2010 report that the state's long-term care workforce will be inadequate to meet the needs of the state's growing number of older adults and their families. This inadequacy stems from a smaller available pool of professionals, who also have less education and training and lower salaries than professionals in many other states.²

On a larger scale, a 2008 Institute of Medicine Report stated, "the health care workforce is too small and unprepared for aging baby boomers." One of its recommendations is to increase and improve dramatically recruitment and training efforts in geriatrics for disciplines such as medicine, nursing, social work and related disciplines.³

Given the challenge of an aging state and an inadequate workforce, the Division of Social Work at West Virginia University and its community partners are committed to developing and providing quality educational experiences to professionals in preparing them to work effectively with the growing number of older West Virginians and their families.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND PROGRESS

To improve the training of professionals (and particularly the long-term care workforce) in the state, the WVU Division of Social Work organized an interdisciplinary workgroup of educators and professionals in the community to attain the following objectives:

1. Evaluate the aging education needs of social workers and related professionals (with associate degrees and higher) in the state.
2. Develop a gerontology practitioner certificate and curriculum.
3. Develop best practices for recruiting and retaining professionals in the field.

The Division began by gathering an interdisciplinary, statewide workgroup. Members represent social work, nursing, counseling and pastoral care in settings such as higher education, private practice, community based-services, home care, hospice, and long-term care. A meeting/conference call was held in October 2010 to begin the development of a survey to assess the aging education needs of social workers and related professionals, as well as inquire about the best ways to attract and retain quality workers in the field. Participants identified key survey questions and devised a sampling and data collection plan. Groups identified for the survey to target included: counselors, nurses, nursing home administrators, pharmacists, social workers, family caregivers, educators and professionals in the faith community.

Of particular interest to the group was exploring the possibility of developing a gerontology practitioner certificate program. Such a program previously existed (possibly developed in 1984) and ran until the mid-1990s. The program was terminated due to low enrollment and lack of departmental interest. In recent years, the Division of Social Work has noticed growing requests for a CEU-based certificate (as compared to its for-credit gerontology certificate program). Workgroup members agreed that the workforce would benefit greatly from the revitalization of such a program. It also was noted that workshops for the certificate could be offered at the Summer Institute on Aging, as well as other geriatric conferences offered around the state. The possibility of offering some workshops online also was very appealing to the group.

Following this meeting, a draft survey was developed and sent to the workgroup for feedback. The survey additionally was disseminated to the WVLTCP Central Advisory Council at its semi-annual meeting in November. The Council was very interested in and supportive of the project. Feedback from both of these groups was incorporated into the final version of the survey (see Appendix). In December, the project description was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at West Virginia University.

Following IRB approval, the survey was built online using a survey development service. Participants were recruited to complete the survey through listservs and email lists provided by the workgroup. An email sent to these lists with a web link to the survey. Findings from the survey will inform plans for the certificate and its curriculum. Survey data related to best practices for recruiting and retaining professionals in the field also

will be disseminated. Development of online modules for the certificate will begin in Spring 2012. Advertisement of and enrollment in the program will commence in Summer 2012.

Results

Respondents

A total of 391 individuals participated in the survey. Percentages will be presented followed by an “n” for each question as not all participants completed every question. The majority of respondents who identified a discipline in terms of education were trained as social workers (46%, n=164), followed by nurses and speech pathologists (each 16%, n=57). Professionals with educational backgrounds in education, counseling, sociology and psychology each represented about 3% of the respondents. Most had earned a bachelors (27%, n=97) or masters (56%, n=195) degree their identified discipline and over 85% also held a professional license. In terms of formal geriatric training, 43% (n=153) identified CE offerings as the source of this training. Thirty-three percent (n=118) indicated that they had no formal training in geriatrics.

Looking at the workplaces of the respondents, almost 60% reported that their primary place of employment serves 50% or more older adult clients, with 26% serving over 90%. Almost 40% worked in health care organizations, including hospice, hospital, nursing home, dialysis, physician office, and home health. Fourteen percent worked for the Department of Social Services. The majority (44%, n=159) described their primary professional role to be direct practice/clinical while 19% (n=71) worked in supervisory or administrative positions. Respondents were very diverse in terms of the number of years they had been employed in the field.

