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## Supporting the Class of 2027 Students from April 15 through Enrollment (Week 1)

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For graduate programs in speech-language pathology, April 15, the national deadline for acceptance of offers, marks a shift in focus from student recruitment to retention. While a program's waitlist may remain active until the first day of their classes in the graduate program, the composition of the Class of 2027 is now largely known. Efforts may now turn to minimizing "melt," which is when accepted students withdraw their plan to enroll in the program. A successful retention plan will both minimize melt and offer a first step to supporting enrollment through program completion.

Several strategies can be used to support enrollment and retention. One approach is to foster accepted students' sense of belonging and engagement, whether they are new to the university or transitioning from an undergraduate to a graduate program at the same institution. To support belonging, faculty may craft personalized welcome emails, a strategy purported to improve motivation and attitudes in coursework (Legg & Wilson, 2009). Follow-up outreach, such as phone calls and email correspondence, may support continued, regular connections with students. Students may be assigned a faculty advisor after acceptance who will serve as their consistent primary point of contact, and help to establish relationships with the program, transforming an acceptance into a connection (Roos & Schreck, 2021). Early and frequent touchpoints may be important for enrollment, and later retention in the graduate program. Faculty advisors play an important role in helping students complete their programs and succeed in the profession (García, Fong, Harper, & Littlefield, 2025). Their mentoring can support student success by fostering a sense of belonging and connection to the program and the university (Wong et al., 2024).

Another strategy to minimize melt is to offer varied opportunities for engagement, which in combination with positive, consistent communication (e.g., via phone, email, social media or on learning management systems), strengthens student engagement and motivation and, in turn, increases the student's retention (Phan, 2026). For example, engagement may be supported through in-person or virtual group program information meetings (e.g. meet and greets, orientation) during which program-specific logistics and expectations are shared (e.g., class schedules). Engagement can be fostered through the department's social media platforms so incoming students can learn about the department's culture and environment, as well as the activities students are involved in (e.g., "*A day in the life of...*"). Programs can support students by providing clear timelines for pre-matriculation requirements, offering meetings with infographics and videos, and sending emails to help ensure timely task completion. Providing information about financial resources, such as student employment opportunities, grants, and loans, may be welcome, given that a primary challenge in recruitment is students' need for financial support. Beyond providing information through email exchanges and meetings, engagement events offer students opportunities to connect with one another, fostering a stronger sense of belonging.

Peer interactions with current graduate students and alumni through panels and individualized outreach may provide incoming students with an additional layer of support

and connection within the department. A program may choose to support these student interactions through well-designed peer mentorship programs. Peer mentorship reduces stress among graduate students in speech-language pathology, for example, by pairing incoming students with second-year graduate student mentors who can provide guidance and support before classes begin (Greene, 2021). Mentorship provides valuable opportunities for students to network and collaborate which leads to increased student retention; however, there is limited information about how mentorship programs are implemented in healthcare programs (Germeroth, Murray, McMullen-Roach & Boshoff, 2024).

By supporting students intentionally during the transition from acceptance to matriculation, speech-language pathology programs can not only secure their incoming class but also take the first critical step in preparing future speech-language pathologists for success in the field.

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