

Appendix B

CHAPTER 7

MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMS IN GERONTOLOGY

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In 1985-86, 21 programs offered a master's degree in gerontology (Peterson, Douglass, et al., 1987). In 1990, a survey identified 40 master's degree programs (Rich, 1990). In 1992, 81 programs identified themselves as offering this degree (Peterson, Wendt, & Douglass, 1994). The master's degree may be described as being in gerontology, aging studies, or human development, or it may have other qualifiers seen as appropriate by the academic institution. The degree is usually designated as a Master of Arts or a Master of Science.

Master's degrees that focus on health gerontology, long-term care, nursing home administration, or gerontological nursing may be designated as master's degrees in public health, health services administration, or nursing (e.g., Geriatric Nurse Practitioner). Some Master of Arts and Master of Science programs also offer a specialization or track in health gerontology, long-term care, or gerontological social work or nursing. The commonality in the degrees is determined by the core of educational offerings in gerontology, not by degree title. The focus of this chapter is on those programs that are similar in requirements to master's degree in gerontology programs.

Description of Credential

The master's degree in gerontology may be either a Master of Arts or a Master of Science. Generally, the Master of Arts implies a greater focus on liberal arts education and the Master of Science places a greater emphasis on the occupational or research aspects of the degree. Institutions should be sensitive to what the degree is called and to its implications for both additional higher education and work in the community. Some institutions offer both degrees.

Every institution that offers a master's degree hopes to operate, in part, in a national arena with respect to potential students and job opportunities for graduates, but the fact is that, with the number of existing programs and the addition of new ones, each degree program will become more dependent on a local market. Analysis of the local, regional, and national market will help to establish justification for development of programs with appropriate specializations or emphases.

The master's degree in gerontology is a multidisciplinary degree intended to have both depth and breadth to a greater extent than the graduate certificate or credentials at lower levels. More emphasis may be placed on theory and both basic and applied research. Some would argue that gerontology master's degree programs are more career oriented to higher levels of administration, service delivery, teaching, or research than are graduate-level certificate programs.

Some master's-level programs other than those designated

as being in gerontology or aging studies title their degrees to reflect specific emphases, such as long-term care, and the content of the core courses in these programs may be similar to that of M.S. or M.A. in gerontology degree programs. The depth of treatment of each topic in the curriculum will not be identical across all master's-level programs, given the fact that specializations offered by some programs fill a large portion of curriculum time. Therefore, student competencies for each program should be carefully planned and communicated to potential students and employers.

Students in master's programs should be involved in the broader field of gerontology from the beginning of their course of study by actively participating in the student sections of national, regional, and state professional organizations in gerontology. This involvement can play an important role in the students' development, and it can not only provide an opportunity to gain a better understanding of gerontological theory, research, and practice, but also create networks of colleagues to assist in information exchange, including employment opportunities.

Curriculum

Most institutions of higher education today require a minimum of 30 semester hours for a master's degree with a range of 30 to 60 hours. This usually translates into a two-year academic program. Although programs are expected to meet at least the minimum number of credits (30 semester hours) required for graduate programs across the country, some gerontology specializations may well extend the graduate program past the average expected number of credit hours. The national mean for required core courses is 21 credit hours, slightly over two-thirds of the minimum required total hours. The rest of the requirements are in elective gerontology credits, averaging 6 hours, and in non-gerontology credits ranging from 3 to 24 hours. Field placements average approximately 6 credit hours.

Gerontology Requirements

Required core competency should be provided in the following broad areas as the topics apply to aging: 1) psychosocial basis of behavior—including sociology, psychology, economics, and political science (4-8 hours); 2) biological basis of aging—including biology, physiology, nutrition, and health education (4-8 hours); 3) research methodology and statistics (4-8 hours); 4) other relevant areas—including human development, public policy, family relations, administration, death and dying, and other gerontology/special topics (4-8 hours); and 5) practicum—a semester of full-time experience (6-12 hours).

Non-Gerontology Requirements

Non-gerontology requirements most often relate to special-

izations and may not be mandatory for all students in a program. Specializations usually require additional credit hours in other academic areas—for example, management, budgeting, or public policy. Some of the credit hours may be determined by state licensure or certification requirements.

Practicum

A practicum consistent with student and program goals is usually required for an equivalent of one semester and normally 6 to 12 hours of credit. The practicum may be extended, based on the specific objectives of the placement. For example, a long-term care practicum may require up to a full year of experience. Students are expected to have developed good technical skills and comprehensive knowledge in aging before placement. Minimum requirements for field work should include an appropriate gerontological field setting for a learning experience, supervisors from both the university and the field setting, and regular evaluations of the student's performance and the appropriateness of the placement.

For students who lack work experience, full-time placement may be the minimum time necessary for introducing them to a work experience in the field. For more experienced students who have extensive backgrounds in gerontology or human services, part-time placements in settings that differ from their previous work environments may be adequate. The number of hours and focus of each practicum will vary from program to program. Current master's degree programs report a range of 120 to 1,200 clock hours as a requirement for the practicum. The 120 clock hour figure represents a minimum for students in a research program. Practicum requirements will vary with the research, clinical, administrative, or service focus of the program.

Waiver of practicum requirements for those students currently working in aging and having extensive experience may be permitted. In most cases, a research paper or its equivalent, plus additional coursework, could substitute for the practicum. Completing a new project within the context of a student's current job—such as a program evaluation, development of a manual for service delivery, or development of a community resource guide—could meet the requirement. A formal contract between the parties is recommended.

