

Role of Higher Education Institutions in Advancing Healthy Aging:

Education, Engagement, and Experiential Learning Collaborations

Cynthia Newton, PhD, MPA;¹ Julia O'Hanlon, MPA;² Elizabeth Orsega-Smith, PhD, FSBM³

1. Program Director and Biomedical, Behavioral, and Allied Health Center Director, Delaware State University

2. Health and Aging Policy Services Coordinator, Institute for Public Administration, University of Delaware

3. Professor, Graduate Program Director, Health Behavior Sciences, University of Delaware

Abstract

Delaware is experiencing a significant demographic shift as its older adult population continues to grow. Currently, approximately 18 percent of Delaware residents are age 65 years and older, and projections indicate that more than one in five Delawareans will be over age 65 by 2030. Concurrently, chronic disease prevalence, physical inactivity, cognitive decline, and other aging-related health challenges continue to place increasing demands on healthcare systems, community services, and public health infrastructure. Addressing these complex issues requires coordinated, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate research, education, workforce development, and community engagement. This paper highlights the collective contributions of Delaware's public institutions of higher education in advancing healthy aging initiatives across the state. Programs and activities supported by Delaware State University, Delaware Technical Community College, and the University of Delaware are unique in scope and topic but collectively contribute to research, workforce training, evidence-based program implementation, policy development, and community outreach. Beyond individual programs, this paper emphasizes the value of interdisciplinary partnerships among academic institutions, healthcare organizations, government agencies, and community stakeholders. Such collaborations enhance opportunities for experiential learning, translational research, workforce development, and evaluation of programs that support older adults across rural, suburban, and urban communities. Looking forward, Delaware's higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to strengthen statewide collaboration through shared educational opportunities, aging-focused workforce initiatives, coordinated research efforts, and a proposed statewide aging summit. By leveraging collective expertise and resources of the state's rich academic programs, Delaware can develop a coordinated strategy to promote healthy aging, improve quality of life, and prepare for the needs of its rapidly growing older adult population.

Introduction

At the state level, Delaware's older adult population continues to grow from the current data showing that approximately 18 percent of Delaware residents are age 65 or older (65+).¹ Projections indicate that by 2030, more than 20 percent of Delaware's population will be 65+, signaling a substantial demographic shift at the state level.² Health data from the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services further shows that chronic disease remains a major

issue among adults.

Delaware's older adult population presents significant public health considerations around chronic disease and long-term care needs. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System 2024 dataset provides current insight into issues such as physical activity, chronic disease burden, and aging-related health risks³ impacting these older adult populations. These patterns indicate that Delaware is not only aging, but doing so in a way that will increase demand for community-based interventions, healthcare services, and policies that address both chronic disease and social determinants of health among older adults.

While healthcare for our older adults will place heavy demands on clinical providers and services, supporting older Delawareans in healthy aging and disease prevention offer important opportunities for collaboration among traditional healthcare providers, community-based organizations, policy makers, and researchers.

Delaware's higher education community plays an especially critical role in advancing a collaborative (and partnership) approach to promoting healthy aging, spanning from a traditional educational and scholarship perspective to experiential learning and community engaged research that addresses varied emerging needs.

Through this article, we examine and feature some of the many examples of activities already taking place among our academic institutions in Delaware. However, there remain substantial opportunities to expand partnerships and strengthen collaboration within and among our academic and community-based programs. Such efforts not only support our residents and their families, but present unique, interdisciplinary approaches for scholars and students in a variety of settings and within many interest areas.

Importance of Interdisciplinary Partnerships

In addition to specific degree programs and courses offered, current interdisciplinary partnerships play a critical role in advancing both clinical and translational research while engaging students at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels. These collaborations support state agencies and community organizations through program evaluation, needs assessment, data collection, or providing support for development and implantation of evidence-based programs to support our residents. At the same time, they provide students with valuable experiential learning opportunities to directly engage with the community.

