

Speech-Language Pathologist

Colleen McElroy, MS CCC SLP

Colleen McElroy had that rare good fortune to know, early on, what career she wanted to pursue. That was particularly useful because speech-language pathology, her chosen field, requires a fairly linear education trajectory. Colleen says her experience as a speech-language pathology student at Loyola University Maryland made her feel as if the discipline was her calling. In an interview with *Imagine*, she explains why this was so, and how her profession continues to inspire her today.



How did you become interested in speech-language pathology as a profession?

In high school, I had a Spanish teacher who introduced me to the field of speech-language pathology. In my first semester at Loyola, I took one class in the discipline—Introduction to Communications Disorders—and quickly declared my major afterwards.

What about that class did you find inspiring?

It gave me a broad look at speech-language pathology. It was also a small class of only six students, which drove discussion. Additional time each week for lectures or service learning allowed us to delve a little deeper into each topic.

In this class and others in undergraduate school, I felt inspired by the professors I had. Many were full-time professors who also worked within the on-campus speech and language clinic. Others were adjunct faculty with full-time jobs in the field.

What classes did you take to prepare for a career in speech pathology?

It was a mix of language and science. Coursework begins with very basic anatomy and neuroanatomy, so that you understand how communication and language are created within the brain. It then moves through the life span and touches on what can happen when injury or disease affects those areas of the brain and how you can rehabilitate (help people regain abilities they may have lost) or habilitate (help people attain, keep, or improve language). I also took classes that focused on evaluation and treatment of swallowing disorders, which prepared me for what I spend most of my days doing today.

Interview by Elizabeth Heubeck

Are speech-language pathologists required to earn a graduate degree?

Yes. To practice as a speech-language pathologist, a master's degree is required. Those who do not have an undergraduate degree in speech pathology can complete a post-baccalaureate program before entering graduate school.

What about pre-professional clinical requirements?

Graduate students are required to do 400 hours of clinical work in addition to attending school full-time. Clinical work usually starts in the first year of graduate school.

As a student at Loyola University Maryland, I completed my clinical work at the university's onsite speech clinic, which serves a wide range of ages and diagnoses. A Down Syndrome Center teaches language and feeding skills to children from a young age and addresses sensory issues. The clinic also works with school-age children who need support with articulation, higher-language concepts, and auditory and reading comprehension. The clinic serves adults, too, oftentimes post-stroke.

When you began your career as a speech-language pathologist, were you immediately able to work independently with patients?

For the first nine months of my career, I was a clinical fellow. This is a mandatory requirement based on national accreditation standards. My clinical supervisor wasn't always present, but we had pretty consistent communication, as well as weekly meetings to discuss goals and complex situations.

Could you describe the setting in which you work today and the types of patients you treat?

I work at Johns Hopkins Hospital in acute care, the inpatient side of the hospital. I work with adult patients, many of whom have had respiratory failure, heart attack, or stroke. Subsequently, they may experience difficulties swallowing, eating, or drinking. Initially, we perform a swallowing evaluation and then provide therapy targeting the muscles that affect the ability to swallow. For example, we focus on exercises to improve the strength of the tongue and the muscles of the throat.



Being able to restore some normalcy for people is inspiring, especially knowing that it's going to move their treatment plan forward.

Have you worked in other settings?

I have always worked in the medical field. In my previous job at St. Vincent's Medical Center in Los Angeles, I was the primary speech-language pathologist in acute rehab. In this setting, patients typically stay longer than in the inpatient hospital, allowing speech-language pathologists more time to work one-on-one with patients toward individual goals. It's rewarding to see progress happen with patients when you are able to work with them so often and so closely.

How do you stay current in the field?

I try to stay informed of any new, evidence-based information that comes out. Working at Johns Hopkins, I have access to lots of resources like medical journals and continuing education programs. To maintain my license, I have to meet continuing education requirements for the state of Maryland and my professional organization, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). I take at least 15 hours of continuing education credits annually to meet those requirements.

Do you have a favorite patient population?

I have a soft spot for oncology patients. They really have this fight to them; I don't know if it's because of what they're already battling. Oftentimes those patients do spend longer in the hospital. You get to know them and their family members. Typically, these patients are going to listen to every recommendation I make. If I tell them to do 10 exercises, they'll say, "Is it bad if I do 15?"

What makes you excited to come to work?

Every day presents something brand new. I'm busy; I'm on my feet all day long. And at any moment, my day could get flipped around.

I might organize my day to evaluate eight patients, but as the day unfolds I may be asked to educate a family member with regard to my recommendations or assist a colleague with a patient, and my original plan has to be adjusted. That's what I like about the setting I'm in, though. I wasn't looking for a structured atmosphere. I also like that when I come home, I leave my job behind and am focused on my family.

What's the best part of your job?

I feel inspired by the work I do. Giving a person the opportunity to eat or drink again is rewarding and motivating. Being able to restore some normalcy for people is inspiring, especially knowing that it's going to move their treatment plan forward.

What's the most challenging aspect of your job?

Ultimately, I want to help as many people as I can, but sometimes, there are just more patients than there are hours in a workday.

If you could do it over again, would you choose to become a speech-language pathologist?

One hundred percent. I am very thankful I knew early on in my education that I wanted to be a speech-language pathologist. I believe the education, mentorship, and jobs I've had shaped the clinician I am today. As I continue to grow and learn, I hope to give back to the field so others can learn about this profession and be excited to consider it as a career possibility.

What advice would you offer young people considering the field?

Seek out volunteer opportunities within the field in a variety of settings: a preschool, a nursing home, a high school. It's a great field with so many opportunities. You can work with an infant or an adult who's 104. ■

What they do

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) assess, diagnose, treat, and help to prevent communication and swallowing disorders in children and adults.

Where they work

You'll find SLPs in schools (elementary and secondary), professional offices, hospitals, nursing homes, and in-home healthcare environments.

Education required

The profession requires at least a master's degree, and most states require SLPs to be licensed.

Job outlook

With a growth projection of 18 percent between now and 2026, the job outlook for SLPs is excellent.

Salary

The median salary for SLPs in 2016 (the most recent year salary data was captured) was \$74,680. Salaries for SLPs tend to be higher in healthcare settings and lower in education settings.

Learn more

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
asha.org

Bureau of Labor Statistics

bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/speech-language-pathologists