

Facebook Live Interview with Megan
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Background: Megan currently works at Vernon health centre in which she recently transitioned to in July. In-person appointments are on hold for her currently but she gets the opportunity to hold online sessions through Zoom.

Where did you do your undergrad and what was your degree?

I did my undergrad at UBC and I did the cognitive systems program which is a unique program. It's either in the arts degree or in science degree and I chose the arts program and its combination of philosophy, linguistics, computer science, and psychology. Depending on what bachelors degree you were in, you could specialize in any one of those streams but still get the breadth of the program so of course I chose linguistics which was the most interesting to me. I actually didn't plan on that until about my third year at UBC and had kind of flip flopped between sociology, psychology, linguistics and did a brief stint where I transferred to a science degree but I was totally unhappy there. I ended up doing a lot of coursework in linguistics and I did a research project in my 5th year of my undergrad and I did a speech perception study through the UBC speech in context lab. After graduating I had already heard about SLP through the grape vine and it was obviously a program that quite a few linguistics students followed after their bachelors. I also knew of some SLP's just personally and so in speaking with them I was really looking for a career that was people based, more about helping or a caring profession. I had done some work as a summer camp instructor and as a daycare staff and I knew that large groups of children was maybe not for me so this was the perfect job in terms of interest in language and getting to work one-on-one with clients and their families. I love kids so working with kids was being filling through this role as well.

To clarify, you didn't know you wanted to be an SLP until after you graduated?

Just about when I was in my last year I was thinking of ways I could go into those interests and then after talking with some SLPs it started to become the more clear choice for me and I really looked at what do I actually need to get there. Through pure coincidence I had quite a few pre-requisites so I ended up doing one more course, the neuroanatomy course for UBC, just before graduating and that was the last kind of tick box that I had to check to get actually start my application.

So you said you did a cognitive systems degree, did you say you only have to specialize in one stream of the four?

Yes you specialize in the one and what we ended up doing was from first to third year you complete capstone courses and then you can choose what you like.

How challenging did you find applying to the masters programs?

I actually approached that last year as my test application year. I had read a lot on different forums, I'm sure some of your students already know about the grad café, hearing different peoples experiences and what they all went through. I figured I would just start slow just at least you know focus on UBC so I really did just apply to the one. Luckily my program had quite a few of those prerequisites and I spent my 5th year catching up to speed on what else was needed and in terms of starting my application. Pretty much by October I had really settled on going for it and if I get in great if not I'll try again next year. I spent that full year prepping myself to be a bit more well rounded in terms of experiences and shadowing perhaps taking a teaching job teaching English abroad was one of my options as well and then solidifying a better application for the following year. But I didn't actually end up having to do that because I got in which was really really just a blessing. I didn't actually have to take my GRE and had I applied to McGill I would have had to do one more anatomy course. I got my references in order, definitely reached out to people who I had already built relationships with. I was missing one other reference so just after my midterm when I was kind of sure that you know OK I'm not doing too bad, I approached one of my professors and ask them to be my final reference and they were definitely OK with that. I really started writing my letter of intent around say November or December, it was quite a bit to pack in on top of a full course load so even though I started in October in November I scrapped the whole thing at the end of my finals 'cause I thought "man this is garbage". I actually just wrote it all few days and re tweaked it before submission so I would say definitely think about what drives you to really pursue this as a career. Shadowing was really helpful, so shadowing for UBC looked like either being there in person or even a conversation with an SLP as well as an audiologist. What I did was I basically sent a lot of emails out or through colleagues who I already knew in the profession (just put some feelers out to who might be able to have me) and I interviewed them or shadowed them.

If I could go back in time and do one thing differently I think I would shadow a few different types of SLPs to really see the breadth of what's out there, and it doesn't just have to be shadow of course you could be interviewing like this which I think is really awesome for students to see a variety of speech pathologists.

Did you apply only to UBC and did you get accepted the same year?

Yes only to UBC and nowhere else, and yes I got in that same year.

Was it your experience or was it your grades that made the biggest impact on your application?

