

Program Performance Review 2024
Aging Studies Program
California State University, Fullerton

External Review Report
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Reviewers

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this program assessment as external reviewers. This report reviews the performance of the Cal State Fullerton Aging Studies Program, which we visited on Monday 12 February. During our visit, we met with the Program Coordinator, the Administrative Services Coordinator, faculty, and students. In addition, we met with the Dean and Associate Dean for Student Affairs in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.



Aging Studies (AGST) is an exemplary program that provides students with a solid understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by an aging population. The program has an outstanding group of dedicated faculty members, led by its long-time Coordinator, Professor Laura Zettel-Watson.

Our report is divided into three sections. First, we highlight the strengths of the program, including a multi-disciplinary curriculum that achieves best practice standards in the field, a focus on applied training, course and mentorship contributions by dedicated faculty from multiple units across campus, strong organizational management and student support, and innovative efforts to achieve the program mission. Second, we identify challenges faced by Aging Studies, including low enrollment in Aging Studies programs, pressures faced by faculty, institutional barriers that affect recruitment of new students, and limited resources for outreach, promotion, and program development. We conclude with six recommendations addressing programmatic and institutional changes.

Strengths

The prevailing theme of our external review was the multitude of strengths that characterize the Aging Studies program. These include a comprehensive multi-disciplinary curriculum that meets best practice standards in the field, a strong focus on applied training and class-to-community integration, a dedicated and passionate faculty from multiple disciplines at the university, strong organizational management and student support, and an innovative mindset with regards to curriculum and training to accomplish the program mission of producing outstanding gerontologists and professionals with aging expertise to address the needs of our aging society. In addition to MSG and Aging Studies/Aging Sciences certificate students, the reach the Aging Studies program has on general education (GE) courses are vital in a time when the need for knowledge and awareness in aging are essential. These GE courses benefit the university and its students as stand-alone courses, but they also can be utilized to develop interest in the growing profession of gerontology.

Curriculum

Aging Studies has one terminal degree program, the Master of Science in Gerontology (MSG) and two undergraduate minors, the Minor in Aging Studies and the Aging Science Minor. The MSG program is commended for a core curriculum that provides education and applied training in core domains of biopsychosocial processes, public policy, research methods, including their application in program evaluation, and application in professional fields of aging. Students can further specialize through elective coursework in human services, psychology, public health, sociology, management and marketing, kinesiology, and other disciplines.

A focus on applied training through community internships (MSG, Minor in Aging Studies) or research internships (Aging Science Minor) is a strength of the curriculum of all three programs. The classroom-to-community approach is further strengthened with strong integration of the curriculum and programs with on-campus institutions, including the Osher Lifelong Institute (OLLI) and the **Rose Center for Gerontology**. The applied focus within the MSG is likely a key contributor to the program's successful placement of graduates into professional employment.

The Aging Studies Minor is designated as a Program of Merit by the Academy (formerly Association) for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE), which is the premier academic organization in Gerontology. The Program of Merit designation is AGHE's highest curriculum commendation. The required and elective curriculum of the MSG and minor programs also meet [AGHE's core competencies](#) for undergraduate and graduate education. The program's GE offerings are a benefit to the university in educating its students to meet current workforce demands.

Faculty

A key strength of the Aging Studies program is the involvement of faculty from multiple disciplines across campus including Psychology, Human Services, Public Health, Sociology, Kinesiology, and Business. The engagement of faculty from these diverse disciplines provides a true multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary training experience for undergraduate and graduate students. Although we note that one limitation of the program is a lack of faculty members with a home in Aging Studies, we were nonetheless impressed with faculty commitment to the mission and needs of the Aging Studies program. The facilitation of faculty engagement in the

program from multiple departments and colleges also speaks to the perceived value of the Aging Studies program across campus.

Organizational Management

We were very impressed with the strong organizational management of the Aging Studies Program. The program is directed by a Program Coordinator and supported by a part-time Program Advisor, a part-time Administrative Support Coordinator, and a part-time Grad Assistant. This management team meets *weekly* to coordinate program activities and develop strategies to meet program goals. Discussions with the management team revealed an inspiring level of dedication and effort expended in pursuit of the mission and needs of the minors and MSG program. It was clear that the success of these programs is due in large part to the passion and commitment of its faculty and staff leaders, especially long-serving Program Coordinator, Dr. Zettel-Watson, and interim Coordinators over the last decade, Drs. Cherry and Horn-Mallers, and Program Advisor Wong.

