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# Undergraduate Students' Knowledge about Applying to and Attending Graduate School in Speech-Language Pathology: The Effect of a Panel Presentation on the Topics

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Undergraduate Students' Knowledge of Applying to and Attending Graduate School in Speech-

Language Pathology: The Effect of a Panel Presentation

Chelsea Swadling

Western Michigan University

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Language Pathology: The Effect of a Panel Presentation

The field of speech-language pathology requires its professionals to obtain a Master's degree in order to become nationally certified clinicians (ASHA, 2014). Therefore, all speech-language pathology and audiology undergraduate students who wish to pursue a career in speech-language pathology or audiology will have to attend graduate school. The task of applying to graduate school can seem daunting, and to undergraduate students the thought of attending graduate school can seem overwhelming to those who are unprepared. The researcher of the following study recognized that undergraduate students in the speech-language pathology and audiology program at Western Michigan University (WMU) feel unprepared and anxious about applying to and attending graduate school. So, the researcher gathered a professional panel of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to give a presentation to the speech-language pathology and audiology undergraduates about graduate school and the application process. The researcher conducted the following study in order to determine the effectiveness of a panel presentation in preparing undergraduate students for applying to and attending graduate school.

The purpose of the panel presentation was to expand the knowledge base that speech-language pathology and audiology undergraduate students possessed about attending and applying to graduate school. Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, and Hansen (2002) determined from prior research that a common stressor amongst the advisors of undergraduate students is finding the best way to prepare undergraduates for graduate school. There are undergraduate programs that provide their students with courses that assist them in preparing for, applying to, and attending graduate school (Huss et al., 2002). This opportunity is provided to certain undergraduate majors at Western Michigan University like psychology, but not to the speech-

language pathology and audiology program. The panel of SLPs assembled for this current study set out to educate speech-language pathology and audiology undergraduate students about graduate school and the application process (in a way similar to the coursework that other programs provide).

Several authors have concluded that undergraduate students were undereducated, as well as underprepared for, applying to and attending graduate school (Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, & Hansen, 2002; Landrum, 2010; Rajecki, Lauer, & Metzner, 1998). Rajecki, Lauer, and Metzner (1998) explained that many individuals planned on applying to and attending graduate school before gaining advanced preparation in the field, which led to many uninformed and ill-prepared future graduate students. Landrum (2010) agreed, and additionally explained that undergraduate students needed to be better informed in order to make realistic decisions about potential graduate study. In order to fully understand the conclusion that undergraduate students are underprepared and undereducated for graduate school, one needs to understand the perspectives that undergraduate students hold about graduate school, their level of involvement with professionals in their undergraduate study, and the reasoning behind their efforts to pursue graduate study.

Landrum (2010) studied undergraduate students' perspectives of applying to and attending graduate school. Fourth-year psychology undergraduate students were instructed to complete an anonymous survey of fifty-eight questions; answers to those questions were rated on a scale from one (1), equivalent to strongly disagreeing with the statement, to five (5), equivalent to strongly agreeing with the statement (Landrum, 2010). The data were averaged for each question (Landrum, 2010). It was discovered that subjects intending on applying to graduate school held concerns such as graduate schools' level of difficulty and the finances necessary to

attend. Many participants agreed that a graduate student's dedication, perseverance, and desire to attain a Master's degree had a significant impact on the future success of that individual.

Landrum (2010) suggested that future research study the graduate admissions process from the undergraduate student's perspective, which could allow educators to assist future students to better understand the process and be more successful in graduate school.

Huss, Randall, Patry, Davis, and Hansen (2002) studied graduate students' perception of their preparation for graduate school. Six-hundred and forty-four graduate students completed a detailed anonymous survey, with survey questions focused around students' undergraduate academic performance, characteristics of the undergraduate program, and student's personal demographics (sex, age, income, and ethnicity). It was discovered that the largest contributor to student preparedness for graduate school was high-quality interactions with the faculty from the undergraduate program (Huss et al., 2002). These authors discerned that undergraduates' lack of involvement with their programs' faculty and other professionals in their field is directly linked to students' feelings of being ill-prepared for graduate school. Those feelings later negatively influenced students' performance in a Master's program, due to their depleted self-efficacy, if students feel that they will not be successful in achieving their goals. In order for future graduate students to become better acclimated and prepared, information about applying to and attending graduate school needs to be thoroughly and clearly communicated to them. It was suggested that further research obtain graduate students' perceived preparedness before they begin graduate school, in order to gain the freshest perspective from them (Huss et al., 2002).

