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Rejuvenating Aging Studies in Academic Libraries

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Introduction

Ten thousand baby boomers (individuals born between 1946 and 1964) are turning 65 today, and about 10,000 more will do so every day for the next 19 years (Pew Research Center, 2010). The number of Americans age 65 or older is projected to be 88.5 million people, more than double the 65 and older cohort in 2010. Consequently, baby boomers will make up most of this growth in our older population (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2011; Vincent and Velkoff, 2010).

This demographic shift will have paramount implications on society (Barrett *et al.*, 2012; Pelham *et al.*, 2012) and has been a major catalyst in the growth of age-related issues portrayed in the media and promotion of academic programs in gerontology (Anderson, 1999; Mercer and Carter, 2012; Wicks and Scarletto, 2005). The growth of the interdisciplinary field of gerontology (also called aging studies) has attracted the attention of many academic disciplines including: economics, engineering, and public policy, not to mention the gerontological researchers and educators found in social work, sociology, psychology, medicine, biology, nursing, human development and family science, and education. In fact, Anderson (1999), Rowles (2010), and Langer and Tirrito (2004), argue that gerontology courses should be incorporated into the general education core, like psychology and sociology have been in the past.

Similar to other interdisciplinary fields such as gender studies and environmental science, support for gerontology presents unique challenges to academic libraries. For example, the lack of a comprehensive current core gerontology resource list to assist librarians with limited knowledge of the sub-areas of this diverse field can be challenging. Collection development and research support for interdisciplinary programs are often handled by several subject librarians under the auspices of larger or more established programs (e.g. sociology, psychology, biology, social work, and nursing). This can be an impediment to having a librarian being assigned as the sole go-to liaison to gerontology (Hodgson, 1992; Holody and Kolb, 2011).

The above factors, in addition to the attention given to reductions in library funding, the application of patron-driven acquisition models, sustainability of ebook resources, and expanded use of grey literature (often non-peer reviewed and not indexed in major bibliographic resources) make it increasingly difficult for libraries to serve as effective hubs for the exchange of information within, and between, disciplines engaged in the study of gerontology. It is imperative that input from faculty continue to be used to inform library planning and development.

This study focuses on the identification of informational materials gerontology faculty currently use for their research and teaching and on the services they receive from librarians. It also provides recommendations for more tailored library services and support for gerontology faculty and other scholars interested in gerontology issues.

Literature Review

Gerontology is the scientific study that focuses on the biopsychosocial aspects of aging and the application of policies, programs, and practices. It encompasses many academic disciplines (generally biology, sociology, psychology, and social work), unlike the medical specialty of geriatrics that is more concerned with the physical health and care of older adults by preventing and treating diseases and disabilities (Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE), 2011) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1 here (centered)

According to the *Digest of Education Statistics*, the number of post-secondary (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral) degrees awarded in gerontology increased by over 50% from 2003 to 2011 (U.S. Department of Education, 2003-2011). A logical extension of this growth is the need for librarians to be prepared to field more gerontology-related reference questions and provide more research consultations. In addition, it is imperative that librarians maintain collections that effectively support gerontology curricula and the interdisciplinary nature of this field.

Results from AGHE surveys demonstrate that core undergraduate and graduate classes in gerontology include a combination of introductory gerontology, biology, psychology, and sociology of aging classes (Gilford and Frank, 2006). This interdisciplinary framework requires course work that provides gerontology content combined with influences from the above disciplines and others (Bass and Ferraro, 2000; Gilford and Frank, 2006; Lesnoff-Caravaglia, 1979). For example, a faculty member teaching a Biology of Aging course may need to synthesize classroom materials from a broad range of disciplinary resources (e.g. nursing, anatomy, physiology, sociology) to cover pertinent information and to customize assignments among gerontology and non-gerontology students.

As with other interdisciplinary fields, few librarians are assigned as the primary liaison to gerontology programs (Lawler *et al.*, 1999), and typically collection development responsibilities are handled by several librarians with little or no specific funding allocated to the discipline (Bolton, 2009; Dobson *et al.*, 1996; Faries, 1996; Jacoby *et al.*, 2002; Post, 1992). This cross-discipline support, while necessary, often runs counter to the traditional academic model "built on disciplinary knowledge domains and departmental structures" (Holley, 2009, p. 2).