Specializations/Tracks

Considering the wide range of tasks to be accomplished in the practice of gerontology, master's degree programs will increasingly need to develop concentrations or specialty tracks that are linked directly to jobs, research tracks that prepare students for doctoral-level programs, or both. Specializations should be developed where faculty support, institutional and community resources, and commitment are present.

Examples of tracks or specializations include the following.

- 1) Long-term care administration tracks may require courses in finance, economics, organizational theory, public policy, and medical law. These tracks lead to jobs in the health care field, long-term care, retirement housing, and health organizations, in particular.
- 2) Administrative tracks may require training in planning, organization, coordination, implementation, reporting,

and budgeting for aging programs. These tracks lead to jobs in the public sector, such as area agencies on aging and state units on aging, and in the private sector.

- 3) Human services tracks may require a core comprising a variety of concentrations, including group work or counseling methods, and lead to jobs in family services, welfare, or health delivery systems.
- 4) Adult education tracks are designed for students interested in teaching careers in gerontology with a concentration on curriculum development, in-service training, and the unique needs of the older learner.
- 5) Mental health tracks deal with courses in assessment, counseling, information and referral, and the organization of mental health services, preparing students for work in mental health agencies.
- 6) Research tracks are designed for students who intend to pursue a doctorate in gerontology or some other discipline with an aging specialty.

Each track should have an advisor who is familiar with all cognate area courses and who would be in a position to advise on course substitutions or waivers. This individual would evaluate the specialization and recommend substantive change if courses need to be added or deleted.

Thesis Requirement

The thesis requirement is most relevant for master's students in gerontology who intend to continue their education for doctoral study in a related discipline or in one of the emerging doctoral programs in gerontology. In some institutions, students are given a choice of an internship or thesis, or they must meet both requirements. The thesis requirement is expected to meet research standards of methodological rigor and to result in a defensible and potentially publishable product. For programs having the thesis requirement, there may be additional admissions prerequisites, such as a more substantial emphasis on statistics and research methodology at the undergraduate and beginning graduate level.

Some additional requirements for the master's degree may include comprehensive written and oral examinations and presentation of a publishable paper or a special project suitable for publication.

Summary of Master's Degree Requirements*

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| Required courses | |
| Psychosocial cluster | 4-8 credits |
| Biology/physiology/health aspects of aging | 4-8 credits |
| Research and statistics | 4-8 credits |
| Practicum | 6-12 credits |
| Gerontology electives | 6-12 credits |
| (additional hours may be required) | |
| Non-gerontology electives | 0-12 credits |
| (specialization requirements will vary) | |
| Thesis or non-thesis option | 0-6 credits |
| (publishable paper or special project) | |
| Total | 30-60 credits |

*In semester hours. To convert to quarter hours, multiply semester hours by 1.5.

Policy and Planning: Administrative Issues

Although a graduate degree program may function under a variety of institutionally assigned names, such as "program," "department," or "center," the actual position of the program within the administrative hierarchy has significant implications for the autonomy, allocation of resources, and monitoring of the program's activities. In general, it is expected that the gerontology degree program will operate within the same constraints as other graduate degree programs on campus. It should maintain the same relationship to the graduate school and to graduate faculty, and have admissions requirements similar to those of other graduate programs. The administration and advisory committee will have the same expectations for faculty recruitment, promotion, tenure, and other faculty activities typical of graduate-level programs.

Faculty

Program faculty should be credentialed by the graduate school of their university and show significant scholarly involvement in gerontology through publications, presentations, and memberships in appropriate gerontological associations. In addition to a demonstrated background in gerontology, a sufficient number of full-time faculty, usually four to six, should be available to provide the critical number needed for multidisciplinary stimulation, teaching, research, and the continuing development of a gerontological perspective. A full-time director should head the program.

In addition to core faculty members, a graduate degree program will need other faculty members who are not responsible for full programmatic activities but contribute to specialized teaching in areas of expertise not required on a full-time basis. Their teaching experience will reflect a commitment to gerontology as well as to their disciplines, but with lower expectations for academic and professional activity in gerontology.

The master's degree program that has a professional occupation focus will also require another group of part-time faculty composed of community practitioners and other specialists who provide applied experience, particularly in areas such as mental health and long-term care.

Articulation

Admission requirements for a master's degree in gerontol-

ogy program must, of necessity, be consistent with the general admissions requirements of the university or college in which the program is housed. These usually include various combinations of the following: 1) a satisfactory undergraduate grade point average, 2) suitable scores on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and/or the Miller Analogies Test, 3) relevant work experience, 4) previous educational experience, 5) interviews, 6) letters of recommendation, and 7) statements by candidates.

Although information on the actions being taken by master's degree programs in gerontology to establish consensus concerning suitable undergraduate preparation is lacking, traditional academic departments usually accept the bachelor's degree in their discipline as a prerequisite for graduate study without further consideration. Some departments, such as social work, may recognize the B.S.W., waive certain requirements in order for students to meet advanced standing, and expand the electives available to them. Courses completed at the undergraduate level in gerontology generally would not serve as a substitute for graduate-level gerontology courses. An exception would be courses listed as undergraduate-/graduate-level courses. These usually require a student enrolled for graduate credit to do additional work. The undergraduate student would need to submit evidence of graduate-level work completed. To set any particular pattern that should be followed by graduate gerontology programs in their evaluation of undergraduate degree programs is not, however, appropriate at this time.

Conclusion

The master's programs that offer a degree in gerontology may have specializations or tracks attached to the degree. These specializations may be confused with a master's degree that focuses specifically on the subject matter contained in the specialization—for example, a master's degree in gerontology with a specialization in long-term care as compared to a master's degree in long-term care. It is recognized that the differences between these two degrees may be a matter of emphasis rather than substance.

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