Rajecki, Lauer, and Metzner (1998) studied why undergraduate students consider applying to graduate school, and whether they are aware of the opportunities for advanced preparation for graduate school. Three-hundred and forty-five undergraduate students were

instructed to complete and submit a non-anonymous questionnaire and allow access to their academic transcripts (Rajecki et al., 1998). The questionnaire topics included undergraduate students' plans for attending graduate school, whether they believed their grade point average was important to gain admission into graduate school, their estimate of the expected grade point average requirement to gain admittance into graduate level programs in their field, their grade point average in their major, and the number of clinical hours completed (Rajecki et al., 1998). These researchers (1998) concluded that the majority of students who considered pursuing a Master's program did so uninformed of the expectations and the implications of graduate study. It was discovered that once students became more informed, they were more realistic about their chances of being accepted to and completing a Master's program (Rajecki et al., 1998).

A secondary purpose of the current study's panel presentation was to reduce undergraduate students' level of anxiety associated with the process of applying to graduate school, and prepare them for the stressors they may experience as a graduate student. Graduate school requires the completion of academic coursework, research, and clinical training which, when combined with performance anxiety, financial constraints, and competition, make graduate students vulnerable to stress (Myers, Sweeney, Popick, Wesley, Bordfeld, & Fingerhut, 2012).

Several authors conducted research on the relationship between graduate students and stress. Kjerulff and Wiggins (1976) conducted a study to examine the stressful situations that graduate students encounter, as well as to discern how they cope with these situations emotionally. The authors determined that graduate students faced three main types of stressful situations: termed academic failure, interpersonal problems, and fate-failure (Kjerulff & Wiggins, 1976). These three divisions that evoke anxiety in graduate students are likely the same types of stressors that undergraduate students experience when applying to and attending

graduate school. Kjerulff and Wiggins (1976) discovered that graduate students reacted to these three types of stressful situations by either experiencing anxiety, getting angry with others, getting angry with themselves, placing blame on themselves, feeling rejected, feeling discouraged, or feeling depressed. These authors determined that a graduate student's personality type made a difference in his/her ability to persevere and cope appropriately, in order to be successful (Kjerulff & Wiggins, 1976). These discoveries about graduate students can be applied to undergraduates working toward becoming graduate students. For example, it is important for undergraduate students who are experiencing anxiety, to learn their own personality type and the best ways to cope with their anxiety throughout the stressful graduate school application and attending process, in order for them to be successful.

Myers, Sweeney, Popick, Wesley, Bordfeld, and Fingerhut (2012) conducted a study to examine the relationship between graduate students' demographic characteristics and their amount of stress, as well as the effects that self-care techniques had on graduate students' stress levels. The authors discovered that the demographic characteristics that each graduate student possessed like race, gender, degree, relationship status, and geographic region directly correlated with their level of stress (Myers et al., 2012). Undergraduate students applying to and attending graduate school may find that being more aware of the anxiety they are enduring because of demographic characteristics may encourage them to take measures to prevent further stress. The authors also determined that certain self-care practices were significantly related to lower stress levels of graduate students like better sleep hygiene (sleep habits) and strong social support. Undergraduate students applying to and attending graduate school could apply these self-care practices, which could ideally lower their stress levels.

### **Research Design**

The presentation given by speech-language pathology and audiology professionals for this research study was intended to inform and educate undergraduate students about the graduate school application and acceptance process. This research study followed strict parameters including the use of a population of undergraduate students, a panel of professional speech-language pathologists, anonymous pre-and post-presentation surveys, focused advertising, and pre-planned methodology for data analysis.

