

From the Director . . .

Change, in some part of our lives, is a constant occurrence. During the University's restructuring, the Center for Gerontology has experienced some anticipated and unanticipated changes – we are hosted by the new college of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, several colleagues affiliated with the Center have moved to other institutions while new affiliates have joined us, and the Center is no longer officially associated with Virginia Cooperative Extension. Although how we operate may have changed, the one thing not altered is our primary mission to “foster and facilitate research that enhances the quality of life of older adults.”

The research of faculty and students affiliated with the Center provides insight to the lives of and issues facing the current cohort of older adults that will assist future generations. With a little over 927,000 individuals joining the ranks of persons aged 65 and older last year, people do not want to just add years to their lives, they want to maintain the quality of their lives. Improving health and functional abilities, engaging in intergenerational and supportive family relationships, understanding housing and community-based care options, reducing incidences of elder abuse, and seeking opportunities for community participation and social engagement are but a few of the areas Virginia Tech faculty are investigating, as we continue to learn about the changing issues and needs of our elderly population.

~ Karen

Newsletter Now Online – The Center for Gerontology newsletter is only available online at www.gerontology.vt.edu (click “Resources,” then “Newsletters”). For issue notification, forward your email address to Erica Husser (ehusser@vt.edu) or call the Center at (540) 231-7657.

*Graduate Certificate in Gerontology
Options Expand*

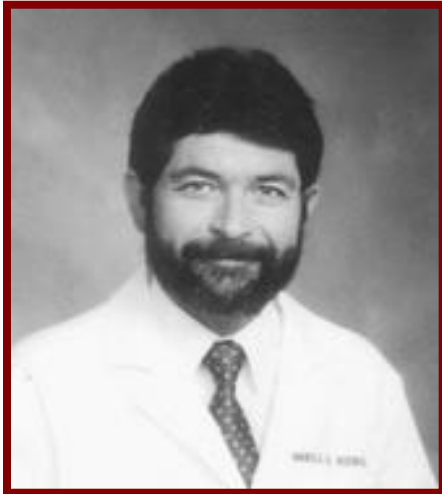
In an effort to broaden access to higher education, the Center for Gerontology announces a new option for the Graduate Certificate in Gerontology. The certificate is now available for those who have completed a bachelor degree but are not enrolled in a graduate program, as well as to graduate degree students. Center Associate Director, Dr. Rosemary Blieszner explains this non-degree enrollment plan is geared toward working individuals who are interested in adding expertise to their credentials. The Graduate Certificate in Gerontology program distinguishes individuals as knowledgeable, skilled, and committed professionals in the field of aging.

Certificate students complete 15 credits in social, psychological, and physical aspects of aging plus a practicum. For details and application material(s), visit the Center for Gerontology's website at www.gerontology.vt.edu.

*Karen Wilcox Rejoins
Center as Project Coordinator*

In November 2003, the Center for Gerontology welcomed back former research associate and Graduate Certificate alumna, Dr. Karen Wilcox. In her role as Project Coordinator, Dr. Wilcox is responsible for data collection for the Center's newest research project, “Caregivers of Persons with Mild Cognitive Impairment” (see “RESEARCH UPDATE” this issue). Dr. Wilcox received her Ph.D. in Family Studies and the Graduate Certificate in Gerontology from Virginia Tech in 1997. Welcome back, Karen!

***Koenig to Give Keynote Address at 8th
Annual Gerontology
Certificate & Awards Celebration
May 6, 2004***



Dr. Harold G. Koenig, M.D., M.H.Sc., will be the keynote speaker for the Gerontology Graduate Certificate and Awards Recognition Ceremony. Dr. Koenig is the founder and director of the Center for the Study of Religion/Spirituality and Health at Duke University. Board-certified in general and geriatric psychiatry, and geriatric medicine, Dr. Koenig is Professor of Psychiatry and Professor of Medicine at Duke University. He has published extensively in the fields of mental health, geriatrics, and religion, and has presented his research at numerous professional venues, including the United Nations.

Dr. Koenig is an advocate of increasing the presence of religion and spirituality in the daily practice of medicine and has testified before the U.S. Senate about the benefits of spirituality on health. The title of his presentation is *Religion, Spirituality and Health: History, Research, and Application*. The ceremony to honor students in the Graduate Certificate in Gerontology and recognize student and faculty award winners will be held **Thursday, May 6, 2004 from 7:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.** in **Fralin Biotechnology Center Auditorium** on the Virginia Tech campus. University and community members are invited to attend.

Improving End-of-Life Care

America's healthcare system can work miracles, but it does not do a good job with end-of-life care. A state-by-state report card funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation highlighted many opportunities for improvement. A local coalition to support efforts to improve end-of-life care has been launched by Anne Glass, Ph.D., senior project associate of the Center for Gerontology, and Sarah Gilbert from Radford University.

The coalition is needed because death is the last taboo subject. Glass notes, "With people living so much longer, you can now be in your 40s before you ever have personal experience with the loss of a loved one, so people don't know what to do when called on to help." Her goal is to help people begin to talk about the end of life so they become more comfortable with it. For example, 70 percent of Americans say they would choose to die at home but the reality is only 25 percent succeed in this goal. Many people do not know about hospice services and how they can support a family who wants to keep their loved one at home. For more information about the local coalition or to join the mailing list for a free e-newsletter on this topic, contact Anne Glass at anglass@vt.edu.

