

Discovery - Learning - Engagement

Fall 2007 Newsletter

From the Director . . .

Fall semester at university campuses is a time of transitions and opportunities. That has certainly been the case at the Center for Gerontology. I am very excited to announce that two new faculty members, Drs. Tina Savla and Victoria Curtis, joined the Center's core faculty in August. Both are developing research agendas that will contribute to the Center's focus on family gerontology and health and aging. Although some of the students who worked at the Center have moved on, we now have five graduate students and several undergraduate and community volunteers who assist with various aspects of our research. Beyond the walls of the Center, there are 71 faculty affiliates (including administrators and professional staff) from 7 colleges, representing 30 different departments or organizational units on campus. Together, our research, scholarship, and professional activities contribute to the scientific literature, and inform practice and policy initiatives that enhance the quality of life of older adults. In addition, the strong partnerships the Center and its affiliates have with external partners provide many opportunities for collaborative research, and for enhancing resources that will ensure the vitality of gerontology on our campus for years to come.

~ Karen

***AARP Virginia Tech Memorial Fund for Gerontology
Accepting Contributions***



In the wake of the April 16th tragedy, the Virginia chapter of AARP donated \$32,000 to the Center for Gerontology in honor of the 32 students and faculty lost. Deeply moved by the character and resilience of the Virginia Tech community that became so apparent in the aftermath of that tragic event, AARP Virginia made the donation to inspire and increase the number of students entering the field of gerontology. With over 35 million members, AARP is the leading nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization for people age 50 and over in the United States. AARP is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for all individuals as they age.

Placed in an endowment account so that the memorial will continue in perpetuity, the Center is actively seeking contributions from community organizations and individuals to reach the \$50,000 minimum required for an endowment fund. Once the fund reaches the targeted amount, the Center will use the annual income distributions to provide support for student activities and programs that will enhance learning and interest in aging.

The Center's goal is to award the first AARP Virginia Tech Memorial Fund for Gerontology student scholarship in Spring 2008. To help us reach this goal, please contact the Center (540-231-7657; gero@vt.edu) today for more information about contributing to the fund.

Alzheimer's Association Grant Extends Research on MCI

Drs. Karen A. Roberto and Rosemary Blieszner received a second grant from the Alzheimer's Association in support of their research on families with mild cognitive impairment (MCI). MCI refers to age-related declines in memory and other cognitive processes that may interfere with daily functioning. Many clinicians view MCI as a transitional phase between normal cognitive aging and dementia.

The purpose of the new three-year study is to identify key variables that place families of persons with MCI at risk for poor psychosocial outcomes. The MCI research team will conduct a third set of interviews with families involved in the original study and expand the study sample to include 40 minority families; 10 from Virginia and 30 from Chicago. New collaborators on the project are Dr. William Dale (University of Chicago) and Dr. Greg Sachs (Indiana University School of Medicine, formerly at UC). They will oversee data collection at the UC Center for Comprehensive Care and Research of Memory Disorders. Study findings will fill a gap in the research literature concerning the challenges and outcomes for racially, socially, and economically diverse families in this precaregiving stage of memory loss. Understanding family responses to early memory loss will provide useful information for the planning and delivery of services and programs and for the tailoring of education and interventions for subgroups of families dealing with MCI.

Center Collaborates with State and Local Agencies to Assess Needs of Older Adults

The Center for Gerontology, under the leadership of Dr. Karen A. Roberto, completed two needs assessment projects this summer. The purpose of the first project was to identify the need for public guardians for persons aged 18 and older living in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Public guardianship refers to the appointment and responsibility of a public official or publicly funded program who serves as a legal guardian in the absence of willing and responsible family members or friends, or resources to employ a private guardian. As of July 2006, 15 public guardian and conservator programs were located throughout the Commonwealth. The Virginia General Assembly funded the project and assigned responsibility to the Virginia Department for the Aging (VDA). VDA contracted with the Center to design and implement the study. VDA will share the findings with key constituent groups and policy makers.

The New River Valley Agency on Aging (NRV AoA) also contracted with the Center to assess current and future needs of older adults served by the NRV AoA. The NRV AoA is one of 25 local Area Agencies on Aging in Virginia. Services offered through NRV AoA include homebound meals, congregate meals, in-home care, respite services, transportation, care coordination, legal assistance, and insurance counseling. Over 300 noninstitutionalized residents 50 years of age and older residing in Montgomery County, Pulaski County, Giles County, Floyd County, and Radford City participated in the study. The NRV AoA will use the study findings to inform the development of its future service plans.

