GSAs Stalwart Policy Pro Looks Back on 20 Years

After more than two decades of collaboration and friendship, this month I finally sat down to interview GSA’s Greg O’Neill, PhD. Greg has had several roles over the years at GSA, including director of public policy and professional affairs, associate editor of the Public Policy & Aging Report, director of the National Academy on an Aging Society, professional affairs analyst, historian, and more.

Suffice it to say, as he comes upon his 20th anniversary at GSA, it is a great time to thank him and get his perspective on how GSA and public policy have evolved. So, thank you Greg; it has been a pleasure to work with, learn from, and grow with you. You bring intelligence, thoughtfulness, and an amazing breadth of knowledge to GSA, and you also happen to be one of the nicest individuals I have ever had the pleasure to know.

Brian: As a foundational figure in GSA’s public policy activities, how have GSA, the Academy, and the aging field changed?

Greg: GSA’s National Academy on an Aging Society was established through a grant from the Administration on Aging, and the goal was that it would be self-sufficient within five years. I was hired for a very specific task — to analyze data from the Health and Retirement Study for a series of information profiles on chronic and disabling conditions among older Americans. Coming directly from grad school with a PhD in sociology with a focus on demography, I had no experience in policy analysis. My role was to crunch the numbers and hand it off to my colleagues to translate my findings into policy-relevant, accessible information. Over time, I learned from observing them how to write for this new audience of thought leaders, policymakers, the press, and the public.

One big change over time is in the landscape of funding for our aging-focused work. In the early days, we relied on big grants from private foundations. These days, working with GSA members, we find ourselves trying to navigate the challenging world of large government grants. We’ve also made an effort to court non-traditional funders in the private sector, including pharmaceutical companies, financial services institutions, and technology businesses. Indeed, I am passionate about the technology sector knowing more about the work that GSA members do, and our members knowing more about the unique opportunities to collaborate with both established and emerging technology companies and start-ups. To that end, in 2009, I started Aging Means Business — an ecosystem of efforts, including pre-conferences, annual meeting symposia, poster sessions, an IAGG conference event, an e-newsletter, and a Twitter feed (agingmeansbiz).

My interest in this area was sparked by my conversations and e-mails with late GSA president Charles “Chuck” Longino from Wake Forest University. I met him in 1995 at my first GSA annual meeting, when I was a graduate student at Duke University. The 1995 meeting was highly unusual in that it took place during a government shutdown and a snowstorm that shut down the East Coast. He took me under his wing, introducing me to leaders in the aging field, and showing me the ropes of how to take full advantage of the conference’s many daytime (and nighttime!) networking opportunities.

Chuck had pioneered the connection between population aging and business. As president of AGHE [GSA’s educational organization, the Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education], he set the theme of its 2003 annual meeting as “AGHE Means Business” — a title that I repurposed later, in his honor. He recognized that the aging community needed to be more open to the business community, especially since that is where many aging students find work.

Another big change over time is the pace at which our work takes place. For example, under grant funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies, I spent more than nine years working on the topic of civic engagement. Under the auspices of the academy, I carried out a range of activities and created products, including town hall meetings in connection with the White House Conference on Aging (WHCoA), several articles and book chapters, an edited volume of GSA articles (“Civic Engagement in an Older America”), and an ideas summit in Washington, DC. In fact, you and I served as track coordinators.

We’ve been part of several successful Hill briefings in the past, such as those on senior entrepreneurship and civic engagement. However, under Patricia D’Antonio’s leadership, we have been more active in proposing topics related to our key projects, connecting our members so that they can testify, and drafting press releases, letters to the editor, and op-eds to highlight our members’ research on these timely issues (as we recently did on over-the-counter hearing aids). GSA also has increased the number of coalitions it supports through sign-on letters and events. These actions are giving our membership a stronger voice on the Hill and a central presence in key policy discussions.
One thing that has been consistent is the quality of GSA's journals. The academy's *Public Policy & Aging Report* joined GSA's other journals as part of the Oxford University Press in 2014. Another is our continued focus on curating high-quality content in the aging field, such as our new From Policy to Practice reports and our bi-monthly policy and aging e-newsletter, which is available free to members. Finally, this work would have not been possible without the key contributions of GSA members — their support has been unwavering over GSA's history.