### **Participants**

The participants were 32 undergraduate speech-language pathology and audiology students planning to pursue a graduate degree in speech-language pathology or audiology. Students in their third or fourth year of undergraduate school were studied, as most would be applying to graduate school within a year or two.

The panel consisted of nationally certified speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who worked in varied clinical settings. One male and five female SLPs, from hospitals, school systems, and speech-language-hearing clinics, spoke as part of the panel. Panel members presented a brief synopsis of their academic and professional histories which provided a comfortable transition to a question and answer format for the remainder of the presentation.

### **Methods**

Advertising for the event targeted undergraduate students in the speech-language pathology and audiology major at Western Michigan University. Oral announcements and flyers were approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB), and presented in several speech-language pathology and audiology classes. They were directed toward recruiting



the faculty and students of the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology at WMU. Email was used to invite the professional panel members to speak at the presentation.

Data were collected from the undergraduate student participants by handing anonymous surveys (approved by the HSIRB) to each attendee as he/she arrived at the presentation. Surveys were color-coded to identify third-year undergraduate responses from fourth-year undergraduates. Prior to the lecture confidentiality disclosure and informed consent statements were read to the participants, as were survey directions. Participants were instructed to answer all twelve survey questions by circling the numerical option that reflected their response to each question. Once the attendees completed the pre-presentation survey they were asked to place it face down in front of them.

The survey consisted of twelve questions: the first eleven inquired about participants' knowledge of the aspects of graduate school and the application process, and the final question inquired about their level of anxiety. Refer to Addendum A for the survey format. In short, the survey questions probed each participant's level of knowledge of the requirements for a graduate school application, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, letters of recommendation, how to explain a poor grade, what to consider when choosing a graduate program, what to consider when accepting, what options are available if denied, what to expect in graduate school, and the participant's level of anxiety towards graduate school at that moment.

Participants answered each survey question using the rating scale listed on the survey (refer to Table 1). Zero (0) referred to one being 0% out of 100% knowledge of the topic, one (1) referred to one being 25% out of 100% knowledgeable, two (2) referred to one being 50% out of 100% knowledgeable, three (3) referred to one being 75% out of 100% knowledgeable, and four (4) referred to one being 100% out of 100% knowledgeable of the topic. The twelfth question

offered four options to indicate the participant's anxiety towards graduate school at that moment: *no anxiety*, *low anxiety*, *moderate anxiety*, and *high anxiety*.

Figure 1

Rating Scale Used to Denote Participants' Level of Knowledge on a Survey Question Topic

<b>KEY (Scale):</b>	<b>Figure 1</b>
<p><b>0 = No knowledge on the topic</b></p> <p><b>1 = Small amount of knowledge on the topic</b></p> <p><b>2 = Moderate amount of knowledge on the topic</b></p> <p><b>3 = Substantial amount of knowledge on the topic</b></p> <p><b>4 = Great amount of knowledge on the topic</b></p>	

At the conclusion of the presentation a post-presentation survey was issued to each participant. The two surveys were identical except for the titles at the top of the page. Upon completion of the post-presentation survey, each participant was instructed to staple his/her pre- and post-presentation surveys together and place them in a bin.

### **Data Collection**

Each participant's pre-presentation survey responses were compared with post-presentation survey responses, responses of the third-year undergraduates were compared with the fourth-year undergraduates, and the levels of anxiety for each participant before and after the presentation were analyzed.

