

shu.edu

School of Health and Medical Sciences Receives \$1.2 Million Federal Grant to Create Occupational Therapy and Speech-Language Pathology Scholars Program to Support Elementary School Children

By Laurie Pine and Lori Riley



The first class of program scholars include, bottom row, from left, Tierney Hughes (OT), Caitlin Campbell (SLP), Linette Perez (SLP). Top row, from left, are Julia Lanuez (SLP), LeslieAnne Dessources (SLP), Anjali Patel (OT), Leah Ogradnik (OT) and Kelly Ann Eckert (OT).

The largest group of school-age children receiving special education services today are those with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Recognized as one of the less understood areas of difficulty, many of these children are not identified as having an SLD – such as dyslexia, dysgraphia and language disorders, among others – until fourth grade or later. Healthcare professionals in the [School of Health and Medical Sciences \(SHMS\)](#) at Seton Hall University, with the support of the federal government's Office of Special Education Programs, are taking action to make a difference in the lives of these young people, their families and the next generation of occupational therapists (OT) and speech-language pathologists (SLP).

Five-Year, \$1.2 Million Grant from U.S. DOE



From left, Anthony Koutsoftas, Karen Hoover, Ruth Segal and Vikram Dayalu.

The Seton Hall interprofessional team received a five-year personnel development grant totaling more than \$1.2 million from the U.S. Department of Education to develop "Project Write to Learn: Preparation of Occupational Therapists and Speech-Language Pathologists to Improve Written Expression in Children with Specific Learning Disabilities." Co-project directors [Ruth Segal](#), Ph.D., OTR, Professor and Chair of the [Department of Occupational Therapy](#), and [Vikram N. Dayalu](#), Ph.D., CCC-SLP, Associate Professor and Chair of the [Department of Speech-Language Pathology](#), along with key personnel, Associate Professor [Anthony D. Koutsoftas](#), Ph.D., CCC-SLP, and Assistant Professor [Karen Hoover](#), OTD, OTR, are leading the project. OT and SLP graduate students – scholars selected to participate in the grant-funded program – will participate in shared coursework, group assignments and coordinated clinical experiences to learn how to support these youngsters to improve their written expression skills.

"The fact that this collaboration is being funded at the federal level underscores the real impact that we see when professionals come together for a common purpose. In the School of Health and Medical Sciences, our ongoing emphasis on interprofessional education and community outreach allows our faculty and students to be leaders when it comes to innovation, advocacy and educational outcomes," said [Brian B. Shulman](#), Ph.D., CCC-SLP, ASHA Fellow, BCS-CL, FASAHP, FNAP, Professor and Dean.

Preparing the Next Generation of OTs and SLPs

Segal and Dayalu explained that they are recruiting an interprofessional cohort of eight graduate students from the OT and SLP departments each year as program scholars, resulting in 40 program scholars trained upon grant completion. The first cohort of graduate students selected in January to participate in the program include OT Program Scholars Kelly Ann Eckert, Tierney Hughes, Leah Ogradnik and Anjali Patel, and SLP Program Scholars Caitlin Campbell, LeslieAnne Dessources, Julia Lanuez and Linette Perez.

Program goals for the scholars include completing interprofessional coursework that provides

evidence-based information to understand, assess and treat written-expression deficits in children with SLD. The scholars will complete group assignments to develop and deliver integrated, high-quality and efficient interventions for treating deficits of written expression for these children in elementary school settings.

Program scholars also will participate in clinical experiences, including guided observations and activities under the mentorship of OT and SLP faculty. Scholar and child outcome data will be tracked across all components of the project to demonstrate achievement of program goals. "What makes this relevant is the push for interprofessional education throughout the national healthcare and educational landscape. We are collaborating with other professionals across the board in a meaningful way, putting protocols in place and engaging our students to work collaboratively in a variety of domains," said Dayalu.

Addressing a National Problem through Collaboration and Community

Both graduate programs have seen the number of students multiplying to meet the increased needs for OTs and SLPs in many school districts, both locally and around the country. Nationwide reports indicate that only 34 percent of high school graduates are at or above age-appropriate writing levels. "Project Write to Learn" looks to reach children in kindergarten through grade 8 who have SLDs, concentrating on the kindergarten through grade 5 population. They will focus on children with dyslexia, dysgraphia, general language impairments or a visual or motor impairment. "Studies show that, from a learning perspective, there are better outcomes and better integration when children are taught to write by hand instead of through technology and keyboards. You are not just transcribing something. There is expression in the children's handwriting. There are more complex sentences. There is a difference," said Segal.

"Rather than using rote writing, how can we incorporate the language? It's not just, 'let's write' for the sake of learning letters. Let's write something that has meaning and incorporates language appropriately," shared Hoover.

Looking to local communities, SHMS has clinical affiliations with a wide range of school districts, including East Orange, Bergen County Special Services, Bridgewater, Paterson and Irvington, which is a key partner for the SLP Department.

Koutsoftas explained, "We are an institution of higher education with a mission to engage in our community, and we are supporting our graduate students in a newer model of community-based learning. We are individual departments, but we are really looking at ways to engage not just in interprofessional outcomes through on-campus experiences, but also by going out into the community, which is something we all enjoy doing. We are surrounded by

communities who need support, and particularly our graduate students can have a real impact there."