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WHAT CAN I DO WITH A DOCTORAL DEGREE IN GERONTOLOGY? EXPANDING YOUR OPTIONS

Kara Bottiggi Dassel, Ph.D.,

University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT

Heidi Ewen, Ph.D.,

Miami University of Ohio, Oxford, OH

Dawn Carr, Ph.D.,

Stanford University, Stanford, CA

Lydia Manning, Ph.D.¹,

Duke University, Durham, NC

Corinne Leach, M.P.H., Ph.D., and

American Cancer Society, Atlanta, GA

Kelly Fitzgerald, Ph.D.

University of Zurich, Switzerland & Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY

Abstract

An endless number of career trajectories are possible for gerontologists. With a growing aging population, our skills and areas of expertise are of high value to numerous industries. The purpose of this study is to describe the professional development and career trajectories of alumni of U.S. doctoral gerontology programs obtained through the Gerontology Education Longitudinal Study (GELS). Specifically, we examine how professional identification, doctoral program career preparation, and perception of job prospects impact alumni decisions to pursue “traditional” (i.e., academic) versus “non-traditional” (i.e., non-academic) careers. Results from the GELS revealed a fairly even split in our alumni sample of careers in traditional and non-traditional settings. The decision to pursue a traditional versus non-traditional career was not significantly associated with personal identification, doctoral program career preparation or perception of employment options. These results suggest that the skill set obtained in doctoral gerontology programs is useful and is in demand in a variety of careers; therefore, doctoral programs may want to consider tailoring training to meet students’ future career goals in both academic and non-academic settings.

Keywords

academic gerontology; postgraduate training; career advancement; survey

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In the United States, the first two gerontology doctoral programs were introduced in late 1980s, and six others have emerged since that time. The increasing number of doctoral programs is a testament to the need for scholars who can translate information about aging from a multidisciplinary perspective into a variety of environments. The types of careers held by gerontologists in the United States and abroad are diverse and varied: from leadership in government and not-for-profit agencies, to nursing, public health and the broader academic setting (Haley & Zelinski, 2007). In part to accommodate these varied career paths, gerontology doctoral programs provide individuals with theoretical and methodological foundations for aging research and scholarship using both interdisciplinary (e.g., public health and public policy) and traditional academic disciplinary perspectives (e.g., psychology, sociology, social work, etc.), with emphases varied based on programmatic and individual goals and intentions (Lowenstein, 2004).

Across disciplines, doctoral training programs are generally designed to prepare students for full-time research or academic careers (Golde & Walker, 2006). However, the unique skills, backgrounds, and training of doctoral level programs in gerontology provide alumni with valuable interdisciplinary skills and knowledge that facilitates a wide variety of career options. In this study, we were particularly interested in non-traditional (i.e., non-academic) career options pursued by doctoral gerontology alumni and the implications that this alternate career trajectory has for the field of gerontology and the aging population in general. Such non-traditional options include data analyst and advisory council for governmental agencies (e.g., Area Agencies on Aging), consultants for and advocates of private sector organizations (e.g. Alzheimer's Association), administrators of organizations serving older adults, public health and preventative health professionals, and specialists (i.e. facilitators or "interpreters") in private research organizations.

In summary, the purpose of this paper is to describe how professional identification, career preparation and perception of career prospects are related to traditional versus non-traditional career choices in doctoral gerontology alumni. To answer these questions, we present data from the Gerontology Education Longitudinal Study (GELS). Specifically, the research questions explored in the current study are:

1. Is professional identification as a "gerontologist" related to traditional versus non-traditional career placement?
2. Are perceptions regarding doctoral program career preparation related to traditional versus non-traditional career placement?
3. Are perceptions of career/job prospects related to traditional versus non-traditional career placement?

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The GELS study was created in order to investigate the relationship between doctoral training programs and the implications for the field of gerontology. Data have been collected annually from doctoral students since 2007. Periodic surveys and interviews have been

conducted with faculty of gerontology doctoral programs. In 2011 the GELS was completed by a sample of alumni of doctoral gerontology programs; results from this wave of survey collection are presented in the current study. Additional details regarding the GELS are described elsewhere (Ewen, Carr, & Pycraft, 2012).

Alumni contact information was provided by directors of doctoral gerontology programs and all eligible participants were sent invitations to participate via email that included the link to the electronic survey. The GELS is an IRB approved study and voluntary completion of the survey implies participant consent.

Of the 150 individuals contacted, a total of 65 respondents completed the survey (response rate of 43%). Participants ranged in age from 27 to 62 years with a mean of 44.7 (S.D. = 10.7) years. The majority of respondents were female (80%) and white (85%).

