

Essential Functions in Speech-Language Pathology

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- ‘Essential functions’.....[include] acquiring fundamental knowledge; developing communication skills; interpreting data; integrating knowledge to establish clinical judgment; and developing appropriate professional attitudes and behaviors.”

--Reichgott (1998, p.79)

Guiding principles in development of “essential functions”

- “a guidance—a framework of objective standards and requirements for programs—not as a prescription.”
- “describe essential functions in an objective manner so that student development criteria would rest on behavioral standards, not on stereotypes.”
- “amendable to each programs modification to meet its own unique program needs, values and capacities.” (Schwarz et al. 2007)

Accommodations

- The purpose of reasonable accommodations is to give qualified individuals with disabilities the opportunity to access educational programs to participate fully in learning opportunities and to compete on basis of merit, not to provide any individual an unfair advantage. (Horner, 2007 a, PGA, Inc. v Martin, 2001)

Accommodations

- The responsibility of the academic institution includes:
 - To articulate essential functions of the professions and distribute them to matriculated students
 - To apply standards and progress criteria to all students without regard to disability status
 - To tailor and revise modifications/recommendations based on reasonableness and suitability for the individual
 - To give students ample notice of academic progress difficulties and provide reasonable opportunities to remediate.

Risks

- The implementation of 'essential functions' places a great responsibility on the programs where they are used. They are a tool that can easily be misapplied resulting in discrimination, marginalization and exclusion of capable students and a homogenization and narrowing of speech-language pathology candidates within academic programs.

- Abilities, Disabilities and Self-reporting:
- Challenges are not static. Everyone's performance is impacted by day to day variability (e.g. amount of sleep, nutrition, stress etc....). Many individuals have not developed clear understanding of these issues prior to becoming graduate students....in addition the experience of graduate school is unique to other experiences.
- Awareness of combined impact of daily challenges and disability may be a developing skill.

Possible Uses of “Essential Functions”

1. Clarify the eligibility requirements for program entry and the roles and responsibilities of a professional
 - Assist programs in self evaluation
 - Assist programs in presenting expectations to students (Schwarz et al 2007)

EXAMPLE

- Western Washington- Put “essential functions” on the website and review them and use for student self-evaluation in a pre-clinical class. They have used for remediation and also to counsel students
- **DISCUSSION:** What is impact/consequences of using essential functions as a list prior to admission?

Potential Uses of “Essential functions”

2. To assist students in self-evaluation

- Students with identified disabilities may use list to become proactive on their own behalf in identifying necessary accommodations
- Clearly outline necessary skills and use to identify their own challenges and develop strategies for successful achievement of essential functions
- (Schwarz et al 2007)

Example

- Student who declared CmSi undergrad. Was hired to work in audiology clinic and there were repeated complaints about social interactions. He reported high level of anxiety. He was not forthcoming with info about a pre-existing diagnosis, but eventually disclosed that he had Asperger's. 'Essential functions' were used when he finally hit "bottom"

Potential Uses of “Essential functions”

3. Use by academic programs

- A written standard and set of expectations that can frame the exploration of case-by-case learning goals and remediation strategies when the need arises.
- As a tool to counsel students who present with challenges that are not readily identified as a “disability”. (Schwarz et al 2007)

EXAMPLE

- Student with mobility concerns-who was unable to easily and rapidly navigate in an elementary school. She demonstrated little self-advocacy or problem solving when faced with difficulties in clinical settings. She was terminated from her final clinical placement

VERSUS

- Student with profound hearing loss who was focused on a PhD, but was counseled into AuD program. Was very successful in some areas but demonstrated difficulty with some clinical activities (could not do APD's) and redirected self to PhD program where he could more selectively choose activities

