Sac State speech clinic provides professional-level treatment

Photo:  http://bit.ly/1E1IbTM. Caption: Graduate clinician Ciara Witzke works with client Ella Cooper. Credit: Sacramento State/Bruce Clarke

Students, faculty and professionals at Sacramento State’s speech and language clinic want the public to know they currently have room for more clients, and they are looking forward to even roomier facilities with a pending move.

The Maryjane Rees Language, Speech and Hearing Center is part of the University’s Speech Pathology and Audiology Department.

The clinic serves a twofold purpose.

First, it provides affordable therapy for a variety of speech and language disorders, including speech fluency disorders, such as stuttering; voice disorders, such as those related to a diagnosis of vocal nodules; communication deficits resulting from a stroke or physical trauma, such as a head injury; and even language-based reading problems, including dyslexia. The clientele ranges from 2-year-olds to those in the geriatric community.

Second, the clinic provides exceptional real-life teaching experience for the 54 graduate students who work there side by side with professionals. “They’re supervised by speech-language pathologists – either professors from the department or professionals from the field,” says Department Chair Robert Pieretti.

The cost is certainly attractive: about $16 per session compared with $85 to $150 at a private clinic. But it’s not just the cost that many clients appreciate; it’s the quality of service. The real-world work environment energizes the students. “That’s one thing our clients comment about,” says clinic coordinator Jeannette Reiff. “They see that level of excitement that they might not find anywhere else.”

One example is 6-year-old Ella Cooper, who has been going to the clinic for about two years. She has difficulty with phonological processing, meaning that she may omit certain sounds, drop a consonant when there are two together, or substitute one consonant for another, says her mother, Nicole.

“The staff identified what it was and figured a way to improve her speech,” Nicole Cooper says. “She is now very much aware of what she was doing and can fix it herself, emphasizing the consonants.”

Nicole Cooper had taken her daughter to a couple of private clinics but eventually brought her to Sacramento State, where she had previously taken her older son for treatment. “I felt there was more personalization at Sac State,” she says.

Since Ella doesn’t always respond well to being told what she needs to do, the student clinicians took a different approach. “They made the therapy sessions into games, giving
her five minutes of playtime for going through the repetitive exercises," Nicole Cooper says. “They’ve really tailored the therapy for her. They want the therapy to fit the child.”

The clinic’s success is even more remarkable given its cramped quarters. It has obviously outgrown the space it moved into 45 years ago. “We’re working on top of each other in these rooms,” Pieretti says.

The voice endoscopy lab, where a scope is used to examine a client’s vocal folds, shares space with the audiology suite, in which hearing tests are conducted.

A language and literacy lab is needed to re-create a public school classroom environment, but all the materials for that simulation are jammed into one small closet.

Department students, faculty and staff are understandably excited by the prospect of working in larger quarters with a move to Folsom Hall, tentatively planned for spring 2016. The relocation potentially would double the space allotted to the clinic, providing room for more students and more clients. “At Folsom Hall, we would have the potential to serve 264 clients each semester,” Reiff says.

The move would not only provide more space, it also would bring together three programs with common interests and goals, since Folsom Hall already is home to the School of Nursing and the Department of Physical Therapy. Having all three programs under one roof would provide an ideal environment for cross-collaboration.

“We’ve been promoting opportunities for inter-professional education for years,” Pieretti says. “Being in Folsom Hall would really help with this.”

The program already graduates highly sought clinicians, and the relocation would take it to an even higher level. “This program is known in the state as one of the best, if not the best,” Reiff says. “As we move and grow, I’m aiming for national recognition.”

Given the high regard the clinic’s clients have for the program, that goal is definitely within reach. As Nicole Cooper puts it: “They go above and beyond. It’s a little more work for the student clinicians, but it produced great results for my daughter.” – Craig Koscho