Site Visit Report
Gerontology Institute
Georgia State University

This report is based on a site visit by a team consisting of Dr. William Haley (University of South Florida)-Chair, Dr. Graham Rowles (University of Kentucky), and Dr. Keith Whitfield (Duke University). The team reviewed the self-study from the Gerontology Institute, the Dean’s Office Response to this self-study, and the Georgia State University Strategic Plan. The team met with students, faculty, and university administrators over a two-day period. The site visit team was able to gain a thorough picture of the Gerontology Institute from multiple perspectives, and concurred on the findings and recommendations provided below.

1. Strengths and weaknesses

**Strengths:**

In general, the review team sees the Gerontology Institute as having a number of impressive strengths. These strengths are apparent in five major areas: the quality of instruction; the quality of faculty; the extent of engagement with Institute members outside of the core group of faculty; engagement with the Atlanta community; and leadership.

In terms of educational issues, the program has a history of excellence in gerontology education at the Master’s level and is recognized as a strong program regionally and increasingly at the national level. Students majoring in Gerontology, and with an interest in Gerontology from other majors, are involved in research and community placement and receive funding through Institute projects. Students reported that they were extremely satisfied with the quality of their engagement with faculty, the quality of their classes, and the connections that the program helps them make with potential employers in the community. There are several scholarship programs available which is impressive for a small program like this. The Institute has awarded 19 undergraduate Certificates and one Minor over the past three years. In addition, 14 MA degrees and 10 Graduate Certificates were awarded during this period. These numbers are very good considering the small size of the Core Institute faculty.

The Institute has made excellent strides in recruiting and retaining very strong junior faculty members. The program has recently had a faculty member successfully attain tenure and promotion to Associate Professor based on her strong independent record of research and is now a PI on a prestigious NIH RO1 grant. Such grants are extremely difficult to receive in the current funding climate, especially by gerontology faculty from universities without extensive geriatrics/gerontology infrastructure. Recently hired faculty came from strong research universities and all have promising research programs.

Excellent relationships have been developed between the Core faculty and Institute members from throughout the campus. These members are very positive about their level of involvement and full of enthusiasm for the Institute. The Institute has truly developed a community of scholars committed to its success. The Institute has shown strong impact on Institute members, helping them with numerous concrete accomplishments including gaining research funding,
completing programs of research, publication, and development of community contacts useful in research. The Institute also offers funding to students from other programs, and cross lists courses with an impressive array and number of departments across the campus. This impact throughout the University is especially impressive given the small number of core Institute faculty members. The Institute clearly serves as a catalyst that improves the productivity of affiliated faculty from throughout the university.

The Institute has done a very good job of linking with community organizations and agencies. These community partners have been sites for field placements for students studying Gerontology and from other majors, and have cooperated with faculty and students on research projects related to aging. Gerontology courses include some of these community members as guest lecturers which have the dual advantages of giving students “real world” knowledge and exposure, but also strengthening the bond with the community. The community linkages also serve as a pipeline to employment for program graduates.

Finally, the Institute has strong leadership. Dr. Elizabeth Burgess has done an admirable job of creating a welcoming climate for faculty across the campus, and has worked successfully to mentor junior faculty and recruit outstanding faculty. She also acknowledges the potential benefit of recruiting a more senior scholar to move the program to an even higher level.

Because of the excellent track record of the Institute to date, the campus-wide community of scholars engaged in the Institute, the extensive community engagement of Institute members in the local community, and limited competition within the state of Georgia in offering Gerontology education, the Institute has the potential to dramatically expand its education programs and to benefit from additional faculty positions as such expansion is attained.

Weaknesses

The Institute has only four core faculty. All of these faculty members have extensive obligations not only in conducting research and teaching their courses, but also in service and advising activities. The faculty appears to be spread thin. Besides teaching regular courses, all of the faculty members are heavily engaged in efforts such as directed readings and advising. Such commitments help build a strong bond between students and faculty, but can make it difficult for faculty to have the time needed to develop outstanding programs of research.