Although there is recognition for the need to support the interdisciplinary academic study of gerontology through library services and resources, research on the topic is minimal and fairly dated (Havens, 1988; Maley, 1993; Nusberg, 1997; Rafferty, 1982). One possible reason for the scarcity of publications examining resources is that the literature is scattered throughout several disciplines (Andrews *et al.*, 2010; Jacobs and Frickel, 2009; Lasda Bergman, 2011; Navarro and Lynd, 2005). Lasda Bergman (2011) created a list of the 10 most frequently cited gerontology journals based on a citation analysis of 400 journal articles that appeared in 222 journals. An analysis by Price and Brosi (2006) also identified teaching-related resources for the sub-specialty of family gerontology.

A further review of the literature suggested that gerontology information tailored for academic librarians was limited and was found to be primarily online bibliographies or resources combined with other subject areas in library and information science (LIS) publications (American Library Association (ALA), 2013; Andrews *et al.*, 2010; Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), 2012; Hudson, 2009). On a positive note, a wide array of LIS literature was found on the information needs of older adults (ALA, 2013; McCallips, 2006; Williamson, 2010; Zabel, 1999). This information was primarily generated for librarians employed in public library settings and included resources addressing aging issues (e.g., elder abuse, planning for retirement, and caregiving) (Bensing, 2006; Decker, 2010; Healy, 2011; Kohn, 2004; Mortensen, 2007) and access to Internet classes designed for older adults (Ninkov and Vuksan, 2011).

Methodology

The purpose of this descriptive study was to identify the information-seeking behaviors and the resources, including grey literature, used by faculty teaching in non-clinical graduate-level gerontology programs. A judgement, non-probability sample of participants was contacted in February and March 2013 and asked to complete a web-based survey consisting of 12 forced-choice and open-ended questions. Prior to distribution, five faculty members and professionals associated with gerontology programs pilot tested the survey. The survey was subsequently revised and then uploaded into an online survey management tool.

The population of gerontology faculty members was drawn from institutions listed in the AGHE's *Directory of Educational Programs in Gerontology and Geriatrics* (2009 Ed.) and *Peterson's Graduate Programs in the Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences* (2013 Ed.) Selection criteria included type of degree (master's certificate, master's, or doctorate) offered and academic home of the degree (programs located outside of nursing or medical school settings like social work, psychology, etc.).

A recruitment email describing the purpose of the project, and providing access to the survey, was sent to potential respondents. A follow-up email was sent to non-responders one week after the initial email. Due to concerns about response rates, the authors implemented an additional non-traditional snowball recruitment strategy. In this approach, participants were recruited with the help of librarians selected from the following library electronic discussion lists:

- Social Work Librarians Interest Group SWLIG-L@listserv.utk.edu (50 subscribers);
- Anthropology and Sociology Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries, anss-l@ala.org (568 subscribers);
- Education and Behavioral Sciences Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries, EBSS-L@listserv.unc.edu (766 subscribers); and
- Library Collection Development, COLLDV-L@usc.edu (3300 subscribers).

The recruitment message and link to the survey was sent to individuals participating in these discussion lists asking them to send the information on to faculty members at their institutions who were involved in teaching or research related to gerontology.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze and report the findings. In addition, the relationships between size of the gerontology program (number of students enrolled) and information seeking behaviors and access to resources were also examined.

Results

A total of 60 participants completed the survey with the majority, $n=34$ (57%) representing institutions offering a master's degree. Seventy-five percent ($n=45$) identified their faculty appointment as being a tenured or tenure track position, and approximately half (57%) taught and/or conducted research in programs with fewer than 20 students. Over half of the respondents, 65%, reported the presence of a library point-of-contact person for gerontology. The most frequently identified area of specialization was social work, $n=22$ (37%) (Table I).

Table I here (centered)

Access to Resources for Teaching

The majority of respondents, 63% ($n=38$), indicated that it was "easy" or "very easy" to find teaching materials. Using a forced-choice list of response options with instructions to "check all that apply," respondents identified the strategies they used to identify teaching materials. The most frequently identified strategies were creating their own materials, using materials produced by governmental and/or professional organizations, and utilizing recommendations from colleagues.

