

Transforming social work education to include gerontology curriculum: Insights from a clinical certificate



Jennifer Hewson, PhD¹; Kaylin Epp, MSW²; Cari Gulbrandsen, PhD¹, RSW; Christine A. Walsh, PhD¹, RSW; Salimah Walji-Shivji, LLB, MSW, RSW^{1,3}
¹Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary; ²Former student, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary; ³AgeCare, Calgary

Introduction

- The number of Canadians aged 65+ has been steadily increasing throughout recent decades (Statistics Canada, 2022).
- With population aging, the need for clinical social workers trained in gerontology is a practice imperative (Boscart et al., 2017).
- In spite of this need, there are few graduate-level gerontology training opportunities in Canadian schools of social work (Azulai et al., 2022).
- **To address this gap, the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary developed the Graduate Certificate in Clinical Social Work Practice – Gerontology (Gerontology Certificate).**
- The Gerontology Certificate was an 8-month certificate offered in the 2021-2022 academic year and was comprised of four 6-week courses, offered sequentially. Twenty students completed the certificate.
- This certificate was designed for students who had already completed their Bachelor of Social Work and who had an interest in clinical social work practice in the field of gerontology.
- Initially designed to be delivered in a blended format (primarily online with four in-person residencies), this certificate was offered entirely online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives

- **The purpose of this evaluation was to gather insights from students, instructors, and the team lead about the inaugural Gerontology Certificate.**
- This evaluation was designed to collect feedback and recommendations about:
 - 1) delivery,**
 - 2) curriculum, and**
 - 3) practice application and impact.**
- Conducting this evaluation was considered vital to learning from the inaugural experience to inform future offerings of the certificate.
- Pandemic-specific learnings were also deemed beneficial to advance knowledge about how to pivot to online residencies should this be required again in the future.

Methodology

- A mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was used which:
 - combined qualitative and quantitative data collection tools and
 - analyzed findings across participant groups.
- Data collection included:
 - One student focus group (n=2),
 - An anonymous online student survey (n=7), and
 - Interviews and team reflections with the certificate instructors, one of whom was the team lead (n=4).

Conclusion

- While many strengths of the certificate were identified, primary areas for enhancement were **further clinical skill development and opportunities to apply these skills in practice.**
- Ways to enhance this in the future could include:
 - Extending weekly Zoom sessions to include time for practice,
 - Ensuring that residencies are face-to-face and in locations where direct interaction with older adults is possible,
 - Identifying clinical competencies and evaluating learners' competencies with regard to the application of these skills,
 - Including simulations and role-play as active learning tools to foster skill development,
 - Introducing interprofessional teamwork skills, and
 - Exploring the potential of service-learning opportunities.

Results

Delivery

Students and instructors noted:

- Shifting to entirely online delivery was the safest choice at the time but impacted residencies.
- There were challenges of engagement with online delivery such as Zoom fatigue.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors were especially flexible with deadlines.

Delivery Recommendations

- Offer blended delivery (as planned pre-COVID-19).
- Have longer weekly classes.
- Keep one in-person residency per course but could be shorter (than 2.5 days).
- Start with an overview course followed by an emphasis on skill development.
- Maintain program length (8 months) and sequential delivery.

"We were going to be doing tours and stuff like that and they had a very different idea of what our residencies might look like. Well, I think we kind of missed out on that."
- Student

Curriculum

- The majority of students were satisfied with: their instructor's knowledge, learning activities, assessment methods, coursework demands, and instructional materials.
- Students' responses were mixed on diversity of curriculum.
- Instructors and students highlighted the value of guest speakers.

Curriculum Recommendations

- Modify assessments (e.g., fewer group projects, fewer but deeper reflections).
- Involve older adults more deeply and directly in the courses.
- Include more diversity (e.g., content & populations).
- Offer more advanced content for those already in the field.

"I really liked the variety of guest speakers that we had ... to be exposed to so many different perspectives and topics, and people who are experts in those things or who work in those areas."
- Student

Practice Application & Impact

- Many students indicated that they learned new or enhanced existing knowledge and skills they could apply to their practice.
- Several students and most instructors indicated that practical skills were the most beneficial aspect of the certificate.
- Many students indicated their confidence increased particularly regarding advocacy for older adults.
- Almost all students indicated they learned about new theories and research and some indicated learning about social policy.
- Students' responses were mixed on the balance of theory, research, practice, and policy.

Application & Impact Recommendations

- Enhance clinical skill development and practice opportunities.

"We had to move our dementia program completely online, which was very challenging because that program is very hands-on, and it has a lot of role-playing in it...So I feel that the students didn't get the same value that they would have got if we weren't in COVID."
- Instructor

References

- Azulai, A., Tong, H., Quinn, K., & Mykietka, K. (2022). Current and future needs of Gerontological Social Work practice in Alberta: Findings from the World Café at the Gerontological Symposium in Edmonton, Canada. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 1–34. DOI: 10.1080/01634372.2022.2047860
- Boscart, V., McCleary, L., Huson, K., Sheiban, L., & Harvey, K. (2017). Integrating gerontological competencies in Canadian health and social service education: An overview of trends, enablers, and challenges. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, 38(1), 17-46. DOI: 10.1080/02701960.2016.1230738
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Statistics Canada. (2022). *The Daily*. (Catalogue No. 11-001-X). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.