The Future of Gerontological Education and Research in Alberta

-EXECUTIVE SUMMARY-

December, 2002

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The Summit on **The Future of Gerontological Education and Research in Alberta** was organized under the auspices of the Alberta Association on Gerontology, by an enthusiastic group of committed individuals. As a result of over one year of planning, this Summit took place in Calgary, Alberta at the Greenwood Inn on Friday, October 4, 2002. The aim of this Summit was to bring together policy makers, educators, researchers, employers, students and seniors from across Alberta to identify issues and develop strategies for collaborative action with regards to gerontological education and research.

The Summit was organized around three thematic areas:

1) **The visions, educational content, and delivery options for accessible & transferable gerontological education in Alberta;**
2) **Making gerontology a viable career track: recruitment and retention issues for education and employment; and**
3) **The needs for gerontological research in Alberta.**

We were pleased to have two guest speakers join us for the day. Dr. Réjean Hébert, the Director of the Institute of Aging, Canadian Institutes of Health Research discussed aging research in Canada. Dr. Margaret Denton, the Director of the McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies at McMaster University discussed their model of delivering gerontological education in Ontario.

Over 100 individuals from across Alberta took part in this event, participating in smaller group discussions organized around the three Summit themes. The following is a summary of these discussions, which are contained in detail in the final report.

The Visions, Educational Content and Delivery Options for Accessible and Transferable Gerontological Education in Alberta

Issues:

Awareness
- Difficulty in marketing the need for gerontological education to the professions and academics
- Need for public education to inform → the importance of gerontological education
- Changing public and professional attitudes towards older adults → overcoming ageist attitudes and beliefs
- Packaging and presenting what is available in gerontology →marketing

Educational Content
- There is little curriculum that exists
- An inventory of what is currently out there/ available in terms of courses and programs is needed
- Need to involve seniors in the education programs → need to hear from seniors
- Need for ongoing professional development for faculty and agency staff

Educational Access
- Need multi-entry points into educational system for those with an interest in gerontology (i.e., universities, community colleges, continuing education, workplace learning)
- Need to provide gerontological education/training for more professionals
- Lack of credit recognition between institutions
- Need for laddering (i.e., methods to move people along in terms of gerontological education needs)
- Disperse gerontological education services out to communities

Collaboration
- Lack of collaboration across province with stakeholders
- Need to promote and develop the interdisciplinary nature of professional education
- Industry and educational and governmental institutions need to jointly develop education standards (define the competencies)
- Academics and institutions need to share more (partnering)

Barriers to Delivering Gerontological Education
- Lack of value at a societal level and at an employer level
- Lack of interest by students in gerontology
- No incentives to get further education

- Hard to sell education to professionals when they already stressed and over-extended
- Employers not valuing the education when hiring
- There is a really low priority for gerontology within educational institutions
- Lack of standards for qualifications required for each professional area
- Funding → who is responsible for what (i.e., development of curriculum)

Strategies to Address Issues:

Changing Public and Professional Attitudes Towards the Older Population (i.e., Ageism, Stereotyping, Valuing)
- Promote the value and contributions of older adults as well as the realities of aging through various forms of media (i.e., print, TV, radio)
- Increase intergenerational interactions
- Encourage educational organizations to provide education on the roles of seniors and the skills they contribute to society, communities, and families
- Empower seniors to speak out and promote positive models of aging and challenge stereotyping and ageism
- Develop "A Social Marketing Campaign"
- Increase awareness of gerontological educational opportunities

Institutional – Sharing, Cooperation and Collaboration
- Develop and enhance networking between educators, researchers, and <u>seniors</u>, practitioners, employers and government
- Identify currently existing collaborative and/or individually existing initiatives, programs, etc.
- Develop 2 Centres of Excellence (North and South) (for geographical ease)
- Create incentives to encourage collaboration → funding
- Support provincial communication → web sites, list serves, e-mail

Develop a Framework for Gerontological Education in Alberta
- Need a person/group devoted to bring together key people or stakeholders to coordinate making plans and goal setting
- Targeted needs assessments (framework/competencies/credentials)
- Develop provincial prototype curriculums for various levels of education
- Develop an action plan that will build on the capacities of various stakeholders, including educational institutions, communities, and service providers
- Develop gerontological competencies for various professions/jobs

Making Gerontology a Viable Career Track: Recruitment and Retention Issues for Education and Employment

Issues:

Ageism
- The negative "orientation" to aging
- There are still lots of myths and stereotypes about aging
- There is a societal wide lack of understanding of the aging process

Workplace Issues
- Attracting people into gerontological practice and keeping them
- Many people in the work force are burning out
- There is a need to look at the working conditions
- Shortage of money
- There is a gap between direct care providers' pay and training and gerontological care providers' pay and training
- We value technology too much vs. quality of life and care

Employment Skills
- Finding the people with the skills, values, education and competencies is difficult
- There is a pervasive attitude that "anyone can do this, you just need to care"
- The older population is becoming increasingly diverse (i.e., ethnicity, language, culture) $\rightarrow$ need people with the necessary skills to meet the challenges of this diversity