The Institute does not have a Mission Statement or a Strategic Plan. The Institute does not have a clear image or “brand” of excellence in any particular area of Gerontology. To some extent, the lack of a Mission Statement or Strategic Plan tends to lead to an issue of the four Core faculty members having to be all things to all people. Because the current faculty members are very accommodating and helpful, they are at risk of being stretched too thin.

Student credit hour productivity appears to be adequate but far below its potential. At the national level and at GSU, Gerontology classes tend to have relatively small enrollment. The Self Study includes figures on enrollment in each class over the past three years, but does not include summary statistics focused on average class sizes, separated at the undergraduate and graduate level, and separated by credit hours produced by Core Institute faculty versus those from other
departments. This will be important in future reports as it could help to document the credit hour impact of the Institute, both from Core and other Institute faculty. The concern is that the Institute is not well positioned to press for additional faculty lines based on student credit hour productivity. It is difficult for Gerontology programs to make dramatic increases in graduate enrollment. However, at the undergraduate level, gerontology courses have the potential to have much larger enrollments, particularly if they can be included within the General Education requirements for the university. Since high student credit hour productivity can be a means to justify additional faculty lines, this weakness may represent an opportunity.

Finally, the Institute does not keep track of all dimensions of its productivity in an optimal manner and likely underrepresents its actual productivity. For example, listings of publications and grants show only work produced by the four Core Institute faculty members. The Institute does not keep track of the productivity of other Institute faculty members in publications and grants. Some of these publications and grants have been completed with support from the Institute. The self-study that we reviewed also did not track student credit hour productivity separately for the four Core Institute faculty members, versus the credit hours produced for all Gerontology courses (often credited to other departments). With a greater effort to capture all of this productivity, the Institute could produce an Annual Report that would truly reflect its university-wide impact, in terms of students exposed to Gerontology courses, credit hours, publications, grants, and community service.

2. Historical and Current Context

The Gerontology Institute has a long and distinguished history of education and research. The educational offerings, in particular, are a significant value added for the university at the beginning of the explosion of older adults represented in the baby boomer generation. The course offerings provide a critical source of information for a growing segment of the student and professional populations. Both undergraduate and graduate offerings by the institute meet both scholarly and everyday practical needs of the Georgia workforce.

The research being conducted by the faculty represent important themes in the field of aging; housing and formal long-term care; social relationships, families, and caregiving; and health and aging.

The Undergraduate Certificate in Gerontology provides a set of flexible cross-college offerings that attract students to the program as they matriculate through GSU. The additional Interdisciplinary Minor represents an excellent option for a guided focus on issues related to aging. The enrollment numbers seem appropriate given the FTEs in the Institute. Gerontology is a discovery topic for most and the certificate and minor are excellent mechanisms to provide an important educational experience for GSU students.

There are four core faculty members in the Gerontology Institute. The mission is carried out by this core and affiliate faculty from other units as well as adjunct instructors. The faculty will likely become increasingly spread too thin for at least two reason; increasing research demands and teaching needs. The core faculty members have clear and expanding fundable research interests. To grow their research portfolio, they will need buy out time to both develop and once
funded to carry out their research. This eventuality will require additional instructional support to maintain and grow the educational mission of the institute. The plans for a BIS degree in Aging and Health, an increase in gerontology classes across the university, development of honors classes, initiation of a dual degree program with Sociology and increased engagement of undergraduates in research all represent significant additional instructional time from what is currently offered. For these reasons, the Institute will need the addition of at least one tenure track line and an instructor to carry out any expansion of research and instructional effort.

3. Progress toward Goals and Objectives

The goals of the Institute are in excellent alignment with a number of the University Strategic Plans. The Gerontology Institute has a number of curricular innovations that will allow students the opportunity for application and extension of knowledge. They have plans to increase the scholarship support for not only undergraduate students and students who excel academically but also for students who face financial barriers. Their internship also fits with the University’s research fellows and professional fellows program discussed in the Strategic Plan.

