Message from the Chair, Dr. Kristine Swain

Each semester it is important to reflect on the accomplishments of the semester. As you look through this newsletter you will find that students and faculty have been actively involved in research and providing service to the community. In addition to the areas of research and service, we have been busy developing and revising academic programs. We are pleased to announce the approval of the new undergraduate major, Early Childhood Inclusive, which is a collaboration with the department of Teacher Education. This new major will provide our candidates with many exciting employment opportunities in high need areas. We also worked with the Educational Leadership department to develop the Special Education Supervisor endorsement. These two new programs are great examples of the collaborative work that is so important for strong programs. We have also revised our graduate program in Behavior Disorders to align with the new Nebraska endorsement, Behavior Intervention Specialist; this program continues to be offered online which allows students from across the state and region to participate.

In this issue, you will learn more about many of the activities happening in speech-language pathology as we welcome Dr. Lucia Scheffel and students involved in research and the Transitions program. Through all of this, we continue to focus on our department strategic plan that focuses on the three themes of our conceptual framework, Dedicated Practitioners, Reflective Scholars, and Responsible Citizens. Through our newsletters we hope that we can share our accomplishments in these areas.
The University of Nebraska at NSSLHA chapter has been busy this semester. UNO NSSLHA’s local chapter was selected as a National 2015 Gold Chapter recipient for its networking, advocacy, career awareness, philanthropy, and community service. Members recently attended the Omaha Walk for Williams and the Nebraska Walk for Children with Apraxia of Speech. UNO NSSLHA also continues to participate in a variety of events which allow members to apply their coursework to real-world experiences, including: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Awareness Day at the Omaha Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha Hands and Voices Fall Bash, Omaha Children’s Respite Care Center’s Trunk-N-Treat, a variety of events with the Autism Society of Nebraska, and Reach for It, a program of dance for adults with Parkinson’s disease.

UNO NSSLHA members also attended the 2015 American Speech-Language Hearing Association Convention in Denver. The chapter was chosen to serve as Ambassadors for the 2015 NSSLHA Experience – a special program put on by the NSSLHA Executive Council for all students attending the convention. Being chosen is an honor and also a big task, but the members of UNO NSSLHA were prepared and excited to take their work to a national level.

This semester has been busy for the Student Council for Exceptional Children. To start off the semester, three new officers were elected, with one returning officer from the previous year. The officers are Trey Stuthman as President, Jena Burns as Vice-President, Lauren Egger as Secretary, and Alyssa DeClue as Treasurer. This semester has been full of volunteer opportunities for the SCEC members. Members have volunteered at two Special Olympic events (flag football and bowling), took registrations at the Down Syndrome Alliance Buddy Walk, danced the night away at the Ollie Webb Halloween Party, scored goals with students at TOPSoccer, and have recently started to volunteer with VSP. On December 5th, members volunteered at the Ollie Webb Holiday party.

Apart from volunteering for the organization, SCEC has had other highlights this semester. During the October chapter meeting, SCEC brought in a guest speaker to share her experiences with raising a daughter who has Down Syndrome. Members of SCEC were able to listen to her experiences to better prepare us as educators. In the month of November, SCEC sold Eileen’s Cookie Dough as a fundraiser to help support members from SCEC to attend the National Council for Exceptional Children Conference in St. Louis in April 2016. The SCEC officers have already started to plan for the spring semester, whether it be setting up volunteer opportunities or planning for CEC conferences in April.
The Transitions Program began in 2010 as a result of our community’s belief that there is a continuing need for social support, post secondary education, for individuals who identify as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Co-directors Mitzi Ritzman, Ph.D. (Special Education and Communication Disorders) and Troy Romero, Ph.D. (Goodrich Scholarship Program) have provided support to young adults with ASD through a variety of avenues. As a collaboration between Autism Action Partnership and the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), the Transitions Program is able to offer many unique opportunities for our participants with ASD. One way in which we are set apart from other social skills programs is that we provide 1:1 ratio of participants to peers mentors. The vast majority of our peer mentors attend UNO and are currently working toward undergraduate or graduate degrees in speech-language pathology, psychology, and education. This mentor relationship provides our participants with a safe environment to practice their social skills and receive constructive feedback when needed.

As a result of being the first program of its kind, the Transitions Program makes an effort to integrate the most current evidence based practices, along with feedback from those involved in the program to improve from year to year. The structure of the Transitions Program has shifted over the short life of the program. Currently, through our program, participants receive 3-4 opportunities per month to improve upon their social skills by receiving direct social skill teaching, small group memberships with one other participant and two peer mentors, and larger group social events.