Changing Faces at the Center For Gerontology

New Faculty Appointments

The Center for Gerontology would like to welcome two new faculty members: Drs. Tina Savla, and Victoria S. Curtis.

Tina Savla, PhD, assistant professor of adult development and aging, holds a shared faculty appointment with the Center for Gerontology and the Department of Human Development. Her responsibilities at the Center include pursuing an externally funded research agenda, supporting faculty affiliates in their grant development activities, and serving in the role of statistical co-investigator on appropriate grant proposals/projects. Dr. Savla earned her PhD from the University of Georgia in Child and Family Development. She completed a postdoctoral fellowship awarded through the National Institute of Mental Health at Penn State University. Dr. Savla's research addresses two important issues in gerontology - the effects of major and minor events and stressors on intergenerational relationships and caregiving behavior and the assessment of pain management strategies such as mindfulness meditation for persons with musculoskeletal disorders. Her statistical expertise includes working with intensive longitudinal designs, missing data, dyadic and multilevel data, and using time series and nonlinear modeling techniques. Tina's can be reach at jsavla@vt.edu.



Victoria S. Curtis, PhD joins the Center as a postdoctoral associate and research coordinator for the Center's new MCI project (see story page 2). Dr. Curtis earned her Ph.D. in Sociology from Western Michigan University and is a medical sociologist. Prior to joining the Center, she worked at the Kercher Center for Social Research at Western Michigan University where she served as the lead evaluator for "Kalamazoo Wraps" a six-year, \$6M SAMHSA project which examined serious emotional disorders in children and youth with a substance abuse component. She has worked on a wide variety of other research projects including client and caregiver satisfaction assessments with adult respite, health care access among individuals uncovered by or lacking health insurance, and occupational environmental toxic exposure among foundry workers. Dr. Curtis is interested in pursuing rural health research and has recently completed a study of the relationship between coronary heart disease, and gender in explaining women's heart outcomes. Vikki's email address is vcurtis@vt.edu.

The Center Welcomes Three Graduate Research Assistants

This Fall, three new graduate research assistants joined returning research assistants Erica Husser, PhD-candidate in Human Development, and Marya McPhearson, who will complete her Master's degree in Human Development in December.

Originally from Russia, Tamara Savelyeva is a doctoral candidate in Agriculture and Extension Education. Tamara received her BS and MS degrees in Biology, Ecology, and Geography at Ural State Pedagogical University. Prior to coming to Virginia Tech, she pursued graduate studies in environmental management and education in the Department of Natural Resources at Cornell University. Tamara is involved with the Center's five-year investigation of rural older women's use of health management strategies. Her research focuses on the ways that learning environments emerge and develop in environmental science and education in a global context. While studying in Russia, Tamara noted that gerontology was not a cohesive, stand-alone discipline, but she was intrigued by "aging science" that was taught across her coursework. Tamara said she is "growing and learning as I broaden and bridge my field with gerontology."

Kristen B. Pujari, a member of the MCI research team, is a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and is currently working on obtaining her LPC licensure. She earned her Master's of Psychology in Clinical Counseling from The Citadel. Her dissertation focuses on improving communication between counselor educators and school psychologists through collaborative efforts to affect treatment planning and school behavioral interventions. Kristen is also interested in social stigma related to mental illness and efforts that promote caregiver wellness. As she puts it, "I feel it is a responsibility of my generation to provide care, support, and nurturance for our aging population, through research and practice."

Ryan Traylor is a doctoral student in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT). He completed his undergraduate work at Brigham Young University and received his MA at the University of Nebraska in Family and Consumer Sciences, specializing in MFT. Ryan's research interests focus on MFT and aging families, specifically issues surrounding grandparents raising grandchildren. Ryan is working with Dr. Tina Savla.



*Center for Gerontology staff: left to right
1st row -Gail Evans, Tina Savla, Amanda Wade
2nd-Karen Roberto, Carlene Arthur, Vikki Curtis
3rd-Marya McPherson, Kristen Pjuari
4th-Erica Husser, Rachel Crump, Teresa Daniels,
and Tamara Savelyeva*

Volunteers Support Center Research

Undergraduate and community volunteers provide faculty and staff help with a variety of tasks necessary to carry out the Center's research agenda successfully. Their assistance is invaluable!

