

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. In the U.S., of those born in 1900 nearly half died before they were 50 years old. People born today can expect to live beyond their 75th year. In 1900 about one in 25 Americans was over 65; today one in eight is over 65. And the age group growing fastest in our society and in many other countries is the "very old," people aged 85 and over. 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. The relative newness of the field means that there are opportunities for innovative ideas and new programs and products. Many people have started their own businesses, such as coordinating home health care or consulting with businesses and corporations about how to develop services or design products that would attract older consumers.

Multidisciplinary Opportunities:

The varied needs of older persons lead to exciting opportunities for working side by side with professionals from other disciplines. As a service provider, you may be coordinating information from housing agencies, lawyers, transportation providers, nurses, and family counselors. As a health professional, you might serve on a health care team providing hospital care, day care, or home care to older persons. As an educator, you might teach a course on work and retirement to students from several university departments. As a researcher, you might study the relationships between the maintenance of friendship networks and the mental and physical health of 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.

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