Career Opportunities
- It is not seen as an exciting area of practice
- We have an aging workforce
- Recruitment – we need to go after young people or look at changing people's careers
- The false perception that there is a finite pie of resources; we will need more resources and must personally and organizationally commit

Strategies to Address Issues:

Changing Public and Professional Attitudes Towards the Older Population (i.e., Ageism, Stereotyping, Valuing)
- Changing public and professional attitudes towards the older population
- Conduct and promote research that refutes the myths of aging
- Promote positive aspects of the aging process

Develop Aggressive Recruitment Strategies
- Advertise opportunities in the field of aging through job fairs, the Internet
- Promote and provide educational/workplace opportunities in the field (i.e., student placements)
- Create stable funding for long-term care and other services for older adults

Develop a Workforce with the Necessary Skills to Work with Older Adults
- Promote and support education on aging for all health care and human services workers
- Develop workplace-learning opportunities
- Provide financial incentives for employees to upgrade their education and training (i.e., money and time off for courses)

Increase Employer Recognition Programs That Emphasize Quality of Life in the Workplace
- Need to value employees as people
- Offer complementary and alternative health care options (i.e., exercise classes, smoking cessation programs)
- Develop employee assistance programs (EAP)
- Create a positive work environment (i.e., flexible hours, day care, ensure adequate staffing)

The Needs for Gerontological Research in Alberta

Issues:

Lack of Value for Both the Older Population and Research
- Ageism → lack of value of older population by the larger population
- Public opinion (stereotypes) drive political process → funding
- Lack of public education/understanding of aging research and its value
- Lack of public policy with a vision for aging research

Funding for Research
- Funding Reflects Lack of Value for Area
- Granting agencies → creating awareness of the value of research in this area
- Funding pot is small – leads to competition
- High level of competitiveness leads to fragmentation; we create our own enemies
- Much energy spent on locating funds instead of doing the research
- Trends toward funding larger research grants → proposal writing is time consuming; approval time is lengthy

Collaboration
- Need for partnerships between academia and other sectors
- Create our own awareness of what is happening in the province re: research
- Difficult to have a sense of identity as a group looking at gerontology because of its multidisciplinary nature

Research Needs
- Involve older adults in the research process → participatory approach
- Focus on research in Canada → not just relying on United States information
- Diversity of population (i.e., race, age, socioeconomic status) → hard to define this group; difficult to break down group
- Access to data (how, quality, cost and "red tape" process)
- Lack of attention to research on multicultural issues / invisible minority groups
- Facilities for research/training
- Lack of trained individuals to hire to conduct research with the elderly
- Technological expertise – need for increase to do research (training or resource issue)
- Few researchers → gerontological research is not promoted

Application of Research
- Research needed for → evidence based practice and decision-making
- Translating research → practice

Strategies to Address Issues:

Changing Public and Professional Attitudes Towards the Older Population & Research
- Increase interaction between older persons and everyone else
- Start promoting healthy aging from elementary school onward → education across the age span
- Increasing media awareness of healthy aging
- Establish and/or increase public awareness and importance of the field of gerontology

Increased Research Collaboration
- Collaboration between academia and other sectors will strengthen research and deal with fear of research
- Ensure research is non-threatening to organization's turf
- Develop a program for recognizing contributors
- Identify and communicate with stakeholders
- Involve community in research
- Provincial director that links organizations who want research and researchers available/interest
- Involvement of seniors: back to grass roots; more action research in addition to regular research

Increased Value of Research
- Need to make it relevant
- Need to address media/press presentations of research
- Increase educational content in post-secondary programs → more focus on gerontology education in institutions
- Supporting students' interests in gerontology

Translating Research into Policy and Communicating It
- Research should be used to develop policies
- Need to work on implementing findings from research (not sitting on shelf)
- We are not connecting the importance of research with economy → older peoples' value to society
- Research needs to show connection to other aspects of society

Collaboration and Working Toward Shared Interests Among Professional Associations
- Clear delineation of common goals among professional associations
- Develop higher public profile for organizations such as the AAG, CAG, etc.
- Strengthening existing research/interest groups (e.g., AAG – Alberta Association on Gerontology) – focus on research mandate

Generate Research Dollars Through Advocacy Lobbying and Awareness
- Education of funding bodies
- Development of funding partners (private/public)
- Public/business champions for funding
- Education re: value/outcomes of funding
- Lobby funding bodies re: psychosocial research
- Create demand for funding dollars (undergraduate training)
- Tax reductions and incentives for research dollars

Resources
- Protected time for people who have skills (expectations for research on top of existing workload)
- Capacity building of personnel to do research
- Create a Provincial Endowment Fund for Aging Research (Pilot Project / Agencies) to Help Create Sustainable Funds for Ongoing Research)
- Develop funds for the training of researchers
- Establishment of a registry of existing data
- Open up use of existing data sets