Faculty also provide support through service on the Gerontology Program Council (GPC) and as Affiliated Faculty. GPC members meet multiple times throughout the year to coordinate the program and all GPC members must serve on at least one committee (Curriculum and Assessment, Admissions, Awards and Scholarships, Events, or Marketing). This level of service contribution of faculty is especially impressive given that all have service obligations in their home departments across campus.

Student Support

Another clear strength of the program is the level of advising support provided to minor and MSG students. The program structures advising support through course release effort for Karen Wong and support for a Grad Assistant to also assist in advising. Dr. Horn-Mallers and Ms. Wong also serve as faculty advisors for the Sigma Phi Omega honor society in aging studies/gerontology, which provides professional development and community building opportunities. The undergraduate students we met provided strong testimonials to the role of the minor programs in strengthening their feeling of belonging and connection to campus, as well as to a professional field of study and practice.

Other student support strengths include internship and career development support, as well as financial assistance. Students receive personalized assistance in the selection and development of internships at the undergraduate and graduate level through internship courses in the curriculum and through the mentorship of Program Advisor Wong who teaches the internship course. A notable strength of the Aging Studies program which may help it achieve its student recruitment goals in the coming years is that it has the capacity to provide one of the highest levels of student scholarship support across campus. This level of development support has been facilitated by the strong connection of the program and its faculty and alumni with the external community.

Innovation

A strength that is evident throughout the Program Performance Review report is the innovative mindset of program faculty and staff in achieving the program mission and goals. This includes rebranding the original minor from Gerontology to the more encompassing Aging

Studies to broaden the appeal to the undergraduate population, adding a new Aging Science minor with a focus on research training with an aging lens to prepare students for PhD and professional graduate programs, and obtaining a \$1.6 million grant (PIs: Dr. Zettel-Watson and Piazza) from the National Institute on Aging to develop a minority training in aging program and the new minor. The program also made innovative changes in their MSG capstone curriculum that tripled their graduate rate, added a new GE (AGNG 313 California Gold: Aging and Diversity) to better infuse aging into general education and increase undergraduate entrance into their minors, and developed a community support program for older adults, *Project Outreach*, that is staffed by student interns. The program was also instrumental in CSUF gaining recognition as an [Age-Friendly University](#) and being highlighted with other institutions across the globe that promote positive and healthy aging.

Challenges

Low Enrollment

Like many smaller programs at Cal State Fullerton, Aging Studies has faced declining enrollments since the COVID-19 pandemic. According to their Self-Study Report, the number of Aging Studies minors fell from 29 in Spring 2019 to eight in Spring 2023. Enrollment in the MSG program dropped from 22 in Spring 2020 to seven in Spring 2023. No new students entered the MSG program in Fall 2023, though the director expects a return to the regular program enrollment in the Fall 2024 cohort.

While the students we spoke with love their small classes and the individual attention they receive from faculty, the Aging Studies programs require more students in order to survive. In particular, the College requires graduate classes to have a minimum of eight students or risk being canceled. Low enrollment also inhibits the ability of the program to be upgraded to a department and hire faculty.

Institutional Barriers

Given the need for new students, any institutional barriers that limit recruitment should be addressed. In the past, CSUF Graduate Studies has allowed Aging Studies to reach out to graduate applicants rejected by programs such as Counseling, Psychology, and Social Work to see if they would like to apply for the MSG program. However, Graduate Studies is now enforcing a “one shot per cycle” rule that requires rejected applicants to wait a year to apply to a new program. This prevents Aging Studies from recruiting students from a pool of potential applicants who have already shown an interest in graduate studies in an affiliated discipline.

We also learned that the lack of a consistent **contact** in CSUF International Programs has limited the ability of Aging Studies to recruit international students. They usually receive about two international applicants per year.

Faculty

While Aging Studies is supported by an outstanding group of full-time faculty and lecturers, we are concerned about the pressures on faculty to sustain the program. Three faculty-related issues deserve attention.

First, there are no faculty members “housed” in Aging Studies. While the program has 2.0 Full-Time Equivalent Faculty (FTEF), they are based in other programs (e.g. Human Services

and Psychology). In addition to serving the Aging Studies program, they need to fulfill teaching, research, and service responsibilities in their home departments. It is no wonder that faculty consider working for Aging Studies a “labor of love” that requires a considerable commitment. Aging Studies would benefit from being a department with its own faculty members, as is the case with the Department of Gerontology at Sacramento State.