Gail Evans dedicates her volunteer time to the MCI project, where she is responsible for coding and verifying transcripts from the open-ended interviews with family members. Gail started her professional journey in the medical field as a medical technologist in Kentucky, then moved to the University of Florida Medical School as the director of pathology. Later, she worked at Rutgers University in biological research while earning her MEd in Psychological Development. From there she worked in the pharmaceutical industry in regulatory affairs, directing new drug applications for FDA and international agencies' approval. When Gail retired from the industry, she moved to Blacksburg, enrolled in gerontology classes at Virginia Tech, and joined the Center's MCI research team!

Amanda Wade also is working on the MCI project. A Roanoke native, Amanda will graduate in December with a bachelor's degree in Psychology; her goal is to become a licensed professional counselor (LPC). Her work at the Center has allowed Amanda to become more familiar with issues related to aging, which she says has informed her professionally and personally.

Teresa Daniels is pursuing a double major in Human Development and Psychology and getting ready to graduate in May. Theresa has given her time and energy to several research projects including Hurricane Katrina and MCI, as well as assisting Dr. Roberto with some administrative tasks. In the midst of applying for graduate school, Theresa is considering a career as a MFT or LPC.

Rachel Crump volunteers at the Center as part of her duties as a College of Liberal Arts and Human Science Ambassador. She works with the graduate students and staff on a variety of projects. Rachel is a Human Development major and will graduate in May. She performs and choreographs with the Virginia Tech Contemporary Dance Ensemble.

New and Returning Advisory Board Members

The Center for Gerontology receives guidance and support from its external advisory council, The Futures Board. Futures Board members represent a variety of aging-related agencies, organizations, and services across the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Board meets at Virginia Tech twice a year. Katie Roeper (Senior Navigator, Richmond) and Tulane Patterson (Generation Solutions, Lynchburg) begin their first term on the Board this Fall. Long time supporters and past board members, Terry Smith (Department of Medical Assistance Services, Richmond), and Susan Williams (Local Agency on Aging, Roanoke) also returned to the Futures Board. In addition, Linda Nablo, who in her new role as Virginia's Commissioner for the Department for the Aging, serves on the board as an ex officio member. For more information about the Futures Board, go to <http://www.gerontology.vt.edu/faculty/futuresBoard.html>

The Center also reports to an internal advisory group known as the Stakeholder's Committee. New members joining the Committee this year are Sue Ott Rowlands, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, who assumed the role of chair, and Tom Inzana, Associate Vice President for Research Programs, Office of the Vice President for Research. The Stakeholder's Committee has oversight of all financial, administrative, and fiduciary affairs of the Center.

Farewell and Best Wishes



The Center for Gerontology said goodbye to a valued member of our team this summer. In August, Nancy Brossoie, who had served in a number of roles over the past five years, accepted a position as a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Health Policy, Planning, and Research at the University of New England (UNE) in Portland, Maine.

The UNE Center is primarily a consulting firm for healthcare systems across the US. Nancy is currently involved in three projects: two community health needs assessments in Connecticut, and a class action law suit against a major tobacco company. In a recent email to the Center, she told us, “the environment is fast-paced and the learning curve has been steep, but I’m enjoying the challenge.”

Although everyone at the Center misses Nancy, we wish her much success and happiness in her new position. We are proud to claim her as one of our own!

Congratulations Carlene!

Carlene Arthur, Administrative Assistant for the Center for Gerontology, completed the Research Administrator Certificate Program through the Faculty Development Institute at Virginia Tech in September 2007. To receive her certificate, Carlene successfully completed 10 two-hour course sessions that covered a full range of topics from proposal submission to grant management protocol. The sessions included university policy and regulations, budgeting, accounting, personnel administration, and human research and compliance.

Center for Gerontology Fall Research Forum

Dr. Tina Savla, Assistant Professor of Human Development and the Center for Gerontology, will be the speaker for the Center’s Fall Research Forum. Dr. Savla will present her research on dysregulation of daily cortisol rhythm in caregivers. The forum is cosponsored by the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences and the College of Science, in support of the Developmental Sciences Initiative. The forum will be held at the Fralin Auditorium on Friday, November 30, 2007, from 2:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. A reception for Dr. Savla will follow.

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