THE GERONTOLOGICAL COMPETENCIES FOR ACCREDITED BACCALAUREATE SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY PROGRAMS

The United States Census Bureau reported an aging population of 55.8 million, which is approximately 17% of the population, according to the 2020 Census (Caplan, 2023). By 2030, one in five residents will be 65 years or older. The number of individuals in this age group will double from 40.2 million in 2010 to 88.5 million in 2050 (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). As the older population grows, so will the demand for rehabilitative services provided by Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs). Nearly 40% of practicing SLPs work in healthcare settings, where the aging population is expanding (ASHA, 2020). However, research shows that 62.7% of SLP students prefer working with children over adults (Leonard et al., 2016). Given the increasing demand for services for older adults, it is crucial to examine the impact of ageism in fields like Speech-Language Pathology.

The Council for Accreditation in Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology (CAA) emphasizes competencies that span across diverse clinical settings, which are crucial for SLPs who will work with the aging population. These competencies include (Council, 2023):

- Ensuring opportunities to work with individuals across the life span and continuum of care.
- Providing students with access to a base of individuals from a variety of clinical settings, populations, and age groups.
- Reflecting diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the academic and clinical education process.

Best practices in gerontological education for SLPs suggest:

- Preparing students to work with older adults by incorporating more gerontology education and practical experiences.
- Preparing students through enhanced education on the biological, psychological, and social concerns of older adults (Darling, 2016).
- Implementing intergenerational contact and practical experiences early in training to foster positive attitudes and effective communication strategies with older adults (Watson et al., 2021).
- Ensuring that students are familiar with older adults before providing professional services to them through receiving education on aging alongside intergenerational experiences prior to more formal clinical experiences (Heape et al., 2020).
- Teaching students to prioritize the complex needs of older adults through practicing a holistic therapy approach that promotes a sense of participant value, contribution, and self-worth among older adults and their caregivers (Toner & Shadden, 2002).

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