Working out of the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center on UNO’s campus, our participants are assigned to one of two social skills groups that strives to meet their individual needs, with the recent integration of two speech-language pathology graduate students serving as instructional facilitators. The lessons use techniques such as video modeling, discussions, and active participation. Small group membership provide the opportunity to practice the targeted skills in a supportive environment. These small groups are encouraged to get together at least once a month to engage in social activities of their choice. Lastly, once per month, the Transitions Program hosts a social event for all participants and peer mentors.

The Transitions Program also believes that it is our duty to make contributions to ASD through various forms of advocacy. Each year we contribute data to establish best practices for young adults with ASD while remaining actively involved with professional development conferences on a local, state, and national level. If you would like more information about our program, or ASD in general, please contact us at transitionscoordinator@gmail.com.

UNO Welcomes New Faculty Member, Dr. Lucia Scheffel

Please allow me to take this opportunity to introduce myself to all of you. My name is Lucia Scheffel, your new assistant professor in Speech-Language Pathology. It is a pleasure to have joined the University of Nebraska at Omaha as a member of the faculty for the Special Education and Communication Disorders Department in August. This faculty position offers new and exciting challenges to me, all of which I look forward to. Prior to coming to UNO, my background entailed a Bachelors of Science in Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology from ULBRA University in Brazil, a Ph.D. in Speech Language Pathology from Kent State University - OH, and a Postdoctoral Fellowship in Medical Speech Pathology at Mayo Clinic - MN. My research and clinical interests involve neurological based language and motor speech disorders in adults. Specifically, my program of research explores the neurocognitive basis of word retrieval and how understanding meaning facilitates naming in individuals with aphasia.
Nebraska Speech-Language Hearing Association Convention in Kearney

The Nebraska Speech-Language-Hearing Association convention is an annual event each fall. This year we had over 230 speech-language pathologists, audiologists, and students in attendance. Both Katie Wittler and Taylor Hansen presented their FUSE-funded (Fund for Undergraduate Scholarly Experiences) research projects to professionals from the community as well as students and faculty from the three Nebraska university SLP programs: UNL, UNK, and UNO. In total, there were nine poster presentations showcased at the convention and three of those were presented by UNO faculty, Drs. Teten and DeVeney, and/or students.

Ms. Taylor Hanson (left) presenting her research project, “iPad Pilot Program: Graduate Student Tablet Technology Use in Clinical and Classroom Settings”
Ms. Katie Wittler (right) presenting her research poster entitled: “Test-Retest Reliability of Independent Phonological Measures of 2-year-old Speech”

American Sign Language Student Organization

This semester ASL students provided an intensive language workshop at the UNO library, volunteered at the state RID conferences in Nebraska and Iowa, provided an in-service to teachers at Plattsmouth Public Schools and partnered with the Marian High School Sign Language club. Students continue to volunteer at many events in the community, including Deaf Awareness Day at the Henry Doorly Zoo and UNMC mock doctor visits.

Prime Time Family Reading Program

The PRIME TIME Family Reading Program, a collaboration among UNO, the Omaha Public Library and Humanities Nebraska, is designed to help families bond around the act of reading. This service-learning project in Dr. Mitzi Ritzman’s Birth to 5 years early intervention class involves graduate students using dialogic reading, a methodology where adults and kids look through the picture books together and talk about the book, going beyond the written word. Instead of just reading the text, the adult uses language techniques to promote a dialogue.

Each reading session begins with breakfast to establish community among families. At the end of the session, kids get a copy of a selected children’s book to encourage them to continue reading at home. The PRIME TIME Family Reading Program was held on Saturdays through the end of November at the Charles B. Washington branch.
Congratulations to Award Winners!

Three alumnae of a UNO Special Education program recently received the 2015 Alice Buffett Outstanding Teacher Award. Fifteen educators in the Omaha Public School System receive this distinguished award. Congratulations to Sarah Monzu (JP Lord School), Cathy Nelson (Blackburn High School) and Irene Urzendowski (Integrated Learning Program).

Congratulations to Ms. Liz Humlicek, adjunct speech-language pathology professor, who received the UNO Alpha Xi Delta Professor of the Month. This award is given to a professor who succeeds in teaching the course materials and impacts the lives of students. Thank you for all you do!