

Advancing Gerontology through Exceptional Scholarship (AGES): a Mentorship Initiative for Early Career Faculty



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ABSTRACT

Mentorship is critical to supporting professional development and growth of new and emerging faculty members. Working with the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), we created the Advancing Gerontology through Exceptional Scholarship (AGES) Initiative as a mentorship model to promote productivity and peer support for new and early career faculty members. In this commentary, we highlight the AGES Program as a prototype to facilitate peer support, collective learning, and co-authorship opportunities to advance new and early career faculty members, especially in the field of aging. Moreover, we identify four crucial strategies that cultivated and refined our AGES Program including: i) ensuring flexibility to address mentee needs; ii) establishing check-ins and accountability to enhance productivity; iii) fostering peer support and collective learning; and iv) delivering motivational and educational activities. Drawing on our experience with the AGES Program, this commentary provides recommendations to support other groups looking to develop high-quality mentorship programs to support new and early career faculty members in academia.

Key words: mentorship, model, peer support, productivity, professional growth, mentee, mentor

INTRODUCTION

Mentorship is critical to supporting professional development and growth for new and emerging faculty members. Research shows that new faculty face growing challenges to achieve tenure and promotion, especially with the decline of full-time, tenure track positions.⁽¹⁻³⁾ Exintaris and colleagues

note that early career faculty must balance increasing expectations related to managing more administrative procedures, greater teaching loads, larger research teams, hybrid teaching formats, and securing competitive funding.⁽⁴⁾ Consequently, these challenges may be daunting for early career faculty who often have limited experience in balancing multiple demands.

Mentorship programs contribute to numerous beneficial outcomes such as facilitating a sense of community, supporting professional development, and promoting academic productivity.⁽⁵⁾ New and early career faculty often identify time management as a critical challenge that leads to heightened stress.⁽¹⁾ Consequently, mentorship is an essential component for educating new faculty about their roles in academia and enhancing time management skills.^(6,3)

There is a growing need for mentorship models to support early career scholars, especially with the unprecedented and ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.^(5,7) The pandemic has contributed to delays in research, increased clinical responsibilities in health-related disciplines, disrupted traditional teaching formats, and heightened stress related to COVID-19.⁽⁵⁾ Similarly, studies show that the pandemic impacted new and early career faculty by decreasing academic productivity, hindering research, creating barriers to team building, and halting in-person events such as conferences and workshops.⁽⁸⁻¹⁰⁾

Although university officials, such as departmental chairs and deans, acknowledge the need for effective mentorship, they often do not have experience in developing mentorship programs to support faculty research.⁽⁶⁾ Specifically, universities often do not have the ability to bring together and support faculty with similar research interests (in gerontology or otherwise), especially in diverse departments and schools. Moreover, many institutions lack formal mentorship programs

to help early career faculty adjust to the competing demands and workload of academia.⁽³⁾ In this commentary, we highlight the Advancing Gerontology through Exceptional Scholarship (AGES) Program as a prototype to facilitate peer support, collective learning, and co-authorship opportunities to advance new and early career faculty members in the field of aging.

AGES Mentorship Model Description

The AGES Program, hosted within the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), is a mentorship program that was developed to support the professional growth, productivity, and career development of early career faculty members. As envisioned, each AGES Program member would lead one co-authored manuscript with collaboration from the members to exponentially increase their scholarship and publishing-related productivity. The AGES Program aims to achieve the following goals:

- Provide new and early career faculty members with mentorship, collective learning, and an opportunity to flourish in academia through collaborative research projects and co-authorship opportunities.
- Offer innovative strategies, educational tools, and motivational activities to increase scholarly productivity.
- Develop a supportive research network and a sense of community for early career faculty members to thrive in gerontology.

The AGES Program was founded by two co-leads (J.D. Bacsu and M. L. Smith) who worked in collaboration to develop and implement the program. The AGES program was envisioned to emulate the co-leads' experiences of working with different research centres where early career faculty members came together to learn and grow by engaging in educational activities, inspirational speakers, and collaborative research opportunities to elevate each others' careers in academia. No formal criteria (specific skills) or requirements were established for the co-leads; however, both were highly productive, experienced mentors, who were well-published, well-funded, and innovative leaders in gerontological research. The time frame for the initial AGES Program pilot was slated for eight months, starting in November 2022 and concluding in June 2023.

Throughout the development and implementation of the AGES Program, the GSA provided integral assistance by supporting program recruitment and providing a key staff member who helped with logistics (e.g., scheduling meetings, collecting applications, and recommending guest speakers). Founded in 1945, the GSA recognizes the importance of mentorship and professional development to support careers in gerontology.⁽¹¹⁾ Consequently, the GSA's collaboration, insight, and networks were invaluable to the uptake and success of the AGES Program.

