CLAS STATEMENT ON UF-WIDE INITIATIVE IN AGING:

With nearly 3 million older adults living in Florida, we rank second only to California in the number of elderly citizens who reside in the state. Consequently, the College recognizes the need to be at the forefront in developing a university-wide vision for the study of aging. The CLAS Center for Gerontological Studies (CGS) is the hub connecting various college aging initiatives to the wider campus efforts in aging. Through CGS, college faculty participate in several critical areas related to aging, the life course, and life-span development. However, the recognition of aging as an issue that is not limited to older persons, but rather as a lifelong process of human development is a particular strength of the faculty that needs to be strengthened through building faculty expertise in demography. Within the college, there are five primary foci for the study of aging: 1) The Aging Mind group in the Department of Psychology, whose principal focus is consistent with the National Institute on Aging call for attention to how the aging mind is affected by the context in which an individual operates in everyday life, with an emphasis on how optimal psychological functioning can be maintained into late life through preservation of the cognitive skills and abilities (e.g., memory, intellectual abilities) required to perform everyday tasks. As well, this group examines how the aging self and personality are resources and buffers for threats and losses that are inevitable as people age. Additionally, the Department of Psychology offers an APA-accredited counseling psychology training program that provides specialized training in Counseling Geropsychology. This program is unique because it is only one of a few programs offering such training. Unlike some counseling psychology programs, the program here at UF encourages research and takes a ‘scientist-practitioner’ approach to training. Research on aging in the Department of Psychology also contributes to understanding the aging brain (vs. aging mind). Work in this area is being conducted that will advance our understanding of the neurobiology of aging in rodent models. Additionally, Psychology is currently planning recruitment strategies to bring other outstanding scholars to UF, whose work with elderly stroke patients will offer critical insights into aging and brain function; 2) The Social Context of Aging group in the Departments of Sociology, and Anthropology focus on the roles of inequality in aging processes and in the context of social changes in the individual, the family, the community, and the larger society. Specifically, within Sociology, research in aging, the life course, and health provides a diverse perspective on aging and covers a broad range of studies from comparative, macrosociological studies of retirement, to the everyday narratives of being and becoming aged. Beyond a focus on retirement, researchers in the Sociology Department also specialize in institutionalization (e.g., nursing home placement and long-term care), the social psychology of aging, widowhood and survivorship, medicalization, and the later life family; 3) The Community, Neighborhood, and Housing group in the Geography Department focuses on factors such as a person’s housing partners, shelter and care options, neighborhood condition, regional and cultural differences in living conditions and opportunities, and differences between people who are aging in rural versus urban areas; 4) The Communication and Aging group in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders devotes attention to physical aspects of aging, including the aging voice, declined auditory perception skills, and psychosocial adjustment to living with hearing loss; CSD is intricately involved with multiple projects studying the effects of normal aging as well as the impact disease has on the elderly population. Several faculty from the department have been examining aging for years including study of the speech and voice characteristics of the elderly and the impact of hearing loss on the aged individual as well as their partner. Other research in the area of speech and voice include how those parameters can be manipulated to produce a younger sounding voice quality; ways in which spectral shape discrimination in elderly hearing-impaired patients, which impacts the future development of hearing aids. Moreover, researchers in CSD are productively working with patients with Alzheimer's examining
working memory. This area of investigation has made a substantial impact on the design of many studies going on at the Brooks Rehabilitation Center and the MBI. Other research on the elderly voice also is ongoing, specifically the impact of diseases such as spasmodic dysphonia in older women and Parkinson's disease. Recent studies in Parkinson's disease has examined the effect of a novel patented treatment device for improving such functions as breathing, cough, swallow and speech; and 5) The National Institute on Aging Predoctoral Research Training Grant, which has two components. First, it is a selective mentored research training program, open to pre-doctoral students at UF who are interested in research careers in aging. Second, for a selected subset (typically 2 to 4 students per year) of trainees, the program also provides stipend and tuition support. Despite these particular strengths, the College recognizes the need to build on this existing infrastructure and to enhance existing relationships with other units conducting aging research on campus, to integrate university-wide research endeavors.

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