

Sacred Heart University

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Proposed Program to Meet Urgent Need

Rhea Paul



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Proposed Program to Meet Urgent Need

A state and national shortage of speech-language pathologists that's only expected to grow has led Sacred Heart University to develop a master's degree-level Speech-Language Pathology program.

In the process of seeking accreditation from the Connecticut Office of Higher Education and the American Speech-Language and Hearing Association, the program is expected to begin in the fall of 2014. When it starts, Sacred Heart will be the only college in the state that has speech pathology students studying alongside occupational and physical therapy students – professions that, in the real world, work together on a daily basis.

“The importance of that kind of consistent, collaborative training can't be stressed enough, because collaborating with other therapists is what most speech-language pathologists do every day,” said program Director Rhea Paul. “Patients who need speech-language therapy generally have other issues that also need treatment or therapy, too. And as most of us know, collaborative, multidisciplinary care is generally most effective.”

Part of Sacred Heart's College of Health Professions, the Speech-Language Pathology program will include an undergraduate minor that Health Science, Psychology and other students can consider. Classes for the undergraduate course of study will begin in the fall of 2013.

To pique students' interest and offer an overview of the scope of conditions speech-language pathologists treat, Dr. Paul — a licensed and certified speech-language pathologist who, before coming to Sacred Heart in early 2012 was a Professor at the Yale Child Study Center — will teach a class this fall called “Speaking on Film: The Treatment of Communication Disorders in the Popular Cinema.” An elective, the course will use films such as *The King's Speech*, *The Piano* and *Rain Man* to introduce students to stuttering, deafness, autism, aphasia and other communication disorders.

“Students will learn not just about the physical aspects of speech problems, but the emotional ones, which for some people can be severe,” Paul explained.

As part of Sacred Heart's commitment to service learning – combining education with meaningful volunteer work to benefit the community – Speaking on Film students will present an evening of films for families of children with disabilities.

“People who decide to become speech-language therapists (SLPs) generally have the same inclination to help others and make a difference as those who go into other health professions, but perhaps have a particular interest in linguistics,” Paul said.

Like most graduate programs, the Speech-Language Pathology program, once up and running, will require students to complete hands-on training in the field. Since most speech-language pathologists work in either hospitals or schools, and Sacred Heart already has well-respected and

well-established partnerships with institutions of both kinds throughout the state, Paul expects clinical opportunities to be rich and plentiful.

“Interestingly,” she said, “one of impetuses for us to start the program was a request from a local agency that works with kids with disabilities. They need speech-language pathologists, but can't find them, and asked us to consider training them.”

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 72 percent of schools, including many in Connecticut, report a shortage of speech-language pathologists. The Connecticut Department of Education has, in fact, designated speech-language pathology as an official “shortage area.”

In all areas, job openings for SLPs have increased 39 percent since 2000. Another 23 percent increase is expected between now and 2020.

“Our proposed Speech-Language Pathology graduate program will be a great course of study for recent undergrads or those with a bachelor’s degree looking to change careers,” Paul said. “The buzz is that people are excited about the program, and we’re excited, too.”

