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NSSLHA: A Pre-Professional Discourse Community

Whether a student has a specific career goal in mind or is just wanting to learn more about and get involved in a certain profession, pre-professional organizations are student run groups that may be beneficial. For a For a pre-professional group, the main goals include fostering professional growth, building leadership and communication skills, and providing opportunities to connect with people currently working in that certain profession. Students working toward a bachelor’s degree in CSD, a master’s in Speech-Language pathology, or a doctorate in Audiology are granted the opportunity to join such a pre-professional group, the National Student Speech Language Hearing Association, fondly called NSSLHA. By joining NSSLHA, the official national student organization recognized by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), students become ingrained in a discourse community that helps them stay current on advancements in CSD, network with other students, and enhance their overall education experience.

The University of Cincinnati’s NSSLHA chapter, located in Region 4 of the North American entities, is one of the most active in the country, composed of approximately 300 members who are active in volunteering and fundraising throughout the Cincinnati community. As John Swales states, there are “six defining characteristics that [are] necessary and sufficient for identifying a group of individuals as a discourse community” (220). One of the main defining criteria of a discourse community is the sharing of common goals. The president of UC’s NSSLHA Chapter, Sue Doenim, also places emphasis on the importance of sharing common goals by stating, “one of the most important things in having a successful group is having common goals and working together as a team”. As a member of NSSLHA since August of 2013, I too share the common goals as the rest of the group. Additionally, as a member of this discourse community on the undergraduate level, one of the most prominent goals is earning acceptance into an accredited graduate program. With Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology both being such widely growing and competitive fields, the acceptance into graduate school seems to be the motivating factor behind much of the work done by individuals. A membership in NSSLHA acts a catalyst of this goal, providing resume builders as well as opportunities for experience in the field.

In reference to the goal of gaining experience in the field of CSD, the overall main goal of NSSLHA is helping those with communication disorders. This goal is reached and carried out several times over throughout the course of the academic year through fundraising, volunteering, and advocacy events. This year especially, there has been an emphasis placed on the importance of reaching out and becoming involved in the community. Doenim speaks of her efforts, stating, “this year we have had a lot more opportunities for…the always important service and fundraising portions of the group”. These opportunities include raising money for Fluency Friday, a group that helps children with stutters, as well as working alongside Cincinnati Children’s Medical Hospital’s Speech-Language Pathology staff to prepare, package, and send out materials used by SLPs in area hospitals and clinics. NSSLHA is also focused on the well roundedness of students as well as the variety of volunteer work. I myself has participated in several of NSSLHA’s organized volunteer and fundraising efforts and very much feel like an integrated member because of it. Additionally, these strong ties to the community as well as the large amounts of money raised and donated to benefit people with communication disorders have helped catapult the University of Cincinnati’s NSSLHA chapter to the highest ranking spot in the country, taking home the award for Chapter of the Year from 2014’s ASHA convention.

Mechanisms of intercommunication among members is another important criteria of discourse communities as defined by John Swales. Between different discourse communities, “the participatory mechanisms will vary…meetings, telecommunications, correspondences, newsletters, conversations, and so forth” (221). In this modern day and age, the use of electronic correspondences, social media, and other information sharing services are the norm. NSSLHA is no exception, publishing several different newsletters and journals on communication sciences and disorders for the consumption of NSSLHA members. Publications include “Contemporary Issues in Communication Sciences and Disorders” (CICSD) journal, “NSSLHA Now!” newsletter, and “In the Loop” e-newsletter. UC’s chapter utilizes several forms of communication as well, from google documents shared by members to organize events, our own individual newsletter focused solely on UC CSD, to a group Facebook page where everything from homework help and job opportunities to friendly correspondences and witty banter is exchanged. Most, if not all, members of the UC chapter are active on the Facebook page where many of the faculty and staff of CSD related courses are also frequent posters. The leadership board of UC’s chapter is filled with incredibly kind and open people who often initiate this intercommunication, mainly through email and social media. Emails are also sent weekly and contain important information corresponding to that week, such as upcoming meetings or volunteer opportunities.

These mechanisms of intercommunication often overlap with another criterion of discourse communities: “A discourse community uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback” (221). As a member of NSSLHA, it is important to keep up to date on correspondences and remain active through intercommunication. Often, NSSLHA members will utilize Google Documents, a way of mass editing and sharing spreadsheets and documents. Google Documents are used within the discourse community to track member participation and attendance as well as involvement in group functions and activities.

In addition to the intercommunication methods used as participatory mechanisms, NSSLHA also holds monthly meetings for its members. These gatherings include an update on current affairs in communication sciences and disorders, a briefing on future opportunities and events, one or more guest speakers relating to the field of CSD, and time for open discussion. This open discussion time is incredibly important because according to Ann Johns, who authored an article titled, “Discourse Communities and Communities of Practice: Membership, Conflict, and Diversity”, “in any thriving academic community, there is constant dialogue” (515).

