PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT SUMMARY

1.   **Reporting Institution** <u>Eastern Illinois University</u>
2.   **Program Reviewed** <u>M.A. in Aging Studies</u>
3.   **Date** <u>February 12, 2021</u>
4.   **Contact Person** <u>Dr. Kathleen A. O'Rourke, Graduate Coordinator</u>
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5.   **Overview**

The M.A. in Aging Studies is administratively housed in the Department of Human Services and Community Leadership in the College of Health and Human Services. The program provides an online interdisciplinary education for future and current professionals in the field of aging/gerontology. Learning objectives are as follows.

1. Students will demonstrate knowledge and understanding representing appropriate breadth and depth in the physical, emotional, social, and economic aspects of aging. Students will also demonstrate an understanding of current theories of aging.
2. Students will demonstrate critical thinking skills with regards to aging topics.
3. Students will display the ability to communicate effectively and professionally information about aging in their written and oral work.
4. Students will demonstrate an understanding of research design and implementation, data analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of results in the context of current theories in aging. Students will also exhibit understanding of current research in the older adult population.
5. Students will interact effectively, sensitively, and ethically with older adults; and demonstrate understanding of the cognitive, physical, emotional, and sociocultural challenges specific to older adults and their families and caregivers. Students will also exhibit an awareness of the diversity of the older adult population through their coursework in the program.
6. Students will demonstrate the ability to connect and apply knowledge gained in Aging Studies coursework, internships, and research experiences in professional settings; and will reflect on such learning with meaning and purpose as part of their intellectual and personal development.

The M.A. in Aging Studies program is 1 of 5 graduate degree programs in Illinois. Our distinguishing features include: interdisciplinary course offerings dispersed across nine academic departmental units; fully online; most affordable; flexibility in full- or part-time enrollment; application acceptance and admissions on a rolling basis for any semester; and history of being the state's first gerontology graduate degree program, established in the 1980s. Students are prepared to launch or further aging/gerontology careers in human and social services, program and agency administration, residential long-term and rehabilitative/restorative care, geriatric health and wellness programs, government services and professional organizations, community outreach and education, and entrepreneurship. Since the previous review, significant revisions and changes have strengthened and revitalized the program components and all are detailed in #6.c. Examples of significant achievements include: student serving as Student Dean of the Graduate School; student selected in a competitive application process for Commencement Speaker; an Aging Studies faculty member selected as the University's Outstanding Graduate Faculty Mentor; curriculum review and implementation collaboration for a Dementia Friendly Community (a national initiative) in an East Central Illinois city; two Aging Studies faculty members secured approximately $800,000 in external grant funding over a 4-year period from the Illinois Science and Energy Innovation Foundation to research smart technology device design and use for older adults and their personal and residential living environments; and selection as a participant for research report, *Market Demand for a Graduate-Level Gerontology Program: Analysis of Regional and Local Employer Demand, Peer Program Characteristics, and Student Enrollments*. The main areas of concern are recruitment and enrollment and retention of students. While enrollment has increased in most years since the last review, there have been two slight declines and we need to continue working to avoid a pattern of decline. Therefore, we must explore and implement alternate or additional recruitment

strategies. One disadvantage to transitioning to an online degree program (although, benefits outweigh losses) was the loss of our international students, due to federal restrictions on the number of online classes allowed for international students. In 2014 and 2015, for example, we had what appeared to be a beginning and promising influx of students from Nepal and, in 2019, we lost two students to face-to-face programs.

6. Major Findings and Recommendations

a. Description and assessment of major changes in the program/disciplinary context

Changes in the field and changes in societal needs are interwoven and mutually influential. [1]Over the past 10 years, population growth of adults age 65 and older increased from 38.8 million to 52.4 million in 2018. By 2030, the estimated number is 73 million and, by 2060, the estimate is 94.7 million. The oldest old of the population, those 85+, are projected to more than double in number from the current 6.5 million to 12.4 million in 2040, representing a 123% increase. At the time of the last IBHE report in 2013, the Baby Boomer cohort (born 1946-1964) had just starting reaching age 65. Now, more than one-third of Baby Boomers are 65 and older. [2]Given the demands influenced by the population growth, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects the number of employment positions related to gerontology to increase by 17% between 2019 and 2029, representing a faster than average growth rate. [3]The most prevalent emerging and evolving issues related to aging and older adulthood include: family caregiving and person-centered care planning; physical and cognitive/mental health care, status, risks, and behaviors; economic burdens and affordable housing; and safety in environmental home and community conditions. The interdisciplinary structure of the M.A. in Aging Studies program aligns with the holistic nature of the field and needs of the older population . In other words, our students are learning about the whole person in later life and the interconnectedness of older persons' system elements (e.g., family/friends/caregivers, health and wellness, economics, housing, living environments, community supports) within their program courses and capstone experiences.