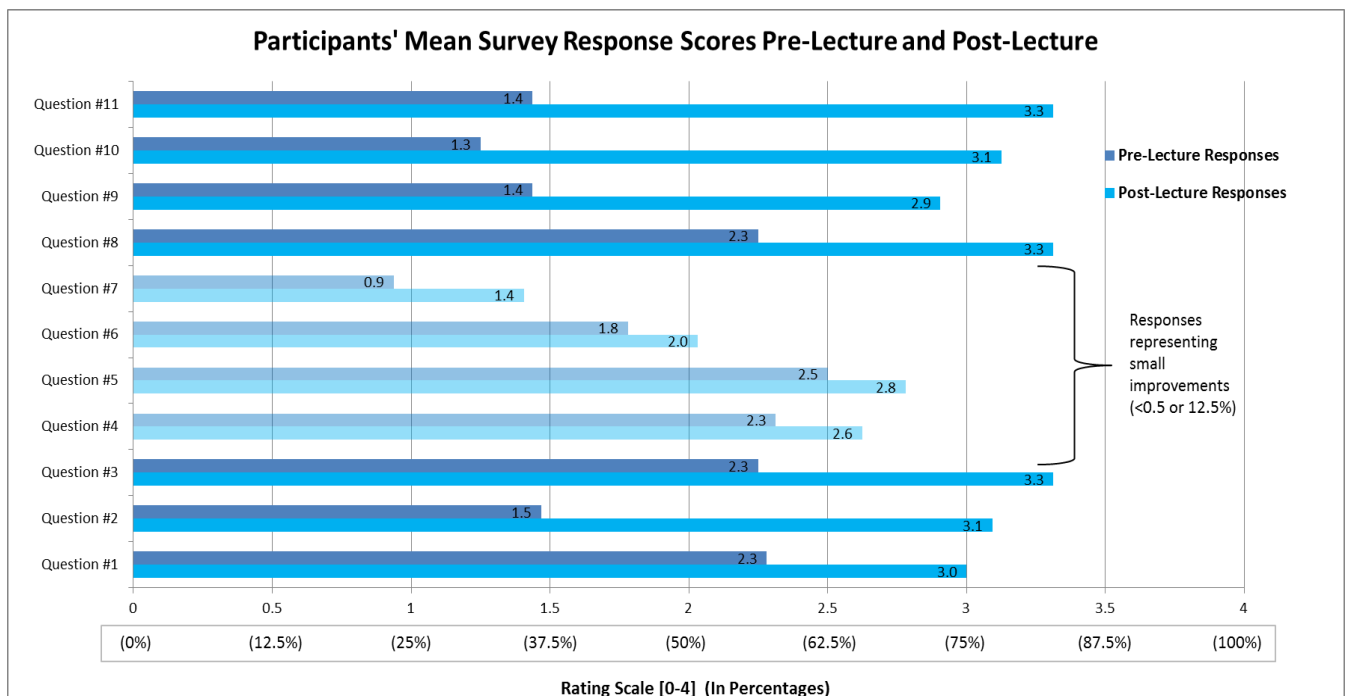
### **Results**

The data revealed multiple trends in the dimensions that were contrasted. Trends were found in the participants' responses to the first eleven questions, and in comparing the participants' level of anxiety before and after the presentation. Similar trends were found

between third-year undergraduates and fourth-year undergraduate students in the level of knowledge questions, as well as the level of anxiety question.

A significant increase in the participants’ level of knowledge was demonstrated with a rating higher than 0.5 on the 4-point rating scale (>12.5%), and this level of increase was found in seven of the eleven questions (Figure 2). Question one was concerned with application requirements, (an 18 percentage point increase), question two inquired about the information required in a personal statement, (a 41 percentage point increase), question three asked how one attains letters of recommendation, (a 27 percentage point increase), question eight probed the factors to consider when choosing a graduate school, (a 27 percentage point increase), question nine inquired about one’s knowledge of the options if denied from a program, (a 37 percentage point increase), question ten was concerned with what to consider when accepting a school’s offer, (a 47 percentage point increase), and question eleven asked what individuals should expect in the program, (a 47 percentage point increase).