The Graduate Certificate and a Master of Arts provide in depth examination of issues critical to understanding an aging society. This corresponds with the university’s goal to “Significantly strengthen and grow the base of distinctive graduate and professional programs that assure development of the next generation of researchers and societal leaders.”

One element of the University Strategic Plan that the Gerontology Institute is particularly well positioned to significantly contribute to is the “Cities Initiative.” While we found the definition and specific plan for this University goal difficult to entirely understand, we assumed that this was meant to be a way that the university would increase engagement with the local community and planned to benefit from what it could teach scholars about real world problems. Based on the placement of graduates in positions of policy and social engagement at the state and local government levels and their connections to different populations in the area, the Gerontology Institute is well-positioned to contribute to this element of university’s strategic plan. We did see that there was a need to provide resources and a more formal structure that is interdisciplinary, coordinated and university wide and that the Institute can play a significant role in the development of a faculty led, grass roots effort to advance this goal.

One of the University Strategic Goals that we feel the Institute is less well prepared to address is the aim to globalize the university. While we think this could be achieved in a long term plan, this unit is in a much better position to address other relevant university objectives and think resources could be better utilized to build on some of the aforementioned strengths.

4. Quality of the Curriculum

At the undergraduate level, the Gerontology Institute offers an Undergraduate Certificate and an Interdisciplinary Minor. The Certificate includes 18 credit hours of coursework, spans the biological, psychological, social, and policy areas of aging, and includes a broad variety of courses and gives students considerable flexibility in choosing courses that suit their interests. All students pursuing the Certificate take an Introduction to Gerontology course, and complete a
Gerontology Internship. Undergraduates completing the Interdisciplinary Minor choose five courses from a list of six, which are offered by diverse academic departments. Both of these programs have appropriate course offerings and are consistent with requirements for undergraduate Gerontology Certificate and Minor programs nationally.

At the graduate level, the Institute offers a Graduate Certificate and a Master of Arts. The Certificate requires 21 credit hours. Students have considerable flexibility to select courses that suit their interests. Courses are offered both in core areas of Gerontology, and in specialty topic areas. MA students take a required Seminar in Gerontology, and Research Methods course, and one of two 9-hour Concentrations. They take additional elective courses as well, completing 36 credit hours for the degree. Both of these programs have appropriate course offerings and are consistent with requirements for Graduate Certificate and MA requirements nationally.

In summary, the Institute offers an impressive breadth of Gerontology curriculum, both through the efforts of the four Core Institute faculty members, and by cross-listing with diverse academic departments. There is appropriate core Gerontology course material offered, as well as considerable opportunities for specialization. Students generally complete Field Placements/Internships which are very advantageous in gaining employment.

5. Quality of the Students

At the undergraduate level, there is relatively little information available about the quality of students. This is common for programs that offer Gerontology Certificates and Minors, because most universities gather such statistics only at the levels of Majors.

At the graduate level, there are few statistics available on students enrolled in the Certificate program. As noted for undergraduates, most universities only gather and report such data for degree programs. The MA students have average GRE scores that would not be considered outstanding for research oriented graduate programs, but that are consistent with those typically recruited into MA Gerontology programs. Around 80% of students who apply to the graduate programs are admitted, which appears typical for Gerontology programs and suggests reasonable scrutiny of applicants. Many students in the GSU graduate programs work in the field of Gerontology and are nontraditional students returning to school. Many have practical experience that makes them well qualified for the program, irrespective of GRE scores. One indicator of the quality of the graduate students recruited is that they are often successful in gaining admission to graduate programs or finding jobs in gerontology. Six of the 14 students completing an MA went on to graduate programs at major research universities, and most of the others are employed in areas related to aging services.

