Jill Shelton, Ph.D.
Application for Professional Development Leave

Planned Activities:

Grant Proposal. The first planned activity is to prepare and submit a grant proposal to the John Templeton Foundation. The research project I will propose is designed to investigate age differences in altruistic behavior (i.e., helping others in need), as well as how such behavior helps individuals develop a sense of purpose. In addition to collecting data on altruistic behavior and life outcomes in adults of all ages, a key element of the proposed project is to engage UTC students in inter-generational dialogue with middle-aged and older adults in the surrounding community. The research question is whether younger adults benefit from building an altruistic, other-focused framework early in life through the intervention of intergenerational dialogue, or simply put, having extended exposure to older generations to gain insight into meaning and purpose through their wisdom? Additionally, will such dialogue benefit middle-aged and older adults by fulfilling a sense of generativity?

There are two funding opportunities through the Templeton Foundation that support research in this area. The "Science of Purpose" track seeks to fund projects designed to examine the roots of goal-oriented behavior, including the mechanisms that promote a sense of agency. A second potential track, "Science and the Big Questions," supports projects aimed at understanding the development of human virtues, such as character and love for others. I will work with program officers to determine the best outlet for funding the proposed project.

Manuscript Preparation and Submission. I will also dedicate leave time to writing up the results of past research projects for publication. The citations for the three papers I will submit are listed in the 'Manuscripts in Preparation" section of my submitted CV, and all co-authors are either former or current UTC students. The Vorwerk et al. project served as Thomas Vorwerk's master's thesis project. The purpose of the study was to investigate the efficacy of a five-week cognitive intervention in a local residential community. We observed increases in memory self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one's memory ability) and improved knowledge of memory strategies in older adults who engaged in the intervention relative to other residents who did not participate. The Hacker et al. study was a project in which we investigated how pro-social and self-interested motives could be promoted in college students. We observed a stronger motivation to complete self-interested goals when a monetary incentive was provided. Interestingly, a pro-social benefit in goal achievement was observed when college students were asked to observe other students on campus engaging in altruistic behavior. Finally, the Wells et al. study is an ongoing project focused on developing a survey that assesses student's perceptions of their own professional competencies. The survey is being administered to students in Psychology courses designated as Experiential Learning, and we predict that engaging in experiences, such as being a teaching assistant or completing service-learning projects with older adults, will lead to an increase in student perceptions of their own professional skills.

Measurable Outcomes:

The planned activities for my professional development leave will culminate in two primary outcomes. First, I will prepare a proposal for a grant through the Templeton Foundation.

Submission of the grant proposal prior to the professional development leave final report deadline will be the outcome measure. Second, I will work with student co-authors to finish preparing the three empirical scientific articles noted in the previous section. The measurable outcome for this activity will be the successful submission of the articles to a scientific journal before the final report is submitted.

Personal and Institutional Impact:

Since joining the faculty at UTC, I have worked diligently to develop a vibrant research program focused on identifying factors that promote health and well-being in younger and older adults. Through this program, I have gained international recognition for scholarly work in the field, and it is critical to my professional development to maintain my presence in the scientific community. Furthermore, the proposed work will help me to achieve greater promotion potential at UTC. Additionally, my expertise in cognitive aging has afforded the opportunity to conduct community outreach projects that involve UTC students and community stakeholders. Notably, I spend a considerable amount of time working with students to conduct research and service-learning projects that provide them with invaluable professional development opportunities. Given the large volume of Psychology majors, student supervision and teaching responsibilities consume a significant amount of time. The professional development leave will provide a valuable opportunity for me to focus on scholarly goals of publishing completed research projects and developing a strong grant proposal. Furthermore, to develop a competitive grant proposal, I will need to further develop relationships with community partners, which will have a long-lasting, positive impact with outcomes that are well-aligned with UTC's strategic plan.

The proposed activities will have a positive institutional impact in the areas of 1) creating experiential learning opportunities for students, 2) promoting diversity and inclusion, 3) being a good steward of resources that align with the university's strategic plan, and 4) creating opportunities for students to engage with community members. Being involved in research projects fosters strong critical thinking skills and makes students more competitive for graduate school and career opportunities. All the papers that I will submit for publication have student co-authors, and they will assist in the publication process. Additionally, students will play an integral role in the proposed grant project as research assistants, students completing service-learning projects in courses, and as volunteer participants. Connecting students with older individuals in the community will lead to a number of positive outcomes, including the development of a professional network that will bolster career opportunities, engagement in intergenerational dialogue that can foster character growth in students and a sense of generativity in older adults, and establishing a a commitment to civic engagement for UTC students. Additionally, Engaging in conversations about the connection between altruistic behavior and positive life outcomes will help students to develop an understanding of the need to advocate for individuals in marginalized groups, including elders who are victims of ageist attitudes and societal policies. Character development in the form of creating constructive habits such as anti-stereotyping behaviors, perspective taking, and genuine appreciation for diversity will enrich the student experience and develop the Chattanooga community.