New or expanded partnerships can address emerging initiatives such as rural health initiatives and educational programs aimed at enhancing and expanding our healthcare workforce to meet the increasing demands associated with caring for and keeping our aging population healthy. An example is the medical school⁴ in the state of Delaware (funded through the Rural Health Transformation Program) that will work with a consortium of academic and clinical partners from across the state. This initiative may assist in keeping students here in Delaware after they matriculate and/or as they continue their education and professional development. This consortium-based medical school will also focus efforts in areas of the state with needed services in rural and underserved communities.

The following examples feature current programs and partnerships among our public higher education institutions. This is not an exhaustive list, but a snapshot that illustrates how each

institution is addressing related public health and aging issues while presenting ideas for expanding, bridging, and collective impact.

Delaware Technical Community College

Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and Patient Care Technician (PCT)

Delaware Technical Community College offers a range of workforce training programs designed to support the needs of the aging community across various healthcare settings. Among these are the Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program, which prepares individuals to provide essential care in long-term care facilities, and the Patient Care Technician (PCT) program, a stackable credential that equips students with advanced skills to support patient care in hospital environments. Additionally, the Home Health Aide program trains graduates to deliver high-quality, in-home care, helping to meet the growing demand for skilled professionals who can assist individuals who desire to age in place. Together, these programs create a strong pipeline of compassionate, well-trained workers dedicated to serving older adults.

Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA)

The Delaware Technical Community College Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) program plays a vital role in preparing skilled practitioners who support public health initiatives, particularly in long-term care settings and services for the aging population. The program maintains consistent enrollment and strong student success outcomes while integrating hands-on clinical experiences that place students in real-world healthcare environments, directly benefiting community partners. Through applied learning and workforce-focused training, graduates are well-prepared to deliver compassionate care and improve quality of life across diverse patient populations.

Practical Nursing (PN) and Associate Degree Nursing (ADN)

Delaware Technical Community College's Practical Nursing (PN) and Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) programs prepare students to meet the healthcare needs of diverse populations, including older adults, through a strong foundation in clinical practice including public health and community-based care. During the 2025–2026 academic year, these two programs graduated 355 nurses, including 301 ADN graduates and 54 PN graduates, helping strengthen Delaware's healthcare workforce. Nursing students participate in extensive experiential learning, completing approximately 90-145 clinical hours per course in a variety of healthcare settings, including hospitals, long-term care facilities, and public and community health agencies. These hands-on experiences foster clinical competence while supporting the health and well-being of individuals, families, and aging populations throughout the community.

Delaware State University

Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program

The Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program (GWEP) at Delaware State University represents an innovative and transformative approach to geriatric education, workforce development, and community engagement in partnership with the Milford Wellness Village. Supported through

federal funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), GWEP seeks to improve healthcare outcomes for older adults by enhancing the knowledge, skills, and competencies of the healthcare workforce in geriatrics and age-friendly care. The program advances health equity by addressing disparities in healthcare access and quality among older adults, particularly those residing in underserved and rural communities. Through community outreach events, health promotion initiatives, curriculum development, strategic partnerships, and practice transformation activities, GWEP seeks to reduce barriers to care while promoting culturally responsive and inclusive healthcare practices. The program prepares a culturally responsive healthcare workforce while simultaneously fostering meaningful intergenerational engagement to advance person-centered, age-friendly care. Beyond workforce education, GWEP also supports family and informal caregivers through evidence-based training programs, educational resources, support groups, and community services designed to enhance caregiving capacity.⁵

Master of Occupational Therapy Program

The Master of Occupational Therapy (MOT) program prepares occupational therapy practitioners who are clinically competent, culturally responsive, and committed to addressing the evolving health needs of diverse populations across the lifespan. Through its emphasis on experiential learning and service, including faculty-led clinical experiences at a local veterans' home, where students engage directly with older adults whose experiences reflect diverse military, social, and cultural histories, the program cultivates practitioners who are prepared not only to deliver high-quality occupational therapy services but also to contribute meaningfully to the health and well-being of communities, including many older adults. This accredited program (Accreditation Council of Occupational Therapy Education) helps graduates enter the workforces equipped to serve a variety of populations including older adults.

