The roles that gerontological specialists carry out are diverse. Many are similar to those of other professions, but gerontological specialists are likely to devote the major portion of their professional time to working for or with older persons.

Their roles fall into seven categories:

**Advocacy.** Gerontological specialists often carry out the roles of community activists, encouraging government and private sector involvement with the needs of older persons. They often work for non-profit organizations advocating for specific programs in health care, community services, and government policy.

**Direct Service Provision.** Gerontological specialists provide social, psychological, health, or legal services. They work with individuals or small groups to determine needs, develop plans, find resources, and solve problems. They are primarily involved in assessment, treatment, counseling, case management, therapy, or rehabilitation.

**Education and Training.** Gerontological specialists are active in planning, teaching, and evaluating instructional programs for older persons and their families, as well as degree programs and continuing education for practitioners in aging. Educators and trainers also teach in non-credit workshops, institutes for older persons, job placement agencies, health promotion settings, nursing homes, and colleges and universities.

**Management and Administration.** Gerontological specialists oversee the operation, staffing, expenditures, and evaluation of organizations, institutions, and agencies that serve the needs of older persons and their families. This management is carried out in a variety of social and health service institutions and organizations, in corporations, and in government agencies.

**Marketing and Product Development.** Gerontological specialists are employed by corporations, organizations, and institutions to develop and market new services and products. They assess needs and wants of various groups of older persons, seek niches that are unfilled, design advertising, and disseminate information to notify older persons of new or improved products.

**Program Planning and Evaluation.** Gerontological specialists design, implement, and evaluate programs to meet the varied needs and interests of groups of older persons. They often work in social service and community agencies.

**Research.** Gerontological specialists design and conduct basic research on the mechanisms of aging as well as applied studies on program outcomes and the needs of older persons. They secure external funding, collect information, analyze data, and report their findings. These researchers, whether working in the biological or social sciences, are increasingly in demand because of the need to understand aging and the desire to make each program as effective as possible.

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Uriel’s main interest lies in architecture, but he found himself exploring the field of aging while pursuing a doctorate at the University of Michigan. His traineeship focused on aging and environment and has since blossomed into a career. Uriel is proud of his accomplishments and very satisfied with his work in the field.

"An opportunity for a research and development project addressing design for dementia crossed my path; one thing led to another, and 14 years, two books, several research initiatives, many articles and conference presentations, and 200 programming and design consulting projects later, I am, as they say, ‘an international expert’ in design for dementia.”
Gerontological specialists find work in many types of organizations and settings, including self-employment. Many positions are filled by persons who have traditional professional and disciplinary education and certification. Other positions that have emerged over the past 30 years do not have traditional titles and are not defined by certification standards or licensure. Examples of traditional and emerging jobs are given below.

Jobs in Traditional Fields

Many gerontological specialists work in an existing professional field, but they devote much of their time to the aging field. They have successfully completed training in the profession and specialize in working with older people.

Architects. Informed architects, engineers, urban planners, resident managers, and maintenance staff are necessary to design, build, and maintain residential facilitates that are appropriate for older persons. Demographic trends and changes in healthcare delivery have influenced the demand for certain institutional structures. A growing and aging population will drive demand for the construction of adult day care, assisted living, and other outpatient facilities, all of which are preferable, less costly alternatives to hospitals and nursing homes.

Licensing requirements include a professional degree in architecture, a period of practical training, and passing scores on all divisions of the Architect Registration Examination.

Clinical Psychologists. Psychologists study human behavior and mental processes to understand, explain, and change people’s behavior. They make cognitive, personality, and neuropsychological assessments to aid in diagnosis; conduct counseling and educational sessions; and provide mental health services and therapies.

A doctoral degree is generally required along with an approved internship. One to two years of professional experience is needed before psychologists can be certified or licensed.

In the past, few mental health services have been targeted to the elderly population, but now many psychologists are likely to work with older persons.

Counselors. Counselors may have undergraduate training in areas such as education, psychology, human development, social work, human resource management, or religion. They typically hold graduate degrees in counselor education and have completed several years of supervised practice. Most states require a license in order to practice.

Counselors work in family service agencies, mental health centers, counseling clinics, business and industry, hospitals, nursing homes, and senior centers. They are involved in therapy, education, support groups, assessment, or case management.

A specialization in aging within the master’s and/or doctoral program is increasingly common and is growing in recognition and popularity among students.

Educators and Researchers. Academicians from many disciplines and professions are employed in community colleges, four-year colleges, or universities. Most are based within traditional departments such as biology, psychology, sociology, economics, law, political science, medicine, nursing, public health, or social work. Others are based in gerontology departments, institutes, or centers on aging.

They generally have earned a doctoral degree in their discipline, and it is increasingly common for them to have supplemented this with a specialization in aging.
Lawyers. Lawyers who practice law and aging may handle a range of issues but have a specific clientele: older adults. The legal needs of older persons include age discrimination, durable power of attorney, elder abuse and neglect, estate planning and probate, trusts, financing of long-term care, guardianship and conservatorship, pension law, health care decisions, independent living options, Medicare, and Medicaid. Attorneys work both in the public interest and in private practice.

There is currently no formal specialization on elder law in law schools, but the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys has developed a qualifying exam that results in a specialization. For additional information, individuals should contact the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys (see page 25). Approximately 50 accredited law schools offer course work and/or specialized clinics in law and aging.