I don't know much about the actual application panel and what they're exactly looking for but I know they do try for a more well-rounded student so a bit of a wishy washy answer but I want to say both I definitely. For my grades, I was at the low end of what was considered competitive and I had some really solid references who were well known at the university as a whole and who knew me quite well so they were able to give quite a strong letter. The other thing was my background, being from a broad studied person as well as just experience working with children. I would say grades definitely factor into it in terms of being competitive honestly if it's something that's really important to you I know people who have gone back and updated their grades to try and get a better GPA. In addition, try reaching out for those more broad

experiences whether that's work or volunteer or shadowing to really prepare yourself for what it looks like.

What are some specific undergrad courses that you would recommend?

I pitched this to my colleague as well and we both had decided it depends on where you're planning to work and what population. For children definitely focusing on those developmental courses where they talk about "here's what we're expecting at these ages, here's what learning looks like for infants and children". I think those were really helpful it's still relevant to me today and in terms of working with adults when I have worked in the hospital in both acute and outpatient settings I actually really relied on a lot of those neuroanatomy basics kind of like motor pathways and motor learning those really helped me once I was in that adult setting.

What was your experience in the UBC masters program like?

I will say I think I was a harder worker or maybe more stressed about classes when I was in my undergrad. It's a different kind of stress I guess once I entered the program definitely not difficult material to grasp as I found some of the undergraduate courses were tricky for me really stretching my brain that way or thinking of all the types of methodology but I found that once I had that foundation going into the program, it wasn't too tricky that way. It is an intense workload I'll say and lots of collaboration with other classmates as well as other programs. We learn a bit about interdisciplinary work which is I think absolutely fantastic, learning what occupational therapy and physiotherapy nursing what all those programs look like and how they interact with us. It was a lot to balance time wise, I definitely did not hold any of my part time jobs during that. I really think the biggest takeaway for me was the clinical experience that I got through my externships as well as connections to my peers. Nowadays I will talk to my peers through some virtual happy hours where we kind of do rounds and present anonymous cases of you know "hey what would you do with this client? They're kind of working on this.." and I'm totally stunned. I really really like that I have that network of people to talk to and sympathize with and brainstorm with so yeah I really enjoyed the program. For the clinical piece, I know some schools have reputations for being stronger clinically or stronger theoretically I would say honestly just get into where you get into, pick where you want to go to and know that even after you graduate there will always be learning. I'm still learning and the biggest learning happens when you're actually in those clinical settings and when you're working so I would say that don't sweat it, just try your best to get in and you'll always be learning anyway!

How did you manage your stress or your mental health when you were trying to get into the program and in your program as well?

Honestly I didn't manage my stress very well for a long time and same with my colleagues. It's not a great answer I know but reach out to people who are in the same boat. Often it can feel very competitive it's going to be what it's going to be. Knowing that you have a buddy going through with you keeping each other accountable or just being there to vent with somebody who's in the same boat is really helpful. And I know that I did start to feel better when I had a positive backup plan. A friend of mine actually who had applied a couple times before me suggested you know "this is my last year trying to get in and up until now this is the only thing I

focused on but at the end of the day you pick things that are going to make you a better person regardless of whether or not you get in". I think that's a really positive aspect so for me, my lovely backup plan was going abroad to teach English and that was something exciting for me instead of being let down it was like "OK you know what if I don't get in this year I'm going to take the time to pursue something else that's fun meaningful and will still help if I want to end up pursuing SLP again". For me I know my anxiety levels were helped by that but for instance some of my friends who did get in, they really contribute that to throwing their all in there so that's just my side of it.

How was AUDI 402 for you?

I sympathize with you all going through it right now, I know that your talents as a student your worth as an individual is not tied to that course at all but I will say that as I mentioned in the response to the question about what was helpful in terms of coursework, that course really did help me in terms of working with adults even with children too in terms of how everything is connected and it really gave me kind of a glimpse into the world of people who I work with too. I'd say its really important to know those things, know that you can always revisit them as well and you're constantly going to be learning new things about them through your Masters program. Even through work as well. So good luck to all of you, I know it's a bear of a course so persevere!

