

Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences Boasts Outstanding Undergraduate and Graduate Programs

08/27/2025



Dr Lauri Nelson, professor in Speech and Hearing Sciences and director of Sound Beginnings

The Department of Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education housed within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services has officially changed its name to the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences (SHS). The change was made in large part to draw greater attention to the department's impressive offerings, which are nationally recognized for excellence.

"We changed the name of the department because we want it to clearly reflect what we do," explained Karen Muñoz, department head of SHS. "At the same time, we want to cast a broader net so more people will learn about the amazing things we are doing here."

"Our newly renamed Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences reflects the breadth and depth of our faculty's expertise and the full scope of our students' preparation," said Shawn Whiteman, interim dean of CEHS. "This change better communicates our commitment to advancing knowledge and practice in both speech-language pathology and audiology, while preparing graduates to meet the diverse communication and hearing needs of the communities we serve."

Undergraduate Opportunities

The department has two undergraduate programs, a communicative disorders major and a certification for speech-language pathology assistant. The communicative disorders major provides students with the necessary academic knowledge to pursue graduate programs in speech-language pathology, audiology, or deaf education.

Muñoz emphasizes that there are good employment opportunities available for majors who choose communicative disorders but do not want to pursue graduate school. For those students, the Speech-Language Pathology Assistant (SLPA) certificate program enables students with a bachelor's degree to work in the field. The certificate can be completed in three semesters and most students finish it along with their bachelor's degree.

"This program is for individuals who want to work with children with speech and language disorders under the guidance of a speech-language pathologist in schools or in private practice settings," explains Karen Filimoehala, a speech-language pathology lecturer in SHS. "The assistant might work with children who struggle to say the sounds of speech correctly or who have difficulty with the language required to participate in the classroom curriculum. There is a shortage of speech-language pathologists in the schools, so districts depend on being able to hire SLPAs to help cover the caseloads of children on individual education plans."

Katie Pierson works in the Logan School District preschools as a speech-language technician. Her introduction to the undergraduate program came after she enrolled in an exploratory majors class as a first-year USU student. When she learned more about speech-language pathology, she decided to take an introductory class in the department. Pierson ultimately earned her bachelor's degree in communicative disorders and received the SLPA certificate along with it.

"I love my job," Pierson said. "Because I usually work one-on-one with the children, I get to know my students really well and see the progress they are making. It's amazing to hear kids start to talk for the first time or correct errors that they're making in their speech. It's very rewarding. People don't usually graduate and then instantly love what they do, but I really do. I feel so lucky."

Interdisciplinary Graduate Training Program

Alongside the impressive audiology, speech-language pathology, and deaf education graduate programs, the

Listening and Spoken Language Interdisciplinary Graduate Training program is a standout in the department. In fact, many students come to the SHS graduate program at USU because of the interdisciplinary element. In this program, students from all three disciplines are in a cohort together for two full years.

“Professionals in this field need to know how to work together and not provide services in silos,” said Lauri Nelson, professor in the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences. “It is important for students studying audiology, speech-language pathology, and deaf education to train together. Our students still complete the requirements within their specific discipline and scope of practice, but they also have a lot of cross training so they can better understand what each other is doing and learn how to collaborate.”

Sound Beginnings, a campus-based early intervention and preschool program that serves children who are deaf or hard of hearing in the Cache Valley community, is one of the practicum sites for students in the Listening and Spoken Language Interdisciplinary Graduate Training program. Services provided in Sound Beginnings include home-based early intervention, parent-toddler groups, preschool classes, a kindergarten class, individual therapy, parent-child therapy, and pediatric audiology.

“Sound Beginnings was developed because there is a need within Utah and across the United States for children to have access to programs that provide specialized training so that they can develop the ability to develop listening and spoken language,” explained Nelson, who is also the director of Sound Beginnings. “The advances in technology have come so far that when children use hearing aids or cochlear implants, they can access sound and learn how to listen and talk.”

Annie Huish earned a Master of Education in communicative disorders and deaf education at USU and is currently a kindergarten teacher in the Sound Beginnings program. In that role, she mentors students in the interdisciplinary program as well as in the other graduate programs offered at SHS.

“We all have a common goal to help these children succeed,” said Huish. “As a kindergarten teacher, I have graduate students come into my classroom almost every day and I get the opportunity to help teach them how to be a classroom teacher, how to collaborate with the speech-language pathologist or the audiologist, how to look at the audiogram and the language goals, and bring that into a dynamic atmosphere where children are learning and growing.”

In addition to Sound Beginnings, the department also provides practicum training through other speech and hearing clinics in collaboration with the Sorenson Legacy Foundation Center for Clinical Excellence, located on the Logan USU campus. These include the Hearing and Balance clinic, the Speech and Language clinic, the Pediatric Audiology clinic, and the Cochlear Implant clinic.

“These are state-of-the-art, comprehensive clinical placement offerings,” said Muñoz. “The students who come here are placed in these clinics for their graduate program practicums. They are amazing facilities and students get access to almost the entire scope of practice here. The fact that we have a cochlear implant clinic and a comprehensive balance clinic is huge, and they really set us apart.”

Muñoz emphasized the ever-increasing value of a degree—either undergraduate or graduate—from the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences and noted that employment in the field is assured. “Graduates of our programs are in high demand and job projections for those fields continue to rise, particularly in the aging population,” she said. And for students who want to work with younger children, the demand is just as significant. “There is a lot of work happening in early intervention and early diagnosis and identification, so that also increases the demand for those degrees and skillsets,” Muñoz says.