

## IBHE GERONTOLOGY PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT SUMMARY **DRAFT**

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### 5. *Overview of the degree program: the mission, student learning objectives, further education objectives, and significant achievements and concerns:*

The stated **mission** of the Master of Arts in Gerontology (MAG) degree program is to provide a multidisciplinary education for current and future professionals in gerontology. Students gain exposure to specialized expertise in gerontology theory, research, practice, social policy issues and the process of aging in a global and culturally diverse society. The program mission aligns with the **university mission and the mission of graduate education** in several ways by fostering inclusion, cultivating opportunities for student-faculty scholarship, promoting applied learning experiences, and nurturing responsible citizens and leaders. The **student learning objectives** for the MAG program encompass the four Graduate School objectives but incorporate two additional objectives. The program learning objectives include: content area knowledge, critical thinking, communication, research, *ethical behavior* and *integration*. **Career/further education objectives** include preparing the graduates for a wide range of careers in gerontology, including direct community and social services, program administration, mental health practice, government services, higher education, long-term health care, and general health care/wellness. Since the 2005 IBHE review, the program's **significant achievements** include: obtaining First Choice status at Eastern Illinois University, a comprehensive revision of the entire Gerontology program assessment plan, increased student involvement in research, implementation of a Gerontology research speaker series, expansion of experiential and integrative learning opportunities for students, redesign of the Gerontology program website, and the introduction of a student progressive portfolio as part of the program requirements. **Areas for concern/improvement** consist of the following issues: loss of Sociology as a core department in the program, the retirements of 4 core faculty members between 2011 and 2013, students not completing their thesis, the need for stronger partnerships with undergraduate institutions offering gerontology minors and concentrations. **Plans for improvement** involve the following: revamping the internship program and manual to enhance student learning outcomes, developing detailed written policies currently deficient for the program, designing a study abroad program/opportunity that is gerontology focused, creating a new "GER" course prefix for courses at the university to enhance the program's identity and recognition, and establishing an annual collaborative student gerontology conference to enhance recruitment efforts.

### 6. *Brief, detailed responses to IBHE-assigned questions/issues*

- a. *Description and assessment of any major changes in the program [e.g., (a) changes in the overall discipline or field; (b) student demand; (c) societal needs; (d) institutional context for offering the degree; and (e) other elements appropriate to the discipline in question.*

During the previous seven years there have been several internal and external events that have affected the program. Externally, the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) has paid increasing attention to the possibility of accreditation standards for Gerontology programs. Notably, the 2013 AGHE national conference open plenary session, titled, *Charting the*

*Future: Assuring Relevance and Quality in Gerontology and Geriatrics Education While Higher Education is Under Siege* will focus on “accreditation as a quality assurance mechanism” <http://www.aghe.org/OpeningandClosingPlenaries>. Many national leaders in the field strongly believe that accreditation will come to Gerontology in the next few years and thus it will be important to stay informed and for EIU’s program to respond appropriately. Internally, events within the Gerontology program are affecting the program. Until fall of 2011, the program was comprised of 5 core departments/programs: Family and Consumer Sciences, Psychology, Educational Foundations, Sociology, and Kinesiology. During the fall 2011 semester, Sociology decided to remove its core faculty member and its overall participation from the program, bringing the core faculty for the program down from eight to seven. The second major change has also involved the core faculty. Between 2009 and the spring of 2012 the program experienced three core faculty changes. First, in 2009 a new Gerontology Program Coordinator joined the faculty at EIU, taking over for the previous Coordinator who was appointed as Associate Dean for the College of Business and Applied Sciences in 2008. Then, the program lost faculty members (from Sociology and Kinesiology). Although Kinesiology has replaced their core faculty member in the fall of 2012, it will take time for the faculty member to be integrated into his role in the program. In addition, spring 2013 will see the retirement of two additional gerontology core faculty members. This means that four of the seven core team members (or 5/8) will have turned over in less than three years, which stresses the program structure (although temporarily) for Gerontology. The fact that the program is interdisciplinary means that replacing faculty members also necessitates support from multiple departments, instead of just one.

Enrollment has declined somewhat over the past 3 years. Fall student enrollments for the program (2009-2011) were 28, 27, and 24 respectively. The number of applications to the program has remained fairly constant, but translating the applicants into enrolled students has not. The interdisciplinary M.A. program has been in existence at EIU for over thirty years and continues to fill an important educational niche in the state. Currently, there are only three Gerontology MA programs in the state, all of which are interdisciplinary. The two other programs (Northeastern Illinois University and Concordia University) are both located in the Chicagoland area. While all three programs currently have similar enrollment numbers, according to the IBHE degree enrollment data, both Concordia and Northeastern Illinois have seen substantial increases in their enrollments during the past 3 years. In addition to these MA programs there are two other institutions in Illinois which offer discipline-specific Master’s degree programs: The Adler School of Professional Psychology in Chicago introduced an MA program in Gerontological Counseling in 2010, and National-Louis University offers an MS in Human Services/Gerontological Counseling (also in the Chicagoland area).