Student demand has significantly influenced revisions of major components of the Aging Studies program since the last review. Section 6.c. will elaborate more on these revisions. Past and current enrollment figures are as follows, along with an explanation of the trends.

2013 N=17	2014 N=10	2015 N=10	2016 N=14	2017 N=21	2018 N=24	2019 N=22	2020 N=16

When enrollment continued to decline in 2013 and 2014, the decision was made to restructure the program from face-to-face to fully online. In June 2015, the online program was launched in the summer term with five new M.A. in Aging Studies students and five remaining M.A. in Gerontology students who were nearing degree completion. In August 2015, a new Graduate Coordinator (Dr. Kathleen O'Rourke) was appointed and has remained in the position since that time. While the majority of academic units were supportive of the transition to a fully online mode of delivery, it took about 2 years between 2014 and 2016 for all participating academic units to navigate the transition together. By the end of 2016, the previously participating academic units, in addition to newly added academic units, reached full consensus and buy-in to participate. Since then, the collaborative and interdisciplinary working relationships of nine academic units have continued to be solid and mutually supportive.

Since 2015, prospective student inquiries, applications, admissions, and enrollment are monitored multiple times throughout every week of the calendar year. In over 95% of admission deferrals and student withdrawal cases since 2015, personal conflicts – as opposed to programmatic conflicts (e.g., choosing another program or attending another university) – are the given reasons. The top three personal reasons are: sudden or worsening challenges/conflicts with work-school-life balance; new or heightened family caregiver obligations and burdens; and changes in personal health status. These reasons align with the change in our student age demographic. Since 2015 and transitioning to fully online, the program's student demographics have shifted in age and outside employment status. The average age of students has increased, The majority is typically in their 30s or 40, some range in age from their 50s to early 70s, and the smallest percentage is

now in their 20s. Students in their 30s and beyond are often working full-time (many of whom are already employed in the aging/gerontology field), raising dependent children and/or providing some level of care for aging parents or an aging spouse, and entering into the years when their own personal acute or chronic health conditions manifest. Flexibility in the program (e.g., full or part time status, asynchronous online delivery, a wide array of course electives, block scheduling of 6- or 8- week courses in a semester) has been critical to recruitment and especially to retention of students. When students change their admissions acceptance decision or withdraw from the program, the Graduate Coordinator maintains periodic contact during the February and September advisement periods and prior to the start of each semester to provide new or revised plans of study options and to offer support in facilitating their return.

Our observations of prospective student inquiries, applications, and enrollment align with and are supported by the findings from the *Market Demand for a Graduate-Level Gerontology Program: Analysis of Regional and Local Employer Demand, Peer Program Characteristics, and Student Enrollments* report (EAB Global, Inc., 2019). [4]Findings yielded the top four factors that students consider in school selection are: distance learning options; flexible curriculum/course options; opportunities for direct work with professionals in aging field (e.g., internships, independent studies, assignments linking students with professionals); and affordable tuition. As the Aging Studies program has been revised and maintained, there is keen awareness of these factors and our program offers all four. [5]Furthermore, findings showed that students tend to: be working professionals seeking career advancement (usually with about 10 years of experience); have a Social Sciences undergraduate degree; be 40-60 years old; and be female. Again, these student demographics align very closely with ours and the Aging Studies program and curriculum structure remain inclusive to best support students in work-school-life balance, in pursuing goals of launching or continuing aging/gerontology careers, and in respecting diversity in needs of a wide age range.

b. Description of major findings and recommendations for program improvement

For the most recent Student Learning Assessment Program report, the program's objectives aligned with the goals established by the University's Council on Graduate Studies (CGS). Direct measures of rubrics were used to collect/analyze data from students' written work and oral presentations. Indirect measures of students' and internship site supervisors' evaluations were used to collect/analyze data. All Aging Studies students are required to complete one of the following capstone experiences to fulfill the Certification of Comprehensive Knowledge during the program: an internship, an independent study, or a thesis. Since the majority of Aging Studies students are currently employed full- or part-time in the professional aging network, most students choose the independent study option for a specialized project and the internship and thesis options are the lesser selected options.

For direct measures embedded in courses, written papers in HSL 5100, HSL 5400, and HSL 5900 (courses are named below) and the presentation in HSL 5900 continue to be included for more assessment breadth and diversity in types of major assignments. A continued strength of program assessment is that the required course assignments reflect a comprehensive and holistic picture of three fundamental tenets: research; theory; and policy.

