

Accreditation Reflection

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In 2017, I came to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as the Graduate Coordinator for their Gerontology Program. The university had decided to move their graduate programs online and to revise their curriculum accordingly. Development and marketing of this new online initiative was supported by an internal grant from UNCG Online, the Division of Online Learning. I was given the unique opportunity to build an online Master of Science in Gerontology program according to my direction and vision. Given my education and training in Gerontology, I knew that I wanted the program to be based on the gerontology competencies established by the Academy for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) and that I would seek accreditation the moment the program was eligible. Accreditation from the Accreditation in Gerontology Education Council (AGEC) had newly become available, and I wanted the program to provide a high quality gerontological education that prepared students for a career in aging as well as garnered recognition on a national level for meeting the rigorous standards of the gerontology profession.

In 2020, the MS in Gerontology program at UNC Greensboro finally met the eligibility requirements for accreditation set by AGEC. I excitedly contacted the Secretary of the AGEC Board in January to inquiry about the process and received a prompt response outlining my next steps and an offer of assistance. With the guidance of the AGEC Handbook, I was able to determine the best course of action to ensure the development of a strong application. I spent January through August establishing an accreditation advisory board at UNC Greensboro, mapping our curriculum, and creating a timeline- all strongly recommended by AGEC to prepare for accreditation. In August 2020, I submitted our official application. We received our “Notice to Proceed” letter shortly, thereafter, formally beginning our accreditation process!

We immediately began to work on the self-study report which was due on January 1, 2021. The self-study was a major undertaking by me and the UNC Greensboro accreditation advisory board. It was not done hastily, and it took an extraordinary amount of time and effort. It was an intense process of self-review and evaluation that involved data gathering, analysis, reflection, and, of course, writing! It gave us the opportunity to engage in a comprehensive review of all aspects of the MS in Gerontology Program for the first time. I found it to be both rewarding and challenging. I enjoyed being able to pull together the different aspects of the program into one document and to describe the program that I had spent the last four years curating and crafting. I was able to look at the self-study and be proud of what we have accomplished at UNC Greensboro. However, the self-study also revealed aspects of the program that should have been more carefully and thoughtfully considered. I found this invaluable because I am not certain that these areas of growth would have come to my attention without the deep review of the program required by the self-study. Submitting the self-study report to AGEC was satisfying and a huge relief.

In early March 2021, I received word that the AGEC committee had completed its initial evaluation of the self-study report. By April, the committee was ready to schedule the site visit.

Again, AGEC was flexible and easy to work with. We were given several time frames and options for the site visit. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, a face-to-face site visit seemed risky, so a virtual site visit was scheduled for three days in early June. The AGEC review team consisted of three individuals with experience in gerontological education or applied gerontology. My experience with the review team was overwhelmingly positive. They interacted with administration, faculty, and students from UNC Greensboro to verify the accuracy of information provided in the self-study report as well as to resolve questions or concerns that arose from review of the report. These exchanges were constructive and allowed us to see the program from an “outsiders” perspective. We were impressed with the depth of awareness and understanding of our program demonstrated by the review team. We thought the questions they asked were appropriate and purposeful. One of my colleagues who is experienced with accreditation site visits commented that the review team was the most skilled team she had ever worked with. I was glad to complete another important step in the accreditation process.

After the virtual site visit, I received correspondence from the Secretary of the AGEC Board thanking me and my colleagues for a productive site visit, which I thought was very nice, and informing me of the next steps. The committee would convene to review their observations and prepare their report and recommendations for the AGEC Board of Governors regarding our accreditation. On July 19th, 2021, I was informed that the AGEC Board of Governors unanimously accepted the recommendation of the site visit team to accredit our MS in Gerontology Program with no provisions. We were elated with this news and ready to shout it from the rooftops!

Overall, we had an incredible experience seeking accreditation for the MS in Gerontology program at UNC Greensboro. I want to encourage anyone who is considering seeking accreditation to go for it. Gerontology will only grow and be able to meet the rising needs of our aging population if it is able to professionalize the field. Accreditation of academic programs in gerontology is one of the most impactful ways to grow the discipline and profession. Through accreditation, our status as a nationally recognized area of study is enhanced. Students who earn a degree from accredited programs are assured that they are effectively prepared for a career in Gerontology. I hope by sharing my experience with accreditation that I can convince you to seek accreditation as well. I want to offer my support to anyone considering seeking accreditation. Please do not hesitate to contact me so I can share our approach to preparing and planning for accreditation. Let's make accreditation the new normal for gerontology!