Second, current faculty have insufficient release time to support the program. The Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator each receive 3.0 units of release time (equivalent to one course), as does the lecturer responsible for advising. The demands of running a small program justify 6.0 units of release time for the Coordinator.

Third, Aging Studies needs to find new faculty to sustain the program. We’re concerned about the lack of faculty across the campus focused on aging-related issues. This makes it more challenging to offer Aging Studies classes, increases the strain on existing Aging Studies faculty, and makes it difficult to turn over the program to new faculty.

Resources

While Aging Studies is a well-endowed program, these funds are dedicated to student scholarships. The program needs additional resources to support recruitment, program development, and the promotion of “aging” components in classes across the campus. Students told us that they would like to have more opportunities for hands-on experiences, such as more activities with OLLI members. The program also lacks resources to connect students with outside organizations and fund student travel to conferences.

Recommendations

After meeting with the college's leadership, aging studies coordinator, staff, and faculty, and students it is clear that there is a strong commitment to the aging studies program. The program is innovative and well-connected with other university departments. While the number of majors is currently in a lull, it is congruent with the trends at sister Master's degree programs within the California State University system. The external reviewers note however that even though Aging Studies graduate students may be low, the number of students the program serves via its courses is strong. This demonstrates the importance of an Aging Studies program to inculcate essential learning about older adults and our world's aging population. Within this context, the external reviewers developed seven recommendations for consideration by CSU, Fullerton leadership.

1. **Make an exception to the barrier created by the Office of Graduate Studies which will allow students not accepted to their first program of choice, be advised of the opportunity for the Aging Studies graduate program.** This is widely done at sister campuses in the CSU. The profession of Gerontology is not as widely known as other professional degrees (i.e. psychology, social work, public health) yet it is commonplace that once students learn about the profession of Gerontology, they become interested in it, and see a pathway to employment through their advanced degrees. The university is losing an opportunity to better serve its community and increase student enrollment. Students having to wait a year to reapply have numerous other options to pursue higher education elsewhere. It would seem prudent to capture applicants already interested in CSU, Fullerton.

2. **Increase efforts to recruit international students.** The International Studies office is currently understaffed and so there is a lack of student support for international students which impacts the Aging Studies program by about two students each year.
3. **Institutional support for faculty from colleges across campus.** There were two areas noted here.
 - a. First, the Aging Studies coordinator communicated that pay differentials between colleges make it hard to recruit faculty/lecturers from other colleges. When discussing with Dean Stern, she indicated that this issue has been resolved.
 - b. When departments within the college and campus-wide hire new faculty, experience and knowledge of older adults/an aging society are not included in search criteria. This becomes a two-fold issue in 1) impacts Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice efforts on campus in not having faculty to teach essential information about older adults/working in an aging society and 2) it makes succession planning difficult for current Aging Studies leadership.
4. **Aging Studies/Gerontology Faculty Line** As mentioned in this report, the faculty in the Aging Studies program are passionate and committed to the field of gerontology and serving the national imperative to contribute to the gerontological workforce. There may be a time when faculty assigned to the Aging Studies program want to explore other research and teaching goals. While they did not indicate to us, the external reviewers are concerned that if the coordinator left, the program may not survive. This puts much undue pressure on the coordinator where perhaps even a sabbatical seems impossible.
5. **Consider a “4 +1” MSG degree program.** We encourage the Department, College, and University to think about innovative “4 + 1” MSG degree partnerships that would more fully educate students on the contributions and needs of older adults. Older adults are the largest

growing global population. This growth creates opportunities not previously thought of for expertise in aging (criminal justice, marketing, computer science). Older adults are more active and civically engaged than ever before. They also have the highest rates of disposable income of any demographic. There is a need for many majors at CSU Fullerton to know about aging and the realities of later life.

- 6. Consider certificate programs to increase awareness of Aging Studies and enrollment.** Aging Studies could work with interested programs to create 12-unit certificates. For example, an Aging Studies - Geography certificate could include courses in population geography and Geographic Information Systems. This would build awareness and understanding of gerontology, and could result in new students adding the AGST minor and considering the MSG degree.
- 7. Increase advocacy to include aging/older adults in DEI and Social Justice conversations campus wide.** According to the World Health Organization, the impacts of ageism are similar to the impacts of racism and sexism, yet older adults as a population are typically not included in DEI discussions and planning. By 2040, 1 of every 5 people in the United States will be an older adult. Universities should be responsive to this in the education of their students and increasing this awareness in faculty and leadership.