

Clarence Lang, PhD, Interim Dean
Ben Eggleston, PhD, Associate Dean for Administrative Affairs
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS

Re: Gerontology Program Review

Dear Drs. Lang and Eggleston,

Thank you for the opportunity to review the gerontology program at the University of Kansas. You and your staff provided us with an excellent opportunity to get to know more about the gerontology program and the University of Kansas (KU), and to feel the hospitality of Lawrence. We appreciate the efforts of your office to make us feel welcome, and to arrange for us to speak with all of the key players in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the gerontology program.

As a way of organizing our program review, we have followed the general structure set forth in the charge letter to the committee. Specifically, we have structured our review to provide an overview of the success of the gerontology program. We also provide specific commentary on teaching, research, and aspects of diversity and inclusion.

Overview

The mission of the Gerontology unit is to offer multidisciplinary education in the science of aging and to conduct aging-related research embedded in a life course perspective. The University of Kansas offers the only gerontology degree in the Regents system. KU has an opportunity to build on their positioning as the only state university training leaders and service providers for unprecedentedly large and growing older population. There is a long history of excellence in research, teaching and service in gerontology at KU. Established in 1977, the Gerontology Center was until 1990 a free-standing unit reporting to the Vice Chancellor for Research, Graduate Studies, and Public Service. The Center was primarily a grant-funded research organization which also provided training workshops for service providers. In the mid-1980s the Center became the coordinator of a graduate Concentration in Gerontology (a graduate minor), open to students enrolled in any master's or doctoral program at KU. The concentration evolved to a Gerontology Certificate program in 2004 which ended with the start of the Dual-Title Gerontology PhD program in 2011.

Currently, the gerontology program faculty are exclusively assigned to their "home" department; they affiliate with the gerontology program as a function of their age-related research and teaching portfolio. Dr. Tamara Baker (Professor; Psychology) is the Director of the Gerontology Program, after spending a year as Interim Director. Other faculty include Dr. David Ekerdt (Professor; Sociology, former Director; 2005-2017), Dr. Mary Lee Hummert (Professor; Communication Studies), Dr. Tracey LaPierre (Associate Professor; Sociology), Dr. Amber Watts (Assistant Professor; Psychology), and Dr. Kristi Williams (Professor; Nursing).

Based upon the written materials that were provided to us, as well as the discussions we had with you and program faculty, we have identified a number of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and these are outlined below. As with any strategic SWOT review, the lines between these four categories are sometimes blurry.

Strengths

- One of the key strengths of the gerontology program is the participating faculty and the outstanding history of gerontology at the KU. The program faculty are highly visible researchers who have a true sense of ownership and commitment to the success of the gerontology program. Despite her relative newness in the position, Dr. Baker is clearly a well-respected leader; the program faculty and upper-level administrators have a great deal of well-placed faith in her.
- The gerontology program at KU has great visibility nationally through the leadership positions that faculty hold in the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), the preeminent scientific organization for the study of aging. Dr. Ekerdt serves as President of this society, Dr. Baker is chair-elect of the Behavioral and Social Sciences section of GSA (the largest section of this organization). Dr. Watts was recently elected as a Fellow of the Behavioral and Social Sciences section of GSA and all other gerontology program faculty are Fellows of GSA.
- The dual title Gerontology PhD provides considerable added value and marketability to the disciplinary PhD degrees. The dual-title program was confirmed by various administrators as a “smart route for gerontology”, and a wise decision for doctoral students seeking to enhance their career options.
- The students in this program appear to be very satisfied with the degree choice; they praised the support and mentoring they get from the program faculty. While they wished for more continuity about course offerings to plan their course of study (this point is addressed below), they also expressed appreciation for the value of a self-authored experience of discovery and professional development.
- There appears to be growing interest in gerontology courses. The Interdisciplinary Proseminar (an important cornerstone of the program) routinely enrolls students who are not in the dual-title program. Some students take all of the gerontology classes they can find, but do not formally enroll in the dual-title program. Campus-wide student interest in aging and in gerontology is clearly a strength to be built upon; addressing the barriers to formal enrollment in the program is an opportunity.
- The gerontology program and KU administrators are clearly committed to diversity and inclusion in terms of faculty, students and staff. Dr. Baker is a leader in the field of aging and minority issues.

Weaknesses

- The gerontology program and gerontology center have undergone a number of significant structural changes that have negatively impacted the resources available to the gerontology program. Although Dr. Baker is provided with a stipend, a course release and some funds for an administrative assistant, the infrastructure is underfunded relative to other gerontology centers across the country. The resources invested in gerontology seem similar to a typical academic department, even though gerontology requires significant cross-campus collaboration. Building synergy for a campus-wide community of scholars with robust funding portfolios, and planning and maintaining a cohesive cross-disciplinary curriculum requires additional investment.
- Gerontology program faculty are active in terms of peer-reviewed publications and book chapters, the level of external funding is somewhat low. A lack of external funding negatively impacts the ability to recruit a bigger pool of high-quality PhD students and engage them in active programs of research.
- There are relatively few students in the PhD in Gerontology (n = 1) and the dual title degree program (n = 4 - 5). It was difficult to determine whether this reflected few applicants because this information was combined with Sociology. Although it is unrealistic to expect

very large numbers of students to populate either PhD degree program, the current numbers of students are perilously small.

