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A Strategic Plan for Engaging Undergraduate Speech Pathology and Audiology Students in the Research Enterprise

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What is Speech Language Pathology and Audiology?

Speech Language Pathologists and Audiologists are the professionals responsible for the identification, prevention and treatment of communication disorders. They work with individuals across the lifespan in a variety of health, education and research settings. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) reports that both occupations have a job growth outlook that is either "faster than average" or "much faster than average." For more than a decade, Speech Language Pathology and Audiology are routinely found in "top occupations" lists (Boswell, 2002) and job placement rates from educational programs are typically 100 percent.

The Bottom Line
Programs in Speech Language Pathology and Audiology are key growth areas for the 21st century university.

How Does The Education Process Work?

Speech Language Pathologists and Audiologists require graduate level preparation to practice. Speech Language Pathologists complete a master's degree, while Audiologists complete a professional doctorate. Though the path to graduate school varies, most students first complete an undergraduate with a major in Speech Pathology and Audiology (SPPA). SPPA programs' primary focus is to prepare the student for a clinical career. This focus demands students spend much of their time in the classroom and in the clinic and, as a result, SPPA students typically carry one of the largest credit loads in the Graduate College. Consequently, unlike students in more traditional graduate programs, SPPA students get little opportunity for direct engagement in the research enterprise, in spite of being surrounded by faculty with active research programs.

The Bottom Line
Both undergraduate and graduate SPPA students get very little direct exposure to the research enterprise.

What are the Implications for a Lack of Student Exposure to Research?

- Programs prepare clinicians who have a weak understanding of scientific research, making it difficult for them to be good research consumers.
- Current students do not see a research career for themselves.
- Potential students with a research orientation are not attracted to SPPA due to heavy emphasis on clinical/professional issues.
- Fewer individuals will pursue the Ph.D. The last 2 decades have seen a growing shortage of individuals qualified to fill the large number of faculty vacancies (Joint Ad Hoc Committee, 2002).
- Faculty shortages will seriously compromise the quality and viability of many educational programs.
- Over time, this trend may cause an erosion of active research within the discipline and/or shift the research to other disciplines (e.g. psychology, linguistics, neuroscience). The result would be a loss in academic autonomy.

The Bottom Line
We need to attract more students toward the academic limb of the discipline of Speech Pathology and Audiology.

Project Goal

The goal of this project is to develop a strategic plan for the **Speech Pathology and Audiology Research Experience**, which is a program designed to increase undergraduate student engagement in research activities. The emphasis on undergraduate students is based on the view that the sooner research opportunities are introduced and 'demystified', the sooner students envision this as a viable professional option.

Why WMU?

1. WMU has a long history as a leader in the field of Speech Language Pathology and Audiology. It is one of the oldest programs in the nation and its graduate programs are currently ranked within the top 50 programs nationally (US News and World Report, 2012).

2. SPPA faculty are actively engaged in a wide range of funded and unfunded research programs.

3. WMU offers both undergraduate and professional graduate SPPA programs, which will potentially provide research experiences at a variety of academic levels.

4. **The Speech Pathology and Audiology Undergraduate Research Experience clearly aligns with WMU's new strategic plan.** Specifically, it aligns with the mission of "...building intellectual inquiry and discovery into undergraduate, graduate and professional programs..." and the WMU vision of being a "Learner Centered" and "Discovery Driven" environment. If successful, the research experience would contribute to meeting a number of the goals and strategies included in the strategic plan.

Mission

*The mission of the **Speech Pathology and Audiology Research Experience** is to provide Speech Pathology and Audiology undergraduate students opportunities to engage in the research enterprise, therefore increase the likelihood of research involvement during graduate studies and beyond.*

Vision

- *To increase the number of students who pursue a career in Speech Pathology and Audiology that includes research.*
- *To enhance the size and scope of the WMU SPPA program's research activity through student involvement.*
- *To create a "research culture" within WMU SPPA program that extends from the faculty down to the first year undergraduate student.*

Potential Gaps and Barriers to Success

Informal discussions with stakeholders (e.g. students and faculty) reveal a number of gaps and barriers to fulfilling this mission and vision. Comments were organized according to general themes.