In youth we learn; in age we understand.
~Marie Ebner-Eschenbach



Students and faculty gather for a photo following the Fall 2003 Orientation Session for new and returning gerontology students.

RESEARCH UPDATE

Caregivers of Persons with Mild Cognitive Impairment: Information and Support Needs

One of the newer concepts of age-related memory deficit is mild cognitive impairment (MCI). MCI reflects self-reported changes in cognitive function that do not markedly interfere with work or social relations; it is viewed as a transitional phase between normal cognitive functioning and dementia. Researchers and practitioners lack a comprehensive understanding of what relatives of persons with MCI are actually experiencing and what they realistically believe would be helpful to manage their situation now and in the future.

Drs. Roberto and Blieszner at the Center for Gerontology recently received a research grant from the Alzheimer's Association to conduct a three-year study to learn more about what older adults and their families understand about memory loss in later life. Working in collaboration with Martha Anderson, Clinical Director of the Carilion Center for Healthy Aging's Memory Clinic in Roanoke, information is being collected from patient charts and semi-structured family interviews to investigate the information and support needs of 100 family members of older adults with MCI.

Each Friday, project coordinator, Dr. Karen Wilcox, discusses the Virginia Tech project with patients and the family member or friends who accompany them to the clinic, and invites them to participate in the study. If the individual and family/friend are willing to participate in the project, an interview is scheduled and the family member is given a set of instruments to complete prior to the face-to-face interview. After Dr. Wilcox interviews the patient and a family member/friend (the person who has the most frequent and consistent contact with the patient), a secondary family member (someone who communicates at least once a month with the patient) is interviewed over the telephone by the project's graduate assistant, Ms. Brianne Weaver. Follow-up contact will be made with the families at six month and one year intervals after the initial interviews are completed.

For more information about the project, contact the Center for Gerontology at (540) 231-7657. For specific information about the Carilion Center for Healthy Aging's Memory Clinic, please call Martha Anderson at (540) 981-7653.

The emotional, financial, and social consequences of Alzheimer's disease are so devastating, it deserves special attention. Research is the only hope."

~President Ronald Reagan, 1983

Southern Gerontological Society Honors Dr. Karen A. Roberto

Karen A. Roberto, Professor and Director of the Center for Gerontology, has been selected by the Southern Gerontological Society as the 2004 recipient of the Gordon Streib Academic Gerontologist Award. This award recognizes Dr. Roberto's outstanding career-long contributions to the advancement of gerontology through excellence in research, teaching, and professional service. Dr. Roberto has been director of the Center for Gerontology, a university research center, since 1996.



The Center, with over 60 faculty affiliates across campus, has completed two successful university reviews under Dr. Roberto's administration and continues to expand its portfolio of funded research projects. Dr. Roberto has won numerous other awards, including the 1995 Distinguished Alumna Award from Texas Tech's College of Human Sciences, the 1998 Outstanding Educator Award from the Virginia Association on Aging, and the 2001 Excellence in Research and Creative Scholarship Award from Virginia Tech's College of Human Resources and Education. She is a fellow of the Gerontological Society of America, the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, and the National Council on Family Relations.

Forum Follow-Up

On January 30, Dr. Janet L. Ramsey, Graduate Certificate in Gerontology alumna and associate professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, presented “*What’s Faith Got to Do with It? Aging Well through Spiritual Resiliency*” for the Center’s Spring Research Forum. Based on case study examples from her cross-national research on how elderly persons use their belief systems in making sense of the life events that have occurred, Dr. Ramsey demonstrated the theoretical and practical utility of attending to spirituality and wisdom in old age. See Ramsey and Blieszner, *Spiritual Resiliency in Older Women: Models of Strength for Challenges through the Life Span*, Sage Publications, 1999.



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*Virginia Tech is an Equal Opportunity/
Affirmative Action Employer*

Resources on Aging

OLDER AMERICANS 2000: Key Indicators of Well-Being – www.agingstats.gov

This new report from the Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics focuses on several important areas in the lives of older people - population, economics, health status, health risks and behaviors, and health care.

ELDERCARE LOCATOR - www.eldercare.gov

Eldercare Locator, a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging, connects older Americans and their caregivers with state and local area agencies on aging and community-based organizations.

Center for Gerontology STAFF

Karen A. Roberto, Ph.D., Professor & Director
Rosemary Blieszner, Ph.D., Alumni Distinguished Professor & Associate Director
Karen Mabry, Administrative Assistant
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Graduate Assistants: Nancy Brossoie, Christina Gigliotti, Kat Hertlein, Erica Husser, Audrey Kemp, Gus Teller, Brianne Weaver
Undergraduate Assistants: Ashley Lambert, Tom Valle

Giving to the Center for Gerontology Your Support Goes A Long Way

This year, as a result of your support, the Center for Gerontology provided seven students with travel awards to attend and present their research projects at annual meetings of the Gerontological Society of America (San Diego; November 2003), the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (Richmond; February 2004), and the Southern Gerontological Society (Atlanta; April 2004). In addition, your donations enabled the Center to invite international and national scholars to speak at our Research Forums. Experts in the field of gerontology shared their knowledge and research with students, faculty and community members.

Contributing to the Center for Gerontology does make a difference! Please make a contribution now to help support ongoing gerontology programs such as student travel, special publications, scholarships, and professional development activities. Visit www.givingto.vt.edu or the Center for Gerontology’s website at www.gerontology.vt.edu.