

Year-long Freshman Course on Frontiers in Human Aging: Biomedical, Social, and Policy Perspectives

at the University of California, Los Angeles



SUMMARY

Target Audience

All entering undergraduate freshmen

Purpose

To introduce students to aging from a multidisciplinary perspective; to introduce them to career opportunities in gerontology and geriatrics; and to train doctoral teaching fellows

Program

A year-long course comprised of lectures, small-group seminars, and hands-on experience in clinical settings

History

The course began in 2000

Operating Costs

Approximately \$175,000 annually, including faculty release time and stipends for teaching fellows

Outcomes

Growth in the number of undergraduates introduced to the field of aging, increasing the possibilities for their entering careers in geriatrics/gerontology; 25 participating doctoral teaching fellows have gone on to faculty positions in the field of aging

Available Materials

Syllabus, course description and materials

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Program Overview

The phenomenal increase in life expectancy has made aging a major issue that UCLA recognizes as deserving attention in the general education (GE) of undergraduates. The year-long *Frontiers in Human Aging* course is one of the innovative “clusters” UCLA has created to focus on “compelling, complex phenomena.” Rather than presenting aging as a distinct specialty area, the cluster approach makes aging an intrinsic part of the undergraduate general curriculum, not only an elective. It presents an alternative model of gerontological and geriatric education to help students view the lifelong process of aging from psychological, sociological, and policy perspectives.

The goals of the *Frontiers in Human Aging* course are to involve students in a stimulating multidisciplinary exploration of the challenging and timely topic of aging and to introduce them to career opportunities in geriatrics and gerontology.

The UCLA Multicampus Program in Geriatric Medicine and Gerontology (MPGMG) seized the opportunity to introduce aging to undergraduates when it submitted a proposal in 1999 to the College of Letters and Science to add a course on aging to the Freshman “cluster” series. The innovative *Frontiers in Human Aging: Biomedical, Social, and Policy Perspectives* cluster, open to all entering freshmen, began in 2000 with 80 students. It now averages 180 freshman students from a variety of majors. Approximately 1,040 students have completed the cluster, which has the lowest drop-rate of any cluster. This is an indication that freshmen students are indeed interested in the topic of aging.



Program Operations

The General Education (GE) Cluster Program aims to:

- increase understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of major complex phenomena
- strengthen writing and oral communication skills
- develop critical, interpretive, and analytical skills from information in the media and scientific literature.

Specific learning objectives of the *Frontiers in Aging* program are to:

- illustrate the interdisciplinary relationship between the biological foundation of aging and psychological and social constructs, and the policy implications of these phenomena
- gain understanding of the science of gerontology and geriatrics and the evolving knowledge base
- explore diversity in human aging across the life course
- become sensitized to principles of successful and intergenerational aging
- appreciate continuity of aging over the life span within a socio-historical context
- view aging within various cultures through literature, art, and the media
- facilitate “hands-on” and virtual learning experiences in aging
- introduce viable career opportunities in gerontology and geriatrics.

A learner-centered approach relates aging to a young student body through a truly interdisciplinary approach across campus schools and departments.

During Fall and Winter quarters, students attend two lectures weekly for the presentation of key concepts and content. These lectures are linked to weekly two-hour small-group discussion sections led by teaching fellows, where the course material is examined in depth and integrated with various types of written assignments to enhance writing skills.

Highlights of the course include:

- an elder-interview project
- film review to link class content with the popular media
- structured debates on timely controversial topics
- a career panel to provide students with the opportunity to explore the multitude of career paths that are linked to the aging population.

During the Winter quarter, students complete 20 hours of structured “Service Learning” at various organizations that serve the ethnically-diverse older Los Angeles community. Examples include a “Cyber-Cafe” for seniors and an intergenerational day care center.

A broad spectrum of small-group seminars are offered in the Spring quarter, allowing close interaction among students and faculty. The culminating student project is a library research paper on a topic of their choice

Staffing Requirements

Staffing requirements include three faculty, four teaching fellows, a Service Learning Coordinator, and an additional seminar leader each year. The teaching fellows are doctoral students from the departments of the teaching faculty and provide half-time support for the full academic year.

Program Costs and Funding Sources

The College of Letters and Science (“the College”) provides approximately \$175,000 annually, covering student materials, faculty release time, and stipends for the teaching fellows. A special fund was established to cover the purchase of curricular materials and learning aids for students. The University provides direct support and incentives for faculty to encourage their participation in the cluster program. The Vice Chancellor of the College negotiated “release time” (equal to one course) with the dean or chair of each cluster faculty’s department. The teaching fellows receive additional reimbursement and



enhanced learning opportunities for their own preparation as future faculty members. The College provides other campus resources, which include consultation with a designated member of the English Department to help develop skills in teaching writing within the clusters, and librarians to train students and teaching teams in information literacy skills.

Process and Outcomes Data

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This course has dramatically increased the number of undergraduates introduced to the field of aging and thus has increased the possibilities for their entering careers in geriatrics and gerontology. In addition, 25 doctoral teaching fellows have been trained in this innovative, interdisciplinary method of teaching and have now gone on to faculty positions in the field of aging.

In 2002-2003, the UCLA cluster administrative team, in collaboration with cluster faculty and members of the Office of Undergraduate Evaluation and Research, prepared a Self-Review Report of the entire Freshman Cluster Program from 1998-2003 (see *Available Materials*). The results are based on a year-end survey of students, interviews with participating faculty, and focus groups with teaching fellows.

Implementation Lessons

- The College initiated the development of clusters in different topics; the geriatrics/gerontology program suggested to the Vice Provost that one be in aging. It is recommended that geriatric medicine and gerontology programs look for and initiate opportunities to link with colleges in order to provide broad aging education

within general education. The idea was presented to the appropriate people, and then a proposal was tailored to fit their needs, since they were already moving in interdisciplinary ways.

Available Materials

Tool/Resources

- Fall 2007 Syllabus, Course Description, and Aims & Objectives
- Winter 2007 Syllabus

Websites

- Link to additional course materials: www.sscnet.ucla.edu/07F/ge80a-1/
- Library Research Homepage (references, how to write an aging-related research paper) www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/ge/cluster80/index.htm

For More Information

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This document is part of a compilation of approaches to geriatrics recruitment, career development, and programmatic expansion, based on the work of the John A. Hartford Foundation "Centers of Excellence in Geriatric Medicine and Training." For more information, visit www.afar.org/recruitment or www.jhartfound.org.