Figure 2

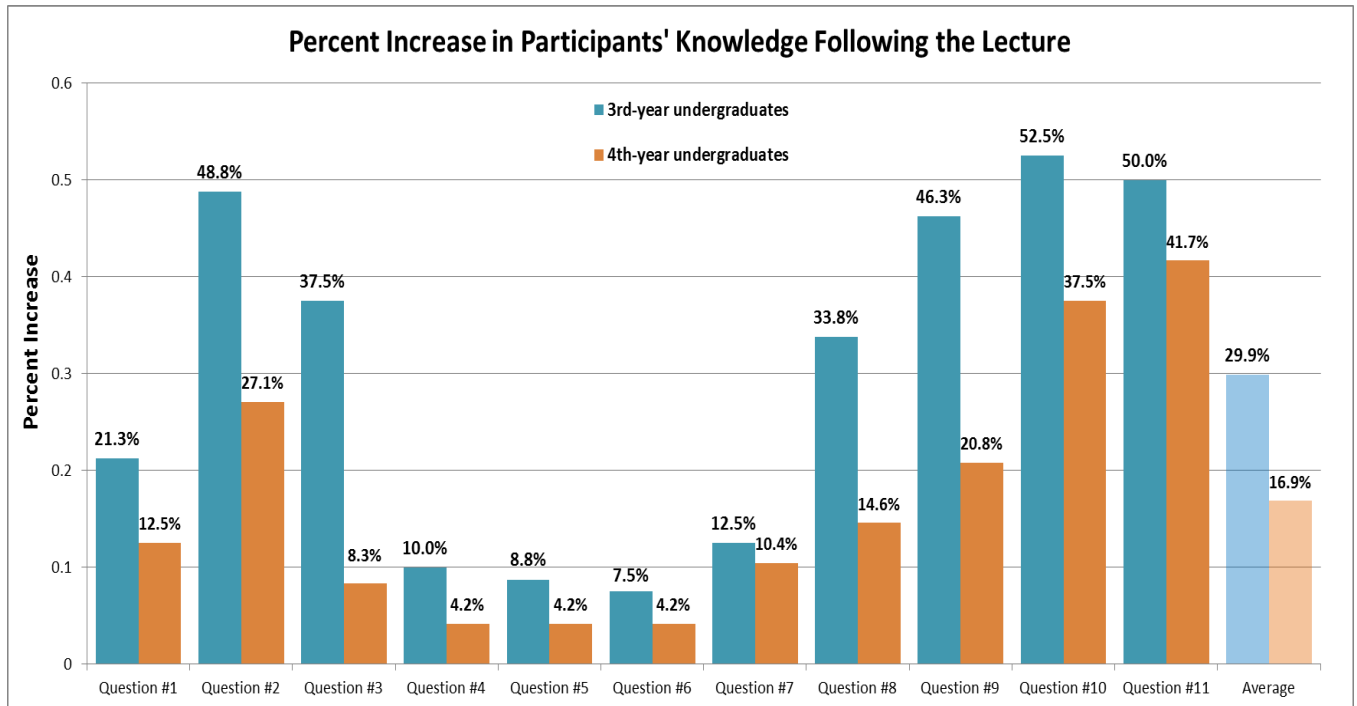


The least growth in the level of knowledge ( $<0.5$  out of 4 on the rating scale, or  $\leq 12.5\%$ ) was found in four of the eleven questions (Figure 2). Question four inquired about the participants' level of knowledge on the number of letters of recommendation required (an 8 percentage point increase), question five addressed the participants' level of knowledge on how and when to take the GRE (a 7 percentage point increase), question six probed participants' level of knowledge about the desired GRE scores (a 6 percentage point increase), and question seven probed participant's level of knowledge about how to explain a poor grade in an application (a 12 percentage point increase).

The third-year undergraduate students displayed a greater increase in their level of knowledge when compared to the fourth-year undergraduate students (Figure 3). The third-year undergraduate students' exhibited a significant increase in the level of knowledge in questions one, two, three, eight, nine, ten, and eleven (Addendum A). For questions four, five, six, and seven the third-year undergraduates displayed less increase in the level of knowledge ( $\leq 12.5\%$ ). The fourth-year undergraduate students' also exhibited significant increase ( $>12.5\%$ ) on questions two, eight, nine, ten, and eleven. For questions one, three, four, five, six, and seven the fourth-year undergraduates presented only a slight increase ( $\leq 12.5\%$ ). The two groups of participants demonstrated large increases on questions two, eight, nine, ten, and eleven, and small increases on questions four, five, six, and seven. The main distinction between the two groups was that the baseline of prior knowledge about applying to and attending graduate school was greater for the fourth-year undergraduates than the third-year undergraduates. This baseline of knowledge that the two populations demonstrated was evident when the percent increase of knowledge overall was compared. The fourth-year undergraduates displayed a percent increase