After consultation with the Executive Director of the Student Success Center, rating expectations of a minimum of 4 on a 5-point scale for rubric items demonstrate appropriate rigor of graduate study expectations. And, percentage benchmarks for all expectations were retained at a minimum of 85% to continue to align with the rigor of graduate study expectations. For each year after the program was restructured in 2015, assessment results showed improvement in the Executive Director's ratings and, in 2019, the program achieved the highest possible ratings and the approval to move to a 2-year reporting cycle. While the program and curriculum will continue to be reviewed and revised as needed, results to date have indicated that the Aging Studies curriculum has been solid and well-implemented. A likely next step will be to explore development of special course topics in aging.

The Aging Studies Board has continued as a cohesive and valuable advisory group. The assessment program has been well received by all and assessment discussion and critical reflection on assessment outcomes continue at Board meetings. The 33 required program credit hours, the online program delivery mode, and the 6- or 8-week scheduling of the majority of classes continue to greatly benefit the program. Beyond assessment outcomes, such program and curriculum structures have earned consistently positive feedback from current students, alumni, and employers at students' current employment or internship/independent study sites. The current program and course configurations are responsive to meet the needs of our student demographic. On a semi-annual basis, the Graduate Coordinator solicits feedback from current students on program and curriculum structure. Our program and curriculum structure have strengthened recruitment, retention (retention rates are in the upper 90th percentile), academic performance levels (course grades, internship evaluations, and capstone experiences are being completed by students with above average success in grades and performance), graduation (rates in the upper 90th percentile), and securing of jobs for students who are not already employed (employment status rates in the upper 90th percentile; a small percentage of students have pursued other career paths). To successfully continue with recruitment/enrollment, retention, and academic performance levels, Aging Studies will continue to offer a high-quality graduate degree program with ease in accessibility, flexibility for diverse students, and cost efficiency. These key considerations assist in guiding all program efforts, including the area of assessment practices. The feedback loop with the Board will remain in place for regular communication and meetings throughout the year and data will continued to be collected from stakeholders and disseminated to the Board. On at least an annual basis, the Graduate Coordinator contacts approximately 15 to 20 alumni to solicit feedback on their past program experiences and learn how their degrees have continued to influence their career paths. Examples of current position titles of alumni include: Medicare Fraud Prevention Specialist for an Area Agency on Aging; Direct Services Coordinator for a HUD housing senior independent living complex; Administrator for a residential skilled nursing/rehabilitation site; Family Life Extension Educator; Service Coordinator for aging community service site; Resident Director for a memory care residence; Director of Volunteer Services for hospice; Marketing & Admissions Coordinator for hospice; Case Manager for Older Adult Protective Services; Resident Service Director for a continuum of care site; and Senior Day Center Supervisor at an adult day program.

Major findings in the following six paragraphs are based on student learning assessment data from AY 2018-2019, which is the most recent reporting cycle for Aging Studies. In 2019, the Aging Studies' student learning assessment program earned the highest level of ratings and transitioned to a 2-year reporting cycle.

For student learning objective #1 and content area knowledge, direct measures include: Certification of Comprehensive Knowledge Written Paper and Oral Presentation Capstone Rubrics; a Thesis Rubric; and the Area Agency on Aging Paper Rubric and Assignment Grade (HSL 5100 Societal Theories of Aging). Indirect measures include Internship Midterm and Final Self- and Site Supervisor Evaluations. For each direct and indirect measure, the expectation is that a minimum of 85% students are rated as competent (4 on a 5-point scale) in content area knowledge and a minimum of 85% of students will earn a minimum score of 85% on the HSL 5100 paper. On all of the above measures, respectively, student outcomes exceeded expectations and 100% of students were rated as highly competent (5 on a 5-point scale) on each. For the HSL 5100 assignment grade portion, student scores ranged from 94-100% (M=98%) and 100% of students achieved above the 85% minimum.

For student learning objective #2 and critical thinking, direct measures include: Certification of Comprehensive Knowledge Written Paper and Oral Presentation Capstone Rubrics; Thesis Rubric; and Research Proposal Presentation Rubric and Assignment Grade (HSL 5900 Research Methods). For each direct measure, the expectation is that a minimum of 85% students are rated as competent (4 on a 5-point scale) in content area knowledge and a minimum of 85% of students will earn a minimum score of 85% on the HSL 5900 paper. On all of the above measures, respectively, student outcomes exceeded expectations and 100% of students were rated as highly competent (5 on a 5-point scale) on each. For the HSL 5900

assignment grade portion, student scores ranged from 80-97% (M=89%) and 87.5% of students achieved above the 85% minimum score.