Let's talk about what you're currently doing and what you've done for the past couple of years. You mentioned in your bio that you've worked in a hospital, what was that like?

Before actually applying to SLP I had no idea that SLPs were even working in hospitals. That was a nice introduction for me through school, learning about swallowing disorders and what the SLP role is in that. At UBC we're lucky to have some really great professors and some of them have a lot of clinical experience and working in hospitals and so not only were there are people who are experienced in swallowing but also communication, so aphasia motor speech disorders TBI things like that. Working in the hospital in Vernon it's definitely a unique spot. Vernon's not like a Tier 1 where it's quite a big hospital it's actually not super huge, alot of the more serious patients who have multiple things going on might go to Kelowna or to Vancouver general. I know some colleagues of mine who work elsewhere in those bigger hospitals tend to specialize within the realm of adult so that might be head and neck cancer, that might be progressive neurological disorders like ALS or Parkinson's, things like aphasia requiring augmentative or alternative communication whether its picture boards some kind of eye gaze or whatever it is.. so at Vernon I actually was lucky enough to do my final placement there and I kind of got to see it all as a student before jumping in as a an employed SLP. I really took that first year to use that as more of a knowledge-building and clinical skill-building area. So what I did there was a mix of acute inpatient so that people who are in the hospital staying there as well as outpatient so people who live at home or in the community at a care home for complex care home and they come in to see me for appointments. And I would say in Vernon it was 75% swallowing 25% communication, again depending on the hospital that might look different for you. What I really liked there was access to other professionals, that was a really cool experience for me. I work pretty closely with the occupational therapist and the physiotherapist in terms of "OK this is what this person can do in terms of mobilizing", "this is how they're feeding themselves", or

“this is where they live and who their supports are” “these are their daily activities, how does that impact their communication ability?” so I got some experience with that. I also had a pretty big role on the stroke units doing rehabilitation for people who had a stroke and subsequently anesthesia. I worked with them and their families to figure out efficient ways to communicate, especially ways to communicate in the healthcare setting, you know figuring out those tough questions with doctors like “what do you want in terms of your care? Do you want to be intubated? CPR?”, those are pretty tricky conversations for anybody let alone somebody who has trouble communicating. That was definitely a big learning curve for me in terms of learning how to counsel families and also learning to advocate to other professionals, other members of the public too. Finally in my outpatient program, working with them to communicate in their everyday life. For inpatient and outpatient I also had the experience of modified barium swallows which are X-Ray videos of people swallowing barium which what lights up to contrast on the X-Ray machine. I'm not the one running it, I'm usually with an X-Ray tech and if I'm questioning some kind of structural differences for abnormalities I would then call a radiologist who would be the person diagnosing. For the swallow, that is all me. It's quite interesting looking at that and getting to be a part of it all. Having access to that for sure in different communities, that's not always option and some places they don't necessarily do X Ray, they might actually do fiber optic endoscopic camera. I did not get to experience that but I have some colleagues who are practicing with that and it's just fascinating to me what we can do as SLPs in the medical world.

Have you worked a little bit of both, acute care and long term care?

I was always working in a hospital so for acute I would run up to different floors so wherever my patients were staying and then as an outpatient SLP I would have patients come in either you know they might be living at home post stroke or maybe they've got Parkinson's and they would come in to see me for things like voice or communication needs.

Did you ever have to handle emergencies or anything like that?

For the most part not really, usually if there was a medical emergency there would be a nurse nearby or there's always you know alarms and alerts to notify people who are better trained than I am. And of course, before stepping into an assessment I always want to know who I'm working with, what their healthcare background is, and what the potential emergencies might be and going from there.

One more question about working in hospital, did you see people of all ages?

In Kelowna they were separated by pediatric and adults and in Vernon I only saw adults. I think the youngest person I ever saw was in their 20s and then oldest would be 108. I think definitely over 100 I've seen a couple.

What kind of externships are offered at UBC?

