



1990

## Speech Pathology and Audiology at Western: A Brief History

Charles Van Riper  
*Western Michigan University*

Frank B. Robinson  
*Western Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wmu-histories>



Part of the Speech and Hearing Science Commons, and the Speech Pathology and Audiology Commons

---

### WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Van Riper, Charles and Robinson, Frank B., "Speech Pathology and Audiology at Western: A Brief History" (1990). *Histories of Western Michigan University*. 1.  
<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wmu-histories/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Histories of Western Michigan University by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



by Charles Van Riper

## SPEECH PATHOLOGY AND AUDIOLOGY AT WESTERN: A BRIEF HISTORY

(Note: the following brief narrative draws heavily upon archival materials prepared at varying times by C. Van Riper and by F. Robinson--the first and the second Department Heads, respectively--under whose skillful direction and caring guidance the present Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology largely has evolved.)

In 1936 a new president, Paul V. Sangren, initiated a significant period of growth at Western Michigan College of Education--revising its philosophy and goals and courses, beginning a campus building program, and bringing in a handful of younger faculty members. Among the new faculty was Charles Van Riper, a native of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, who--along with other pioneering students and faculty at the University of Iowa--recently had developed one of the early nuclei of the fledgling profession of speech pathology, the university speech clinic. Dr. Sangren's charge to Dr. Van Riper is reputed to have been brief and to the point: "Build a clinic and a profession."

The first quarters for the clinic were in a shed "with broken windows and rats," which was attached to an old factory at the corner of Oakland and West Michigan near the railroad tracks. Even in this setting, and though burdened at times by his own stuttering, Van Riper's skills as a clinician and as a gifted teacher were soon recognized, as was his dedication to excellence in education.

The first few years were devoted to recruiting students, designing courses, acquainting the public with the services offered, and operating a mobile speech clinic which travelled throughout the Lower Peninsula diagnosing children's speech disorders and helping teachers, principals and parents to understand the problems of those who could not talk or hear normally. At the same time, by 1938 the first students majoring in "speech correction" were graduated and employed in the public schools; and by 1939 the speech clinic had been relocated to occupy a portion of the third floor of the newly erected Health Service Building--the same building, renamed the Speech and Hearing Center in 1971, which

today is nearly totally occupied by facilities, faculty and staff of the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology.

For some forty-three years, then, Western Michigan University has actively fostered the development of quality education and clinical service in speech pathology and audiology. From an early focus which emphasized the professional training of baccalaureate level students for employment as public school speech therapists, the "Speech Clinic" (initially an administrative subcomponent of Western's Speech Department) gradually evolved toward departmental status and toward broadened academic programming and professional preparation. In 1955 a graduate program ("Teaching of Speech Correction") was initiated under the aegis of the College of Education. Even then the program was earning a national and even international reputation for excellence, although the major thrust continued to be the pre-service training of personnel for positions in education with particular emphasis in the area of stuttering therapy.

It was in 1963 that Western began to offer a master's degree which was independent from the College of Education--by which time the academic and clinical practicum focus also was expanding to include educational and service programming in audiology and to encompass a broadening view of the habilitation and rehabilitation of individuals with speech, hearing, and language disorders. The development of speech pathology and audiology at Western essentially had paralleled--and often led--similar developments occurring across the state and the nation as this new profession sought to define itself under the tutelage and guidance of Van Riper and other pioneering clinicians.

President Sangren's initial charge was indeed becoming realized. Western had contributed substantively to the emergence of an identifiable profession; and in 1979 as in 1936, the clinic remains the central focus of departmental programming. Clients of all ages with handicapping problems of speech, language or hearing continue to be served without fee, with the clinic providing a

critically important teaching laboratory for graduate and undergraduate students. Included now among the diagnostic and therapeutic programs of the clinic are services for stutterers, for children with developmental speech and language problems, for children born with cleft palates, for adults with aphasia, for individuals with voice disorders, for hearing impaired children and adults, and for severely handicapped non-verbal persons. And, of course, even the immediate impact of this type of student-practicum/community-service activity continues to be felt far beyond the confines of the University through on-going liaisons with affiliated off-campus centers and clinics.

