

REFLECTIONS FROM A CLD GRADUATE STUDENT: UTILIZING EXPERIENCES AND PERSONAL STRENGTHS DURING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

By: CLD Committee Members

*The CLD Corner was created in an effort to provide information and respond to questions on cultural and linguistic diversity. Members of the TSHA Committee on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CLD) answer questions posed by individuals. Members for the 2014-2015 year include **Brittney Goodman**, MS, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Raúl Prezas**, PhD, CCC-SLP (co-chair); **Amanda Ahmed**, MA, CCC-SLP; **Mary Bauman**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Phuong Lien Palafox**, MS, CCC-SLP; **Alisa Baron**, MA, CCC-SLP; **Raúl Rojas**, PhD, CCC-SLP; **Judy Martínez Villarreal**, MS, CCC-SLP; and **Ryann Akolkar**, BA (student representative). Submit your questions to bgoodman.speech@gmail.com, and look for responses from the CLD Committee on TSHA's website and in the Communicologist.*

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As our world becomes increasingly intertwined and global, the need for a shift toward multiculturalism is more prevalent than ever. As speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and SLPs in training, it is our responsibility to be at the forefront of understanding cultural and linguistic factors that impact our practice. We hold the tools to give our clients a voice and a means to communicate, and as a result, we must have integrity in knowing how to best be aware, open, and empathetic of differences that affect our assessment and treatment of individuals from backgrounds different than our own. Interestingly, only five percent of SLPs and audiologists nationwide are self-identified as bilingual service providers. Furthermore, this five percent includes both certified and non-certified American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) members (ASHA, 2012). A great need exists for more individuals in our professions to recognize their unique skills when providing services in languages other than English or with families from non-mainstream backgrounds.

A current challenge to our professions is the training and preparation of communication sciences professionals and a mismatch between available programs and the number of hopeful applicants. For example, there are numerous applicants to graduate-level programs but a limited number of available spaces in an accredited program. Based on information from the Communication Sciences and Disorders Education Survey National Aggregate Data Report (CAPCSD & ASHA, 2012), a majority of programs in Texas typically receive more than 200 applicants when the university training program has available staff for only 20 or 30 graduate students. Some institutions across the state have reported as many as 400 on the lower end and close to 900 on the higher end of applicants, with 13-percent and 24-percent admittance rates. Students looking to be admitted to a graduate program often apply to numerous universities in the hopes that they will be selected. The average grade point average (GPA) of accepted applicants is approaching 3.75 (and higher in most cases). As a result, hopeful graduate students are becoming creative in their pursuit of an SLP program and acceptance to that program.

In this article, we feature the journey of **Ryann Akolkar**, currently a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin and the new student representative to the TSHA Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CLD) Committee. It is our hope that her story will inspire other individuals who come from CLD backgrounds to consider their own background as a source of strength and

experience when seeking admission to graduate school in order to pursue a master's degree in speech-language pathology.

Growing up in a secular household as a child of Jewish heritage in central Kentucky, I was well aware that I was different from the mainstream. I embraced my family's open-minded outlook on the world and soaked up opportunities to experience cultures different than my own. I attended Hebrew school, studied French in school, and was enthralled by people who were multilingual. I relished hearing foreign accents. Because of my love for people, my inquisitive nature, a propensity for second language learning, and what I later would learn was called speech perception, my nurse-practitioner mother suggested I investigate becoming an SLP. During my senior year in high school, I was selected to participate in a program in which I observed various types of SLPs in the community. I was enamored by the field and by the brain's role in various disorders.

To pursue my goals in college, I majored in communication sciences and disorders (CSD), minored in Spanish, and joined the National Student Speech-Language-Hearing Association (NSSLHA). Because I struggled with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), my first and second semesters in college were extremely difficult as I adjusted to a big university. I took a semester off to regain my composure and earned straight A's for the first time upon returning. For family reasons, I later had to transfer to another university that had no undergraduate CSD program. I selected Spanish as my major to gain a better understanding of the growing Latino community in the United States. I was also involved in the Indian Students Association, began learning Hindi, and held the leadership position of vice president of communications at Hillel, the university Jewish youth group and community center. I was very interested in seeking these opportunities to learn and understand other cultures. I constantly sought out opportunities to engage in multicultural domains, seeking to understand the importance in gaining a global perspective.

After graduating, I applied to seven graduate programs, most of which had bridge programs for students who did not have a CSD undergraduate degree or the prerequisite courses. Despite my high GPA and mention of my leadership and multicultural activities, I still only received admission into one school. I declined the offer because the school was on the other side of the country and required three and a half years to complete the master's degree. In addition, I had just met my now-husband, Rahul, and decided to take a year off and move to New York to be with him. Struggling to find a job to support myself with a Spanish degree before the application season started again, I eventually landed the role of program assistant at Lifetime Arts Inc., a cutting-edge nonprofit arts service organization that connects older adults from diverse backgrounds with professional arts instruction and public institutions. I poured myself into planning my Hindu wedding with Rahul, who wiped the tears off my crushed spirit as I began contemplating other lines of work beyond SLP. He kept asking me, "What do you want to be?" I answered, "There's nothing more I'd rather be than an SLP!" This later became the title of my graduate

school application essays.