Only 23 % ($n=14$) indicated using a librarian at their institution to help them identify teaching materials. Respondents were also provided with an option to identify other strategies. These included electronic discussion lists managed by professional organizations, web-based searches, and ideas gleaned from conferences, journals, and personal experiences (Table II).

Table II here (centered)

Journals Used as Resources for Teaching and Research

Faculty identified journals using a forced-choice “check all that apply” response option. Fifty percent or more of the participants identified four journals used in both teaching and research (Table III). Respondents also identified journals not included in the survey: *Generations (ASA)*, *Journal Applied Gerontology*, *Aging and Mental Health*, *Research on Aging*, *Journal of Gerontology and Geriatric Education*, *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *Dementia*, *Health Care for Women International*, *Journal of Aging Studies*, *Trauma*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Journal of the American Public Health Association*, and others.

Table III here (centered)

Organizations, Research Centers, and Institutes Used to Access Information

Respondents were asked to identify the usefulness of selected organizations, research centers, and/or institutes in providing access to gerontology resources.

Over 80% of respondents identified the following organizations as very or somewhat useful:

- Gerontological Society of America (GSA),
- American Association of Retired Persons (AARP),
- National Institute on Aging (NIA),
- Alzheimer's Association, and
- Administration on Aging (AoA).

Other organizations identified in the survey included the John A. Hartford Foundation, local Area Agencies on Aging, Institute on Aging's Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center (ADEAR), the National Association of Geriatric Care Managers (NAPGCM), and Canadian-based research centers.

Databases Used to Access Information

As noted previously the survey included four response options ranging from “Very Useful” to “Not Useful at All,” and these findings were collapsed into two categories for reporting.

Over 60% of respondents identified MEDLINE/PubMed, PsycINFO/PsycArticles, Google Scholar, and Ageline as “Very or Somewhat Useful.” (Table IV).

Table IV here (centered)

Essential Reference Books in Gerontology

In an effort to identify core resource materials, respondents were asked to identify reference books they or their colleagues considered to be essential to gerontology research and practice (Table V). This question presented a list of possible references with options to “Check All that Apply” and to include other titles if desired. Other reference books identified were: *Health Care and Aging* (Berkman), *Handbook of Geriatric Assessment* (Gallo, Bogner, and Fulmer), *Handbook of Social Work in Health and Aging* (Berkman), *Aging, Society, and the Life Course* (Morgan and Kunkel), and the *Handbook for the Humanities and Aging* (Cole, Ray, and Kastenbaum).

Table V here (centered)

Alerting Services, Blogs, Forums, or Electronic Discussion Lists used as Sources of Information

Respondents were asked to identify the alerting services, RSS feeds, blogs, forums, or electronic discussion lists used by themselves or their colleagues. Over half (52%) of the participants indicated they did not use these services or tools although many listed online resources they had used. These included: *Journal of Aging Studies*, *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, AGHE, GSA, ASA, National Center for Gerontological Social Work Education (CSWE), National Council on Aging (NCOA), *AARP Newsletter* (Mooney), CAARE Reports (University of Wisconsin), Association for Gerontology Education in Social Work (AGE-SW), Minnesota Gerontological Society, NIH, NIA, and the American Psychological Association (APA).

Relationship Between Program Size and Types of Library Resources Used

The variable of size of gerontology program was recoded into two groups, less than 20 students and more than 20 students, to facilitate analysis of resources used. No statistically significant association, $p = .05$, was found although the analysis was limited due to the small sample size.

Discussion

The findings from this survey provided a snapshot of the current resources and library services used by gerontology faculty in their teaching and research endeavors. Results confirm that faculty teaching in gerontology use a wide variety of resources in creating their own pedagogical materials (Tables II-V). In fact, the majority of teaching faculty report that they do *not* have difficulty finding materials, and only 23% of the respondents contact a librarian for help in this process (Table II). As most faculty typically do not contact librarians for curriculum advice, this was not surprising to the authors (Arua, 2011; Kobzina, 2010; Wang, 2011).