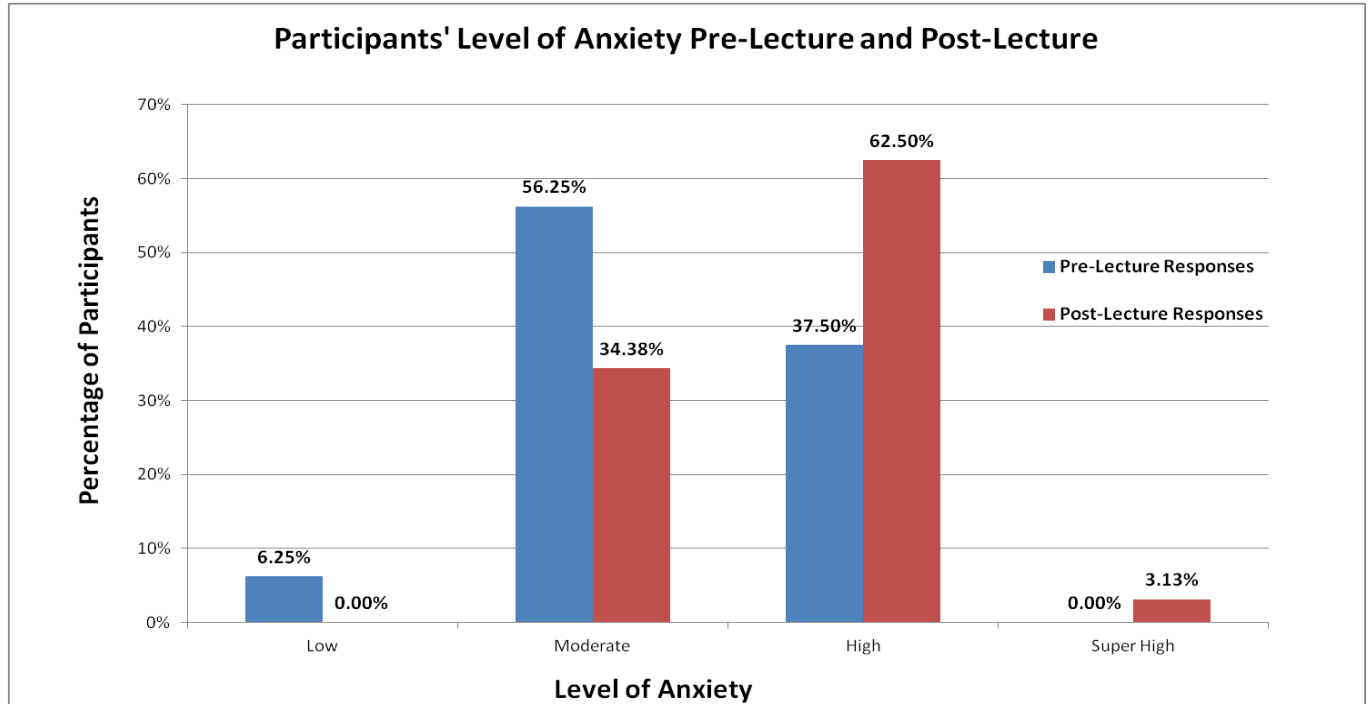
of 16.9%, while the third-year undergraduates displayed a percent increase of 29.9%, almost double the percent increase of knowledge compared to the fourth-year undergraduates.

Figure 3



Overall, there was an increase in anxiety levels recorded by all participants, at the conclusion of the presentation. The anxiety levels associated with graduate school and the application process increased dramatically, from moderate before the presentation, to high at the conclusion of the presentation (Figure 4). Prior to the presentation two of the participants rated their anxiety level as low (6.25% of the population), eighteen rated their anxiety level as moderate (56.25% of the population), and twelve rated their level of anxiety as high (37.5% of the population). At the conclusion of the presentation none of the participants rated their level of anxiety as low (0% of the population), eleven rated their anxiety level as moderate (34.38% of the population), and twenty rated their level of anxiety as high (62.5% of the population). There was one participant that added 'super high' to the rating scale (3.13% of the population).