Societal needs will continue to favor the growth of employment in the aging field. With 37 million people in the U.S. currently over 65, the necessity for professionals being prepared to work with or on behalf of older adults will only increase. A large number of professional disciplines now offer specializations in aging or gerontology (i.e. law, social work, medicine, counseling, nutrition, political science, nursing), acknowledging the shift in the national and global population. Educating students to understand the aging process and multi-dimensional aspects of life after age 70, 80, or 90 will only increase in relevance in the coming decades.

*b. Description of major findings and recommendations, including evidence of learning outcomes and identification of opportunities for program improvement;*

From 2010-2012 the Gerontology faculty extensively redesigned the assessment process for the M.A. program. Although the program received First Choice status in 2009, the faculty believed it was important to develop an even stronger assessment plan. From 2010-2012 revisions were made that encompassed learning goals, student learning outcomes, and assessment rubrics. All of these changes were made in order to keep the program relevant and at pace with the dramatic changes in the older adult population and employer needs.

Previously, the Gerontology program lacked a focused and concise list of performance indicators/outcome measures. A major aspect of the assessment update was to design such a list in relation to the six program learning goals the faculty had established. Ten performance indicators/outcome measures were created to directly and indirectly measure student learning and performance throughout the program. The indicators include: the comprehensive exam (direct), the thesis (direct), internship self-evaluation (indirect), supervisor's evaluation of the intern (direct), progressive portfolio evaluation (direct), exit survey (indirect), professional activities form (direct), oral presentation (direct), grant proposal (direct), and research paper (direct). The new assessment procedure also moves the evaluation much farther out of the classroom than before. While effective, the previous assessment procedures focused much on the core courses in the gerontology program. The problem arose if/when faculty members who taught a particular core course did not gather the assessment data—because there was no other measure in place, a gap would exist in the data and make application of findings very difficult. As each of the new performance indicator/outcome measures was discussed and developed, a very conscious effort was made to connect them directly to the six learning goals for the program (Content Knowledge, Critical Thinking, Communication, Research, Ethical Practice, and Integration). This “cross checking” solved the problem of missing data from a particular faculty member for a particular course while it also offered the faculty multiple ways to assess the same learning goal. In fact, each of the six learning goals now have *at least four performance indicators* linked with them (with at least one direct and one indirect measure represented for each learning goal). In order to concisely document these extensive changes, a *Gerontology Program Learning Goals & Performance Indicator Matrix* was created.

Another critical aspect of the reworked assessment program was the move to proactively share and discuss the plan with the graduate students. As part of the new student orientation, several handouts are distributed to the new gerontology graduate students including those explaining the program learning objectives and performance indicators. The Gerontology program coordinator carefully discusses the learning goals with the students and clarifies the handout. Then, the coordinator distributes a copy of the matrix to the students and discusses it in detail, emphasizing to the new students the “bigger picture” of the program and how courses, integrative and experiential learning options, as well as professional development opportunities *all* play a role in the holistic education of a gerontologist. The 2012-13 academic year is the first year to implement the redesigned assessment program.

Key stakeholders are also involved in the assessment process, although the program has room to improve in this area. Students have played a critical role in the recent assessment developments. In 2010-11, the coordinator and a Gerontology Graduate Assistant launched an internal study to examine learning outcomes and various learning experiences and opportunities students and recent alumni perceived they had in the core curriculum. The data gathered from those 18 students and alumni helped to shape the direction faculty took with the updated assessment program. In addition, two Gerontology Advisory Council meetings are held each year at EIU. The Advisory Council is comprised of gerontology/aging professionals (for example a retired professor who used to teach in the program, a geriatric physician, the Director of the Coles County Council on Aging, Director of the Peacemeal Senior Nutrition Program, a representative from the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging, and several graduates of the program who serve as gerontology professionals throughout central and southern Illinois). All of these stakeholders

have given their input on the assessment program during 2010 and 2011. Their experience, perspective, and feedback was critical to shaping a relevant and appropriate assessment plan. Because the Gerontology faculty realize that assessment is on-going, feedback is also being gathered for further restructuring. In October, 2012, the program coordinator held a two hour focus group with eight recent or soon-to-be graduates from the M.A. program. Their recommendations and advice are now serving as the foundation for tackling what the faculty hopes to be the next major enhancement to the program: a cutting-edge internship program that will truly serve as the thread that weaves together all six program learning objectives to best prepare Gerontology MA graduates for careers in the field of aging.