- There is a lack of clarity regarding the course offerings in aging at KU. The students have been very entrepreneurial when creating their programs of study to complete their degrees. However, it appears that each semester students must comb through course offerings across the campus to identify suitable classes to take. One potential solution would be the use of a common course prefix that would allow students to more easily identify relevant courses and when they are being offered. This would require a minimal administrative change but would need cooperation of the relevant departments.

Opportunities

- The richness of expertise on the Lawrence campus and the University of Kansas Medical Center provides outstanding opportunities to engage students, faculty and the surrounding communities on a variety of topics on aging and gerontology. In the self-study document, Dr. Baker has outlined a well-articulated plan to increase research productivity and community-engaged participatory activities associated with the gerontology program.
- There are additional opportunities to link the dual title degree program to other academic disciplines and research endeavors. For example, the hiring of Dr. Jen in the School of Social Welfare allows for the building of formal research and educational opportunities with this department. Collaborations with (for students and/or faculty) on applied research with CRADO (Center for Aging and Disability Options) seem like a natural opportunity to explore, given the community-engaged focus of some of the gerontology faculty and students.
- Despite the considerable gerontological expertise at KU, opportunities to bring all interested parties together appear to be somewhat limited. For example, sponsoring an external speaker series or research day may allow for existing connections to be strengthened and new collaborations to be built. Other institutions sponsor speaker series that include an on-campus lecture, as well as a less technical presentation to community members. Activities such as these are great ways to engage academic and local communities and can also serve to facilitate development opportunities.
- Dr. Baker and her colleagues implemented a very creative solution to the need for enhanced student-credit-hour production and more stable course offerings for the graduate program by making the Psychology of Aging course a cross-level course for graduate and undergraduate students. This kind of thinking, and an enhanced synergy between graduate and undergraduate curricula, are very promising.

Threats

- One of the most significant threats to the success of the gerontology program is the reliance on other departments to include content that is related to aging. This includes whether courses on aging are offered by each department, as compared other areas of departmental need, and the ability to recruit and hire faculty with an expertise in gerontology. While the support of other departments is a current strength, this model does not allow for the planning and marketing necessary for the continued success of the gerontology program. Incentives for, and formalization of, commitments to gerontology could strengthen the necessary connections. For example, appointment letters that confirm gerontology teaching commitments, and a formal designation as a gerontology program affiliate could heighten the significance of the collaboration.
- The reliance on other departments to offer courses that are relevant to the PhD programs and hire faculty who possess expertise in aging places Dr. Baker in a difficult position to lead the success of the gerontology program.

- The fiscal climate at KU would appear to make it difficult to direct additional resources to the gerontology program. As Director of the gerontology program, Dr. Baker is underfunded which compromises her ability to grow this program. Having an administrative assistant at least half-time to coordinate aging-related activities at KU and assist in media and outreach efforts would enhance the visibility of the program. A dedicated budget for outside speakers and other professional activities for students and staff would help to coalesce efforts in aging. We recognize that additional funding is a common yet often unrealistic recommendation in many program reviews; however, the support necessary for a strong multidisciplinary program that effectively crosses departments and divisions is an important investment decision for university leadership.

Summary

There is considerable enthusiasm about the gerontology program and Dr. Baker's leadership which builds on a long and storied history of gerontological research and teaching at KU. The faculty at KU are enthusiastic, well-respected and nationally visible; they are committed to the success of the gerontology program and promoting success among PhD students. There are numerous opportunities to link with additional faculty and programs to grow the reach of aging at KU. Despite our enthusiasm for the gerontology program and Dr. Baker as its' Director, there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed. Greater coordination is needed in order to ensure that students are aware of what aging courses are being offered, as well as the opportunity to grow faculty with an expertise in aging. Currently, Dr. Baker has no control or input on course offerings and it is expected that departments will emphasize their own hiring needs, rather than building the gerontology program. Finally, additional funding should be directed towards the gerontology program and Dr. Baker as Director. Funding for an administrative assistant, lectures series, and professional development activities for Dr. Baker and gerontology program faculty, will encourage the continued growth and national impact of the program.

At this time of transition, a new round of strategic planning can facilitate necessary decisions to prioritize the most important opportunities and goals for gerontology at KU. Some of the potentially complementary goals mentioned during the site visit include: defining gerontology's niche within KU and within the field of gerontology; balancing student-credit-hour production and graduate program success; and strengthening the unit's research profile and portfolio of externally-funded research.

Respectfully submitted,

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