Reminders of hope and compassion welcome all at the entrance of the new home of Baylor’s Speech, Language and Hearing Clinic in the Cashion Academic Center. Scripture references at the doorway and in the reception area signal the heart and compassion to be found within the clinic:

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” [John 14:6 NIV]

“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” [Psalm 121:1-2 NIV]
The new clinic boasts 21 treatment rooms, two reading rooms, a motor lab, an audiology suite, research rooms and more. It is space remediated to meet the needs of more children and adults with speech and language disorders in the community.

Yolanda Anderson, BA '00, whose 4-year-old daughter Malayeh is the third sibling to be aided by the speech program at Baylor, is grateful for the new facility, which opened in September. Anderson, a speech pathologist herself, points to the facility's size and child-friendly atmosphere.

“We have a family history of speech and language disorders,” Anderson says. “Our other children have gone on and no longer need speech services, and we’re hoping it will do the same for Malayeh.”

Two years ago, the CSD department received an anonymous $10 million gift from a Baylor family, setting the program on a fast-track for growth. With the gift—and the new home it afforded the CSD in Cashion—Ritter and her colleagues are planning to launch a doctoral program, expand the master’s program, add faculty positions and broaden the department's research base. The timing is perfect when it comes to healthcare and the needs of the clients being served.

“Right now, healthcare is huge. Many universities are just now thinking about the need for programs like ours, but we’ve been working on our program and have proven it to be of top quality for more than 60 years,” Dr. David Garrett, BA '80, MS '81, says. The associate professor previously served as the CSD department chair and graduate program director. “We are way ahead of the curve. We have a great reputation in the academic community and the workforce.”

According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of speech-language pathologists (SLP), also called therapists, is projected to grow 21 percent in the next seven years—much faster than the average of all occupations.

As the large baby-bloom population grows older, there will be more instances of health conditions that cause speech and language impairments,” the report says. “The role of an SLP is to assess, diagnose, treat and help to prevent communication and swallowing disorders in patients. Speech, language and swallowing disorders result from a variety of causes, such as stroke, brain injury, hearing loss, developmental delay, Parkinson’s disease, a cleft palate or autism.”

CSD undergraduate students complete courses that provide a strong foundation in speech-language pathology, observe the many clinics operated through the program and engage with faculty in research. An undergraduate student is trained in the processes of communication and speaking, including education in identifying and treating various disorders to communication and speech.

A master’s degree is required to be a SLP. Currently Baylor has 68 students enrolled in its master’s program with new students starting every semester—fall, spring and summer. The department fields roughly 350 applications each year for this highly sought-after degree and previously accepted only 10 to 15 students per semester. With its new space, the program plans to expand to 25 students per semester, eventually increasing enrollment to 100.

The CSD master's program is composed of four semesters, three spent on campus and the final one spent off campus for an externship, generally in a hospital setting. The program
It has been really wonderful to watch that take students under their wings and support them. Garrett says. “We set up a system where we are students bond together in a special way,” than colleagues.

Garrett says. “We were using every square inch of our space and using it as effectively as it could be used. Oftentimes, rooms had triple uses.” The CSD graduate program, which offers a Master of Science in speech-language pathology and a minor in American Sign Language, has been recognized nationally in recent years. It holds a U.S. News top-tier graduate program status, according to the publication’s Ranking of America’s Best Graduate Schools—a difficult achievement without a doctoral program.

"It is truly amazing to see these graduate students bond together in a special way," Garrett says. "We set up a system where we are students bond together in a special way,” than colleagues.

Prior to 2016, Neill Morris Hall, found near the Waco Scottish Rite, was designed with students in mind. The graduate student lounge joins the Waco community, serving as the home for the clinic and CSD. Garrett recalls the tight quarters of Neill Morris Hall—originally constructed in 1921 as the campus physical plant—and points to its space limitations. The department remained small while continuing to garner an excellent reputation within the speech pathology field. "There is no doubt that we were bound by the size of our space," Garrett says. "We were using every square inch of our space and using it as effectively as it could be used. Oftentimes, rooms had triple uses.”

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The facility houses a clinical psychology doctoral student who uses the clinic as a practicum and is available to clients who may need a psychological consult or evaluation. A reading specialist is on staff to work with clients alongside clinicians. An ear, nose and throat doctor joined the clinic recently, and an occupational and physical therapist comes once a semester to screen clients who may need the services. Students are introduced to new technologies and equipment, including the use of a strobeoscope, as part of the clinic’s partnership with the Baylor School of Music and EEG technology as it relates to children with language and reading disorders.

Graduate clinicians also work off-campus in several outreach programs in public schools managed by the department. Clinical Coordinator Deborah Rainer, BS ’81, MS ’92, is working to expand this outreach in the community with the addition of hospitals, private agencies and more schools. With the variety of clinical experience and settings, graduates of the CSD master’s program are highly sought after in the workforce, and they feel well-prepared to enter their field.

"Baylor's graduate program taught me how I could walk into a patient’s hospital room and essentially provide quality therapy from the contents of my coat pockets," Nicole Rossen, BA ’09, MS ’11, says. "It’s not about having the fancy therapy materials; it’s about being the best therapist you can be.”

Since graduating, Rossen has worked in a school, hospital and clinic, and she has traveled throughout Texas teaching and speaking about her passion—phonology. "Baylor's program is an academic green house where students can grow, learn and thrive," Rossen says. "During graduate school, when I was studying, I used my brain, but when I was providing therapy, I used my entire being. You are engaged emotionally helping clients, and it is very fulfilling.”

With the demand rising, flexibility of settings and diverse clientele, speech pathology is an attractive field for students who are looking for a financially stable career that also serves others. "God called me years ago, to ministry,” Rainer, who is also a senior lecturer in CSD, says. "He put me where I am because this is my ministry. When you talk to most speech pathologists, they will say the same thing. This is what they were called to do. They have a passion for it. They have a love of people, and they want to help others. I think you will find that this is the overriding factor for all of us in the field.”