Measures and Analysis

The comprehensive GELS electronic survey is comprised of 149 questions about participants' demographic information, educational backgrounds, and perspectives on doctoral training programs, mentoring experiences, scholarly development, and career placement. Alumni were asked to list all of their places of employment since obtaining their doctoral degree in gerontology. The survey took 30 to 60 minutes to complete.

Participants were categorized as traditional if all of their job placements were in an academic environment (e.g., post-doctoral fellowship, research, teaching, etc.). Participants were categorized as non-traditional if any of their job placements fell outside of the academic setting (e.g., non-profits, healthcare, government, etc.). Chi-square analyses were conducted in SPSS 9.0 to explore group differences in three specific areas: 1) identification as a "gerontologist", 2) perceptions regarding doctoral program career preparation, and 3) perceptions regarding job prospects.

Results

Participant Descriptive Information

The study respondents received their doctoral degrees on average 6.5 years prior to completing the 2011 data wave of the GELS. All respondents reported being currently employed. Of the alumni sample, 40% (n=24) reported that their career plans had changed since the start of their doctoral training. Of those respondents who indicated a career change, the reasons for this transition included the following: change in respective areas of research (18%), deciding not to pursue intensive research career but rather focus on teaching (12%), or transitioning from clinical work to academia (10%).

Results of grouping of alumni into traditional versus non-traditional career paths were fairly even; 46% (n=28) traditional and 54% (n=33) non-traditional. Those traditional alumni most frequently reported being employed at research-intensive universities (31%), "balanced" research/teaching universities (25%), and lastly, teaching-intensive universities (17%). The non-traditional alumni held positions outside of academia and included placement in government agencies, private sector businesses, and research corporations.

Identification as a “Gerontologist”

The majority of respondents agreed with the statement “Today, I consider myself to be a ‘gerontologist’” (n=51, 82%) while the remaining respondents (n=11, 17%) reported disagreement or a neutral response to this survey item. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between alumni who held traditional versus non-traditional careers and their personal identification as a “gerontologist” ($\chi^2=1.88$; $p=.171$). An example of an alumnus who did not identify as a “gerontologist” gave this professional description of him/herself.

“While my graduate training prepared me quite well for work with older adults and caregiver, working as a clinician has provided me with an immeasurable understanding of end-of-life issues, aging, and caregiving that cannot be taught in a classroom.”

Alumni were asked whether their perception of what it means to be a “gerontologist” had changed since they were doctoral students. There was a fairly even split with 42% (n=18) reporting a change while 58% (n=25) reported stability in their perceptions and felt connected to the field of aging. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between traditional and non-traditional careers and change in perception ($\chi^2=.240$; $p=.625$). One alumnus who reported stability in his/her perception of what it means to be a “gerontologist” said,

I believe that as gerontologists we look at the field of aging through a broader lens. Thus, my experiences all fall under the purview of my gerontological beliefs.”

This is in contrast to other alumni who reported a change in perception in the following statements:

“At graduate school the focus was more in research. After graduation I have been serving more as an advocate, and consultant as well as an educator. This has expanded my horizons and I have been able to diversify my interests and serve the aging population in many different ways.”

“I went from thinking that gerontology was like sociology of aging to seeing that it is an emerging interdisciplinary field; A field that does not limit the types of questions we can ask by disciplinary boundaries.”

Perception of Career Preparation in Doctoral Program

Participants were asked to rate how well they thought their respective doctoral program prepared them for their desired careers. The majority of alumni (n=43; 80%) reported satisfaction with their level of career preparation while a smaller group (n=11, 20%) were dissatisfied. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between traditional and non-traditional careers and agreement with the career preparation provided by doctoral programs ($\chi^2=.040$; $p=.841$).

Examination of a sub-set of questions regarding programmatic career preparation revealed that 74% (n=40) agreed that their program prepared them for academic careers while only 41% (n=22) agreed that their program had prepared them for applied jobs (i.e., outside of

academia) in the field of aging. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between traditional and non-traditional careers regards to preparation for academic ($\chi^2=.212$; $p=.645$) or applied settings ($\chi^2=.779$; $p=.377$). Overall, 61% ($n=33$) of respondents agreed that their programs had prepared them to be competitive in the job market. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between traditional and non-traditional careers regards to perception of competitiveness in the job market ($\chi^2=1.39$; $p=.238$).

