



The Busse Legacy

By George L. Maddox, PhD

In a career that spanned over half a century at Duke, Ewald W. Busse, MD, was a pioneer in the development of gerontology and geriatrics and the founding director of the Duke Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development.

His arrival from the University of Colorado Medical Center in 1953 proved to be timely. Duke University Medical Center leadership had an emerging interest in the interdisciplinary research by physicians and in increasing the interaction of physicians with scientists outside the medical center that coincided with Busse's emerging interest in multidisciplinary research on social and behavioral factors associated with mental functioning in later life. Busse proved to be a man with vision.

While developing a department of psychiatry at Duke, Bud Busse, as he was known to friends and colleagues, seized an opportunity provided by the National Institutes of Health to develop research and training programs in human aging. He proved to be an innovative administrator.

Within his first two years at Duke, he had chartered what he intended to be, and what later became, a multidisciplinary, university-wide Center for the Study of Aging that included scientists from departments in both the Medical Center and Arts and Sciences. He included among his advisors prominent intellectual leaders in both medicine and in behavioral and social sciences. All Center faculty were required to have an appointment in some academic department in the university. Members of the new Center's Advisory Council were appointed by the university president who was to receive an annual report of accomplishments.

While the Aging Center focused initially on research and postdoctoral training, in time Busse's initial objectives for the Aging Center were also expressed in a multidisciplinary undergraduate program in human development and aging. It later became a model for an internship program for "Leadership in an Aging Society" for both undergraduate and graduate students.

In 1957 the U.S. surgeon general Leroy Burney designated the two-year-old Duke Center as one of the first five regional Centers on Aging of the National Institutes of Health. Of these five, the Duke Center, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2005, was the only one to reach the milestone.

The capstone of these early developments in gerontology and geriatrics at Duke was the design and building of a wing of the Medical Center to house a team of multidisciplinary investigators

and their research and training programs. The Duke Endowment and the NIH were the primary contributors of a centrally located facility whose computing facilities, laboratories, research space, and offices came to represent Duke's timely commitment to the research and training needs of an aging population. The Aging Center became the visible space on campus where pioneering research and training on aging occurred.



While Busse had every reason to be pleased with the early years of the new Duke Center and the building that was named in his honor on the 30th anniversary of the program in 1980, he worried about its location in the Medical Center. Locating the Center more centrally on the campus, he felt, would have signaled more clearly his intent to emphasize that understanding human aging should be a university-wide multidisciplinary initiative.

Building sustainable all-university research and training programs in a major university was a major accomplishment that illustrated creative administrative leadership. But equally notable are Busse's contributions to the timely development of gerontology and geriatrics nationally and internationally in anticipation of the now clearly recognizable challenges of aging populations:

The Duke Longitudinal Studies of Normal Aging (1955-1980): These pioneering, widely noted multidisciplinary studies of older adults living in the community laid the basis for realistically optimistic expectations of aging well and for anticipating the health and welfare resources required to fulfill these expectations.

Mentoring the next generation of gerontologists and geriatricians: Busse maintained the enthusiastic curiosity of a scholar and investigator over his entire career. Young investigators found him interested in their ideas and careers, but a mentor who encouraged them to chart their own futures. The memorable Monday Night Meetings over several decades brought Aging Center investigators to the gracious home of Bud and Ort Busse to benefit from discussion of their research with colleagues from a wide variety of backgrounds. A conscientious mentor, Busse helped young colleagues to develop the personal and professional connections on which careers are built.

Developing an infrastructure for research: While shared space for scholars and investigators working on related issues



facilitates useful intellectual exchange, Busse anticipated correctly the value of three distinctive resources for his Center for the Study of Aging—a lecture series, a computing facility, and a colony of experimental animals. The Duke Center’s lecture series in the early years brought many leading scholars and investigators to the Duke campus to discuss current and developing knowledge and research. A state-of-the-art computing facility that was on the leading edge of computing on the campus brought the best hardware available and the best available software and statistical consultation to assist Center investigators. The Aging Center’s animal colony was among the first such facilities at Duke and was available to all appropriate investigators. These three resources, housed in the Aging Center, ensured the new Center’s visibility on the campus and attracted colleagues to research on issues of aging.

Personal and professional leadership: Busse’s academic and administrative leadership at Duke was evident in many ways. He was a successful department chair, Center director, and dean of medical education who, at his retirement, was honored by having the Center building named in his honor. But his leadership was far broader than the university. He was the initial president of the North Carolina Institute of Medicine, which created an annual Busse Award to honor individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the health and well-being of older adults. At the national level, he became president of and was honored for excellence by every organization in which he was active—the Gerontological Society of America, the American Geriatric Society, and the American Psychiatric Association. He was honored by election as a fellow of the Institute of Medicine and the National Academy of Sciences. He was president of the International Association of Gerontology and presided over its Congress in New York City in 1985.

Busse died in 2004. A large gathering in Duke Chapel celebrated his life and his founding of the Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development that has made such a difference to the university, the community, and the nation. ■