

Climate and Belonging

Communication Sciences and Disorders

Fall 2025

Edited by: Naihua Wang



Building Belonging Through Dialogue: Fall Student Discussion on Inclusive Practice

Contributors: Verhonica Raj, Hadley Lange, Sydney Meyers, Angelina Pelikan; Student Discussion Group Leaders

This fall semester, the Climate and Belonging student discussion meetings centered on building connection, reflection, and practical skills that support inclusive and affirming clinical practice. Students engaged in structured discussions that encouraged shared learning and fostered a strong sense of belonging within educational and clinical spaces. Each meeting emphasized community norms grounded in respect, trust, and inclusion, helping create a welcoming environment for open dialogue.

Throughout the semester, participants explored topics relevant to future clinicians, including how cultural perspectives shape professional practice, the distinct roles of medical translators and interpreters, and the importance of equitable language access for clients. Guest speakers enhanced these conversations with learning opportunities focused on gender-affirming voice care, accessibility for d/Deaf and ASL-using individuals, and strategies for inclusive clinical environments. Sessions incorporated guided discussion, interactive activities, and reflection to support meaningful clinical application.

The semester concluded with a focus on sustainability and resource-sharing, highlighting clinically diverse materials in audiology and speech-language pathology that support culturally responsive, multilingual, and neurodiversity-affirming care. Students collaborated to share resources, discussed affirming approaches to neurodivergence, and learned about opportunities to remain involved through future facilitation and leadership roles. Overall, this fall's student discussion meetings provided a supportive space for professional growth grounded in inclusion and belonging.



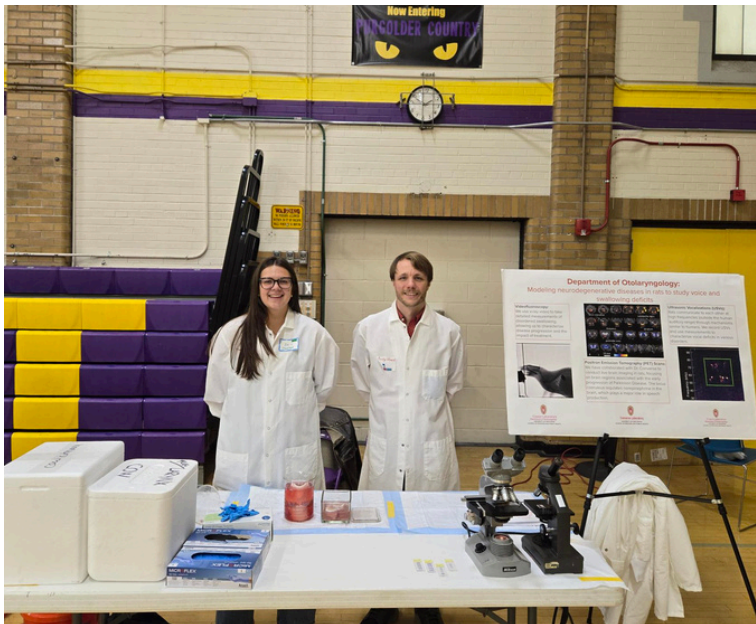
Ciucci and Connor Research Group

High School Expo Outreach

Contributor: Dr. Michelle Ciucci's Lab

This past October marked the 3rd year of the Ciucci and Connor research group's participation in the UW-Madison High School Science Expo at Madison East High School. Lab members presented recent findings on swallowing dysfunction in Alzheimer's Disease and Down Syndrome models. They engaged high school students in learning more about voice production with a demonstration of laryngeal function on a cadaver larynx. Students from a wide range of science education and backgrounds showed genuine enthusiasm for research and relevant topics in otolaryngology and communication sciences.

The UW Antiracism Learning and Action in Neuroscience group (ALAN) organizes this annual event with the mission to engage young people in science and to shine a light on the diversity of backgrounds among scientific researchers. Drs. Ciucci and Connor and their research staff are committed to participating in this event in future years to promote inclusion, belonging, and engagement with future-generation scientists.



