Finding Your Gerontology Career Niche: An original essay by the author of 101 Careers in Aging

by C. Joanne Grabinski, MA, MA, ABD, FAGHE

The growth of the elderly population in the United States should signal increasing opportunities for professionals with gerontology expertise and experience. Certainly, the current drive to expand health care holds the promise of new positions and new types of programs and services for older Americans. With budget cuts and downsizing in all sectors of the economy, however, the tendency to think in gloom and doom terms masks the potential for development of creative ways to continue serving the needs of our older citizens. While there are many existing and emerging new opportunities for gerontological professionals, it is not always easy to find one’s niche in the field of aging.

Defining Terms

To better understand these expanding opportunities for gerontological professionals, it is helpful first to define and clarify some basic concepts. Gerontology is most commonly defined as a field of study that encompasses biology, psychology and sociology of aging as its core disciplines. This is not, however, to ignore the importance of other disciplines (such as economics, history, philosophy, religion, and anthropology) that are now recognized as relevant to the study of aging. Gerontology also is the “umbrella” term that covers a wide array of subfields, including geriatrics, which refers to the biomedical aspects of aging. Academic programs in an array of professions, such as social work, interior design, and an array of allied health fields (e.g., nursing; nutrition and dietetics; occupational and physical therapy; communication disorders/audiology and speech pathology; pharmacy; therapeutic recreation) also include gerontology coursework and open doors to careers paths that are gerontology-related.

In terms of professional practice directly with and/or on behalf of older persons, it is more common to refer to the field of aging and many of the existing jobs in this field are positions within the formal aging network; this network includes the Administration on Aging (AoA) at the federal level, State Units on Aging (SUAs) such as the Virginia Department for the Aging, Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), and local level county or city agencies (such as county or city commissions, bureaus or departments of aging) funded through the Older Americans Act (OAA), state budgets, and other relevant legislative initiatives at the federal and state level—for example, Retired Senior Volunteer Programs (RSVP) and the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA).

Beyond the Aging Network

The aging network is only one sector of our society in which career positions exist for professionals in the field of aging. Opportunities exist for persons with gerontological expertise and experience in an array of related professional fields, including clinical psychology; social work and applied sociology; medicine and nursing; allied health fields like health and long-term care administration, dietetics, ophthalmology, audiology and speech pathology, pharmacy, and occupational, physical and recreational therapy; interior design and architecture; and elder law.

Emerging positions are now visible in fields such as library science; intergenerational studies; adult/older adult education; bibliotherapy and art, music, dance and drama therapy; human factors engineering, gerontechnology and ergonomics; transportation; media and communications; conflict resolution and family mediation; and business fields (e.g., marketing,
banking, and advertising)—to name just a few. New subfields, such as financial gerontology, spiritual/religious gerontology, and family gerontology, are gaining visibility and recognition. Especially exciting to me is the growth in entrepreneurial gerontology, which allows professionals with gerontological backgrounds to assess, identify, develop and offer programs and services to meet previously unmet needs and interest of elders in unique ways.

Although most of these career opportunities are in direct service with older adults and/or those who provide personal, family, and social support for elders, many career paths also exist for professionals to work indirectly on behalf of older persons or older populations. There are three broad pathways: research, policy, and education. Research is one major pathway, most frequently practiced by faculty members in academic settings or through affiliation with a university, free-standing, government or corporate research center. Policy is another major pathway for individuals interested in patient/client advocacy (e.g., as an ombudsperson or grass-roots advocate), policy development (e.g., as a legislator or legislative aide), policy analysis (e.g., as a policy specialist for an organization that advocates for older persons), or policy enforcement (e.g., as an elder law attorney, law enforcement officer who specializes in elder abuse, regulation reviewer). For the past 30 years or so, education has been a career pathway for those who want to teach about and conduct research related to aging in higher education (e.g., at community colleges, four year colleges, universities, professional schools), but it more recently has been emerging as a pathway through K-12 aging education programs and intergenerational programs/services.

**Categories of Work**

Professional education and training programs specific to aging (e.g., certificate and degree programs at community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, professional schools, and postdoctoral fellowships) now make it possible to categorize paraprofessionals and professionals who work with and/or on behalf of older persons into three categories according to the schema I proposed in my chapter on “Careers in Aging” in the Encyclopedia of Gerontology: Age, Aging and the Aged, 2nd ed. (2007, Elsevier) and in my book, 101 Careers in Gerontology (2007, Springer).

*Gerontologists* have completed a full undergraduate or graduate degree in gerontology or aging studies. If the primary focus of their professional practice is with and/or on behalf of older adults, a gerontologist also can be a gerontological specialist. Not all gerontological specialists, however, are gerontologists.

This schema is the beginning of what I see as an emerging career ladder in the field of aging. Keep in mind, however, that this career ladder (and related terminology) is not yet formally recognized across the field. Further development of such a career ladder, with clear role definitions and preparatory educational paths, would, I believe, lead to appropriate recognition of the field, expand career opportunities for gerontological specialists and gerontologists, offer greater status for these professionals, and increase the likelihood that competent and knowledgeable professionals are available to meet the needs of older adults. Additionally, it would provide the basis for licensure and other types of credentialing designed to protect clients from those who claim they are “gerontologists” without having legitimate claim to such a title.
On the cover of my book on careers in gerontology, the cover designer posed the question, “Is Aging the Field for You?” An equally important question is, “If I think Aging is the field for me, how do I find my niche within the field?” Here is my advice:

1) Assess your specific interests in gerontology by thinking through questions like: What gerontology-related disciplines and/or professions intrigue you the most? Would you prefer to work in direct service to elders or indirectly on their behalf? Which level of the proposed gerontology career ladder is the best fit for you? Which type of job role do you prefer?

2) Discuss career options with discipline-specific and/or gerontology program, department, or center administrators, faculty members, and students on your campus or a nearby campus.

3) Browse Websites of gerontological/geriatric professional organizations, such as the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), American Geriatric Society (AGS), Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE), American Society on Aging (ASA), National Council on Aging (NCOA) — for career-related information (e.g., AGHE’s Careers in Aging page, GSA-AGHE’s AgeWork, ASA’s Job Search).

4) Also browse Websites of discipline- and profession-specific organizations, such as the American Psychological Association (APA), American Sociological Association (ASA), National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), American Bar Association (ABA), American Dietetics Association (ADA), American Public Health Association (APHA) - to learn about aging-specific organizational units and potential career paths within these fields.

5) Meet, visit with and shadow professionals in specific gerontology-specific or gerontology-related career positions that are of interest to you.

6) Include at least one practicum or internship experience in any certificate or degree programs you complete. Add extra hands on experience with and/or on behalf of elders through volunteer opportunities.

7) Get involved with a local, state, regional, or national organization with an aging/gerontology focus. Many of these professional organizations have student or associate memberships.

8) Attend conferences, seminars and workshops focused on aging that are offered in your locale.

9) Find a gerontology professional to become a career mentor for you. This may or may not be your academic advisor.

Gerontology and the field of aging present a rich array of career path options. We have mentioned only a few here. Enjoy exploring your options and best wishes on your journey to find your specific niche!

C. Joanne Grabinski, MA, MA, ABD, FAGHE, is President/Educator & Consultant with AgeEd in Mt. Pleasant, MI; Lecturer, Gerontology Program, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI; and Lecturer, Human Development: Gerontology, Saint Joseph College, West Hartford, CT. She is an AGHE Fellow. She can be reached at jgrabinski@me.com or (989) 773-3813.