Based on the results (Table II), faculty often consider recommendations from colleagues in their selection of teaching materials. This interest in collaboration is consistent with the findings from Wicks and Scharletto (2005) and provides a glimpse into the culture of the discipline. As discussed by Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) and Rupp-Serrano and Robbins (2013), this interest in collaboration and sharing information can be capitalized on by librarians as they assist faculty locate resources and connect with others outside their academic areas of expertise.

The enthusiasm exhibited by the respondents for resources and information obtained from professional, governmental, and aging and/or disease-specific organizations highlights the importance of grey literature in teaching and research activities. With an overwhelming number of participants using information from organizations such as GSA, AARP, NIA, and the Alzheimer's Association (Table VI), it is imperative that librarians be familiar with these organizations and resources. Librarians should also include these types of resources in research guides (e.g. LibGuides) and library instruction sessions.

Additionally, gerontology faculty and librarians recognize that it is essential to evaluate critically grey literature, especially websites that are constantly changing or are politically or socially sensitive (Bensing, 2006; Fu, 1999; Price and Brosi, 2006). The funding and motives behind the production of grey literature must also be evaluated. For example, funding could be from non-profits (e.g., National Academy on an Aging Society), special interest group/lobbying organizations (e.g., AARP), educational organizations (e.g. University of North Carolina System's Institute on Aging), and/or government agencies (e.g. NIH). Librarians can play a key role in the critical review of this information to assure that authoritative, and sometimes unique and exclusive, resources remain available (Pappas and Williams, 2011) to gerontology faculty and students.

Findings from this study were used to initiate a resource to address the need for a current core or recommended list for academic gerontology resources. Moreover, the resources identified complement the resources reported by Price and Brosi (2006) and Lasda Bergman (2011). Table VI lists recommended resources including definitive reference works, journals, databases, and grey literature outlets.

Table VI here (centered)

Regarding the use of current awareness technologies, faculty may need more information and/or assistance. Most faculty indicated they did not currently use these tools to keep up-to-date with gerontology-related research, and some reported using other online resources. Whether faculty are unaware of these tools or need more training regarding their use are questions not addressed by the survey.

Contrary to the literature review, the number of faculty who reported they had a gerontology-dedicated library liaison or point of contact was unexpectedly high (66%). This is encouraging because it is evidence that gerontology faculty appear to be collaborating with librarians. Potential for synergistic opportunities abound in the faculty-librarian partnership since librarians, like gerontology faculty, are accustomed to working in the various cultures of interdisciplinary teams.

Although caution must be used when generalizing the results to other populations due to the small sample size, the findings do provide valuable insight into the information seeking behaviors and needs of faculty teaching in gerontology related disciplines. In addition the findings provide a foundation for further research. While the population of interest was limited to institutions granting non-clinical graduate degrees in gerontology, the authors recognize the need for research on the information needs and information seeking behaviors of faculty representing undergraduate and clinical degree-granting gerontology programs. Finally, the interdisciplinary nature of this discipline dictates that faculty from “non-traditional” gerontology disciplines such as economics, engineering, business, and public policy be included in future studies.

Future Recommendations

The authors recommend using the information to refine core or recommended lists of resources. A list based on the survey is not comprehensive nor prescriptive, but rather provides suggestions for supporting gerontology research and teaching. This knowledge could prove beneficial in the decision-making processes in the current economic climate of diminishing funding for library materials.

Given the interdisciplinary collaborations among gerontologists and the applied settings in which they work (Price and Brosi, 2006), library liaison outreach efforts could be furthered strengthened by making contacts with the institution’s gerontology centers (Knapp, 2012). Finally, librarians need to proactively seek professional library networks that provide a platform for the exchange of ideas and practices regarding related gerontology research. Currently no ACRL gerontology sections or groups exist (Megan Griffin, personal communication, 2013), although ALA does offer support for public librarians.

Conclusion

The explosion of the older adult population coinciding with the presence and expansion of gerontology education on many college campuses in the last decade warrants further attention and discussion. While the inherent interdisciplinary nature of gerontology brings some challenges to academic libraries, these same challenges can translate into opportunities for the campus community. The findings provide valuable information about materials used for curricular and research activities at gerontology graduate degree-granting institutions. Use of this information will enhance the assistance provided by librarians in their roles and in enriching the library’s collections in an increasingly interdisciplinary academic environment.