

Department of Communicative Disorders
West Chester University

**Essential Functions of Candidates
for Graduate Program Admission and Continuance**
06-03-09

Introduction and Background

West Chester University's (WCU's) Department of Communicative Disorders offers programs leading to a Bachelor of Arts (BA), Pre-graduate Certification (PC), and a Master of Arts (MA). The mission of these programs is to provide students with the academic coursework and clinical practicum experiences required by the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association (ASHA) in fulfillment of the requirements for the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology (SLP). The education of a speech-language pathologist requires assimilation of knowledge, acquisition of skills, and development of judgment through client care experience in preparation for independent and appropriate decision making practices. Additionally, the current practice of SLP emphasizes collaboration among SLP and other professionals in education, rehabilitation, and medical settings.

Policies Influencing the Program of Study

WCU's Communicative Disorders graduate program in SLP is accredited by ASHA's Council on Academic Accreditation (CAA). Operating within the scope of ASHA standards, the Department has the freedom and ultimate responsibility for (1) the selection of students, (2) the design, implementation, and evaluation of the curriculum, (3) the evaluation of student progress, and (4) the determination of who should be awarded a degree.

Faculty and professional staff in the Department of Communicative Disorders have a responsibility for the welfare of clients tested, treated, or otherwise affected by students enrolled in the CD Program. The Department has the responsibility to the public to assure that its graduates can become fully competent SLP professionals, capable of delivering quality services in a timely manner and preserving the well-being of the clients they serve. Thus, it is important that the persons admitted, retained, and graduated possess the intelligence, integrity, compassion, humanitarian concern, and physical and emotional capacity necessary to practice SLP.

The Department of Communicative Disorders, as part of the College of Health Sciences at WCU, is committed to the principle of equal opportunity. **The University, College, and Department do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, disability, or disabled veteran of Vietnam era veteran status. When requested, the University will provide reasonable accommodation to otherwise qualified students with properly certified disabilities.** The CD faculty and professional staff have responsibility for the welfare of students in the Department and for the clients the students treat in the Speech and Hearing Clinic. To meet this responsibility, the Department has established academic standards and minimum essential functions (defined on the following pages) that must be demonstrated by students with or without reasonable accommodations in order to participate in the program and to complete it successfully. Students with conditions that may require accommodations will be referred to the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (OSSD) for a determination of whether the condition is a disability as defined by applicable laws, and for a

determination of what accommodations are reasonable. The determination will specifically take into consideration whether the requested accommodation might jeopardize the safety of clinic clients or the ability of the student to complete the classroom, laboratory, and clinical coursework required for the CD graduate program. The OSSD will make this determination with input from the Department of CD. Whenever possible, reasonable accommodations will be provided for students with disabilities to enable them to meet these standards and ensure that they are not denied the benefits of, excluded from participation in, or otherwise subjected to discrimination.

Essential Functions

WCU's Department of Communicative Disorders endeavors to select applicants who have the ability to become highly competent SLP professionals. Admission and retention decisions are based not only on satisfactory prior and ongoing academic achievement but also on non-academic factors that serve to insure that the candidate can demonstrate the essential functions of the academic and clinical program required for graduation. **Essential functions**, as distinguished from academic standards, refer to those cognitive, physical, and behavioral abilities that are necessary for satisfactory mastery of the curriculum, and the professional attributes required of all students at graduation. Essential functions can be described in relation to six areas: **physical health, motor, sensory, communication, intellectual/cognitive** (conceptual, integrative, and quantitative abilities for problem solving and diagnosis), **behavioral/emotional**, and the **professional** aspects of the performance of an SLP professional. Each is described below:

1. **Physical Health** - The student must possess the physical health and stamina needed to carry out the SLP Program. The student must be able to continuously sit or stand for several hours.
2. **Motor Skills** - The student must have sufficient motor function so that he or she can (1) access transportation to all academic settings and clinical affiliations, (2) process relevant academic and clinical information (e.g., take notes during class and during client interviews, type papers and clinic reports, participate in classroom discussions and client counseling sessions, give oral presentations, model the production of speech, etc.), (3) use a computer keyboard to operate clinical and laboratory equipment, and to (4) execute movements required to provide with acuity, accuracy, facility, a complete speech/language and dysphagia evaluations and to provide therapeutic services to clients of all ages and genders across a full range of clinical and educational contexts.
3. **Observation Skills** - Students must have sufficient vision and hearing to observe effectively in classroom, laboratory, and clinical settings. Hearing (aided or unaided) must be functional for the speech frequencies. Students must be able to master information presented in course work through lectures, and recorded audio signals, including subtle discriminations involving individual phonemes, phoneme sequences, words, larger language segments, and suprasegmental features of speech. Vision (aided or unaided) must be sufficient to allow for the processing of written materials, projected video segments, laboratory demonstrations, and demonstrations in the clinical training portion of the program. When performing clinical evaluations and treatments, the student must be able to observe a client sufficiently from varying distances to identify nonverbal communication signals (e.g., body orientation, joint attention, facial expressions, conventional gestures, manual signs, proxemics cues). The student must further be able to read a case history and to perform a visual evaluation of various oral, manual, and cranio-facial structures (i.e., ear, throat, oral cavity, skull, etc.) and functions (e.g., individual oral-motor movements, swallow

patterns, articulatory gestures, manual gestures, facial expressions, visual gaze patterns, body postures, etc.). The student must have sufficient sensory capability to perform all required evaluations and treatment protocols using instruments and tools necessary for accurate, efficient, and timely completion of such activities, including the ability to interpret video swallow studies.

4. **Communication Skills** - Consistent with ASHA's Standard IV-B for Certification in Speech-Language Pathology, the student "must demonstrate communication skills sufficient to achieve effective clinical and professional interaction with clients and relevant others." For oral communication, students must "demonstrate speech and language skills in English, which, at a minimum are consistent with ASHA's most current position statement on students and professionals who speak English with accents and nonstandard dialects." For written communication, students must "be able to write and comprehend technical reports, diagnostic and treatment reports, treatment plans, and professional correspondence." (ASHA, 2005). Information must be communicated in a succinct yet comprehensive manner and in settings in which time available may be limited. These skills require the ability to assess and effectively communicate all relevant information including the significance of nonverbal responses. Also required is the ability to immediately assess incoming information to allow for appropriate, well-focused follow-up inquiry. The student must be capable of responsive, empathic listening to establish rapport in a way that promotes openness on issues of concern and sensitivity to potential cultural differences. He or she must express his or her ideas clearly and demonstrate a willingness and ability to give and receive feedback.
5. **Cognitive Skills** - The student must have the cognitive abilities necessary to master relevant content in basic science and clinical courses at a level deemed appropriate by faculty and professional staff. These skills may be described as the ability to comprehend, memorize, integrate, analyze, synthesize and apply material. He or she must be able to develop the reasoning and decision making skills needed for problem solving appropriate to the practice of SLP.
6. **Behavioral/Emotional Health** - The student must possess the emotional health required for the full utilization of his or her intellectual abilities, the exercise of good judgment, the ability to manage the use of time, and the prompt completion of all responsibilities attendant to the diagnosis and treatment of communication disorders. In addition, he or she must be able to maintain mature, sensitive, and effective relationships with clients, students, faculty, staff, and other professionals under all conditions including highly stressful situations that may be associated with some clinical contexts. The student must have the emotional stability to function effectively under the typical stresses of clinical settings and to adapt to an environment that may change rapidly without warning and/or in unpredictable ways. The student must know if his or her values, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and/or experiences affect his or her perceptions and relationships with others. The student must be willing and able to examine and change his or her behavior when it interferes with productive individual or team relationships. The student must possess skills and experience necessary for effective and harmonious relationships in diverse learning and working environments.
7. **Professional Skills** - The student must possess emotional health sufficient to carry out the tasks above, must have good judgment, and must behave in a professional, reliable,

mature, and responsible manner. The student must effectively manage the use of time and be able to systematize actions in order to complete professional and technical tasks with realistic constraints. He or she must be adaptable, possessing sufficient flexibility to function in new and stressful environments. He or she must be able to critically evaluate his/her own performance, be forthright about errors, accept constructive criticism, and look for ways to improve academic and clinical performance. The student must show respect for individuals of different age, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, and disabilities across the diverse spectrum of communicative disorders. The student must exhibit professional behavior by conforming to appropriate standards of dress, appearance, language, and public behavior. The student must uphold the Code of Ethics of the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association and WCU's standards of academic honesty. **It is expected that the development of essential professional skills will occur over the course of the program with the support of faculty through a combination of modeling, direct instruction, and constructive performance feedback.**