Recruitment for the AGES Program

In September 2022, recruitment for the AGES Program began with a well-known GSA webinar series entitled "Career

Conversations".⁽⁵⁾ Recruitment criteria focused on new and early career faculty who conducted gerontological research and were interested in advancing their careers through mentorship, peer support, and co-authorship opportunities. The application process involved submission of the applicants' curriculum vitae, research interests, goals for joining, meeting availability, and length of time in their faculty position. The application form also collected information about the applicants' proposed manuscript topic, abstract outline, and potential journals for publication. The applications were reviewed and rated using a scoring rubric. The main reasons for program exclusion consisted of: i) incomplete applications forms; ii) not holding a postdoctoral or faculty position (PhD students); and/or iii) manuscript topics not addressing gerontology (e.g., childhood obesity). Five applicants were selected for the pilot to ensure manageability of the AGES Program.

AGES Program Membership

The AGES Program consisted of five mentees in the pilot year. The mentees backgrounds ranged from nursing to family medicine. Of the five mentees, four had assistant professor positions, and one had a postdoctoral fellow position. Length of time in positions ranged from a few months to three years of experience. Overall, more mentees were women (n=4; 80%), and all mentees were located in the United States. The mentee's research interests primarily focused on dementia topics ranging from social support to caregiving.

AGES Meetings

There were ten meetings (Sept 2022–June 2023) held at an agreed-upon day and time determined by the cohort for each month (see Table 1 for details). In November 2022, the first kickoff meeting was held to: i) provide introductions; ii) review the AGES Program goals; iii) discuss co-authorship styles; and iv) review the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE's) recommendations on contributions for authorship.⁽¹²⁾ Through facilitated discussion, members were asked to recommend topics (and associated guest speakers) they would like to learn about, which would help them enhance skills in writing/publishing and team science. AGES Program co-leads and GSA staff also proposed topics and were tasked to identify guest speakers to meet the desired member needs.

Recommendations

Based on our AGES mentorship model, we have provided tangible actions and recommendations to support early career faculty in the field of aging. We have (as a result of the pilot implementation of AGES) identified four main recommendations: i) ensure flexibility to address mentee needs; ii) establish check-ins and writing accountability to enhance productivity; iii) foster peer support and collective learning opportunities; and iv) deliver motivational and educational activities.

Ensure Flexibility to Address Mentee Needs

Flexibility was vital to supporting the development and evolution of our AGES model. The co-leads welcomed participant suggestions and feedback to ensure that the model

was effectively addressing the needs of the mentees. Specifically, our meeting format would pivot to address any specific challenges or concerns raised by the group. For example, in the month of March, the cohort decided not to have a guest speaker in order to provide ample time for group discussion about constructive editing processes and individuals' editing preferences. One-on-one writing sessions were also provided by a co-lead if a mentee requested individualized support in refining their manuscript's outline. Accordingly, program flexibility was necessary to support the mentee's changing needs, preferences, and progression in the program.

Establish Check-Ins and Writing Accountability to Enhance Productivity

Establishing accountability measures were critical to deterring procrastination and supporting the steady progress on

manuscripts in the AGES Program. For example, new and early career faculty often postpone publications due to teaching responsibilities, grant writing, and committee obligations. Consequently, writing accountability played an important role in enhancing publication productivity within the AGES Program. We used accountability measures such as having verbal manuscript check-ins during each meeting, requiring monthly online updates, and establishing deadlines.

Each member committed to leading one co-authored manuscript, with collaboration from the AGES cohort, for publication by the end of the program. Each member independently selected their manuscript topic. For example, during the AGES application process, applicants were required to identify their manuscript topic, initial abstract outline, and potential journals for manuscript submission. This application