Long-Term Care Administrators. Persons in this role administer nursing homes, retirement facilities, continuing care retirement communities, home health care programs, and adult day care facilities.

They are licensed by the state, but most do not have specific training in long-term care administration beyond their experience as an administrator in training. Thus, bachelor’s or master’s degrees in a variety of fields are accepted in the licensing process.

Nurses. Nursing provides diverse opportunities to work for and with older adults. Registered nurses with basic educational preparation at the associate degree, diploma, or baccalaureate level are often providers of direct care services to older persons who are ill. Care is provided by these nurse generalists to individuals and families in their homes, hospitals, nursing homes, and outpatient settings.

Advanced gerontological nursing education begins at the master’s level and prepares nurses to function as gerontological nurse practitioners, gerontological clinical nurse specialists, researchers, consultants, and administrators, and as faculty members in undergraduate and graduate programs. Registered nurses with specialized preparation also contribute to policy analysis and policy making.

The need and opportunities for generalists and specialists in gerontological nursing will continue to grow, and new roles may evolve as the need for health care increases.

Physicians. Physicians who work exclusively with older persons are known as geriatricians. Becoming a geriatrician requires completion of medical school, followed by a residency in either family medicine or internal medicine, followed by a fellowship in geriatric medicine. Physicians who have completed a residency in psychiatry may opt to focus on the mental health care of older persons by doing a fellowship in geriatric psychiatry.

Geriatricians and geriatric psychiatrists specialize in treating problems that are unique to older persons. In addition, they treat the whole range of adult medical or psychiatric illnesses, some of which may present differently in the elderly population. Usually this treatment involves coordinating care with other members of the health care team. Many excellent career opportunities exist for geriatricians and geriatric psychiatrists in acute and long-term care, teaching, and clinical research.

With the obvious exceptions of obstetricians and pediatricians, physicians who do not specialize in geriatrics nonetheless provide care for large numbers of older persons. Some of these physicians choose to focus primarily on treating older persons and may enhance their skills in this area by participating in continuing medical education courses that are usually taught by formally trained geriatricians and/or geriatric psychiatrists.

Recreation Therapists. Therapeutic recreation uses treatment, education, and recreational services to help people with illnesses or disabilities develop and use their time in ways that enhance their health, independence, and well-being. Many of these patients are older persons.

Recreation therapists work in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, recreation centers, group homes, senior centers, schools, correctional institutions, and community mental health centers.

They frequently hold a bachelor’s degree in therapeutic recreation from one of approximately 140 accredited educational programs in the United States.
Rehabilitation Therapists. Physical, occupational, and speech therapists provide services to persons of all ages who are physically, psychologically, or developmentally disabled. Their goal is to assist patients to achieve a maximum level of independent living. Many of these patients are older persons who have had strokes or accidents or have chronic health conditions such as arthritis.

Rehabilitation therapists have at least a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree is increasingly expected. Licensing for geriatric clinical specialists may be obtained by completing several years of clinical work and passing a national specialty examination.

Social Workers. The field of social work is closely associated with aging, and as many as one third of all social workers devote the majority of their time to providing services for older persons.

Social workers are employed in multipurpose senior centers, hospices, human service agencies, hospitals, and nursing homes. They do case and group work, community organization, advocacy, administration, discharge planning, and policy analysis.

Education is offered at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, but most social workers have the master's degree (MSW). Approximately one half of all MSW programs offer a specialization in gerontology or aging studies.

Jobs in Emerging Areas

Some gerontological specialists work outside the boundaries of the traditional professional fields listed above. Each year, several thousand persons earn degrees in gerontology, and most find jobs that do not require certification or licensing.

Entrepreneurs. Self-employment and other entrepreneurial activities are relatively common in the field of aging. Often referred to as consultants, these persons typically have extensive gerontology experience and education.

Some consultants do program evaluation, offer management assistance, write or speak on related subjects, and offer a variety of services for a fee. Many write proposals to secure money from federal or state agencies, whereas others work extensively for one or more corporations or organizations.

Geriatric Care Managers. This is a category of professionals who assess an older person's living environment, help families with planning, and act as liaisons with service providers. The care (or case) manager is often a health professional hired when caregivers live a long distance from the older person who needs assistance. Geriatric care managers can work for a hospital or health maintenance organization or be in private practice.

Managers. Organizations, agencies, institutions, and programs are overseen by managers. They carry out the day-to-day functions of supervising staff, planning, reporting, budgeting, and problem-solving in numerous types of human service agencies. Because no standard educational preparation is required, managerial roles are open to persons with interest and some experience.

Marketing Specialists. This recently developed employment area involves the advertising and sale of products and services for elderly adults. Marketing personnel identify the needs of the older population and help banks, continuing care retirement communities, hotels, nursing homes and hospitals, retailers, securities dealers, social service agencies, travel companies, and many others more effectively sell products and services to older persons.

Program Planners. Human service agencies and corporations employ persons to assess the needs or desires of specific population groups and to design new programs, services, or products for their use. Planners are often responsible for writing proposals that request funding or government approvals for a new project.

Trainers. Because many persons gain employment in the field of aging without formal gerontological education, many organizations find it necessary to have in-house training programs for staff who need additional information and skills to do their jobs effectively. Thus, workshops are regularly offered by professionals with experience and insight into working with older persons.