Community Health Worker Certificate Program

The Community Health Worker (CHW) Certificate Program in the Department of Public and Allied Health Sciences represents an approach to public health workforce development that combines community engagement, health equity, and intergenerational learning. Designed to prepare individuals committed to improving health outcomes in underserved communities, this new program equips participants with the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to serve as trusted liaisons between community members and healthcare systems. Through a flexible, community-centered curriculum, the program not only addresses immediate workforce needs but also creates pathways for lifelong learning and professional advancement while fostering meaningful connections. Community health workers occupy a unique position within healthcare and public health systems. Offered through both in-person and fully online formats, the program accommodates working professionals, caregivers, and individuals with family responsibilities. An important feature of the program is its role as a workforce and academic pipeline. Upon completion of the certificate, participants have opportunities to apply their coursework toward Delaware State University's public health degree programs, including the Associate of Science and Bachelor of Science pathways. This stackable credential model supports lifelong learning and creates educational opportunities for individuals at different stages of their academic and professional journeys.

Adult and Continuing Education and Prior Learning Assessment Programs

Delaware State University's Office of Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) initiatives provide a model for expanding educational access and supporting workforce development. Together, these programs recognize that meaningful learning occurs throughout the lifespan and across multiple environments, including workplaces, military service, community organizations, volunteer experiences, and family caregiving roles. The Office of Adult and Continuing Education serves as an important gateway for individuals seeking career advancement, professional development, and entry into high-demand occupational fields through a diverse portfolio of online certificate programs. Complementing the ACE framework is Delaware State University's Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), also known as Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), which serves as a mechanism for evaluating and awarding academic credit for knowledge and competencies acquired through employment, military service, professional certifications, volunteer activities, community engagement, and other experiential learning opportunities.

University of Delaware

Center for Community Research and Service, Joseph R. Biden School of Public Policy and Administration

The Center for Community Research and Service (CCRS) works to create more just and equitable communities and enhance the wellbeing of underserved populations at the local and national level. Through research, program evaluation, and dissemination, CCRS engages with communities and the health and social service systems serving them to measure and track health indicators throughout the lifespan of Delawareans. Partnerships with state and local entities have focused on topics that impact residents of Delaware from birth through old age including housing and homelessness, substance use disorders, and health services provision. Recently, CCRS partnered with the Delaware Division of Medicaid and Medical Assistance to report on home care service utilization, an important support for the state's aging population.

Delaware Center for Cognitive Aging Research

This center at the University of Delaware provides a framework that allows for multidisciplinary Alzheimer's Disease and related dementia research to be coordinated. The center not only provides a framework for those researchers but also conducts outreach to the community to promote awareness and education to both community members but also clinicians and students engaged with older adults who may be at risk for developing Alzheimer's Disease or related dementia. In addition, cognitive assessment is a key core component as the center provides the expertise in administration of assessment tools and interpretation of the results. The center maintains a registry of older adults and their cognitive status for research purposes.

Community Engagement Initiative

The University of Delaware created the Community Engagement Initiative (CEI) in 2016 as a way to enhance the university's capacity to serve as a community partner throughout the state of Delaware. The University received the Community Engagement Classification in 2015 and was reclassified in 2026 from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Through this initiative, the University has recognized a variety of partnerships to mobilize university-wide capacity in the areas of community priority including the Partnership for Arts and Culture, the Partnership for Public Education, the Partnership for Healthy Communities, the Wilmington Partnership and the Newark Partnership. CEI further expands hands-on and research opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to work with the communities in the state of Delaware to address social and health challenges. Some of these previous activities have included older adult populations in senior centers.

Cooperative Extension Programming

Dining with Diabetes

Dining with Diabetes (DWD) is an evidence-based National Extension curriculum. DWD is a 4-part series with a 3-month reunion. Each class is two hours and includes an interactive lesson and a cooking demonstration with recipe sampling. The program is designed for people with diabetes, their family members, caregivers, and support persons, but is also beneficial for adults over the age of 18 looking to prevent diabetes. Classes are taught by two University of Delaware Cooperative Extension employees, one of which is a Registered Dietitian. DWD teaches the basics of meal planning, as well as ways to reduce sugar, salt, and fat in foods, without giving up good taste. The goals of DWD are for participants to learn about diabetes and the relationship to nutrition and physical activity, develop new diabetes self-management skills and gain confidence in using them, observe new healthy cooking techniques, taste diabetes-friendly recipes, and interact with others in the program. DWD programs are held once or twice a year in each county, and have been offered in Delaware for over 10 years.