In 1965 an autonomous Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology was formally established by Western's Board of Trustees. In that same year, the master's degree was defined by the American Speech and Hearing Association as the minimum level of preparation acceptable for clinical practice in the speech and hearing profession. In 1966, by then the most widely published author in his field and an internationally acknowledged authority on the treatment of stuttering, Dr. Van Riper retired as Department Head with appointment as Distinguished University Professor. His successor, himself a widely recognized expert in stuttering, was Frank B. Robinson, for many years the Head of the Speech and Hearing Clinic at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Dr. Robinson, who was to continue to serve as Department Head at Western until 1977, had done his undergraduate work at Western and had been an instructor here briefly during the forties. Robinson's return was marked by a reiteration and continuation of departmental efforts to nurture excellence and dedication in its students.

Also in 1966 Western's graduate speech pathology program became the first in Michigan (and one of the first six in the nation) to be accredited by the American Boards of Examiners in Speech Pathology and Audiology (ABESPA). In 1971, the graduate audiology program became similarly accredited.

During the 1960's and early 1970's, the departmental faculty and staff grew and further diversified--as did the department's commitment to educational objectives which recognized the complexity of the study of human communication and which were appropriate to the nurturing of a sound academic discipline within the context of a simultaneously emerging multipurpose university. Speech and hearing science laboratory facilities were established, course and practicum offerings were strengthened and diversified, federal grant support was successfully sought, and greater numbers of students began to enroll--including many persons from other states and from countries around the world. Western's reputation for quality service and education continued to be reflected also, then as now, in the types and numbers of clients of all ages served by the Language, Speech and Hearing Clinic.

At the present time, the Department numbers fourteen regular faculty members, eight of whom hold the Ph.D. and six of whom hold the terminal professional master's degree, plus several part-time faculty, one electronics technician, four secretaries, and a number of graduate assistants. Substantial contributions to the program also are made by nine adjunct faculty members, including medical and dental representatives, and by countless professionals who provide student practicum opportunities and supervisory services in the immediate geographic region and beyond. Some 130 undergraduate majors are enrolled, along with an average of 40 full-time graduate students. During a typical semester, something over 300 clients are afforded on-campus clinical services under faculty supervision, and many other handicapped individuals are served by our students in off-campus practicum settings.

Clinicians and researchers from around the world are frequent visitors to the Department, and the departmental faculty is itself significantly involved in scholarly and professional endeavors at the local, state and national levels, in both inter-and intra-disciplinary contexts. Past program graduates may be found

in essentially every state of the union and in several foreign countries. Their employment settings, as well as their professional accomplishments, are as varied as they are substantial. Many hold clinical positions in elementary and secondary school systems, hospitals and rehabilitation centers; some are in private practice. Others are in agency and academic administrative roles or are themselves now members of university faculties. In the aggregate, their performances and their human impacts constitute perhaps the most eloquent, and certainly a most relevant, testimony to the history--and to the future potential--of the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology. For it is through our students--former, current, and yet to come--that the Department (and, for that matter, the University) truly is enabled, in Van Riper's words, to "play billiards with eternity."

by Charles Van Riper

The speech clinic and department of speech pathology here at Western have attracted students from many lands and they have returned to their native countries to pioneer the field of speech pathology and audiology there. Some that come to mind were from Japan, Taiwan, China, the Philippine. India, Australia, South Africa, Kuwait, Egypt, Israel, Iran, France, Germany, Poland, Norway, Sweden, England, Denmark, Holland. Great Britain, Canada, Iceland. We have had several Fulbright scholars. Western has an international reputation in this field.

Many of our former students have gone on to get their doctorates and to head or staff departments of speech pathology or audiology at other universities in this country. Two of them, Katharine Butler and Roland Van Hattum became presidents of our national organization, the American Speech and Hearing Association. Many have contributed significant research and publications.