

Learning outside the box

By Leslie Mertz

Education has entered a new age where students venture beyond the boundaries of their disciplines to work with and learn from colleagues in other departments and research areas. The WSU Institute of Gerontology is welcoming the shift both through its research program and with the help of a large grant that will support at least 20 pre-doctoral students over a five-year period.

“What’s particularly exciting about this grant is that it’s not just within the institute, but it’s university-wide. Our faculty and associate faculty have really bought into this cohesive program in terms of training students on multidisciplinary aspects of aging,” said Peter Lichtenberg, director of the Institute of Gerontology, professor of psychology, and in the WSU School of Medicine departments of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience, and Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

Through this highly competitive training grant, known as a T32, from the National Institute on Aging (NIA), the Wayne State Institute of Gerontology will embark on a collaborative effort with five WSU colleges. Together, they will invite new pre-doctoral students to undertake research on aging and urban health. While the students will continue to earn a degree in a traditional academic department, they will receive their research training in gerontology at the institute. The five colleges are Nursing, Engineering, Liberal Arts, Science and Pharmacy & Allied Health.

“The grant, called the Predoctoral Research Training Program in Aging and Urban Health, will fund two students at the level of graduate research assistant in the first year, four students in the second, six in the third, eight in the fourth and 10 in the fifth – and

with a university match, this will total 20 students,” Dr. Lichtenberg explained. The institute currently has 17 students, including the two students funded with monies from the initial year of the grant.

A true training environment

Basically, the grant will enhance the program that is already in place. He pointed out that the institute has been developing its training program since 1996 with an eye toward the NIA training grant. “We originally applied to the NIA in 1999 and we got a ‘good’ priority score, and then this past year, we really strengthened the program by broadening it to reach out to all corners of the campus, and by demonstrating student progress.” That led to an “outstanding” score, as well as approval of the grant.

The institute set its sights on the NIA grant for two reasons; he began, “For one, I think that having a true training environment really keeps your faculty fresh, keeps them challenged, keeps them excited about their research and keeps them on their toes.”

Second, he felt the grant could help the institute expand its reach. University students frequently are confined within one discipline, or even one small area within a discipline, he suggested. “Often they don’t have a close affiliation with the wide range of people with whom they will be interacting as professionals. We can provide that here.” The best way to bridge that gap was “to develop some kind of cohesive program in which we are not just helping somebody get a degree, but we’re really helping cohorts come into the profession.”

He added, "We thought that we could carve out an area of training excellence and demonstrate that we are very much a mentoring environment."

A sense of community

The institute has three traits that have led to the success of its program and receipt of the training grant, Lichtenberg recounted. "One is the way we mentor students. We have three-person mentoring teams working with each student rather than just one principal advisor." Through this approach, each student meets in the fall and spring with his or her mentoring team to set and review goals in the areas of research productivity, academic progress toward the degree and professional service.

"In addition, those teams are multidisciplinary," he continued. "By definition, then, more than one discipline is represented by faculty on these teams. This is very important, because it starts to build a little bit of a sense of community in that the student doesn't deal with just one person and stay isolated, but instead interacts with different professionals in different areas on an ongoing basis. That draws out the student to think more collaboratively, and to consider what another discipline might be able to add in terms of strategies for research."

The institute program also encourages students to produce scholarly works. In the four years from 1996 to 2000, institute students published 30 research papers, and gave about 70 national and regional presentations. "Our strategic plan specifically states that we want each student to average one publication a year," Lichtenberg said. He acknowledged that the requirement is rigorous, but added, "The publication process is a great experience for the students, because they get peer-review

comments that are very, very challenging. The students really have to come in with a very well-thought-out, concise product for their work to be accepted for publication." He added, "These avenues give them a leg up when they go out to compete for post-doctoral appointments and other positions. It's been very exciting for us and for the students."

In addition, he reported that several students won regional, state or national awards for their research, and three even received small federal grant awards for their dissertation work or for research grant proposals they submitted. "We try to get them involved in looking for funding opportunities and entering other competitions early and often. The results have been fabulous."

"A good thing"

Another aspect of the institute program is its emphasis on research methodology. "Here in our hallways, we have some top-notch methodologists with both quantitative and qualitative methodological expertise," Lichtenberg said. "We push our students to take more statistics than they otherwise would, and to learn more about analysis and research design. It's a good thing to start off by having them learn it early and gain some familiarity with it before they get too scared off. We think this really pays off for them."

Besides the multidisciplinary mentoring teams and wide range of research assistance, the institute program also includes a wide-ranging colloquium series. "This has become the place where students gain exposure to many disciplines and a variety of researchers who give their perspectives through their studies on aging," he said. "For instance, we have economics students listening to what a psychologist has to say, or psychology students listening to an engineer or to an economist. It broadens

their thinking about aging and aging research.”

Speakers at the weekly colloquia comprise nationally and regionally known researchers, institute faculty and faculty associates, and students. Sometimes speakers address professional development issues, such as the practicalities of obtaining grants, writing research papers or getting jobs,” Lichtenberg said. “Overall, we get tremendous participation at the colloquia.”

The future

With the NIA grant, the number of institute students will at least double by 2005.

Lichtenberg guessed that the grant will likely generate additional interest among other students and might push the total number even higher. He noted that the institute has already begun to see a noticeable increase in the number of African-American graduate students. “That is one of the exciting things, and we’re delighted. We have spent a lot of time

building those bridges and relationships, and it’s really working well.”

Besides the growth in student number, he believes the grant will help boost the institute’s reputation among other centers. “These grants are very difficult to get, so this award will elevate the Institute of Gerontology in terms of its standing among gerontological institutes and centers across the country.”

The institute’s heightened visibility and the increase in students have combined to create an excitement and a sense of mission at the institute, he remarked. “There definitely is an increasing demand for professionals in the area of aging, and that demand will continue. Even though we’re making great health strides and the average older adult is much healthier than 20 years ago, the sheer number of older adults will continue to rise. That means we’ll still have many of those challenges ahead of us.”

“We’ll be ready.”

Biography

Dr. Peter Lichtenberg received his bachelor’s degree in psychology from Washington University in St. Louis in Missouri, and his master’s degree and his doctoral degree in clinical psychology from Purdue University in Indiana. He joined Wayne State University in 1991.