



# *Preparing for Careers* to Address the Growing Aging Population

**D**uring its 2020 survey, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that by 2035, the number of adults aged 65 and older will exceed 78 million. Within a little more than a decade, for the first time in our history older Americans will outnumber those under the age of 18. In Mercy's School of Health and Natural Sciences, the growing need for services to support an aging

population—not just keeping seniors safe and healthy but enabling them to thrive—is at the heart of a new partnership between Mercy College and two assisted living organizations in Westchester County.

Students have been at two new clinical training sites this spring, including the Yonkers Neighborhood Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NNORC), a program of coordinated services and community resources for seniors still living in their homes, and The Chelsea at

Greenburgh, a residential facility for assisted living and dementia care.

The partnerships have enabled Mercy College Occupational Therapy (OT), Physical Therapy (PT) and Communication Disorders (CD) Programs to expand the range of vital hands-on learning experiences that prepare graduates to enter their professions as competent, caring practitioners.

What's more, Mercy's arrangement has provided much needed and valued support to a segment of the



community that is not just aging but striving to age well. Along the way, Mercy's bonds with the community have strengthened, fortified by a growing recognition of the College's role as a vital resource in the life of the community.

"All educational programs in the health professions require students to engage in integrated clinical experiences at a variety of health care facilities as part of their training," said Nannette Hyland, Ph.D., associate professor and director of the physical therapy program. "Any time a student can apply classroom knowledge to a real-world, individual case, the experiential learning tends to stay with them throughout their careers."

The benefits of an on-site internship are many: enhancing the student's understanding of course material, improving interpersonal skills, building confidence and dispelling any trepidation they might feel as they transition to the realities of their chosen career. Many students report these experiences helped improve their connection with the community.

Mercy offers numerous opportunities at hospitals, clinics and other health care facilities where students can gain the needed clinical experiences for their careers. Yet exposure to an aging population has been limited—until now. "It's so important for our society to find ways to help older people age in place," said Jeanine Stancanelli, OTD, associate professor of occupational therapy and associate director of the graduate program in occupational therapy. "Staying connected and interacting with people of all ages allows them to remain positive members of the community. It's a great way for our students to develop not only the skills and best practices for this population, but also a passion for giving back by providing something of value to the community."

Ashley Webb is the clinic director for the Mercy Speech and Hearing Center, an on-campus enterprise

that for three decades has offered diagnostic evaluations and therapy for children, adolescents and adults. Webb views the new partnership as contributing real value to the aging community. "Hearing loss is greatly underdiagnosed, leading to problems with communication, mental health and general wellness," she said. "Regular audiology screenings can help identify a problem at the earliest possible juncture."

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Mercy's focus on the aging community is of great interest to Diane Mandracchia, executive director of The Chelsea at Greenburgh. "Assisted living is still a fairly new

discipline and the need for these services will only increase over time," she said. "At The Chelsea, we can provide the clinical support, the rehab facility and the supervising professionals to enrich the learning experience for Mercy students. From our point of view, we see the value in exposing the next generation to the needs of older people. Mercy's reputation and expertise in these professional disciplines is another plus."

In the future, the arrangement may grow to include nursing students and undergraduates, with services expanding to include people in more areas, such as private homes and senior centers. "We expect to see more collaboration as students from the various disciplines set up projects that complement each other," said Hyland.

At the end of the day, it's the elders of the community who will benefit the most. "Many of our residents have had long, successful careers. Even though they've lost some independence, they still want to feel they have value and purpose," said Mandracchia. "We're eager to have these students work with our residents. It revitalizes people to feel like they're part of something meaningful, a community. It adds a little pep to their step."