In summary, it is difficult to evaluate the quality of students in the three tracks that award Minors and Certificates. These programs largely function to supplement the education of students based in other departments. The MA program appears to be admitting students with the potential to succeed and to go on to graduate and to advance to graduate programs or employment in aging services fields.
6. Quality of the Faculty

The Institute has an excellent, productive, core faculty. With the recent addition of two junior faculty members who have strong previous track records and considerable potential to develop competitive research programs over the next few years, this department is poised to move into the very top echelon of programs of its size. The review committee notes that one member of the faculty has recently succeeded in securing substantial multi-year R01 funding from NIH. All four of the faculty members are active in research and publishing at a rate consistent with their level of experience and obligations in teaching and service. It appears that the research program of the chair has been somewhat constrained as a result of administrative responsibilities and extremely active engagement with Institute outreach activities involving other units in the University and community agencies.

There is also evidence of teaching excellence and the committee was impressed by the level of engagement of the faculty with students. Mentorship of certificate students and in particular master’s level students is particularly impressive and the committee received strong positive feedback from these students. With increasing commitment to research, the Institute may need to reassess the degree to which individual faculty members will be able to sustain the current level of intensive mentorship to individual students. There is also a need to explore the development of approaches to assessing the quality of the curriculum in a systematic manner; perhaps in relation to well-articulated competencies.

The faculty is currently operating at peak capacity. With the anticipated growth of junior faculty member research programs it appears that some important decisions will need to be made as there is a danger that faculty resources will be stretched too thin. There is a need to develop priorities and to acknowledge that the Institute cannot sustain its current level of activity in all domains. As the research programs of the junior faculty develop, it would be desirable to add personnel resources to support the teaching mission and current educational offerings. Specifically, the addition of a full-time permanent instructor would facilitate maintaining the instructional contributions of the unit at its current high level as well as enable the Institute to expand its teaching mission—for example through the proposed development of a collaborative interdisciplinary Bachelors of Interdisciplinary Study in Health and Aging or offering general education courses in gerontology.

Given the small size of the core faculty, the role of the 27 affiliate faculty members is crucial. The committee was impressed by the level of engagement of the affiliates and by the strong efforts of the chair and the faculty to nurture relationships with the affiliates. The affiliates seem to contribute as much, if not more, time and effort to the Institute than is the case with comparable programs across the country; this may reflect the ability of the Institute to provide affiliate faculty members with modest resources (a contribution that enhances their level of commitment). Future outreach and the engagement with faculty affiliates from the sciences including biology, neuroscience and other domains of gerontology not covered by the current faculty would represent a potentially valuable avenue for growth.

In order to rise to the next level of excellence in comparison with gerontology programs elsewhere in the country, it would be highly desirable to add a senior faculty member who would
provide a catalyst for realizing the Institute’s potential for growth and achievement of national prominence. Most desirable would be the recruitment of a senior level “rising star” whose area of focus would complement the emphases of the current faculty. Over the past decade, the Institute has begun to develop a distinctive research identity that is consistent with elements of the University’s strategic plan, and especially the Cities Initiative [Goal 4 in Unit Self-Study]. Hiring a senior level faculty member who would be able to provide research and scholarly leadership and nurture the existing faculty to reach their full potential would be a wise strategy; especially valuable would be a senior faculty member whose own program of research would grow collaboratively with the existing initiatives of the faculty.

7. Resource Adequacy

The Institute is considered to be highly productive given its limited resources. There are only four Core Institute faculty members. Because the Institute lost its Student Affairs Coordinator position in 2012, student advising and related administrative tasks have been taken over by faculty members. Currently the role of Undergraduate Director is fulfilled by an Assistant Professor. This is necessary because the entire unit has only the Director, one Associate Professor, and two Assistant Professors. In general it is inadvisable to have Assistant Professors serving in this type of service role because it detracts from their ability to focus on development of an outstanding research program, and teaching.

Current resources are barely adequate to maintain the existing operation. Such activities as supervising internships and advising undergraduates fall heavily on the faculty. This will likely lead to difficult in allowing these faculty to expand their research programs, or will create disruption if faculty get additional grants funding research efforts, leaving them unable to handle routine advising duties.