The overall progress made by each graduate student toward the completion of academic and clinical requirements is reviewed by the CD faculty as a whole at the beginning of every semester. This review includes a consideration of (1) grades earned in academic and clinical courses and (2) the student's demonstration of the academic and clinical standards defined on the Knowledge and Skills Assessment (KASA) form. The standards on this form are those set forth by ASHA's Council for Clinical Certification (CFCC) as prerequisite for the Clinical Fellowship Year [CFY], a requirement for earning the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology (CCC-SLP). A copy of the KASA is available at the following website: www.wcupa.edu/ACADEMICS/HealthSciences/commdisorder/cdkasa.asp.

Academic standards are defined in WCU's Graduate Catalog. Specifically, all students must maintain a cumulative GPA of 3.0. If a student's GPA falls below this standard despite reasonable accommodations (as determined by OSSD), they will be placed on probation and required to bring their GPA up to at least a 3.0 in the following semester. Students who fail to bring their cumulative GPA up to at least a 3.0 will be dismissed from the university.

KASA standards are addressed in most academic and all clinical courses. If a student fails to meet these standards, a remediation plan is developed by the instructor of the course. If the student continues to fall short of meeting standards despite remediation and despite reasonable accommodations (as determined by OSSD in collaboration with the Department) the student will be advised to discontinue the MA program. Students who do not meet the KASA standards will not be eligible for their CFY and, therefore, for the ASHA Certificate of Clinical Competence (CCC), which is the entry-level credential for SLPs as determined by ASHA.

Program Applicant Agreement Statement

- As an applicant to the MA program in Communicative Disorders, my signature below indicates that I have read all 4 pages of the Essential Functions document; that I agree with its contents; and that I am committed to the policies expressed therein.

 Applicant's Name _____
Date

Program Participant Agreement Statement

- As a matriculated student in the Communicative Disorders MA program, my signature below indicates that I have read all 4 pages of the Essential Functions document; that I agree with its contents; that I am committed to the policies expressed therein; and that I may be advised to discontinue the program should I fail to demonstrate all of the Essential Functions despite reasonable accommodations (if recommended by OSSD) and reasonable levels of support from the faculty.

 Participant's Name _____
Date

The Essential Functions Policy is adapted from the following sources:

ASHA (2005). Background Information and Standards and Implementation for the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech Language Pathology. http://www.asha.org/about/membership-certification/handbooks/slp/slp_standards_new.htm

Katz, J.R., Woods, S. L., Cameron, C. A., Miliam, S. (2004) Essential Qualifications for Nursing Students. *Nursing Outlook*, 52, 277-288.

Council of Academic Programs in Communicative Sciences and Disorders (2007). *Eligibility Requirements and Essential Functions*. Prepared by Schwartz et al., and retrieved from <http://www.capcsd.org/proceedings/2007/talks/EFChecklist.pdf>

Department of Communicative Sciences and Disorders. (date unknown) Essential Functions of Candidates for Program Admission and Continuance. Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington. <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~csd/essential%20functions.htm> Retrieved on 5/8/09

Department of Communicative Sciences and Disorders (2008). *Technical Standards in Speech-Language Pathology*. University of South Florida. (The document was developed by Ray Hurley (USF's former CSD program Chair), and obtained on 5/6/09 via e-mail from Jennifer Lister (USF Graduate Coordinator).

Department of Communicative Disorders (date unknown). Department of Communicative Disorders, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, New Orleans.

Essential Functions Committee (2007). Disability Law in Higher Education. Council of Academic Programs in Communicative Sciences and Disorders. Retrieved from the internet on 5/8/09 at <http://www.capcsd.org/proceedings/2007/talks/EFslides.pdf>

Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology Program (2008). Department of Special Education and Clinical Services, Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Received via e-mail on 3/14/09 from David Stein (SLPA Program Director).