*c. Description of actions taken since the last review, including instructional resources and practices, and curricular changes.*

Please see sections 5 and 6.a. & b. above.

*d. Description of actions to be taken as a result of this review, including instructional resources and practices, and curricular changes.*

Please see sections 5 and 7 of this report for details.

## ***7. Response to institution-assigned issues.***

*a. What strategies has the unit implemented and/or begun to develop that will support the Integrative Learning Experience at EIU?*

Integrative learning is increasingly being woven into the fabric of the multidisciplinary Gerontology Master's program. As noted in 6.b. above, the faculty added a new program/student learning objective in spring 2012, titled *integration*. The objective states, "Students will demonstrate the ability to connect and apply knowledge gained in Gerontology coursework, internships, and research experiences in professional settings; and will reflect on such learning with meaning and purpose as part of their intellectual and personal development." The strategies that have been put into place to support this objective include: 1) As of 2011 all incoming students in the program are required to pay for student membership in the American Society on Aging (the flagship professional organization for gerontology). This membership provides students access to a variety of educational and professional development resources and opportunities and helps them to integrate classroom learning with current developments in the field of gerontology, 2) As of the 2011-2012 academic year all students in the program are required to complete a Progressive Portfolio as part of their academic program. This electronic portfolio provides the opportunity for purposeful reflection and integration of the students' coursework, professional goals, and personal growth throughout the program. As part of the feedback loop for this portfolio, each student meets individually with the 3-member faculty portfolio committee to discuss their portfolio, thus further helping students to think consciously about integration of knowledge. 3) In-class opportunities have been developed and implemented to augment integrative learning in the Gerontology curriculum. Two examples include the prison-veteran-student service-learning collaboration from 2010 and the Immersion in Long-Term Care course, taught in the fall of 2012. The strategies that are being developed to support integrative learning at EIU are: 1) the exploration of a study abroad opportunity that would focus on gerontology-related issues; and 2) the renovation of the Gerontology internship structure and forms to facilitate stronger integration with the student's overall professional development.

*b. What strategies has the unit implemented and/or begun to develop that will improve students' critical thinking skills?*

Since the previous program review in 2005, the Gerontology program has implemented two primary strategies to improve student critical thinking skills. 1) the Progressive Portfolio- this tool was developed in 2010 and implemented in 2011, impacting every student in the program. As part of the progressive portfolio, students are required to address a series of questions, several of which focus on critical thinking (as well as integration of knowledge mentioned above). For example students are required to provide a reflective essay about the development of their critical thinking skills over the past semester, addressing both the field of gerontology and themselves. In addition, another section of the portfolio asks students to think critically about their own professional goals and development in relation to their course content and current research in the field of aging. 2) With the updating of our program goals in the 2011-12 academic year, the faculty also updated the comprehensive exams. Specifically, the questions and structure of the exam was realigned to match the overarching program goals, rather than specific core courses in the program. This repositioning of the questions with the goals has raised the bar for students' critical thinking about their discipline and their education. The faculty have begun to examine the structure of the required internship and to develop a 1-credit pre-internship course that will focus students' critical thinking skills and better prepare them to think critically while they are participating in their internship experience.

*2. What one unique, noteworthy activity is the unit involved in that will enable the IBHE to distinguish its program from other similar programs in the state?*

During the 2011-2012 academic year a new course was developed and proposed for inclusion in the Gerontology MA program. The course, titled, *Immersion in Long-term Care* was approved for introduction in the fall of 2012. The Gerontology program coordinator taught the course for the first time during the fall 2012 semester. The Gerontology program partnered with Sullivan Rehab and Healthcare Center in Sullivan, Illinois for a unique and intensive integrative learning experience. As part of the course curriculum, students were required to reside in a nursing home for 48 hours *as a resident*. The graduate students assumed a condition or ailment common to nursing home residents prior to moving into the facility. As part of the students' 48 hour stay, they live in the nursing home (with a real resident as their roommate), eat the food, participate in activities and programs the other residents do---without their cell phones, laptops, or resources not available to the elderly residents. The major purpose of the immersive experience was for students to become more effective gerontology professionals by experiencing the reality of life in long term care. This type of immersive, integrative experience is totally unique to any gerontology program in Illinois and received newspaper coverage in 3 central Illinois area newspapers. Since the course has been taught, numerous EIU faculty and gerontology professionals in Illinois have stated that they believe this course will "put us on the map" and distinguish us from any other program around. This course will be submitted to CGS in the coming year as a permanent elective that will be offered as part of the interdisciplinary gerontology Master's program. A 90-minute panel symposium about this course and student learning outcomes was also accepted for presentation at the American Society on Aging national conference in March, 2013.