

**Position Statement of the Academy of Neurologic Communication Disorders and Sciences  
on Clinical Doctorate Programs in Speech-Language Pathology**

**August 26, 2014**

The missions of the Academy of Neurologic Communication Disorders and Sciences (ANCDS) include, among others:

- Promoting quality service to persons with neurologic communication disorders by developing: training guidelines for preparation of speech-language pathologists for clinical practice with this population; standards for clinical practice of speech-language pathologists with this population; and standards and the means to certify clinical specialists in this area of practice.
- Promoting state-of-the art education of practitioners in neurologic communication disorders.
- Providing leadership in the development of clinical expertise in neurologic communication disorders.
- Establishing and supporting liaison with related professional organizations.

In accordance with these goals, *the ANCDS endorses the development of rigorous clinical doctorate programs in speech-language pathology. In concert with the mission of the ANCDS, such a degree would place a strong emphasis on neurologic communication disorders as one vehicle for improving clinical services and education in that area of clinical practice. Furthermore, we strongly encourage and support the development of crucially important, rigorous minimum standards and guidelines for such clinical doctorate programs.*

Given the missions of the ANCDS, the remaining discussion is specific to advanced education and training for medical speech-language pathology and neurologic communication disorders.

### **Background**

A 2012 report from the Academic Affairs Board of ASHA noted that clinical doctorate programs in speech-language pathology were not simply a future possibility, but a reality. It concluded that there is no longer time to debate whether or not such programs should exist because a small number of programs already exist and several more are in various stages of implementation. More recently, a report of the ASHA Ad Hoc Committee on the Feasibility of Standards for the Clinical Doctorate in Speech-Language Pathology (2013) concluded that oversight of clinical doctorate programs is warranted. It recommended that “ASHA initiate the development of guidelines (quality indicators) for academic programs offering the clinical doctorate in speech-language pathology...” (p.3) and laid out a phased-in approach for evolving from those guidelines (the lowest level of oversight) to recognition and ultimately to program accreditation (the highest degree of oversight).

*ANCDS supports the addition of a clinical doctorate in speech-language pathology to the existing degree options (i.e., Master’s degree, Ph.D.), as one avenue for achieving the goal of improving/enhancing clinical practice, but only if rigorous minimum standards are established for the degree. Educational programs offering such a clinical doctorate will contribute to: (a) improving the quality of care to people*

with neurologic communication disorders through enhanced development of the many traits associated with clinical expertise and leadership (e.g., critical thinking, use of evidence-based practices, commitment to continuing education, ability to collaborate with other health care providers, a history of quality clinical mentorship); (b) improving the education and clinical skills of clinicians who are faced with an expanding scope of practice and a reduction in the amount of closely-supervised clinical education during the clinical fellowship associated with the Masters degree; and (c) increasing the stature of SLP relative to other rehabilitation professionals in an environment where the doctor of PT,OT and audiology are becoming the mandated entry-level degree.

### **The ANCDS Position**

The ANCDS believes that a primary goal of a clinical doctorate in SLP should be to develop knowledge and skills required to be an independent, expert clinical practitioner and professional leader. This is consistent with the consensus from the 2012 ASHA report that learning outcomes for such a degree need to address advanced clinical skills and knowledge, as well as advanced professional leadership skills. We also believe that the requisite knowledge and skills should be learned through a combination of formal coursework and clinical experiences mentored by individuals whose clinical expertise is well established through a peer-reviewed process<sup>1</sup>. Such a clinical doctorate should not merely extend the current Master's degree nor should it substantially replicate, beyond its rigor, current research doctoral education.

The ANCDS believes that for a clinical doctoral degree to have value and credibility, and to ensure a level of consistency across programs, rigorous guidelines and, ideally, accreditation standards will be necessary. The minimum standards must be carefully considered and thoughtfully created to provide a basis for this degree. However, given the rising number of programs proposing clinical doctorates, the establishment of standards is time-sensitive. The profession is in a precarious position at the present time, given the increasing interest in, and promotion of this advanced degree, but without existing guidelines or minimum standards on which to develop new programs. There is a danger that programs providing only minimal additional education or clinical experience will be created, with the effect of "cheapening" the clinical doctorate degree, without substantive improvement in clinical competence or quality of service.

ANCDS applauds and supports ASHA's efforts at addressing these critical issues and encourages ASHA's development of standards (e.g., guidelines, recognition, accreditation) for clinical doctorate programs in speech-language pathology that include a strong emphasis on neurologic communication disorders. Without being prescriptive about the content or design of clinical doctorate programs, the following list contains examples of minimum standards critical for a credible doctoral-level degree. Although some of these general areas may be addressed in some masters-level programs, it is expected that the depth, student and mentor responsibility, and level of critical thinking of a doctoral-level degree would be well beyond that of current master's programs.

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<sup>1</sup> There are many possible indicators of established clinical expertise, including but not limited to: ANCDS Board certification or other specialty certifications, a record of consistent publications or presentations related to clinical diagnosis or management, consistent continuing education activities that exceed minimum ASHA or state requirements for certification/licensure, and honors or awards for clinical contributions.

1. The program should be as rigorous as a research doctorate (PhD) program in regard to duration and quality.
2. The advanced academic and clinical education should be provided by a team that includes both doctoral-level faculty and expert clinicians (preferably with tangible evidence of clinical expertise).
3. The majority of the program should involve direct contact with the academic and clinical team (as opposed to a majority of on-line learning).
4. The degree should involve higher-level integration of academic and clinical skills, such as for evidence-based practice and clinical research methods.
5. The degree should include formal, substantive clinical and academic interactions with related disciplines (e.g., neuropsychology, ENT, neurology, geriatrics, rehabilitative medicine, health care administration)
6. Content should not focus exclusively on a single disorder area (e.g., only aphasia or only motor speech disorders), but should include advanced education encompassing a variety of neurogenic communication disorders (or a variety of other conditions) and other professional competencies (e.g., clinical teaching, clinical scholarship).

## REFERENCES

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Academic Affairs Board. (2012). *Academic Affairs Board report to the ASHA Board of Directors on the clinical doctorate in speech-language pathology*. Retrieved from <http://www.asha.org/uploadedfiles/2012-Report-SLP-Clinical-Doctorate.pdf>.
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Ad Hoc Committee on the Feasibility of Standards for the Clinical Doctorate in Speech-Language Pathology (2013). *Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Feasibility of Standards for the Clinical Doctorate in Speech-Language Pathology*, November, 2013.