Perceptions of Career Prospects

Alumni were asked to compare whether they felt that having a doctoral degree in gerontology opposed to a more traditional discipline (e.g., psychology, biology, sociology, etc.) put them at an advantage in the job market. Only 19% ($n=8$) of respondents agreed with the statement that having a gerontology doctorate was an advantage in the job market. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between traditional and non-traditional careers regards their perception of a gerontology degree providing an advantage in the job market ($\chi^2=2.47$; $p=.116$).

In regards to whether doctoral gerontology graduates are less likely to obtain a post-doctoral fellowship, the majority (75%, $n=31$) of respondents disagreed with the statement. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between traditional and non-traditional careers regards their perception ability to obtain a post-doctoral position ($\chi^2=.287$; $p=.592$).

The majority of respondents (88%, $n=36$) agreed with the statement that doctoral gerontology graduates are able to obtain academic jobs in gerontology or aging designated programs. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between traditional and non-traditional careers regards their perception job placement in a gerontology program ($\chi^2=.123$; $p=.726$).

Alumni were asked about their future career goals and the future of gerontology as a field. Among respondents who completed these questions ($n = 42$), the most commonly reported short-term career goals included obtaining funding through grants (64%), obtaining a tenure-track position or tenure (47%), and publishing (30%). Long-term goals of respondents reflected a desire to conduct research that can be translated into evidence-based practice or policy (27%), becoming a full professor (20%), and taking on a mentoring role to younger professionals in the field (20%).

Alumni had varied and overlapping perceptions of the benefits of their gerontology doctoral training for the broader field. The most commonly reported benefits of gerontology included the multidisciplinary nature of gerontology that allows for research to be easily translated to the older adult population (37%), societal level changes (i.e., policy) that directly and indirectly impact the older adult population (20%), and improved quality of life for older adults (14%). The main challenge for the field of gerontology, according to alumni, revolves around the need for gerontology to become a recognized and accepted discipline within the academic setting (65%).

Discussion

Data from the Gerontology Educational Longitudinal Study (GELS) showed that alumni of doctoral gerontology programs aspire for, and find employment in a range of fields - both traditional and non-traditional. Surprisingly, the results of the GELS show a fairly even split between alumni holding positions in academic and non-academic settings, which may indicate on a national level the increasing demand for professionals with gerontological training in community and public sector jobs including government, the non-profit sector, and health care. The GELS data presented here illustrate how students and alumni of gerontology doctoral programs feel about their training. Although historically, particularly in many social science disciplines, doctoral programs were designed to prepare students to go on to academic environments in their respective fields, the GELS data definitively show that despite the relatively large number of current students interested in going down the academic path (see Ewen, Carr, & Reynolds, 2012) many students at one point or another in their career path hold jobs outside of the traditional academic setting.

Identification as a “gerontologist” was not found to significantly differ between those alumni who have traditional versus non-traditional careers. In fact, 82% of respondents agreed with their professional label as a “gerontologist”. These findings suggest that even in both academic and non-academic settings that alumni are embracing the identification as a “gerontologist” rather than discipline specific or professional titles.

In regards to alumni perception of career preparation, there was a considerable discrepancy in reported satisfaction with doctoral program preparation for traditional and non-traditional careers (74% vs. 41%, respectively). These findings suggest that it may be useful for doctoral students to learn about and explore the variety of ways in which they can use their gerontological knowledge post-graduation early in their graduate career so that their academic training and experiences can be tailored to their specific career aspirations. In addition, doctoral programs may wish to consider expanding their career training curriculum to enable graduates to be prepared and competitive in both traditional and nontraditional settings. Formal and informal career preparation opportunities, such as seminars, panels, mentoring, and informational interviewing may empower students to develop more informed plans for their careers.

Of note, only a fifth of respondents reported that they perceived a doctoral degree in gerontology to be advantageous in the job market over discipline-specific doctoral degrees. This perspective may reflect a lack of knowledge regarding potential traditional and non-traditional career options available and/or difficulty obtaining a desired career post-graduation. Doctoral programs should be preparing students with the skill set that allows them to successfully market their doctoral gerontology degree to employers in both traditional and non-traditional arenas.

The findings in this study are limited in their generalizability due to the moderate response rate and the potential bias of all respondents being currently employed. The primary strength of this study is its novelty. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine alumni career trajectories of doctoral gerontology alumni from across the U.S. Future analysis of the

GELS data will include linking participant data from both the student and alumni waves of data collection.

In summary, this study provides a foundation from which to further explore the variety and scope of career opportunities available for doctoral gerontology graduates. By learning about the options available with a doctoral degree in gerontology, students can be more strategic in developing skills and experiences that they need to make critical contributions as gerontologists and programs can use this information in the evaluation and revision of their career preparation curriculum for doctoral students.

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