Collaborating to Make Later Life the Best It Can Be

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Collaborating to make later life the best it can be

Older people fall down—statistically, a lot. It’s one of the most significant health risks they face. So what could a big, complex university like UB do about that? Assistant Clinical Professor Danielle Pelfrey Duryea counts the ways:

- Neuroscientists can study the brains of mice and figure out how to help people keep their balance.
- Doctors can counsel their elderly patients about fall prevention.
- Physical therapists can help their clients strengthen their abdominal core muscles.
- And law faculty and students can look at housing codes and compliance with federal accessibility standards; can draft a model ordinance on residential design that municipalities could enact; can contribute informed comments on new Americans with Disabilities Act regulations; and can even lobby for changes in the law.

That approach to tackling a problem is the hallmark of a new initiative in which Pelfrey Duryea represents the School of Law: the University-wide Center for Successful Aging. The idea is to get practitioners in widely disparate disciplines together to tackle common problems, cross-pollinating their ideas and working toward real results in the community.

“We wanted this to be broadly interdisciplinary,” says Pelfrey Duryea, who is associate director of the Center and also serves as the School of Law’s assistant dean for interprofessional education and health law initiatives. “You could have a nursing researcher sit down with an engineer, and they would have things to talk about.”

“We said, ‘Let’s find a way to make this a big tent where people meet each other across widely disparate disciplines, and help them figure out what they have in common, and dream up the kind of research that would be truly trans-disciplinary.’ ”

The Center already comprises a dozen University schools and departments—not only the health and allied professions, but law, management, engineering, even sociology.

Dr. Ranjit Singh, who teaches in the Department of Family Medicine in UB’s medical school and studies the public policy aspects of health care delivery, serves on the steering committee for the Center for Successful Aging.

The initiative, he says, “is helping us to think about patients’ health and well-being in a broader way. In the health care professions, we tend to see through the lens of the health care we provide. But we know health and well-being are influenced by many factors. The social determinants of health—housing, income, education, social networks, social support, employment—indirectly but very significantly influence people’s health, and all of these are things that legal services can improve.”

This interdisciplinary, whole-person approach is key to all of Pelfrey Duryea’s work, including her service to the University’s interprofessional education (IPE) initiatives. They have launched a twice-yearly Interprofessional Forum, a three-hour experiential education opportunity for students in the graduate schools of health sciences, social work, law, management, and public health. Using case studies, the forum aims to teach the students how to work as an interprofessional team. The first forum, last fall, drew 900 students.

In addition, IPE has created a series of self-guided learning modules that all departments can make available to their students.

Pelfrey Duryea says the Center is also awarding seed grants to small teams to fund pilot projects, with the hope that their efforts will attract further grant money.

“We think that UB researchers should look at the Western New York ecosystem for aging as a whole,” she says. “By having our priorities driven by what the city needs, we will better understand how to solve problems well.”

“We think that UB researchers should look at the Western New York ecosystem for aging as a whole.” — Assistant Clinical Professor Danielle Pelfrey Duryea