All but 19 of the 55 WV counties were represented in terms of respondents' residences, with many living in Monongalia and Kanawha counties (14% and 15% respectively). All counties in WV were represented in terms of where respondents worked, with Monongalia and Kanawha again being the most prevalent (17% each). The bordering states of KY, MD, PA, and VA were also places of work and residence for respondents.

Interest in the Gerontology Practitioner's Certificate and Training Needs

The primary purpose of the survey was to determine interest in a gerontology practitioner's certificate and the curriculum for such a program. Many questions focused on interest, training needs and current training practices. The majority (77%, n=300) of respondents expressed some interest in enrolling in the certificate program within in the next two years. Increased knowledge and competence, personal satisfaction and growth, as well as meeting CE licensure requirements were the major reasons given for enrolling in the program. A variety of answers were chosen for reasons that respondents would not enroll in the program, with personal cost, the amount of time to complete the certificate and lack of benefit to career being the most noted. Many would consider enrolling if CE events were offered near them or if a portion of the required hours were offered online.

Similarly, 85% (n=312) said that they would be likely or very likely to access certificate training online regardless of whether they enrolled in the program.

Respondents were also asked to provide additional comments regarding the development of a gerontology practitioner's certificate. Many shared their enthusiasm in enrolling in such a program and gaining further knowledge in geriatrics. Meeting the needs of a growing population of older adults appeared to be a strong motivation for this enthusiasm, which is evident in the following comments,

“I would LOVE the opportunity to learn more and pass the information along to as many older residents in our community to help to improve the quality of life for these individuals.”

“A curriculum is very much needed for our workers to understand the population that we are dealing with and the need is urgent.”

“The population of the country is aging so no matter the discipline this is an area in which we all need to become more competent.”

“The population warrants that we improve and expand our skill sets to meet the changing population. We are an aging population in an aging state surrounded by aging states in an aging world. This (and subsequent) aging generation's needs (psycho-emotional) are changing from previous generations. We are living longer and we are living longer with chronic diseases.”

“It is very evident that WV NEEDS to offer this certificate.”

In terms of content, respondents selected a variety of subject areas in which they wanted or needed more training. Cognitive changes and dementia and end of life issues were each selected by almost half of the respondents. Legal issues and health care and social policies and programs were also of great interest to over 30% of respondents. Respondents currently meet their CE needs primarily through employer-based trainings (33%, n=121) and attendance at the NASW-WV annual conference and the Summer Institute on Aging and other Division of Social Work-sponsored workshops (each selected by over 20% of the respondents).

Online training was again indicated as a training method preferred by respondents, with 69% (n=251) noting it as a style that would be most beneficial in attaining CEs. A mixture of lecture and experiential style was also preferred (44%, n=162). Several locations were noted as those to which respondents would be willing to travel for trainings, with Charleston and Morgantown each reflecting the preference of over 39% of respondents. In terms of paying for training, many (32%, n=117) were not sure how much they currently pay for one hour of continuing education, while over 38% believed they paid under \$15 per hour. About the same number of respondents indicated that they would pay under \$15 per hour for an online training.

Retention of Professionals in the Field

An additional objective of the survey was to gain insight into the retention of professionals in the field. When asked what led them to work in the field, many noted a job opportunity (57%, n=201) as well as personal and family experiences (29%, n=101). Open-ended responses to this question indicate that many respondents have always “enjoyed” working with this population. Increased opportunity for career growth as well as increased salary and benefits were all selected by over 40% of respondents. Increased opportunity for leadership in the field was selected by 28% (n=98) of those who worked in the field. Respondents were also invited to list additional factors. Many responses reflected recognition of the growing number of older adults and need to training as well as a genuine love of working in the field,

“I feel as the older population increase there will be an increased demand and opportunity to work with older people. I feel it is important to have people that have had specific training in this area to work with them.”

“Enhancing knowledge, research, theory and social justice of gerontology is critical to continue working in the field.”

“No motivation is needed. I love the population, and I intend to continue working with them, regardless of pay-rate or continuing education”

“I love what I do and just want to keep doing it. Beyond the CE requirement for licensure, I enjoy obtaining new information that will help me and those I serve.”

Conclusions and Limitations

The survey provided a wealth of knowledge for determining the need for a gerontology practitioner’s certificate. Given not only the demographics of the state and region but also the needs of professionals in the field, the program is necessary and perhaps, crucial. The structure and requirements of the previously offered certificate appeared to be supported by the respondents. Elective topics such as those pertaining to dementia as well as normal cognitive aging are particularly needed as is training related to end of life care and aging-related policy and programming.