The Institute also has 27 affiliate faculty members from 17 different academic departments. One issue facing the Institute is that it has an extremely broad scope. Aging issues encompass areas ranging from cell to society. The Institute is involved in research, teaching, advising, community engagement, and service activities across many areas of aging. Existing resources could be better focused with development of a more focused vision and long term plan.

8. Goals and Objectives

The Institute has outlined four challenging goals but proposed initiatives to achieve these goals may be rather too diverse and comprehensive to accomplish given the current size and commitments of the faculty.

a) Goal 1: Strengthen Our Research Base

The proposed expansion of partnerships within the University and increase in the number of affiliate faculty represents a useful goal, especially if this expansion embraces scholars from domains beyond the sociological focus of the current faculty. Some potential lies in outreach to faculty in the biological and neurosciences. The proposed pilot seed funding program for Affiliate faculty is a very useful innovation that should facilitate an increase in collaborative
b) Goal 2: **Enhance the Educational Experience of our Undergraduates in Gerontology**

This is a laudable goal and the emphasis on the quality of the educational experience for undergraduates is commendable. Developing a Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies in Health and Aging in collaboration with the School of Nursing and Health Professions is a useful approach. So, too, is the goal of building on a dual degree BA/MA in Sociology and Gerontology. Both of these options are consistent with national trends toward the growth of interdisciplinary gerontology and are likely to generate a pool of well-educated students to enter into the Institute’s graduate programs and graduate programs elsewhere. While proposed initiatives to develop honors classes, increase support for undergraduate scholarships and engage undergraduates in research are all valuable and might be considered routine components of ongoing undergraduate program development, focusing an inordinate amount of time and resources in these directions may not be cost effective at this time given the limited number of personnel to lead such initiatives.

Recent experience at other institutions (including those of the reviewers) has indicated the potential for considerable expansion of the undergraduate enrollment particularly at the general education level where gerontology is becoming an increasingly popular and where larger class sizes can be taught. This can expose more students to gerontology, enhance credit hour production, and feed other gerontology tracks. In this context, the addition of a permanent full time instructor with sole responsibility for teaching would be a prudent investment that, in addition to fulfilling an educational need of the Institute, might well pay for itself in tuition dollars earned.

A major trend in undergraduate education nationwide has been the development of on-line courses. As the Institute moves forward, it is recommended that the faculty give strong consideration to supplementing their efforts by moving in this direction.

c) Goal 3: **Build Our Graduate Program**

The proposed modest increase in the number of MA students over the next five years is entirely consistent with the growth of the Institute in other domains, especially the expanded research portfolio that is envisaged. A priority on recruiting an increasing number of doctoral students from other departments into the Graduate Certificate program is also consistent with this future direction.

d) Goal 4: **Become more Engaged with University’s Cities Initiatives**

The skills, research interests, and increasing level of engagement with projects in the Atlanta area of the current faculty aligns well with a planned increase in engagement with issues facing
older adults residing in cities. This University priority provides a major opportunity for the Institute to develop a distinctive identity that will distinguish it from many comparable gerontology programs elsewhere in the country that tend to be in non-metropolitan areas. A location in the heart of Atlanta provides an opportunity that should not be missed.

9. Replies to Dean’s Office Responses, and Recommendations

The Dean’s Office requested that the external review team address four items. We will first respond to these items, and then follow with several additional recommendations.

a. The Dean’s Office asked what strategies the reviewers would recommend for the Institute to better engage partnerships across campus, and how these partnerships could be leveraged to produce gains in extramural grant seeking.

We believe that the Gerontology Institute is already engaging very effectively with faculty across the campus. However the Institute currently does not have a clear focus. It is broadly encouraging of gerontology. However, this is a field that truly ranges from cell to society in its breadth. We have two major recommendations that would enhance this goal.

