

Editorial

Audiology Saved My Life: “Yes,” “Sometimes,” or “No”? A Commencement Address for the Class of 2020

Gary P. Jacobson¹

¹ Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, Tennessee

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The following is a commencement address for the graduates—of every college and university—who did not have the opportunity to celebrate their graduation with their classmates this year.

Graduates, and families, you will remember this day for the rest of your life because it signifies for most of you the beginning of your professional career. Regardless of today's weather, or how hard you had to work to get this far, or how much money you spent to complete your degree, this day will mark the end of your training and the beginning of your life as an independent professional.

Along the way on your journey, you have no doubt interacted with a number of key individuals who enabled you to reach this goal. These people have become chapters in your academic autobiography. I would like to invite you to cast your mind back a few years to remember those individuals who were most influential on your path to becoming an audiologist. While you are doing that, I will share with you a little bit of my own story.

My Journey Begins

My story began in high school when a friend told me that she had decided to become a speech-language pathologist and had been accepted to the University of Arizona. Her father had given her a brand-new 1969 tangerine-colored Chevrolet Camaro for graduation. To this day, that still has got to be the coolest graduation gift ever.

Now, I was not the “brightest bulb” in high school and knew that my grades would not permit me to become a lawyer. I entered college as a communication disorders major, with the intention that I, too, would become a speech pathologist. However, although there were things that I enjoyed about my speech pathology classes (unfortunately, at this moment I cannot think of one), at the end of my sophomore year I decided that I should change majors.

That was when I met Dr. Michael J. Metz, a young, brilliant, and hyperkinetic graduate of the University of Denver program. He was a professor at the California State University

program at Fullerton and also had a private practice in Garden Grove.

I expressed to him an interest in becoming an audiologist. He invited me to spend some time shadowing him while he examined dizzy patients. There was something about recording electrical signals from the body and making diagnostic statements based on those recordings—and how much fun it looked like he was having doing the evaluations—that “set the hook.” My goal was to become an audiologist.

My master's degree work was completed at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point. Toward the end of the calendar-year training program, my academic advisor, Dr. Fred Tyszka, called me into his office and told me that I should consider going to “PhD school.” His reasoning was that I had become a good test-taker and a decent writer and that those skills would not be permanent.

I applied to the PhD programs at Purdue University, Northwestern University, Vanderbilt University, and Kent State University. I was accepted at Purdue and Kent State and chose Kent State University to complete my PhD.

My Career Begins

My doctoral program was fairly uneventful compared to others. I graduated at the end of my fourth year and was fortunate to secure a job as a staff audiologist at the VA Medical Center in Cleveland under the supervision of Dr. Marvin Engelberg. During my time at Cleveland, I was extremely lucky to work with a trainee by the name of Dr. Craig Newman. Craig went on to become well known in the areas of tinnitus assessment and treatment, the development of clinical outcome measures, and more. We did not know at the time, however, that (1) we would become great friends and (2) we would be working together again in about 9 years.

After working for about 2 years in Cleveland, I was given an opportunity to become the chief of the Audiology and Speech Pathology Section at the VAMC in Cincinnati. This gave me the ability to work in the Neurology Service both at

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the VAMC and at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center. My boss and mentor there was a neurologist and spinal-cord researcher by the name of Dr. Eugene D. Means.

One of the many things I learned from him was his amazing work ethic, which was: to work extremely hard during the week, with long days and nights, and then to play hard on the weekends. My connection with Neurology enabled me to develop multisensory clinical evoked potentials laboratories, vestibular testing clinics, a brain topography laboratory, and an intraoperative monitoring program. One influential person I met while living in Cincinnati was a gifted and creative clinical electrophysiologist by the name of Dr. Paul Kileny, who had recently become the head of the audiology program at the University of Michigan.

In 1988, I received a phone call from Dr. Richard Nichols, a head and neck surgeon and chair of the Department of Otolaryngology and Head and Neck Surgery for the Henry Ford Health System. He told me that Dr. Kileny had suggested that he call me to ask if I would be interested in becoming the director of the Division of Audiology.

Building a Network

My wife and I are native Californians. The thought that two Californians might be moving to Detroit, Michigan, to seek fame and fortune was confusing to our parents, to say the least. The clincher occurred when Dr. Nichols agreed to let me recruit Craig Newman as part of my recruitment package to the Division of Audiology. Thus, began both a friendship and a productive writing partnership that yielded the first textbook on balance-function testing and, among other things, a series of standardized outcome measures including the Dizziness Handicap Inventory, Tinnitus Handicap Inventory, and the Headache Disability Index.

Midway during my time at Ford, Craig Newman was offered the audiology directorship at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, which, of course, he accepted. At that same time, I began working with an extremely smart clinical Fellow by the name of Devin McCaslin. I found him to be an excellent writer, a voracious reader, and a fountain of research ideas.

We published a few papers and then he decided to complete a PhD at The Ohio State University. After he completed his PhD, he accepted a job at the VAMC Dayton, Ohio. I recruited him back to the Henry Ford Health System and thus began another extremely productive research and writing partnership that included areas of study such as vestibular sciences, tinnitus, and magnetoencephalography. Over and above work, Dr. McCaslin became a great friend.

In 2002, I received a phone call from Dr. Fred Bess, who was for more than 30 years the brilliant and charismatic chair of the Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences at Vanderbilt University. He asked me if I had an interest in becoming the director of the Division of Audiology. He said that he thought I would enjoy both working in his department at Vanderbilt and living in Nashville. Of course, he was correct.

I asked Dr. Bess if I could recruit Devin McCaslin, making it possible for us to continue our clinical research work. Devin and I updated the clinical program and developed the vestibular sciences training program. All totaled, we had worked together for 20 years when Devin was given the opportunity to direct the Balance Disorders Laboratory at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

In addition to Devin, I was fortunate to have worked with a doctoral student by the name of Erin Piker, who was whip-smart, creative and, in addition, had a bibliographic memory. Most importantly, she was then, and continues to be now, an incredibly gifted writer. She has distinguished herself as a professor at James Madison University.

Since moving to Nashville, there have been too many individuals, including students, staff clinicians, and faculty, who have in many ways influenced my personal and professional life. I will not list them here for fear of committing an error of omission.

The Professional “Walkabout”

So that is an abstract of my 40+ years in our “Great and Noble Profession.” It represents a series of chapters, or events, some of which I had control over and others that occurred due to pure serendipity.

I have learned a few things on my professional *walkabout*:

- Trust your instincts when it comes to making big professional decisions. Your gut is smarter than you give it credit to be.
- Often opportunities you seek do not present themselves, while others you aren’t looking for, do. Take another look at those in the second group. Those opportunities can be some of the real “diamonds in the rough.”
- Never underestimate the potential for irony. Remember, I was not accepted to the Vanderbilt doctoral program, but have spent the past 17 years teaching in the AuD and PhD programs there.
- Lastly, if you can help a deserving individual reach their goals along the way, then consider making the effort to do so. We all can use help from time to time. In most cases, it will cost you nothing and you will have the satisfaction of knowing you have done a good deed that will be remembered. Those hours I spent observing dizziness assessments with Mike Metz truly influenced the direction of my professional life.

And so, as my generation edits the galley proofs of their autobiographies, it is your turn to begin writing yours.

You have come a long distance on your journey and you have many more miles to go.

Oh, what fun you will have.

Class of 2020, congratulations!

Gary P. Jacobson, PhD
Editor-in-Chief