Providing low-cost as well as web-based opportunities would encourage the majority of professionals to participate in certificate trainings. The Morgantown and Charleston areas may serve as convenient locations for face-to-face trainings for many professionals although other locations should certainly be employed. As many respondents noted attendance at state conferences, offerings at these venues should be reviewed for certificate credit. Approving content for the certificate at state conferences could also serve to increase enrollment at these events.

Retaining professionals to work with a growing population of older adults will continue to be a challenge for WV and surrounding areas. This survey shows professionals who desire and deserve increased salary and benefits as well as opportunities for career growth and to become leaders in the field. Above all, they enjoy working our elders and are committed to competently preparing themselves to better serve this population.

Although acquiring a respectable number of respondents, the survey results have several limitations. To begin, the survey is biased in terms of the disciplines and backgrounds of respondents. Despite enlisting a multidisciplinary workgroup and sending announcements out on a variety of professional listservs, the overwhelming majority of respondents were social workers. While continually reviewing survey responses, extra efforts were made to attract disciplines that were under-represented, including nursing and speech, occupational and physical therapists. This additional recruitment seemed to attract nurses and speech pathologist and audiologists. In comparison, the disciplines of the respondents closely resemble those of the Division of Social Work's for-credit undergraduate and graduate gerontology certificate programs. It is evident through responses to open-ended questions that some of these professionals were currently or had previously been family caregivers.

Another limitation of the survey was the mode of recruitment and delivery. Although online surveys and survey recruitment have become commonplace, this delivery may have eliminated the opinions of a large group of people who are not on listservs or who do not wish to complete an online survey. This bias could be taken into consideration when examining responses to questions regarding providing online trainings as part of the certificate. Also related to recruitment bias, it is likely that individuals who are interested in enrolling in a certificate would be more likely to respond to a survey on the subject.

Despite these limitations, the workgroup believes that developing a gerontology practitioner's certificate is a valuable endeavor to better prepare professionals in the field. This endeavor would not have been possible without the support of the WV Long-term Care Partnership and the workgroup would like to express its sincere appreciation. As expressed best by one of the survey respondents,

“These words by Lao-tzu say it best: "Deal with it before it happens. Set things in order before there is confusion." :-) It is very evident that WV NEEDS to offer this certificate.”

REFERENCES

1. Wu, B. Aging in West Virginia: Findings from the 2000 Census. Retrieved from: http://www.hsc.wvu.edu/coa/publications/Wu/download_aging2.asp
2. WVLTP Workforce Working Group (2010). Workforce Working Group: Final report and recommendations. Retrieved from: <http://www.wvltpartnership.org/workforce.htm>.
3. Institute of Medicine (2008). *Retooling for an aging America: Building the health care workforce*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

APPENDIX

**GERONTOLOGY PRACTITIONER CERTIFICATE
NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY**

GERONTOLOGY PRACTITIONER CERTIFICATE NEEDS ASSESSMENT (ONLINE)

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

The WVU Division of Social Work and its community partners are conducting a survey to obtain information to use in a needs assessment for the possible creation of a Gerontology Practitioner Certificate. The certificate would be interdisciplinary and would be attained through the completion of an approved program of continuing education credits. The WVU Division of Social Work would grant a certificate at the completion of the program requirements. A similar certificate program was once offered by the WVU Center on Aging, but was discontinued due to low enrollment. However, the WVU Division of Social Work and its partners have noticed increased interest in this field.

The results of this survey and feasibility study may be used to establish curriculum for a renewed Gerontology Practitioner Certificate Program. Your answers to the survey would help us determine the program curriculum. If offered, a new Gerontology Practitioner Certificate Program would provide continuing education credits to social service professionals & related disciplines in West Virginia and the surrounding area.

The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes. Your responses will remain completely anonymous and will only be reviewed in aggregated form.

The survey will be open through (date). Please fill out the following survey as completely as possible and only complete it once. Please share the link to the survey with others who may also be interested in gerontology/geriatrics training. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact Kristina Hash in the WVU Division of Social Work at kmhash@mail.wvu.edu or (304) 293-8807.

Please click on the link below or cut and paste the link into your browser to begin.

(link to survey)

Thank you in advance for your participation.

This assessment is funded by the WV Long-term Care Partnership (<http://www.wvltpartnership.org>).