Wits Workout

Wits Workout is a peer-reviewed, pilot-tested brain health resource tool developed to provide programming to older adults (aged 55 and older) in community settings. Based on the research, intellectual challenge and social connectedness are two of several factors contributing to brain health throughout life. Wits Workout has two main goals: 1. To provide purposeful opportunities for older adults to engage intellectually, and 2. To increase their socialization through ongoing group participation. Wits Workout activities are built to be novel, fun, and challenging. There are 24 units delivered over 6-weeks. Each unit has a training component featuring educational topics on memory, brain health, or aging.

Institute for Public Administration, Joseph R. Biden School of Public Policy and Administration

Through its programs and experiential learning opportunities, the faculty, staff, and students at the Institute for Public Administration (IPA) strive to develop public leaders while improving the quality of life for those in Delaware and beyond. IPA's Health and Aging Policy Services works with a variety of governmental and nonprofit organizations on policies and programs that address the diverse needs and issues facing older Delawareans, including healthy aging and social isolation. IPA's work in this area includes applied research, needs assessments, data and mapping tools for policy analysis, project management, and professional development services. Featured partnerships include the Delaware Senior Center Grant in Aid (GIA) Funding Formula and DE-PLANs, a hub site developed in partnership with the Delaware Sea Grant program.

Health and Aging Policy Services staff and students partner regularly with state agencies, community-based organizations, and other academic units on campus at the University of Delaware to offer comprehensive expertise and outcomes. Collaborative research examples include work with the College of Health Sciences' Health, Behavior and Nutrition Sciences on the evaluation of healthy aging and intergenerational programs among community-based organizations in Delaware. IPA also actively seeks partnerships with its sister centers and institutes, including the Center for Research and Community Service, in the Biden School.

Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, Professional and Continuing Studies

As one of the earliest and largest lifelong learning programs in the country, Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) programs in Dover, Lewes, Newark, Ocean View, and Wilmington. Structured as academic cooperatives, OLLI programs are open to adults aged 50 and older (50+) to take and teach a variety of classes together, with course offerings determined by member interest as well as the passions and expertise of the dedicated volunteer member-instructors at each program's location, with no grades, exams, or educational prerequisites. Members form strong governing Councils throughout the state. They lead the efforts to offer travel tours, host the art shows, a biannual Book Sale, Earth Day, Regional Writers Seminar and provide more than 20 concerts and performances each semester. OLLI members mentor students in the Sussex community and at UD. They actively engage in local community outreach with partner organizations sharing speakers, gathering spaces, their skills, and their expertise.

Partnership for Healthy Communities, College of Health Sciences

The Partnership for Healthy Communities (PHC) works with community partners and the academic community (faculty, staff, students) and policy makers to translate research findings into practice to improve the overall community's (including older adults) health. This is accomplished via supporting engaged research while providing students with service-learning opportunities to achieve the vision of equality in health for all members of the community. Through the use of neighborhood, school, places of worship, and work setting partnerships, PHC focuses on assisting communities with health disparities in acquiring access to holistic care so that the community may thrive in reaching optimal health. PHC further assists working with the communities for developing advocacy efforts and translational briefs to assist in informing local and state policy makers to improve community health. Strategic PHC initiatives include Healthy Communities Delaware, Delaware State Health Improvement Plan, and UD Health for All.

UD Health for All, College of Health Sciences

Health for All is a program under Partnership for Healthy Communities with the support of Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield and the Laffey McHugh Foundation. This program provides mobile services and community outreach to all three counties across the state of Delaware with activities including education in addition to behavioral health and physical health screenings. These activities provide hands-on experiences for University of Delaware's undergraduate and graduate students in addition to data collection and research opportunities for these students. The outreach activities focus on the communities who are in need of health care services while drawing upon cross college and cross university collaborations and engagement. Examples of these activities include blood pressure screenings, blood glucose screenings, visits with a nurse practitioner, and educational sessions that occur at a variety of community settings including

local libraries, senior centers, retirement communities, and community centers.

