

Sacred Heart University

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CHEFA Grant Will Fund Critical Training to Evaluate Swallowing



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Ciara Leydon, associate professor of speech-language pathology at Sacred Heart University, has received a \$74,700 Connecticut Health and Educational Facilities Authority (CHEFA) grant to develop systematic, standardized, simulation-driven training to evaluate patients' ability to swallow. Feeding and swallowing disorders are serious and widespread, occurring in 50 percent of those who have had a stroke, head and neck cancers, neurodegenerative diseases, and 85 percent of children with disabilities, such as cerebral palsy and Down Syndrome. Swallowing disorders are associated with significant financial, health and psychosocial burdens.

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) evaluate 10 million children and adults annually in the United States for these disorders, according to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

While fiberoptic endoscopic evaluation of swallowing (FEES) is used commonly to detect these disorders, there is no national standard FEES curriculum to train students in the skills they need to properly diagnose children and adults.

"We are pleased to provide this important grant to standardize the training curriculum addressing swallowing disorders. This is a serious issue and the new curriculum can be utilized in multiple teaching environments. By providing this grant we are addressing two of CHEFA's core priority funding areas of education and healthcare," said Jeanette Weldon, CHEFA's executive director.

"You can get trained in FEES at different facilities, but it is typically not part of a graduate program," said Leydon, a speech pathologist who specializes in voice and swallowing issues.

With the grant from CHEFA, Leydon and her colleagues will design and implement a simulation-driven training program. The FEES equipment will be utilized to train Sacred Heart speech-language pathology students, licensed community SLPs, students, and practitioners in related health professions.

Training will be offered at the state-of-the-art simulation facilities in the University's College of Health Professions and College of Nursing to cohorts of 25 students three times during the grant period, and thereafter, three times annually. The first cohort of Sacred Heart graduate students will begin in May, with a second group open to students and area practitioners in August.

The Connecticut Speech-Language-Hearing Association developed a list of knowledge and skill competencies to promote consistency in aptitude requirements, provide continuity of patient care, and facilitate transfer of personnel across facilities. Presently, a systemic FEES curriculum for teaching and evaluating students' grasp of these competencies does not exist.

Since many professionals work with children and adults with swallowing disorders, Leydon estimates this training could help more than 10,000 people over the equipment's lifespan.

"With shared knowledge and skills, there is better communication, allowing students to understand the most appropriate patient assessment and care," Leydon said. "Training will inform their practice and improve outcomes for their patients."

For more information on future cohorts, call the Speech-Language Pathology Department at 203-416-3950 or contact Ciara Leydon at leydonc@sacredheart.edu.

About CHEFA

The Connecticut Health and Educational Facilities Authority (CHEFA) is a quasi-public agency that provides access to tax-exempt financing and other financial assistance, including grant programs, to educational institutions, healthcare providers, childcare providers, cultural institutions, and other eligible nonprofit entities. CHEFA derives its revenues from the annual loan servicing fee it charges its clients, and operates without any State or taxpayer funds. CHEFA also expands higher educational opportunities for Connecticut students through its subsidiary, the Connecticut Higher Education Supplemental Loan Authority (CHESLA).

For more information on CHEFA or CHESLA, visit www.chefa.com, or www.chesla.org.