Figure 4



## DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data revealed an increase in knowledge following the presentation for all participants in this study. Every participant indicated an increase in his/her knowledge base on all of the first eleven survey questions. Therefore, the panel presentation was beneficial to the participants' knowledge base, because each participant left the presentation having learned something new that they did not know prior to the presentation.

Some survey questions revealed a greater increase in the level of knowledge than other questions. For example, questions one, two, and three (which covered the aspects of application) and questions eight, nine, ten, and eleven (which covered admission and attending graduate school) revealed the largest increase in knowledge. Questions four, five, six, and seven, which covered the testing aspects of application, explaining poor grades, and recommendation letters, revealed a smaller increase in the knowledge level (Addendum A). All participants'

demonstrated an increase in knowledge for all of the topics that were addressed in the surveys, suggesting that the presentation was valuable to the students.

It is important to consider that each participant had a baseline of knowledge prior to attending the presentation. This is especially relevant when comparing the responses of third-year undergraduates with the fourth-year undergraduates. For example, there likely were individuals who came to the presentation knowing about the GRE, for example, making the baseline rating a three or a four at the beginning of the presentation. In a case like this there is little chance that this individual will learn more about this topic in the presentation, with no or little change in his or her rating for this survey question. This is likely what occurred with the fourth-year undergraduates because most had already prepared to apply or applying to graduate school and came to the presentation relatively informed on some or all of the topics. This is thought to indicate students who are well-prepared for graduate school in some or all of the areas covered.

Of particular interest is the increase in students' level of anxiety after the presentation. This may have been due to exposure to an overwhelming amount of information in a short period of time. It is also thought that learning the expectations of graduate study and the application process may have been intimidating to some participants. It is possible that some participants had questions that they did not have answered, increasing their anxiety about the unknown. These potential causes of participants' increased anxiety was seen as "positive", because the anxiety may have been beneficial in motivating participants to further educate themselves about applying to and attending graduate school.

The information delivered during the presentation addressed topics about graduate school and the application process: GRE scores, grade point average, letters of recommendation,

acceptance considerations, personal statements, and each panel member's graduate school experience. The data revealed that many of the participants took away new information, which could have caused the participants to become overwhelmed and anxious.

The amount of new information the participants were exposed to likely caused anxiety, but another factor may have been that the new information was alarming. Many of the things addressed in the presentation could be new topics of which some participants were not aware. Therefore, learning the requirements and components of graduate study and the application process could have been intimidating to many of the participants.

The participants may have had questions that they did not have answered during the presentation because they did not want to ask in a presentation setting or because there was not time to answer them. If this was true for any participant, then it is likely that this could be a significant contributor to their anxiety, because they left the presentation without all of the information they were seeking. However, this does not deem the presentation unsuccessful, because the data revealed that all participants learned information about graduate school and the application process during the presentation.

The participants may be overwhelmed by the amount of information to be learned, intimidated by the content of the presentation, or may have not had individual questions answered in this presentation. However, this presentation may have provoked participants to conduct individual research to become more knowledgeable, and to find the answers to their questions. Although the increase in the participants' level of anxiety may negatively impact their health, it displays that participants now possess newfound knowledge to better prepare for graduate school and the application process.



### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this presentation was to inform and prepare speech-language pathology and audiology undergraduate students for applying to and attending graduate school. The data analyzed from pre- and post-presentation surveys completed showed positive results. As each participant gained knowledge on all of the topics covered in the presentation, the presentation from the panel of professionals had a positive impact on the undergraduates' knowledge about applying to and attending graduate school. There were particular survey questions that exhibited a greater influx of knowledge than others, which indicated that if this presentation is replicated in the future there needs to be equal attention paid to every topic within the presentation. Overall, the positive results collected at the conclusion of the presentation indicated that while the presentation could improve with some slight alterations, it was beneficial to all participants. In order to confirm and generalize this conclusion to all populations of undergraduate students, it will be necessary for future research to be conducted.

