



Seniors Study Seniors: More Undergrads Major in Old Age

With U.S. Population Aging, Colleges Train Students for Careers With the Elderly

By **LIZ BOROD WRIGHT**

Oct. 27, 2005 — - Going to parties, living in the dorms and ... contemplating the burdens of old age?

That is college life for a growing number of students like Emily Keppler, a senior gerontology major at Ithaca College in New York state. She says people are usually surprised she has chosen to pursue a career with the elderly at such a young age -- until she tells them how much she loved working as a dietary assistant at a nursing home.

"I knew after I had that job in high school that this was a population I could work with everyday," she says. "I had such fulfillment working with older adults."

After graduation, Keppler hopes to work to make services and programs more accessible to the elderly. This summer, she interned with the Center for Healthy Aging, a nonprofit in Santa Monica, Calif., which does just that.

College Seniors, Studying Senior Citizens

More than 46 colleges across the country allow students to major in gerontology, which is the study of the process of aging as it affects the physical, mental and social aspects of life. Students take courses in everything from medical ethics to psychology and sociology.

At many more schools, undergraduates are minoring or concentrating in gerontology, taking courses on the biological, social, psychological and cultural aspects of aging as well as policy issues and research methods.

An important component of these programs is an internship or doing field work. And many programs, such as the one at Ithaca College, ask students to choose a concentration in areas such as management, recreation/leisure services, health promotion or counseling.

Although college students are just entering adulthood, studying the elderly will put them in position to enter a hot job market.

The number of jobs in gerontology-related fields will increase by more than 36 percent by 2012, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. By 2020, there will be 53.2 million Americans older than age 65 -- forming 15.8 percent of the population -- and 6.5 million of those will be over 85, according to the Census Bureau.

Changing Face of Aging

The first of the baby boom generation will reach age 65 by 2010. They are the ones who will change the face of aging and what it takes to care for the aging.

"We have an aging community, but the baby boomers are not going to be frail," Stepp says. "This is not just going to be a group to take care of, but a group to work with."

Helping the baby boomers navigate the programs and services available to them when they join the ranks of the elderly will be an area of strong job growth, says Lynne Hodgson, who chairs the department of sociology and gerontology at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Conn.

"Our focus is to help the elderly to remain independent and viable in a community setting for as long as possible," she says. "We don't want premature institutionalization."

The baby boomer generation, for whom quality of life has always been important, will expect no less as it ages.

"The field of gerontology itself has shifted from an emphasis on the problems of aging to the promotion of successful aging," says Nancy A. Orel, an assistant professor at the gerontology department at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. "This includes factors that create a healthy, fulfilling life in later adulthood."

"It's important for students enrolled in gerontology to become strong advocates in eradicating ageism within the culture," she says. "Strides have been made to confront other 'isms' -- racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism -- but ageism continues to flourish."

There's No 'CSI: Gerontology'

But despite the need for people with expertise in working with the elderly, the field can be a tough sell.

"The number of colleges offering gerontology programs is increasing, but not by a huge means," says Derek D. Stepp, director of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, a national membership organization of colleges and universities that offer education, training and research programs in the field of aging.

The nation's 90 different gerontology master's programs are in a similar situation, Stepp says. The biggest increase has been in doctoral programs, which have grown from two to nine over the past few years.

"You'd think every school in Florida would have aging programs, but it's not necessarily the case," he added.

In attracting students to a gerontology major, schools must combat "the negative connotation that you're just dealing with sick old people," Stepp says.

"It's very hard to sell to 18-year-olds, very few of them can imagine themselves working in the field of aging," says Hodgson, who chairs the department of sociology and gerontology at Quinnipiac. "It's not on their radar, it's not on the TV screen. There's no 'CSI: Gerontology,' which has brought students to the criminal justice program."

Although it may not seem glamorous, the field of aging offers diverse career choices. In addition to

working at nursing homes and assisted living facilities, graduates of gerontology programs go on to work in nonprofits, government agencies, health care organizations or insurance agencies. Or, they can work in a traditional field such as architecture or investments, and specialize in the needs of the elderly.

But college-age students need a lot of foresight to know that's what they're going to want to do.

From Loving Grandma to Making A Career Out of It

"It takes a student who, at a relatively young age, has had a real attachment to older people," says John Krout, director of the Gerontology Institute at Ithaca College in Ithaca, N.Y.

"It's one thing to love grandma, but it's quite another to know that you want to make a career out of it," he adds.

An attachment to her grandmother and her grandmother's siblings is what inspired Jessica Berman, a junior at Ithaca College, to study gerontology. She's double-majoring in speech-language pathology and audiology, and plans to help seniors with hearing issues.

"My main reason for majoring in gerontology was to be able to incorporate what I love, interacting with and getting to know and help older people, in my future endeavors," she says.

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