

Ensuring Our Future: The Pathway to Excellence in Audiology Education

By Cynthia Compton-Conley

As an audiology veteran, I have worn several hats during my career. As a fledgling audiologist, I began my career in a medical practice, later transitioning to a rehabilitative hospital setting. Following a move to the Washington, DC, area, I then worked as a clinical supervisor (preceptor) at Gallaudet University, training master's level students and, eventually, AuD students. Midcareer, I earned a PhD and spent the last few years of my tenure at Gallaudet teaching, doing research, and placing students in externships.

Currently, I am enjoying an encore career on the industry side, working for Etymotic Research, where I have the privilege of continuing my work in the area of receptive communication needs assessment, and the selection and fitting of various assistive technologies. Although the work settings have changed, this singular career focus on communication needs assessment has afforded me the unique opportunity to see, first hand, what is important to the consumers we serve—and perhaps what steps we should consider taking to strengthen our AuD training programs so that our graduates can more readily navigate and thrive in the ever-changing health-care landscape.

Times change and, like all professions, audiology must adapt. Currently, we are witnessing a sea change—a paradigm shift. Some

of the external pressures upon us include:

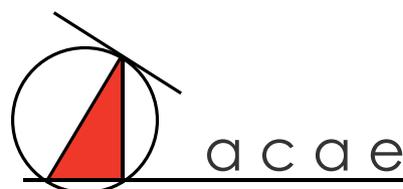
1. Insurance companies are creating direct-to-consumer models to market their products and services.
2. Federal funding is supporting research to improve accessibility/affordability of hearing health-care services, including development of low-cost technologies and innovative delivery systems.
3. Hearing Loss Association of America's (HLAA) Accessible and Affordable Hearing Health Care Initiative (and the Academy's, ADA's, and ASHA's support of it) calls for unbundling audiology services beyond the sale of hearing aids, including aural rehabilitation, counseling, and instruction on assistive listening and alerting devices (hearingloss.org/content/accessible-and-affordable-hearing-health-care).

The pressure is on to critically analyze our AuD training programs to see what we must do to preserve our standing as a strong and autonomous profession. Audiologists now need to be better prepared than ever upon graduation. Thanks to social media, apps, and the economy, consumers are demanding more control

of their health care. In addition, gone are the days when patients simply do what professionals recommend with no questions asked. People want to really understand their situation, and they want justification for whatever it is we are recommending. They want (and deserve) results.

Our response should be to take a hard look at the goals of audiology education. It is critically important that we all be on the same page and present a united front to consumers. As shown in the illustration, each of our AuD training programs should provide a standardized, rigorous curriculum that incorporates evidence-based practice in both diagnostic and treatment procedures. The curriculum should be consumer-focused. Without consumers we have no profession.

Every program should be actively involved with a local chapter of the HLAA, and every student should be required to attend and report on his or her experience at an annual HLAA Convention. There is no better way to learn what consumers want and expect. Patient engagement is what it is all about.



AuD programs must also move away from a narrow focus on teaching students to become hearing aid fitters, and, instead, focus on the big picture of what it is that we really do—enhance hearing. As “hearing enhancement specialists,” we assess residual hearing in light of a person’s unique receptive communication lifestyle and associated receptive communication needs. Every AuD program should be educating students on how to do a receptive communication needs assessment, and how to select, fit, verify, and validate technology for the enhancement of face-to-face communication and the reception of media, telecommunications, and alerting signals. It is only through this process that we can recommend an appropriate solution set of technology and training. This technology may include hearing aids and various traditional and cutting-edge assistive technologies, or it may include assistive technology only. The best solution depends on the person’s hearing loss and unique needs at home, in the workplace, at school, while traveling, and while engaging in leisure activities.

Key to the sustainability of our profession is building curricula that are adaptable and can change as quickly as times change. Audiologists are educated in a bubble, and we need to change that so that our students are educated with a public health focus. This focus will provide our students with a comprehensive understanding of a patient’s environment, family/social milieu, and a worldview of how hearing fits into the scheme of life. Students should also be aware of and sensitive to the complex needs of people from all economic and geographical strata. We must remember that patients are consumers who will eventually find power (personally or legislatively) if they are not provided

the things they need and deserve from us as professionals.

Whether you are a student, a clinical preceptor, an educator, a researcher, or an industry representative, we all have a stake in the future of our profession. The only way to ensure that our profession survives and thrives is to elevate its academic programs via standardized, rigorous education that places the consumer first. By doing so we will increase the respect and visibility we desire.

The Accreditation Commission for Audiology Education (ACAE) is forging a path toward achieving this goal by investing in new, rigorous benchmarking methods. These investments are intended to ensure that students

who graduate from ACAE-accredited programs are better prepared to meet the needs for an ever-changing, autonomous profession now and in the future. Won’t you participate in a call to action? As an alumnus from your AuD program, speak with fellow alumni and the AuD administration about becoming ACAE accredited. Our future depends on it. 🗣️

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