**Brian:** You have worked with and befriended hundreds of GSA members over your 20 years. Who are your mentors and what are the most exciting discoveries or revelations you have seen?

**Greg:** Although I had not planned to focus on aging when I entered graduate school, my mentors at Duke University — Linda George, George Myers, Debby Gold, George Maddox — had a different plan for me! Best of all, after I left Duke I remained connected to them because GSA was their professional “home” in aging. Carol Schutz and Linda Harootyan made me feel “at home” at GSA from day one — and I’m very grateful to have had their guidance and friendship over the years. Joseph Coughlin, Mary Furlong, David Lindeman, Janice Wassel, and Rick Moody have been wonderful partners as we have explored together how to create a more fruitful relationship between the gerontological and business communities. It has been an honor and a pleasure to have worked with Rob Hudson, *Public Policy & Aging Report* editor and chief, over the past 18 years (72 issues!). He has offered me a master class in public policy and aging. Finally, as the staff person to the Social Research, Policy, and Practice Section and GSA’s Public Policy Committee, I’ve worked with a host of talented GSA members — too numerous to name — who have volunteered their time and energy.

**Brian:** One of the more interesting dilemmas that I see for GSA is that we have members who work in every aspect of aging policy, so it would be nearly impossible to weigh in on all those policies and related programs on Capitol Hill. How do you sort through this?

**Greg:** That has been an interesting challenge over the years. On one hand, our strength is in the knowledge, experience, and diversity of our members. On the other hand, we do not have the resources to weigh in on every issue on which our members have expertise. So, we have — with the guidance of GSA leadership, the Public Policy Committee, and you — developed ways to play meaningful roles on various aging policy issues through work on coalitions, but most importantly by broadly sharing the work of our members with policy makers and Hill staff. As we say, facts and data matter to good policy makers.

Today, the academy is reshaping itself. It has begun strategic planning to refine and reinvigorate its mission, activities, and governance. You conducted a survey last year that has informed us what people who work on Capitol Hill think about GSA and its academy. It has forced us to ask some probing questions: What does a think tank do in today's world? What kinds of communications are most effective with today's audiences? If we were to start out new today, what would we do differently? Today, we use a broad range of social media communications to amplify our message. Although social media metrics provide us with a gauge of our impact, we still struggle to assess how influential our total sum of efforts has been. We attend Hill briefings in support of our colleagues’ causes, and vice versa. It is challenging to assign an ROI to such efforts — as it is equally challenging to interpret what 1,000 “Likes” on a post about our Hill activity equates to in terms of impact/influence or how it may affect the ultimate outcomes of changing viewpoints and passing legislation. I’m really excited to be rethinking the Academy’s future — and I’d like to thank James Appleby for creating a new culture of innovation at GSA.

**Brian:** We have seen many GSA members testify before Congress and regulatory agencies. How do we motivate members to do more in terms of using their knowledge and research to educate policy makers?

**Greg:** I saw a lot of value in the work GSA did in training the Hartford Scholars and the Change AGEnts. We need to continue to incorporate those kinds of opportunities in our annual meetings and also let GSA members inspire their peers by sharing the great work many are doing in education and advocacy. In this issue, readers will see that another GSA member, Pamela Teaster, was up on the Hill recently. We also need to share widely information on the good work of members of Congress who are trying to fill the shoes of Claude Pepper and John Heinz because we need to show our appreciation for their efforts.

Looking back, I’m very proud of some of the Capitol Hill briefings and events that we organized, such as the Senate Aging Committee 50th anniversary celebration; the Civic Engagement breakfast briefing; and the Serve America Act passage reception. However, I’m also a lot more aware of the fact that there’s a lot that happens in the Capitol that is just for show. That is, one learns that events like hearings or the introduction of new proposed legislation mean very little if they are not followed by implementation — particularly funding! Brian — you’ve been a great resource for helping me to understand the mechanics and ins and outs of how things really work on the Hill. Your guidance has been especially valuable since, as a Canadian, the government I learned about in high school included members of Parliament seated in a House of Commons.

**Brian:** Now I understand why you keep suggesting we send letters to the prime minister. Greg, it has been a pleasure. Thanks again for your time and all you have done for GSA.