

Community College Corner

Active Aging: Searching for 21st Century New Gerontology Paradigm Planning at Kapiolani Community College

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After four years of development and implementation, Kapiolani Community College's Kupuna (Elder) Education Center in Hawaii has much that it can be proud of. It has established a series of continuing education courses for the community, created a center with permanent staffing, hosted a website and networked widely in the community. As the Kupuna Education Center begins planning its next 5-years, there is reason for both excitement and apprehension. On the one hand, excitement is generated in the opportunity to meet the challenge of a rapidly growing elder population. On the other hand, apprehension stems from the status of gerontology programs because the level of student interest in gerontology and more specifically in certificates of gerontology has been waning. The question is how should gerontology programs plan for the future? How do we attract students, meet the community need and achieve financial viability?

While there may be a number of factors involved, I suspect that gerontology is facing a public relations challenge given the general focus on a need-driven and its pessimistic view of the plight of the elderly. Gerontology as a whole has tended to emphasize sick care rather than well care. Older people are often viewed as beset with complex chronic health conditions, long-term care needs, and frailty. They are blamed for the increasingly high cost of care and our national debt. Aging is often viewed as a major reason for the fiscal insolvency of both the Medicaid and the Medicare systems. Gerontology in many respects seems to have been tolerated but not embraced by scholars, students, and the general public. Perhaps as long as gerontology is viewed from this negative, pessimistic, need-based, and sick care perspective, its ability to create excitement and command attention may be limited. How then can a paradigm shift occur?

The Kapiolani Community College's Kupuna (Elder) Education Center has established several programs for family caregivers and direct care paraprofessional workers. Now, it will be embarking on initiatives related to an unfinished agenda - active aging. This is a shift from a sick care to a well-care focus of aging. While we have created some short-term training and activities on the multi-faceted aspects of active aging, no systematic theme has emerged. Will our Center be able to increase the attractiveness and popularity of gerontology as a result? Is it possible that Active Aging

could become the New Gerontology for the 21st Century? How do we accomplish this paradigm shift?

At the present time, there seems to be a wave of activities focusing on active aging and the positive themes of well-aging. The World Health Organization's (WHO) Active Aging policy framework in 2002 has been widely regarded as an important springboard for international support for this movement. Within the past decade, new terms such as positive aging, vital aging, Third Age, productive aging, successful aging and healthy aging are becoming commonly used. We are also witnessing the science of anti-aging medicine and the conceptual clarifications of the dimensions of multi-faceted meaning of wellness. New academic respectability is emerging as new centers such as the National-Louis University's Center for Positive Aging, Brigham and Women's Hospital's Positive Aging Resource Center, and Korea's Research Institute of Science for the Better Living of the Elderly (RISBLE) conduct evidence-based research and create innovative programs from an assets-based perspective. New journals, newsletters, and numerous books on wellness and positive aging themes are also appearing in increasing frequency. Conferences both national and international including many sponsored by the Active Aging Consortium for Asia Pacific (ACAP) and the International Council on Active Aging are occurring annually.

Kapiolani Community College will begin down this path in search for new opportunities to target active retirees, their strengths, assets, and interest for continued contributions to society. Will this lead to increased enrollment? Will it lead to increased interest? Will it help create a more financially viable gerontology program? Will it help us recruit more elders to become engaged? Can it transform our concept of aging and unleash the potential of Third Agers to engage, to volunteer and contribute? We are not sure but we believe that this is a direction worth pursuing since what has taken place to date has not worked well. Does this mean that our long-term care paraprofessional training is terminated? Absolutely not. It will continue and hopefully will expand as our center continues to collaborate and seek to add partnerships over time.

However, our future path will probably entail transforming how we view gerontology from sick care to well care, from deficit-focused training to an asset-based training. Even the demographic tidal wave which we have metaphorically referred to as the "aging tsunami," may not be the right paradigm. This metaphor may be too much a part of the old doom and gloom mentality that has so afflicted Gerontology. Perhaps, what we are envisioning is a view of aging as part of the life course perspective of continuing interrelationship of families, of roles related to life stage, of generational interactions, and intergenerational support. Perhaps what we are envisioning are methods of unleashing the power and potential of elders to create better communities.