TABLE 1.
AGES meeting topics, speakers, and goals

| <i>Date</i> | <i>Meeting Duration</i> | <i>Meeting Topic (Zoom platform)</i> | <i>Speakers (Volunteered their time)</i> | <i>Goals</i> |
|----------------|--|--|--|--|
| September 2022 | 1 hour | Recruitment launch of AGES Program | AGES webinar launch on GSA's Career Conversations with Co-hosts: Dr. Juanita-Dawne Bacsu and Dr. Patty Slattum | Program recruitment for AGES Program during a GSA webinar (Career Conversations). |
| October 2022 | Not applicable | Competitive application process | Not applicable | Competitive application process to determine AGES members. |
| November 2022 | 1 hour | Program kickoff/ introductions/ collaborative writing styles | Group Discussion | Understand different forms of collaborative writing style formats to support co-authorship opportunities. |
| December 2022 | 1 hour | Managing timelines and productivity | Accomplished gerontologist with extensive authorship experience and co-lead of AGES (Dr. Matthew Lee Smith) | Learn about organizational skills, time management tools, and productivity for publications and grant writing. |
| January 2023 | 1 hour (30 minutes for guest speaker and 30 minutes for updates/ check-ins) | Editorial insights | Editor of renown gerontological journal (Dr. Joseph E. Gaugler) | Identify editorial insights to support publication in top journals. |
| February 2023 | 1 hour (30 minutes for guest speaker and 30 minutes for updates/ check-ins) | Strategies for writing commentaries | Commentary writer (Dr. Raya Kheirbek) | Discover strategies, tools, and tips for writing effective commentaries. |
| March 2023 | 1 hour | Constructive editing processes | Group Discussion | Recognize different styles and preferences for constructive editing processes. |
| April 2023 | 1 hour | Revisions and resubmissions | Group Discussion | Develop a collaborative revision and resubmission process. |
| May 2023 | 1 hour (30 minutes for guest speaker and 30 minutes for updates/ check-ins) | Paper in a Day (PiaD) | Accomplished scholar and developer of the PiaD strategy (Dr. Jennifer L. Tackett) | Learn about an innovative approach and tools to write a paper in a day (PiaD approach). |
| June 2023 | 1 hour | Effective communication strategies | Group Discussion | Identify communication strategies for wrap-up of publication and program. |

process saved time and enhanced productivity, since the initial conceptualization of the manuscript was identified prior to joining the program.

During monthly check-ins, the cohort would discuss the refinement of their article outlines and topics, as well as manuscript challenges. At the beginning of the AGES Program, an outline of each member's manuscript was shared with the cohort using SharePoint (www.microsoft.com). SharePoint supported co-authorship contributions by enabling members to provide direct feedback in each others' outlines, manuscripts, and editing processes. In addition, members would often volunteer to help write specific manuscript sections such as the introduction, limitations, or discussion. By volunteering to contribute to specific areas, each member was able to share their unique expertise to augment the manuscript.

Foster Peer Support and Collective Learning Opportunities

Fostering peer support was key to bolstering the AGES Program. Over the duration of the program, trust, relationships, and collective learning evolved between the members. For instance, participants shared strategies for promoting career development and meeting academic demands (e.g., setting deadlines and using start-up funds to hire a research coordinator). Since all of the mentees were early career faculty, the cohort shared a collective understanding about the complex challenges faced by new faculty, including pandemic-related concerns. Consequently, the AGES Program provided a venue to promote collective learning, address challenges, and provide peer support by drawing on the cohort's diverse knowledge and backgrounds.

Deliver Motivational and Educational Activities

Providing inspirational learning opportunities were critical to supporting the AGES Program. We found it helpful to host a guest speaker at meetings to foster inspiration on different topics ranging from time management to publishing. Often the enthusiasm of the speakers would inspire and motivate our members to consider new roles and opportunities, such as writing commentaries or joining journal review boards. For example, our guest speaker on commentaries described her passion for writing commentaries as a form of advocacy to address health inequities of marginalized populations. Consequently, these learning opportunities allowed our members to understand different roles and passion that drive successful scholarship.

Next Steps and Potential Challenges

It is essential to reflect on next steps and identify potential challenges to help ensure the AGES Program's success and sustainability over time. First, as the AGES Program grows in popularity and future cohort sizes increase, dedicated efforts are needed to ensure all members are able to provide substantial contributions to earn co-authorship as recommended by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.⁽¹²⁾ For example, while the 60-minute cohort meetings in the pilot

were beneficial to check-in and learn from others, additional meetings are needed to support collegially as co-authors (one author specifically drawing upon certain knowledge or expertise of a particular cohort member).

Second, the expansion of the AGES Program is likely to result in diverse research interests among members, which may limit members' enthusiasm or expertise to co-author manuscripts. To accommodate non-convergent interests among members, it is conceivable that topical 'tracks' may be needed to facilitate meaningful contributions that warrant earning co-authorship.⁽¹²⁾ Third, unanticipated challenges may be encountered because of delayed access to data or the need to consult study team members and methodologists about data cleaning and modeling. These delays may impede members' ability to meet established manuscript deadlines. As such, future AGES applications will require that members have data 'in-hand' at the time of application and can begin writing their manuscript as soon as they are accepted.

CONCLUSIONS

Mentorship is critical to supporting professional development and growth for new and early career faculty. In this commentary, we have provided an innovative mentorship model to foster mentorship, peer support, and co-authorship opportunities to advance early career faculty, especially in the field of aging. Moreover, we have identified tangible recommendations to help facilitate mentorship programs such as ensuring flexibility, establishing accountability, fostering collective learning and peer support, and delivering motivational and educational activities. Supportive programming and mentorship models are essential to helping new and early career faculty members thrive in academia.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

We have read and understood the *Canadian Geriatrics Journal's* policy on conflicts of interest disclosure and declare the authors have no conflicts of interest.

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