1. The Gerontology Institute should engage in a process of development of a Mission Statement that identifies areas of concentration that could be the focus of research efforts. Along with this, the Institute should identify long-term goals, and a long-range plan. For example, while it would be possible to contribute to the internationalization of the university, to focus on this strategic goal would not represent the best use of faculty time and resources at this time. Similarly, although an excellent aspiration with respect to contributing to the University, the proposed development of courses to support the new Honors College may not be the best use of limited resources of time and personnel.

2. The Gerontology Institute should develop a more effective and comprehensive means of gathering data on its impact. The current self-study, for example, does not include data on publications and grant funding from Affiliate Members of the Gerontology Institute. The review group heard many stories from Institute faculty of how the Institute had facilitated their efforts to develop research, which led to publications and extramural funding. The Institute should develop a system of gathering such data for an Annual Report. The regular compilation and dissemination of measures of effectiveness would enable the Institute to achieve greater visibility both within the University and in the Atlanta community beyond. A unit of such accomplishment and potential should not hide its light under a bushel. Such an annual report could help both to document current impact and to disseminate this information to key leaders on the campus, and also to provide the basis for establishing goals for expansion.

b. The Dean’s Office asked what the review team would recommend as an entrepreneurial strategy to attract senior scholars with established track records for sponsored research, and sources of funding that would be compatible with such an effort.
3. It is very difficult at present to recruit senior faculty members with proven experience in leading Gerontology programs to universities such as GSU that have relatively small programs, and do not have the major research infrastructure and large scale NIH funding found at some top tier universities. However we believe that the Gerontology Institute could successfully recruit an “up and coming” scholar, perhaps at the brink of promotion to Professor or in early years at this rank. The Gerontology Institute has positive momentum, outstanding linkages to the community, and is in a thriving urban center. Successfully recruiting such a scholar will be most likely if the university is willing to provide some resources for expansion, e.g. additional faculty lines. The kind of research done in the Gerontology Institute has potential to be funded by the National Institutes of Health, the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, and Administration on Aging.

c. The Deans Office asked what recommendations the review team would offer for growing and sustaining student enrollment, and whether the self-study’s plan is optimal for attaining such growth.

4. In general, the review team believes that the quickest and most effective path to growing and sustaining student enrollment is to develop General Education courses in gerontology that can be offered in large class formats. Such courses as Introduction to Gerontology, The Life Cycle, and Psychology of Aging have been approved for General Education at other universities and enrollments range from 100-250 students per course. Such courses serve to inform students about other gerontology options, such as the Minor, Certificates, and MA degree. The review team believes that some of the options proposed in the self-study, such as a dual degree with Sociology and involvement with Honors courses, are meritorious but will be less fruitful in growing enrollment.

5. The review team further believes that it is vital that at least one permanent full-time Instructor be hired to develop such courses, and possibly to take on some of the advising and internship supervision activities that are currently carried out by faculty.

d. The Deans Office asked how the Gerontology Institute can best engage and complement the University’s focus on the complex challenges of cities, and how such engagement can be accelerated.

6. We believe that development of a clear mission statement and strategic plan will be the most important step toward this goal. The Institute should consider building on a unifying theme that embraces the entire faculty in coordinated and overlapping and complementary research, teaching, and community engagement initiatives. For example, a focus on the entire continuum of long-term care within the context of the Atlanta community—ranging from the development of an elder friendly urban environment, through community-based care, elder housing and assisted living, to institutional care—would represent an approach consistent with current faculty expertise and interests that would make a major contribution to the Cities Initiative component of the University’s strategic plan.

In addition to these recommendations made in response to the Deans Office queries, we have several other minor recommendations.
1. The Institute should consider decreasing the number of hours required for the Graduate Certificate. The current requirement is 21 hours. Since the Gerontology MA degree only requires 36 hours, the Institute may find that more students are willing to complete a lesser number of courses, such as 15 credit hours.

2. While in general we are recommending the development of a more focused mission, we believe that there are some important underdeveloped opportunities in the area of biological aspects of aging, such as neurosciences.

We believe that the Gerontology Institute at Georgia State is functioning very effectively but has the potential for major expansion and success in the years ahead. We hope that our review and comments are useful in this process.