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Center for Gerontology champions quality of life for older adults

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BLACKSBURG, VA., March 10, 2008 -- For 30 years, the research, education, and outreach programs of the Virginia Tech Center for Gerontology have enhanced the quality of life of older adults.

Gerontologist Jon (Joe) Hendricks, dean of the University Honors College and professor of sociology at Oregon State University, will give the keynote presentation at the official celebration luncheon on March 26.

Hendricks is a past president of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, has chaired both the sociology of aging and life course section of the American Sociological Association and the behavioral and social sciences section for the Gerontological Society of America. He received the association's 2004 Clark Tibbitts Award for outstanding contributions to gerontology. Hendricks is author or editor of more than three dozen books. He is editor for the *Society and Aging* series for Baywood Publishing Co. and previously co-edited the *Foundations of Gerontology* series for Little, Brown.

People nationwide have reason to celebrate the Virginia Tech Center for Gerontology's decades of contributions.

"The center focuses primarily on family gerontology, health and aging, and elder rights," said professor and center director Karen Roberto, who is also the interim director of the [Institute for Society, Culture, and Environment](#) at Virginia Tech.

On-going research by the [Center for Gerontology](#) that is an example of both family gerontology and health and aging is the study of families of people with mild cognitive impairment, funded by the Alzheimer's Association. The research has discovered that families need information about changes in memory, help to identify effective coping strategies, and support for the social and emotional changes they are experiencing. As a result, the center created a research-based guide for elders and families.

[View the guide.](#) (PDF)

In the area of elder rights, the center works on policy to address abuse and provision of community services. For example, Pamela Teaster, who was a doctoral student then a faculty member with the center, drafted the public guardianship legislation for Virginia. Another example is an assessment of the current and future need for public guardians, carried out for the Virginia Department for the Aging. The center also is assisting with the evaluation of the "No Wrong Door/Aging and Disability Resource Center" program to improve how information is gathered from clients who need more than one service.

In addition to its core faculty, the center has more than 70 affiliates throughout the university, such as Toni Calasanti, professor in sociology, who is doing research funded by the Virginia Center on Aging on gender differences in informal care work for persons with Alzheimer's disease, and Thurman Lockhart, associate professor in industrial systems engineering, who conducts research on slips and falls in late life.

The Center for Gerontology provides seed money to help researchers get the data they need to apply for larger grants. For example, the center funded Mike Madigan, associate professor of [engineering science and mechanics](#), to do preliminary work on age and balance so he could submit a proposal to the National Institutes of Health. He subsequently received \$139,844 from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health for a study on "Muscle strength and age effects in balance recovery."

In three decades, research by the center and affiliate faculty members has contributed to disease prevention and management, better health care delivery, improved family relationships, suitable housing, consumer products that meet the needs of the older adults, and reduction of fraud and abuse – and more, Roberto said. "And the challenges in understanding and meeting the needs of older adults continue with the rapid increase in the segment of the population over age 65," she said.

The center's core and faculty affiliates have received numerous national and international honors and awards for their work. For example, Calasanti, human development Professor Katherine Allen, and the center's associate director Alumni Distinguished Professor Rosemary Blieszner, have been named Petersen Fellows in Family Gerontology at Oregon State University. These nationally competitive appointments represent 25 percent of Petersen Fellow awards; no other university has had more than one appointment.

The center's research often has an outreach component. "Our outreach efforts provide research-based education and consultation to individuals, families, organizations, and communities throughout Virginia and beyond," Roberto said.

The center also has an educational component. "We have been awarding graduate certificates since 1985," said Blieszner. "The center's graduate certificate is one of the first programs awarded the Program of Merit distinction by the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education. Students in many majors across campus, such as architecture, urban studies, psychology, hospitality, education, human development, sociology, and biomedical science, enroll in a program of graduate study and conduct research that helps them connect their major to gerontology. In any given year, we have 15 to 20 certificate students."

For example, Teaster examined the nature and quality of care provided by public guardians in four states as her doctoral dissertation and received a degree in public administration and policy in 1997. She is now on the faculty at the University of Kentucky, is president of the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, on the American Bar Association Commission on Law and Aging, and on the Board of Trustees for the National Guardianship Foundation.

Student activities have been hands-on from the beginning, when a three-credit Project Home Repair Field Experience course was conceived as the best way to inform students of the social issues and underlying poverty and aging problems in Appalachia, Blieszner said. "Our educational programs prepare researchers, educators, and human service professionals for careers addressing the needs of older adults and improving their quality of life."

Many students are supported with scholarships. In fact, three \$10,000 AARP scholarships were awarded to Virginia Tech students in 2005 when only 30 were awarded nationwide.

Graduate Certificates and scholarships will be presented at the anniversary luncheon and the outstanding accomplishments of faculty affiliates will be recognized. For more information, contact the center at (540) 231-7657.

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