Future Opportunities

Higher education institutions in Delaware have a critical responsibility to not only generate aging-related knowledge through research and training but also to remain informed about statewide programs and initiatives. Thus, they can help identify opportunities to strengthen, expand, and align efforts that address the needs of an aging population.

Academic institutions can play a unique role in creating and providing educational opportunities that transcend institutional boundaries and disciplinary silos. These opportunities may include aging-focused certificates, micro-credentials, and continuing education programs tailored to older adults. Such opportunities are also applicable across professions in healthcare, public health, social services, business, and government. For example, the Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program (GWEP) at Delaware State University fosters collaboration between academic units, primary care providers, community-based organizations, and caregivers to promote age-friendly, person-centered care. GWEP aims to improve healthcare outcomes for older adults by enhancing the training and education of the healthcare workforce in geriatrics.

To build on aging-focused programs like these and others, there remains significant potential for public and private higher education institutions to collaborate in developing interdisciplinary research, evidence-based training, and community engagement initiatives. By leveraging complementary expertise and resources across institutions, these partnerships can generate impactful research and workforce development opportunities that address the diverse needs of older adults living in rural, urban, and suburban communities throughout Delaware. Such collaborative efforts can enhance the state's capacity to promote healthy aging, improve quality of life, and respond effectively to the demographic shifts associated with an increasingly older population.

Our academic institutions have an important responsibility to educate students about the diverse career pathways and workforce opportunities associated with serving an aging population, as well as the meaningful impact they can have on the health and well-being of older adults and their communities. As Delaware's older adult population continues to grow, so too does the demand for professionals with expertise in aging-related fields, creating expanded employment opportunities across healthcare, public health, social services, policy, technology, and community-based organizations.

Higher education institutions can play a key role in preparing and retaining this workforce by partnering with career services at their respective institutions to increase awareness of aging-focused careers and employment opportunities that serve older adults within the state of Delaware. Additionally, strengthening connections with community-based organizations, healthcare systems, government agencies, and nonprofit partners can expose students to internships, experiential learning opportunities, and career pathways that they may not otherwise consider. By creating clear pathways from education to employment, institutions can contribute to workforce development efforts while supporting the state's capacity to meet the needs of its growing older adult population.

Our public academic institutions within the state of Delaware are uniquely positioned to lead and facilitate critical conversations about demographic trends, evidence-based interventions,

and collaborative strategies to support Delaware's growing older adult population. While there are many initiatives already in place, enhancing the current ones and deliberately seeking new ones are essential to better serve the shifting population of the state. Given the state's size and interconnectedness, faculty and staff across institutions often maintain strong partnerships with public health agencies, healthcare systems, community organizations, and policymakers engaged in aging-related initiatives. Organizations such as the Division of Services for Aging and Adults with Physical Disabilities (DSAAPD) and the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services play vital roles in monitoring demographic trends, assessing the needs of older adults, and supporting programs that enhance health, independence, and quality of life throughout the state. Higher education institutions can complement these efforts by contributing expertise in research, evaluation, workforce development, and community engagement. Through collaboration both within and across institutions, Delaware's academic community can strengthen the state's capacity to collect, analyze, and disseminate data that inform policy and practice.

Moving forward, we as leading public academic institutions within the state of Delaware can offer an annual joint forum or summit based on the opportunities that exist within our institutions to showcase and better inform the citizens of Delaware. Importantly, the summit would foster dialogue around critical issues facing Delaware's growing older adult population while creating opportunities to develop strategic partnerships across sectors that would also include the general public and essential community-based organizations. Discussions could focus on advancing interdisciplinary research, expanding educational and training programs, strengthening the aging services workforce, implementing evidence-based community programs, and improving statewide data collection and dissemination efforts. By leveraging the expertise and resources of multiple institutions and stakeholders, a statewide aging summit could help establish a shared vision and coordinated action plan for promoting healthy aging, enhancing quality of life, and ensuring Delaware is well-positioned to meet the needs of its increasingly older population.

Dr. Orsega-Smith may be contacted at eosmith@udel.edu.

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