Several areas of research should be conducted in the future as follow-up to this research, assuring that conclusions made here are consistent and reliable. Further research should assess other programs within Western Michigan University, as well as at other universities across the United States, to discern if conclusions made in this research study can be generalized to other undergraduate majors. Future research also should focus on determining the topics the panel presentations should focus around in each specific major. This could help tailor the professional presentations to be as beneficial to the undergraduates as possible. Research conducted in the future should also aim to discover whether the age, gender, professional background, workplace, and/or education of the panel members are related to the effectiveness of the presentation. Lastly, it is important for future researchers to conduct research on undergraduates' anxiety toward

graduate school in other programs, as well as at other universities across the country. It is also important that future research focus on discovering effective ways for undergraduates to cope with this stress and alleviate anxious feelings caused by applying to and attending graduate school. Further research will help professors and undergraduate advisors determine whether it is effective and beneficial for presentations similar to the one in this study to be held for undergraduate students in designated majors at designated universities. It will also help future professors and undergraduate advisors assist anxious undergraduates through the stressful and overwhelming process of applying to and attending graduate school.

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## Appendix A

**PRE/POST-PRESENTATION SURVEY**

**Confidentiality statement:** You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “Graduate School Knowledge” designed to analyze the knowledge undergraduates have about graduate school before and after a professional panel gives a presentation. The study is being conducted by Kathryn Hillenbrand and Chelsea Swadling from Western Michigan University, Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology. This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirements for Chelsea Swadling.

This survey is comprised of 12 questions in a ranking scale format and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your replies will be completely ANONYMOUS, so do NOT put your name anywhere on the form. You may choose to not participate in this survey by checking the “No Consent” checkbox below. If you wish to participate in this survey please check the “Consent” box below. Returning the survey indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply. If you have any questions, you may contact Mrs. Kathryn Hillenbrand at (269-387-7367), Chelsea Swadling at (248-342-2266), the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269-387-8293), or the vice president for research (269-387-8298).

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. You should not participate in this project if the stamped date is more than one year old.

**Informed consent:**                      “No Consent” [ ]                      “Consent” [ ]

**Directions:** Read each question and circle the numeric rating that best describes your answer to the question. The numeric rating scale is defined in the key below.

**KEY:**

**0 = No knowledge on the topic**

**1 = Small amount of knowledge on the topic**

**2 = Moderate amount of knowledge on the topic**

**3 = Substantial amount of knowledge on the topic**

**4 = Great amount of knowledge on the topic**

- 1) Indicate the level of knowledge you have about what the requirements are when applying to graduate schools.

0            1            2            3            4

- 2) Indicate the level of knowledge you have about the information to include in your personal statement for graduate applications.

0            1            2            3            4

- 3) Indicate the level of knowledge you have about how to obtain letters of recommendation for graduate application(s).

0            1            2            3            4

- 4) Indicate the level of knowledge you have regarding the number of letters of recommendation required for graduate application(s).

0            1            2            3            4

- 5) Indicate the level of knowledge you have about how and when to take the GRE for graduate application.

0            1            2            3            4

- 6) Indicate the level of knowledge you have about the desired GRE score ranges for graduate application(s).

0            1            2            3            4

- 7) Indicate the level of knowledge you have regarding where and how to explain a poor grade in a course when completing your graduate application(s).

0            1            2            3            4

- 8) Indicate the level of knowledge you have regarding the factors to consider when choosing graduate schools.

0            1            2            3            4

- 9) Indicate the level of knowledge you have about your options if you are denied from graduate school admission.

0            1            2            3            4

10) Indicate the level of knowledge you have about what factors there are to consider when accepting a program's offer of admission.

0            1            2            3            4

11) Indicate the level of knowledge you have about what to expect in graduate school.

0            1            2            3            4

\*\*\*Your level of anxiety towards graduate school at this exact moment...

No Anxiety      Low Anxiety      Moderate Anxiety      High Anxiety

When you have completed the survey place it face down on the table in front of you and wait for further **INSTRUCTIONS**.