Gap/Barrier 1. Student Perceptions

(e.g. no knowledge of faculty research activity, reluctant to initiate research discussion with faculty, not aware of research as a career option, don't feel qualified to participate, unsure how it will 'help' them)

Gap/Barrier 2. Faculty Perceptions

(e.g.UG research is too time consuming, students unprepared, more efficient not to involve UG students in ongoing research, faculty research too complicated for UG students, unsure of rules for Lee Honors College or Dept. Honors, no workload 'credit' for supervising research)

Gap/Barrier 3. Procedures and Processes

(e.g.no clear flowchart for students to follow to get involved, process largely informal, no mechanism for recording workload associated with supervision, inconsistency in when/if to register for formal credit, no established mechanisms for CITI research training and HSIRB, a limited range of options for an UG research experience, no mechanism for program monitoring)

Gap/Barrier 4. Resource Utilization

(e.g. limited funding to support UG research, faculty time that would be used for other activities, uncertainty about how many faculty will enlist in activity, need for formal research oriented classes, faculty/staff time to administer the program)

Gap/Barrier 5. Administrative Support

(e.g. possible conflicts with other WMU initiatives, possible redundancy with other WMU initiatives, determine fit within the strategic plan of Department, College and University)

Strategic Goals

GOAL 1: Stakeholders will provide direct input on the plan for the Speech Pathology and Audiology Undergraduate Research Experience.

Action Items

1. Survey UG SPPA students at all levels to determine interest in the UG Research Experience.
2. Survey faculty regarding UG involvement in faculty research.
3. Identify faculty interested in participating in the UG Research Experience.
4. Propose project plan to Dean's Office to determine CHHS interest, as well as possible conflicts and redundancies.

GOAL 2: Undergraduate SPPA students will get greater exposure to faculty research and student opportunities for research engagement.

Action Items

1. Create Colloquia for sharing faculty and student research (initiated by A. Tyler in Spring 2012).
2. Increase awareness of current SPPA student research presentations (i.e. UG thesis, MA thesis, Doctoral projects).
3. Use web and written materials to elevate profile of SPPA research labs with a special emphasis on students.
4. Make research experience a valid volunteer experience for students applying to the major (begun in Spring 2012).
5. Include more information about academic careers in various SPPA orientation materials.
6. Investigate the viability of offering an undergraduate SPPA course in research methods.

Strategic Goals Continued

GOAL 3: Formalize Processes for the Speech Pathology and Audiology Undergraduate Research Experience.

Action Items

1. Establish a pilot project that enlists a smaller set of students and faculty in order to further identify gaps and barriers (begun Spring 2012 – currently 11 students and 3 faculty members participating in pilot project).
2. Expand the UG Research Experience options beyond the Honors thesis to include volunteer experiences and independent studies.
3. Establish a student research opportunity grid. For example,

Research Lab	UG Student Research Opportunities			
	General Research Aims	Volunteer Research Assistant	Independent Study	UG Thesis
Lab # 1	Aim 1, 2, 3	Yes	No	No
Lab # 2	Aim 4, 5, 6	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lab # 3	Aim 7, 8, 9	No	Yes	Yes
Etc.				

4. Establish a detailed Research Experience flowchart for faculty and students that provides a clear path from beginning to end.
5. Develop processes for efficient handling of required student activities (e.g. CITI training, thesis paperwork etc).
6. Develop clear guidelines for student credit registration for different research experiences.
7. Identify and support applications for small and large internal and external funding mechanisms for UG research such as the WMU UREA, ASHA's SPARC program, NSF Research Experience for Undergraduates, and the NIH R15 program.

Processes Feedback

1. Evaluate pilot project and survey participants.
2. Poll faculty on workload associated with the UG Research Experience.
3. Monitor number of students and faculty involved.
4. Monitor credit hours accrued for the UG Research Experience.
5. Monitor costs (time and money) associated with project.

Outcome Feedback

1. Evaluate experiences of the UG Research Experience participants.
2. Evaluate faculty experiences with research mentorship.
3. Monitor participants research engagement at graduate level and beyond.
4. Monitor faculty research productivity associated with the UG Research Experience.

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