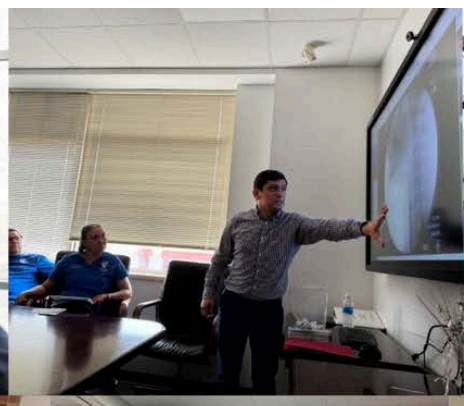
Research Spotlight:

Swallowing and Salivary Bioscience Laboratory

Contributor: Swallowing and Salivary Bioscience Laboratory

C&B continues to collaborate with the Swallowing and Salivary Bioscience Lab (SSBL), which is advancing equitable, community-engaged research to improve the identification and treatment of dysphagia in older adults. SSBL's work spans saliva wet lab science and behavioral interventions, including validating diagnostic tools, identifying saliva biomarkers linked to aspiration and pneumonia, and testing novel therapies, such as recent projects on lingual strengthening in individuals with Alzheimer's disease.

Grounded in a commitment to diversity, equity, and belonging, SSBL recognizes that racially and ethnically diverse populations remain underrepresented in clinical research. This limits both access to new treatments and the generalizability of findings. To address these gaps, the lab operates at the level of community-based participatory research and partners with organizations such as the African Center, Jamarek, United Community Center, and the Latino Health Council.



Current community-engaged projects include a Community Readiness Assessment, which interviews local leaders to understand priorities and resources, and plans for a Mobile Swallowing Data Collection Unit. This unit will bring oral and swallowing assessments, VFSS, and questionnaires directly to high-need communities in Milwaukee. Together, these efforts aim to reduce health disparities and build lasting, trusted partnerships that center community voices in research.



Training Law Enforcement and Supporting Persons with Aphasia: A Collaborative Project

Contributors: Kim Caul and Kristin Murphey



Department clinical professors, Kim Caul and Kristin Murphey, presented their poster at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) Convention, highlighting a collaborative project developed through their work at the UW Speech and Hearing Clinic (UWSHC) that focuses on educating law enforcement about aphasia. With approximately 84 percent of the general population unaware of aphasia, clients from the clinic's large aphasia population shared powerful experiences of being misunderstood during emergency encounters, often being mistaken as intoxicated or struggling to communicate following accidents.



In response, Caul and Murphey developed targeted training for local law enforcement officers to increase awareness of aphasia and to teach practical, accessible communication strategies. Using real client stories and pre- and post-training data, the project demonstrated increased officer knowledge and confidence when interacting with individuals with aphasia. The work also fostered mutual learning, helping speech-language pathologists better understand law enforcement procedures while balancing safety with communication access.



To further share this work and celebrate faculty initiatives that reflect CS&D values, Caul and Murphey were invited to present the same content at a CS&D meeting. This created space to amplify their message within the department and highlight faculty efforts that promote dignity, safety, and inclusive communication practices.



This initiative centers life participation and communication access as essential to equity and belonging within the community. The project continues to expand locally and has also been shared at Wisconsin Speech and Hearing Association (WSHA) in addition to the ASHA Convention.

More Than a Game Night: Facilitating Peer-Support to Minimize Graduate Student Burnout

Contributor: Shannon Welby

Shannon presented a poster examining protective factors against graduate student burnout in speech-language pathology programs, with a focus on the impact of intentionally designed peer-support activities. The project examined the development and implementation of a strategic, team-based “Cohort Olympics” event designed to foster connection, collaboration, and shared experiences among graduate students.

Survey results indicated increased peer support and reduced burnout following the event, highlighting how purposeful community-building initiatives can meaningfully support student well-being. By centering connection and inclusion, Shannon’s work demonstrates how intentional departmental programming can strengthen a sense of belonging, promote peer support, and contribute to a healthier learning environment within CS&D.



Au.D. Students in the Community

Contributor: Dr. Melanie Buhr-Lawler

LISTEN UP UW: PROMOTING HEARING HEALTH AT THE SYLVEE



As part of the committee's focus this year on celebrating and supporting outreach that strengthens communication access in the community, Listen Up UW highlights the meaningful impact of audiology-led engagement beyond the classroom. Through this program, UW-Madison Doctor of Audiology (Au.D.) students and undergraduates interested in audiology bring hearing health education directly into Madison's vibrant music scene.



By regularly attending concerts at The Sylvee, students engage concertgoers in conversations about safe listening practices, provide free hearing protection, and share practical strategies for reducing the risk of noise-induced hearing loss without diminishing the live music experience. These efforts support individuals' ability to communicate, connect, and fully participate in their communities now and in the future, while reinforcing the department's commitment to accessible, community-centered care.

