



# Postdoctoral Research Training

By George L. Maddox, PhD

In 1955 Bud Busse, founding director of the Duke Aging Center, envisioned an all-university, multidisciplinary program of research, training, and service intended to serve an aging population. The first component of the Duke program was a multidisciplinary longitudinal study of aging in the community begun in 1957. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recognized this initiative by naming Duke as one of five major universities to receive center grants to develop programs of research and research training to serve a rapidly growing older population.

With the Longitudinal Studies of Normal Aging under way and a team of multidisciplinary research investigators in place, in 1966 the Duke Center proposed to the NIH a research training program (RTP), “Behavior and Physiology in Aging,” to be directed by Carl Eisdorfer. The center’s established multidisciplinary research investigators in biomedicine and behavioral and social sciences were obviously important resources for a training program. The timing was right and NIH (initially funded by NICHD and transferred to the National Institute of Aging when it was created in 1974) awarded its first multidisciplinary research training program in aging. That program thrived and is now in its 42nd year.

An explanation of the continuing support of NIH for the Duke Postdoctoral RTP is succinctly summarized in the report of a multidisciplinary 22-person site visit in 1989. This mature RTP, the report concluded:

- is “well-designed...with a good track record of turning out investigators in aging...in an unusually rich environment for developing interest in aging and scientific skills;”
- has provided 38 well-published multidisciplinary mentors with active research funding and career interests in human aging who provide an unusually rich intellectual environment for individualized training in research;
- has complemented individualized training with regular exposure to core topics in research such as the multidisciplinary aspects of aging, research design and data analysis, ethical issues, and professional development; and
- has trained over the previous decade 89 postdoctoral fellows, 69 percent of whom have made a significant continuing commitment to aging research, usually in a college or university setting, and another 19 percent who have continued some involvement in aging research.

The Duke RTP, in sum, has been a “very successful program with a visible history of impressive cross-disciplinary research by productive fellows mentored by a strong faculty, a multidisciplinary environment, and ample resources.”

The site visit review clearly affirmed the continuing strength of the

original design of the Duke center for integrating multidisciplinary research and research training. The center’s RTP in aging benefited from interaction with other postdoctoral training programs in the university: Everett Ellinwood’s Neurosciences Program in Psychiatry; Ilene Sigler’s Adult Development Program in the Aging Center (both supported by NIMH); George Myers and Ken Land’s Demography Program in Sociology (NIA); and Harvey Cohen’s Geriatric Medicine Program (VA).

The only recommendations made by site visitors for strengthening the program were that even more emphasis should be placed on the established commitments to multidisciplinary training, behavioral and social research, and the recruitment of minority investigators.

The RTP has benefited from strong and creative leadership. Following the training program’s founding director Carl Eisdorfer, MD, PhD, now professor and chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Miami University School of Medicine, subsequent distinguished program leadership included Pete Elias, PhD, professor of psychology, University of Maine; Ilene Siegler, PhD, professor of medical psychology, Duke Department of Psychiatry; Harvey Cohen, MD, now Kempner Professor and chair, Duke Department of Medicine, and director, Duke Center for Aging; Erdman Palmore, PhD, professor emeritus of medical sociology, Duke Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science; Gail Marsh, PhD, professor emeritus of psychology, Duke Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science. Deborah Gold, PhD, associate professor of social psychology, Duke Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, currently coordinates the program.

While the directors, preceptors, and over 200 fellows who have participated in the Duke RTP are recognized research investigators and scholars in gerontology and geriatrics, many have also been recognized for outstanding organizational leadership in the Gerontological Society of America, the American Geriatric Society, the Institute of Medicine, and in the National Advisory Council of NIA/NIH. They have also been recognized by their peers as Distinguished Mentors, for Distinguished Lifetime Contributions to Research and Teaching, and for membership on the NIA National Advisory Council.

Now in its fifth decade of continuous support by NIH, the Duke Center’s RTP continues the hallmark strengths of a successful postdoctoral research training program in aging: a multidisciplinary team of recognized scholars and investigators in aging, and a multidisciplinary learning environment that provides preceptors who are experienced mentors in career development. The historic Duke Research Training Program continues to be a major national resource for assuring essential scholarship and research in gerontology and geriatrics. ■