These meeting times are crucial for integration and full membership into NSSLHA because of the important information and experiences shared. Hearing the guest speakers is especially beneficial considering that the information they share during meeting times is not usually recorded for or relayed to people who do not attend the meetings. During the November meeting, Nancy Creaghead, Head of the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Cincinnati and former ASHA president, spoke on the process of applying to and choosing a graduate program. In focusing her presentation on graduate school and sharing this information with NSSLHA members, Creaghead subconsciously reiterated the importance of being accepted into an accredited graduate program – a common goal of this discourse community.

Once again overlapping with NSSLHA’s intercommunication methods, the group utilize several different genres and therefore meets John Swales’ criterion emphasizing “the roles texts play in the operation of the discourse community” (221). Along with the previously stated Google Documents, Facebook groups, and email correspondences, NSSLHA often makes use of PowerPoint Presentations. All meeting topics are outlined through a PowerPoint which is made public for member use after each meeting. It is also common for guest speakers to utilize PowerPoint during their own individual presentations. This is a highly effective genre because most members are very familiar with PowerPoint and have no difficulty understanding the information presented through this genre.

Within this discourse community, as explicit lexis is shared by the members of the group, specifically relating to speech and hearing disorders as well as other medical terminology not widely used. Several acronyms have already been defined such as ASHA, NSSLHA, CSD, AuD, and SLP, standing for American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, National Student Speech Language Hearing Association, Communication Sciences and Disorders, Audiology, and Speech Language Pathology, respectively. Several other acronyms have been ingrained into NSSLHA’s lexis, such as AAC, PDD-NOS, and CCC. AAC is Augmentative and Alternative Communication which includes all forms of communication other than oral speech that are used to express thoughts, needs, wants and ideas. Those with communication disorders often rely on AAC to properly convey information to others around them. A pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified is referred to as PDD-NOS and is a form of Autism that is often accompanied by speech problems. When a speech pathologist is referred to as “having their C’s”, they have their Certificate of Clinical Competence by passing a national exam and then completing one clinical fellowship year under ASHA regulations. This “development of community-specific abbreviations and acronyms” further establish NSSLHA as a discourse community. NSSLHA’s specific lexis also includes an abundance of terms relating to the medical and anatomical aspects of speech production and communication, learned over the course of one’s education in CSD.

Fortunately for students studying CSD or related fields, NSSLHA is a viable option for them no matter what year of their education they are currently enrolled in. NSSLHA is a perfect example of having “a reasonable ratio between novices and experts” because members range from inexperienced freshmen to highly knowledgeable graduate students (222). The group is open to any student, undergraduate through graduate, majoring in CSD or a related field, with varying levels of experience and expertise. As a second year student, I fall on the lower end of expertise and experience but am fortunate to be surrounded by a diversity of others. However, the novice to expert ratio can provide challenges when organizing activities or events. Sue Doenim mentions that keeping older members engaged is a challenge often faced by board members. Nevertheless, the leadership board works hard to overcome this challenge “by making sure everything [they] ask people to do it relevant to them; whether they want to add to their resume, network with [UC CSD] faculty, or just eat and socialize, [they have] made sure NSSLHA isn’t just for one type of person”.

The diversity of NSSLHA unfortunately falls short in some areas. Sue Doenim, UC’s chapter president estimates that 95% of members are female, leaving very little room for gender diversity. However, based on several studies by Development Dimensions International that indicate a strong female majority often leads to more success within groups, this may not be as big of an issue as one may originally presume. Of course, challenges stem from not being able to fully represent the male population of SLPs and AuDs because of the low number in UC’s chapter, but issues that arise are small and manageable. For example, when ordering sweatshirts that display the organization’s name for members who wished to purchase them, the design was highly feminine with pink lettering and feminine font styles. A more gender neutral sweatshirt design was eventually presented, but not after voiced opposition by male members.

Many organizations have issues with gender diversity in regards to retaining women and developing a strong female presence. In regards to NSSLHA, the problem stems from not having enough male representation. Representation and inclusion issues also occur between SLP and AuD students. Only a small handful of members are taking the audiology route, so it is easy to overlook them. As a student planning to become an SLP, I too often forget that AuD students are often NSSLHA members. Doenim does her best to be as inclusive as possible, but recognizes and addresses the issue saying, “One thing that I find challenging is making sure we are just as inclusive of our Audiology students as we are with our SLP students. As you know we are an SLP dominated major and since I am also SLP, I have to remember to have activities and events that also pertain to AUD students”.

Fortunately for all members of UC’s NSSLHA chapter, whether male or female, SLP or AuD, they are members of a discourse community that is nationally recognized for its efforts and accomplishments. As a pre-professional organization, NSSLHA prepares students for careers in Communication Sciences and Disorders related fields while simultaneously meeting John Swales’ six criteria of a discourse community. As a fully ingrained member of this discourse community, I feel better prepared for my future, strongly supported by other members similar to myself, and part of something that is truly beneficial.

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