AUDIOLOGY AT VERNON HEALTH'S CENTER FOR SPECIAL CHILDREN

Addressing barriers to healthcare access is a core priority to foster equity and belonging, particularly for rural and historically underserved communities. This fall, Au.D. students continued a longstanding partnership with Vernon Health's Center for Special Children in La Farge, WI, a clinic dedicated to meeting the unique healthcare needs of the Plain (Amish and Mennonite) communities in rural Wisconsin.

Twice each year, Au.D. students, under the supervision of UWSHC audiologists, provide free hearing evaluations and care to Plain community members. Working closely with Vernon Health's physicians and staff, this collaboration helps ensure that both children and adults have access to comprehensive hearing healthcare.

In addition to addressing healthcare disparities in rural settings, this partnership offers students meaningful experience in culturally responsive, community-based care. Together, this work supports access, dignity, and trust in healthcare and reflects the department's commitment to reducing barriers while strengthening belonging within the communities it serves.



Hearing and Speech-Language Screening for Children in Reach Dane

Contributor: Dr. Melanie Buhr-Lawler

For decades, UW-Madison graduate students in audiology and speech-language pathology have partnered with Reach Dane to provide hearing and speech-language screenings for every child enrolled in its Head Start program. Reach Dane serves children from low-income families throughout Dane County, offering early childhood education and family support to promote school readiness and overall well-being. These screenings are vital, as early identification of hearing or communication challenges can significantly impact a child's ability to learn and thrive. By working together across disciplines, our students not only ensure timely referrals and resources for children and families but also strengthen a sense of collaboration and belonging among future professionals committed to equitable access to care.

DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING VISOR CARD RESOURCE



This resource provides a printable visor card designed to support effective communication between Deaf or Hard of Hearing individuals and law enforcement officers. The card uses clear text, visual icons, and communication guidance to help convey needs, reduce misunderstandings, and support accessibility during traffic stops or emergency situations. It also reinforces the individual's right to effective communication under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).



Scan the QR code to view resources in English and Spanish, including a Spanish version of the card and visor placement instructions.

WITF Brings Communication Sciences and Disorders to Local Schools

Contributor: Angelina Olson, DEIAB Liaison

The NSSLHA Wisconsin Idea Task Force, led by Misha Finney, continues its long standing mission of outreach and recruitment by sharing Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) with students and the community. Partnering with the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County and local schools including West, East, La Follette, and Memorial High Schools, the task force hosts on campus field trips and supports a yearly summer intern in Rita's Lab. These efforts reflect the ongoing purpose of the task force to draw future students into the field and increase awareness of CSD for years to come.

At the first C&B general meeting of the year, WITF task force members presented their outreach presentation to committee members, as a key focus is the lack of diversity in the profession and the actions the task force is taking to improve representation and awareness. The presentation introduces NSSLHA at UW-Madison and its advocacy work, along with the three core aspects of communication: speech, language, and communication.

Through discussion and engaging visuals, attendees learn about the prevalence of speech, language and hearing disorders, the roles of speech-language pathologists and audiologists, and the wide range of work settings within the field. Videos such as a barium swallow study, audiometry in action, and MRI footage of beatboxing help bring clinical concepts to life.

The presentation also covers education pathways for SLPs, SLPAs, and Au.D.s, as well as salary expectations and job outlook. Interactive activities like exploring the IPA chart and writing names in phonetic transcription, along with occasional ASL practice or AAC board creation, give participants hands on experience before closing with a final activity and reflection. In addition to in person outreach, the task force has expanded its reach through Zoom presentations for high schools outside the Madison area, further extending its impact across Wisconsin.



WITF Supports Summer CSD Intern, Abea Fobate

Contributor: NSSLHA Wisconsin Idea Task Force (WITF)

This summer, WITF hosted CS&D summer intern, Abea Fobate (she/her), in collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County. Funded by WITF and the CS&D Department, this internship expanded access to mentorship, research, and professional pathways in CS&D, with an emphasis on inclusive learning and community engagement.

Abea gained hands-on research experience in the Language Acquisition and Bilingualism Laboratory and helped plan and facilitate WITF's CS&D on-campus field trip on July 17th.

Through research engagement and outreach, this work fostered inclusive learning environments, increased exposure to CS&D, and supported a sense of belonging for local students and community members.



WITF on-campus field trip presentation for local students led by Abea Fobate, incoming graduate students Maggie Thomas and Aide Trejo, and advisor Misha Finney.