I decided there was no more time to waste. I retook a couple of college classes and the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE). I still scored in the average range. I knew I needed to excel in other ways and decided I needed to highlight my multicultural experiences as a strength. I voraciously sought out volunteer and observation opportunities online and contacted local clinicians in order to arrange observation hours. I was able to make contact with a home-care SLP and with a Spanish-speaking bilingual SLP. I finally decided to take the nine prerequisite CSD courses at Mercy College, cultivated relationships with professors there, rejoined NSSLHA, volunteered with them at a local nursing home, and became an English as a Second Language (ESL) volunteer tutor. I thought doing research might help me stand out from other applicants, so I reached out to all of my professors. Dr. Shari Berkowitz, a professor at Mercy College, responded to my email promptly, asked for my resume, and wanted to meet me within the next few days. Dr. Berkowitz introduced me to the world of speech perception, which seeks to understand how human listeners recognize speech sounds and use this information to understand spoken language. She enlisted my assistance on a cross-linguistic speech perception study. Dr. Berkowitz not only exposed me to speech science but also introduced me to the need for additional research in the CLD population. Through this experience, I became more interested in pursuing research at the doctoral level. Moreover, my interest in learning about other cultures and working with diverse clients in the future continued to grow.

The time to apply to graduate school was quickly approaching once again. I reached out to professors from multiple universities to inquire about their research because I had learned that establishing contact was important. Some generous professors in my area agreed to meet with me, even offering me a position as a volunteer in their lab, while others did not respond. I made a spreadsheet with all of the deadlines, school codes, and prices and used ASHA's EdFind to find bilingual graduate-level programs. I brushed up my resume and wrote 19 essays while my husband graciously filled out the online forms. I asked for letters of reference from past mentors, including Dr. Berkowitz, Rosario Elejalde (my bilingual SLP mentor), and one of my former Spanish professors. At this point, I had a better understanding of the importance of the letters of intent and recommendations, and I described my multicultural experiences as an advantage. I emphasized these experiences and was very candid about my diverse background and desire to work with CLD individuals. Moreover, I discussed my desire to seek ways to continually engage in various communities so I could serve them in a culturally relevant manner.

After a seemingly endless wait, the first three responses I received were rejections. I wondered if somehow I had missed the mark again. About a week later, I received my first acceptance from my third-choice school, and I screamed in relief, calling all my eagerly anticipating family members. Then the acceptances and rejections flooded into my cell phone at odd hours, ringing in moments of sheer

joy because I had finally been accepted and would be able to pursue my dreams of becoming an SLP. While at a celebratory dinner with my husband, I received the notification of acceptance from the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin), my number-one choice. I opened the message, and “Congratulations!” flashed across the screen. We howled and embraced each other as my husband reaffirmed, “You did it! I am so proud of you!” I was accepted into the MA-PhD program with a teaching assistantship (TA) and in-state tuition. I chose UT-Austin for many reasons, including research opportunities in my areas of interest, personable faculty, the structure of the program (MA-PhD), location, and additional opportunities (TA position, in-state tuition). Most importantly, I chose UT-Austin because it had a bilingual track and I would receive Bilingual English-Spanish Certification. Continuing my quest to learn more about CLD populations and increase my skills as a bilingual SLP was very important to me.

Currently, I am a full-time graduate student in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at UT-Austin. I also serve as a TA and spend four to five hours a week in a research lab working on projects related to CLD. In addition, I have been fortunate to serve as a mentor for undergraduate students, giving advice on how to apply to graduate school and editing statements of purpose and resumes. I continue to remind myself of how lucky I am to be where I am, and I feel compelled to frequently express my gratitude to my family and mentors. Most recently, I was asked to serve as the student representative on the TSHA Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CLD) committee. I am very grateful to be on this committee with an amazing team of individuals who are also passionate about addressing challenges related to CLD.

I do not think I would be where I am today without the support of my family and mentors, my cultural background, and the various culturally diverse experiences that I pursued in order to gain experience for graduate school. As a result, I would like to offer a few suggestions to others who may be applying to graduate school at this time or in the near future.

A successful applicant to graduate school should, in addition to general guidelines, consider the following:

- Highlight personal strengths. Sometimes personal strengths can be experiences learning other languages or can be drawn from one’s own cultural background.
- Explore the field of speech-language pathology and search for information regarding the scope of practice and populations served by SLPs. Contact faculty members at universities of interest. Ask about CLD opportunities within the programs. Follow-up with inquiries and questions while being polite and gracious.
- Invest in a mentor relationship, whether with a professor, a current graduate student, or a clinician in the field who can answer your questions and help guide you. For example, if you are bilingual in a language other than Spanish (e.g., Vietnamese), inquire about an SLP mentor who speaks your language and who may be able to provide you with additional resources.

- Reach out to researchers and clinicians at different universities who are doing the work you want to do, especially if you have a special interest in an area not generally discussed or researched (e.g., Autism and CLD). Mention these collaborations in your application essays.

