



AGING

gracefully

Binghamton University leads the way in meeting a growing demand for social workers who specialize in geriatrics.



The generation that first rocked out to the Rolling Stones is now rolling toward retirement. By 2030 all of the baby boomers will be 65 or older. And just as they changed previously accepted views of sex, music and work, the baby boomers are going to introduce new ideas about aging.

That makes the graying of America a concern for everyone from travel agents to architects.

Social workers are no exception. The National Institute of Aging estimates that 60,000 to 70,000 specialist social workers will be needed by 2020 to work with older populations, which is a 40 to 50 percent increase from the current number of gerontological practitioners.

Binghamton University is at the vanguard of a movement to address these needs. With new programming and partnerships, the University hopes to help swell the ranks of social workers who specialize in geriatrics, just in time to help the nation cope with an expected tsunami of aging baby boomers in need of social supports.

“Social work looks at the person’s relationship with the environment, and what’s going on that either supports or places obstacles in his or her way,” said Laura Bronstein, chair of the Department of Social Work in Binghamton’s College of Community and Public Affairs.

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Most social workers are drawn to child and family practice, but research has shown that when graduate students are exposed to geriatric clients, as well as given extra support and training related to working with this segment of the population, it motivates them to work in this field.

“This is where the jobs will be because it’s where the clients will be,” Bronstein said. “Whether it’s a school where the grandparents are raising grandchildren, or the aging prison population, social workers are increasingly serving older adults in every institution where they practice.”

Unlike other master of social work programs, in which students spend each of their two years of internship in a single field placement, some of Binghamton’s graduate students spend one year in placements at various social service agencies or community organizations.

They spend one day a week at each of two different agencies during the academic year, and research has shown that this type of exposure nurtures the future pool of geriatric specialists if the placements involve elderly clients. “It’s as much developing interest as expertise in working with older adults,” Bronstein said.

The New York Academy of Medicine’s Social Work Leadership Institute provided this model of rotational field placements, and the Hartford Partnership Program for Aging Education awarded Binghamton University’s social work program a \$75,000 grant over three years. This money and matching

funds raised by the department provides \$5,000 annual stipends plus tuition to graduate students. It also pays for a part-time supervisor with a master of social work degree to work with students who are placed in agencies that do not have such a professional on staff.

“Students report that field placement is the most important part of their education, so this money is a wonderful incentive for students to explore geriatric social work,” Bronstein said.

The New York Academy of Medicine started looking at access to health care a decade ago and discovered most people had difficulty navigating the system. Those consumers who were also elderly and/or had chronic illnesses found it nearly impossible, said Patricia J. Volland, the academy’s senior vice president for strategy and business development.

“We realized there was already a group of professionals — social workers — who could link social service systems to health care, but weren’t trained to do this type of work for that particular population segment,” she added.

The academy’s educational model proposes three unique features that the Binghamton program has adopted:

- It promotes school-community agency partnerships so the education is based on real-world experience.
- It seeks to develop competencies in geriatric care.
- It includes rotational field placements in its practicum component that let students experience the system the way elderly clients do.

“Our career assessment showed that 80 percent of these social work graduates are working in geriatrics,” Volland said.

Starting in September 2007, Sunha Choi, an assistant professor of social work at Binghamton, conducted a year-long assessment of graduate students who were in these rotational geriatric field placements to discover if they were developing more skills and a greater interest in the field.

Students measured their gerontological competencies in four areas: values and ethics; assessment; intervention; and aging services, programs and policies. They completed a self-assessment scale before, midway through and following the academic year. The department also recorded student focus groups answering questions.

In May, the students reported gains in knowledge and experience through the program. In direct contrast to September, they could identify specific areas in which they would like to gain additional knowledge and skills.

One student said, “If you asked me last semester, if I wanted to (work with older adults), I would have said no, not really. But I actually applied to some of the assisted living social work positions. ... There is so much you can do other than just hospice with the elderly.”

Jennifer Marshall, director of field education for the MSW program at Binghamton, noted that through the variety of field placements, graduate students observe firsthand the final stage of human development.



Laura Bronstein

"They learn about the issues that affect different types of elderly people," Marshall said, "and through assessments, determine the appropriate level of service from those social services available in the community."

Heidi Bowne of Binghamton, who received her MSW in 2008, was placed in two Broome County social service agencies: the Council of Churches' Faith in Action Volunteers and the Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment Inc.

"I felt privileged to hear what people said about their lives and the challenges they faced as they aged and how they accommodated them," Bowne said.

For the Council of Churches, Bowne assessed the needs and interests of individuals requesting assistance. This allowed volunteer care providers to be compatibly matched with clients.

She also saw that these volunteers might provide much-needed transport for AVRE clients. The Broome County Office for Aging will have another MSW intern explore how agencies might expand their transportation services.

Bronstein said this sort of insight is exactly what can be gained when social work students have regular interaction with elderly clients.

"Geriatric social work specialists," Bronstein said, "can connect older adults to the community services that will improve their quality of life and provide them with less expensive care. These geriatric social workers will be at the forefront of practice, program development and policy change to support all of us and our caregivers as we age." ■

— Katherine Karlson

BY THE NUMBERS



Nearly one in five U.S. residents is expected to be 65 and older by 2030, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This age group is projected to increase to 88.5 million in 2050, more than doubling the number in 2008.