For student learning objective #3 and communication, direct measures include: Certification of Comprehensive Rubric; and the Aging Policy Paper Rubric and Assignment Grade (HSL 5400 Aging Policy in Action). Indirect measures include: Internship Midterm and Final Site Supervisor Evaluations. For each direct and indirect measure, the expectation is that a minimum of 85% students will be rated as competent (4 on a 5-point scale) and a minimum of 85% of students will earn a minimum score of 85% on the HSL 5400 paper. On all of the above measures, respectively, student outcomes exceeded expectations and 100% of students were rated as highly competent (5 on a 5-point scale) on each. For the HSL 5400 assignment grade portion, student scores ranged from 90-100% (M=98%) and 100% of students achieved about the 85% minimum score.

For student learning objective #4 and research, direct measures include: a Thesis Rubric; and the Research Proposal Presentation Rubric and Assignment Grade (HSL 5900 Research Methods). For each direct measure, the expectation is that a minimum of 85% students will be rated as competent (4 on a 5-point scale) and a minimum of 85% of students will earn a minimum score of 85% on the HSL 5900 paper. On all of the above measures, respectively, student outcomes exceeded expectations and 100% of students were rated as highly competent (5 on a 5-point scale) on each. For the HSL 5900 assignment grade portion, student scores ranged from 80-97% (M=89%) and 87.5% of students achieved above the 85% minimum.

For student learning objective #5 and ethical behavior, the direct measure includes a Thesis Rubric. Indirect measures include Internship Midterm and Final Self- and Site Supervisor Evaluations. For each direct and indirect measure, the expectation is that a minimum of 85% students will be rated as competent (4 on a 5-point scale). On all of the above measures, respectively, student outcomes exceeded expectations and 100% of students were rated as highly competent (5 on a 5-point scale) on each.

For student learning objective #6 and integration, the direct measure includes the Certification of Comprehensive Knowledge Capstone Rubric. Indirect measures include Internship Midterm and Final Self- and Site Supervisor Evaluations. For each direct and indirect measure, the expectation is that a minimum of 85% students are rated as competent (4 on a 5-point scale). On all of the above measures, respectively, student outcomes exceeded expectations and 100% of students were rated as highly competent (5 on a 5-point scale) on each.

Curriculum, instructional, and learning objectives, assessment measures, expectations, results, and dissemination practices are sound and formal and anecdotal student, alumni, and employer evaluation feedback has been positive. In the future, the Aging Studies Graduate Coordinator and Board will explore changes related to: enhanced formalization of methods to collect and analyze data; development of Special Topics elective courses in areas such as, dementia/Alzheimer's disease, elder abuse and neglect, and smart technology; and review student learning objectives and change as needed, as the program and aging field evolve.

c. Description of actions taken since the last review
The following actions have been taken since the last review:
1. Degree name changed from M.A. in Gerontology to M.A. in Aging Studies.
2. The number of participating academic units has grown from four to nine and includes: Human Services and Community Leadership (formerly Family and Consumer Sciences); Communication Studies; Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation; Psychology; Public Health; Secondary Education and Foundations; Biological Sciences; Political Science; and Recreational Administration. This increase in participating academic units, along with dedicated faculty/administrators and consistent/sequential regularity in course offerings/scheduling, have strengthened the interdisciplinary core of the program while continuing to align with the holistic nature of the aging/gerontology field.