- Join your local chapter of NSSLHA and consider joining a special interest group (SIG) (e.g., ASHA’s Hispanic Caucus or SIG).

- Volunteer with a local organization (ideally related to SLP). For example, shadow a bilingual SLP or ESL tutor.

- Look for multicultural experiences, such as organizations on campus, bilingual conversation groups, multicultural alliances, and international nights.

- Look for leadership roles big and small. List all of your activities and volunteer and leadership experiences, including in religious organizations (if applicable).

- Learn another language or gain experience in working with the CLD population. For example, offer to tutor a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who may happen to be from a culturally or linguistically diverse background.

- Study abroad if you have an opportunity to do so.

- Be deliberate in choosing which schools you want to apply to. Choose schools with values, areas of focus, and other components that align with yours. Read their websites up and down! Utilize ASHA’s EdFind (<http://www.asha.org/edfind>) to see who has a multicultural focus or may meet your interests. Avoid only applying to one type of school, and instead consider multiple schools.

- Don’t give up! Keep trying, and do whatever it takes if this is your dream!

Personal essays, statements of purpose, and letters of intent are very important and can set an applicant apart from similar applicants in merit. Consider the following when writing an application essay:

- Make the first paragraph very powerful and moving. Tell your story (including your background and cultural influences).

- Discuss how the experiences prepared you and helped you understand people from all backgrounds.

- Talk about your goals/aspirations and why this field motivates you. Feature any aspirations that may set you apart from other applicants (e.g., to become a bilingual SLP).

- Mention interesting or inspiring observations or individuals who have shaped your desire to be in our field.

- Discuss any gaps or “mistakes” in your record and how you learned and moved on from them.

- Mention the professors you may have worked with by name and explain how their work is in line with your core interests and also what their work inspired you to consider for future investigations.

- Feature your research (if you have any), talk about your preliminary findings/future aims, and explain your role (don’t be modest). Every contribution is important!

- Take your essay to a writing center (if possible) or have it edited by a mentor.

• Most importantly, describe how the field of speech-language pathology won't be the same if you're not part of it. Show what your unique perspective and approach brings to the forefront of our field. These schools also need you!

If you are accepted to multiple graduate programs, here are some additional questions for self-reflection to help make the decision of where to earn your degree.

Consider asking does the program:

- Align with personal desires/needs?
- Support current and future goals?
- Offer the level of hands-on attention and one-on-one instruction needed/wanted?
- Offer research opportunities in CLD, and is that viewed as important?
- Offer access to clinical opportunities with diverse clientele?
- Have a bilingual certificate/program?
- Offer classes in multiculturalism or other off-site opportunities?
- Have alternative multicultural opportunities if not directly offered?
- Offer financial assistance?

If the SLP profession is your calling, do whatever it takes to become a practicing clinician who is on the front line of understanding cultural and linguistic factors that inform our practice. We must have integrity in knowing how to best be aware, open, and empathetic of differences that affect our assessment and treatment of individuals

from backgrounds different than our own. Sometimes that awareness comes from our own experiences and backgrounds. Become the culturally competent SLP you were meant to be by embracing your own culture and sharing your journey!

Perhaps the most important aspect of a graduate school application is one's own personal story. Cultural and linguistic differences exist in everyone. In many instances, our own backgrounds make us good candidates for becoming a trained SLP. Professionals from all non-mainstream backgrounds (e.g., culturally different exposures, bilingualism, experiences as immigrants, growing up in poverty) are needed and should be valued because they all represent the vast differences in the populations that are served. Differences should be celebrated as sources of strengths in the professions. This not only prepares aspiring SLPs to become more competent but also provides clinicians the opportunity to understand others of different backgrounds because one's own background is accepted.

The CLD Committee appreciates Ryann Akolkar's willingness to share her perspective regarding her personal experiences and participate on the committee as our graduate student representative. In addition, we would love to hear your perspectives and questions on graduate/post-graduate school and other topics related to culturally and linguistically diverse populations. If you are interested, please send us an email at ggoodman.speech@gmail.com. ★

References

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2015 CONVENTION HIGHLIGHTS FOR THE TSH FOUNDATION

ANNUAL AWARDS LUNCHEON › FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 11:45 A.M. TO 1:45 P.M.

Attend the Texas Speech-Language-Hearing Foundation (TSHF) Annual Awards Luncheon, a time-honored tradition in which you can reminisce about the past and also celebrate the future as we award scholarships to the TSHA members of tomorrow! Seating is limited, so get your tickets early. Enjoy lunch with colleagues while we honor this year's TSHA and TSHF award winners! For more information, contact **Sherry Sancibrian** (tshfoundation@gmail.com). Tickets are \$50 each or \$40 for students. The luncheon is at the San Antonio Grand Hyatt.

Silent Auction

Enjoy shopping for a cause? Support the work of the Foundation by attending the **silent auction**, which will be located in the Exhibits Hall again this year. The silent auction will feature exciting items to purchase, including vacation stays, jewelry, artwork, gift baskets, and much more. Arrive early to place your bids! ★