

USC News

Zelinski Gets \$2.2M Federal Grant

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Five-year grant to USC Davis School of Gerontology researcher will sustain a 29-year study that tracks how mental functions change with age.

By Athan Bezaitis

The National Institutes of Health will provide a \$2.2 million research grant over five years to continue funding for the Long Beach Longitudinal Study.

Currently in its 29th year of data collection, the study examines changes in cognitive processes beginning at age 30 and extending throughout the lifespan.

Under the guidance of principal investigator Elizabeth Zelinski since 1994, the study follows individuals and population age-groups over time, with an emphasis on the elderly.



Principal investigator Elizabeth Zelinski

In recent years, her team has recruited a large sample of people over the age of 80 – the fastest-growing segment of the American population – to explore mental abilities in the ninth and 10th decades of life.

Photo/S. Peter Lopez

Participants are tested every three years on memory, intelligence and vocabulary. Results, which are archived for public use, measure demographic differences, personality type, self-reported activities and health conditions of volunteers.

Zelinski and the study recently made headlines by showing that today's senior citizens are staying sharper than previous generations. Research featured in the current issue of the *Psychology and Aging* journal found that present-day individuals in their 70s performed better on cognitive tests than people the same age 15 years ago.

"We know that some people get better on some tasks with age, and we will be studying what it is that helps them stay so mentally fit," said Zelinski, holder of the Rita and Edward Polusky Chair in Education and Aging at the USC Davis School of Gerontology.

In the next five years, Zelinski plans on expanding the scope of the study by including tests from another largescale population study of older adults, the Health and Retirement Study, which is funded by the National Institute on Aging.

The Health and Retirement Study looks at more than 22,000 Americans over the age of 50 every two years to gauge their physical and mental health, insurance coverage, financial status, family support systems, labor market status and retirement planning.

"Including HRS tests will allow us to see whether our findings are observed only in healthy, highly educated people, or to all older Americans from all levels of education and status," she said.

In the future, Zelinski hopes to retest as many people as possible from the current sample of volunteers to determine how well they fare as they age. The ultimate goal, she said, is to learn the "secrets" of mental fitness and to start a new panel that will chart generational changes in baby boomers beyond 65 years.

"The value of Zelinski's study is that it examines the same people over time and can therefore actually determine whether people have gotten better, worse or stayed the same on a wide range of abilities over a period of 15 years," said Gerald C. Davison, dean and executive director of the USC Davis School.

"Another great benefit is that the data will be made available for qualified researchers to make new discoveries in the future."