3. New Graduate Coordinator appointed in 2015.
4. Mode of program delivery changed from face-to-face to online.
5. Major curriculum revisions:
    a. Updated program mission statement
    b. Reduced credit hours from 36 required credit hours to 27 required credit hours and 6 elective credit hours for a total of 33 credit hours.
    c. Eliminated cohort model and replaced with rolling year-round application and admissions process to increase accessibility of start time for prospective students.
    d. Eliminated the two course per semester cap and replaced with the option of either full- (nine or more credit hours) or part-time (six credit hours or less) status.
    e. Eliminated 18-month degree completion timeline and aligned with Graduate School's more flexible time limits for degree completion; on average, most students now complete degrees within a 12-, 18-, or 24-month time frame.
    f. Deleted MBA 5520 Strategic Human Resource Management course as a requirement due to high cost fees for the course, which posed a financial burden to students; replaced with elective courses of PLS 4793 Civic and Nonprofit Leadership, PLS 4893 Budgeting in Government and Nonprofit Organizations, and PLS 4873 Human Resource Management in Public and Nonprofit Organizations.
    g. Deleted FCS 5200 Immersion in Long Term Care course due to liability concerns and risks of students residing in long term care sites for multiple days.
    h. Deleted FCS 5301 Consumer and Management Problems of Older People course as a requirement and replaced with an elective course, HSL 4775 Human Services Programs and Resource Management.
    i. Added 24 elective courses for ample choice in fulfilling the six credit hours of elective courses; while this is a large number of electives, it ensures greater ease in having enough courses offered each semester and enough online "seats" for students and it increases the number of courses from our collaborating academic units, reflecting the holistic field of aging.
    j. Changed academic advising practices from face-to-face to online process.
    k. Eliminated the requirement that students must only take online courses; while the vast majority of students earn a fully online degree, there are occasions that a student resides in the local area, is interested in a single course that may have a face-to-face section, and is interested in in-person contact with other students and instructors.
6. Implemented undergraduate Aging Studies minor to serve, in part, as a pipeline for graduate recruitment.
7. Implemented Aging Studies Accelerated Program, giving students the option to share/apply up to 9 credit hours of coursework to both undergraduate and graduate degrees, along with greater tuition/fees affordability, and potentially faster time-to-completion of the graduate degree.
8. Revised non-thesis option capstone experience by replacing student portfolio and comprehensive exam with a research/critical reflection paper and a presentation focusing on application of course content to professional practice; if students do not choose the thesis option, the capstone experience is aligned with either the independent study or internship.
9. Engaged in recruitment efforts of: local, regional, and national conference exhibitor/sponsorship tables; EIU undergraduate class presentations (approximately 6 per semester); and strategically-timed and boosted Facebook posts with program and contact information, student updates, and current news and issues in aging.
10. Collaborated with Human Services Program Administration (HSPA) Graduate Coordinator to develop a curriculum guide for students interested in pursuing both Aging Studies and HSPA degrees.
11. Increased number of community and campus partnership sites where students engage in independent studies, internship, and volunteer opportunities and faculty/students engage in collaborative projects or events. Since the last review, these sites have included: Sarah Bush Lincoln Health Care – Lincoln

Land Hospice; EIU Academy for Lifelong Learning; Arbor Rose Memory Care Home; The Fellowship Center (HUD independent living apartment complex housing for people 62+), SACIS (Sexual Assault Counseling and Information Service); and the Coles County Lifespan Center.

12. In 2015 as the program was undergoing major transitions, the First Choice designation by the Council on Graduate Studies was put on probationary status for a 3-year period, mainly due to low enrollment at the time; in 2019, the Graduate Coordinator consulted with the College of Health and Human Services Dean and Human Services and Community Leadership Department Chair. The Dean's advisement was not to pursue First Choice re-application at that time and to continue investing time and energy in other areas of the Graduate Coordinator's responsibilities. Going forward, the Graduate Coordinator will revisit this discussion with the College Dean, the Graduate School Dean, and the Department Chair.

13. As of 2017, our Program of Merit status with the Association of Gerontology in Higher Education expired and the expiration coincided with the final phase-out of the Program of Merit by AGHE; other aging studies/gerontology programs are still listed as Programs of Merit with AGHE until their certificates expire.

d. Description of actions to be taken as a result of this review

Future plans include:
1. Increasing student enrollment by increased recruitment efforts such as, targeted email blasts to aging network professionals, more social media marketing posts, continued class presentations, and more personalized and frequent outreach to alumni and professionals in the aging network;
2. Collaborate with other academic units to develop curriculum guides to pursuing the Second Master's Degree option;
3. Develop Special Topics courses in aging;
4. Revise and update forms and packets for internships and independent studies;
5. Revise and update program's website; and
6. Expand alumni and aging network relationships for external relations and internship/job placement purposes.

7. Responses to Institution-Assigned Issues – N/A

8. Outcome

8.1 Academic Affairs Decision:

___X__ Program in Good Standing
_____ Program flagged for Priority Review
_____ Program Enrollment Suspended

8.2 Explanation

The program meets and exceeds IBHE APEER minimum benchmarks. Additionally, the program and its faculty are actively engaged in an assessment process that builds on and extends from the graduate school's learning goals. Further, the program has an established record of national recognition (AGHE) and continues to hold the merit designation. With respect to program innovation, the report documents sustained curricular and course revisions—as well as a commitment to flexible online pedagogies. Further, the program's enhanced recruitment plan intentionally focuses on professional outreach/partnerships and meeting the needs of learners. This program is in good standing and the program's outcomes testify to the sustained leadership and broader efforts of the graduate program director.

Jay D. Gatrell, Provost & VPAA