Each school is a little bit different in terms of the structure and how they choose to work those into your schedule. Basically we started in September or first year did one semester we kind of had a mix of childhood stuff and maybe one or two adult courses and then some audiology

minor courses. Everybody is required to do an audiology two week externship so some people do that in the 1st December of the program and other people do that later. Again this might be different because I'm a few years post graduation now so just double check the website. Then in terms of the first speech externship that would have been the summer. What I ended up doing was I had one of my externships at Columbia speech in Vancouver and it was part of the intensive therapy for aphasia of Western Canada (ITAWC) and that was a really great externship for me, especially because I have been interested in working with adults with aphasia. In the late summer I think I ended up going to Merritt. Two externships are required to be out of town and I think the closest out of town was Chilliwack maybe and the farthest was I believe Whitehorse so yeah that's kind of the range. I did a school district placement after ITAWC placement that was a month and a half. Then after that the third externship was concurrent with classes so I would do Monday Wednesday Friday classes and then Tuesday Thursday placement and then that placement was at the Surrey child development centre at the yellow umbrella organization that's on 140th street. I got to work with kids ages zero to five and it was children with multiple needs or complex health histories sort of. My last speech externship was with the hospital here in Vernon. So in terms of opportunities, kind of how it worked was we would get to put out a location as well as areas of specialty that we wanted to have covered. They do their best but it's obviously quite tricky to coordinate that many students. I would say everyone got a good variety and we are required to go through a breadth of topics and specific subtopics like child's language swallowing, motor speech disorders, adult communication and then audiology. I did ask to be placed in Surrey 'cause that's where my parents lived and then finally Merritt and Vernon. I really wished we had a bit more sharing among students in a more formal setting to spend all day to talk about what we all saw around the province around certain topics. We ended up doing that informally just as classmates but it's a great wealth of knowledge.

I'd like to know a little bit about Carson therapy and Vernon health centre, are those private practices?

Carson therapy is a private practice in Vernon. Amy Carson is a speech pathologist and Damian Carson is a physiotherapist and both have worked in public settings before they decided to branch out and go on their own with a clinic. I'm actually still doing some work for them outside of my regular job and that's been really nice for me in terms of getting to see those clients who I normally wouldn't see working in the hospital and working at the health unit. I don't really get to see those school aged kids a lot and that's kind of my bread and butter. Amy has really great clinic coordinators so I had some private clients in the clinic of course and then living in Vernon she actually ended up getting some contracts to go and work for local schools on First Nations land who didn't necessarily have a full time speech pathologist so we would be contracted out. She's also working with some OTs as well in her clinics. I did get some chances to work with OT and PT in terms of what their goals are how I can incorporate those into my sessions so yeah and it's pretty pretty flexible in terms of schedule with clients. I like that I get to just have free reign for how I want those sessions to go. I can also see them in their own home which I'm not always able to do in my public health positions.

For Vernon health centre, it is also a private practice. I had done a few casual shifts here and there just covering people sick days or vacation. Once I officially transitioned here I've been

meeting clients in our caseload, doing some review consultations with them and planning our year in terms of therapy programs. Here at the health centre we do quite a few groups which we are now planning via Zoom so I'll keep you all posted on how successful that is. We do focus a lot on parent coaching and really empowering parents to be active participants in their child's communication development. We do work with kids who have language delays speech sound errors that we can work on in-home programs work and individual sessions have social communication difficulties and maybe even autism, as well as kids who have some stuttering.

After I graduated from my Masters program, I've been working a few different positions to hopefully figure out what I like the most and honestly it's still a tie. I still really like working with adults and I still really like working with young children so that's why I'm still balancing both.

What do you wish you could have known before you started working as an SLP?

I guess that everything is pretty site specific. Depending on where you work, things will look different of course that's very obvious but a lot of what you can do is going to be dictated by the structure of your setting. I think seeing many different types of settings will be helpful for you in your career, learning what potential solutions you might try or best ways to serve your population. There's a lot of structural things that can be fiddled with for example groups. I never thought I would be running so many groups in my life but this is a way that we can have people access our services earlier and be creative with incorporating social things where they are interacting with peers. The other thing I would say is I guess in hindsight I would have told myself not to stress so much definitely it is hard getting into this program and it is a long journey for some and if you love it, do your best to pursue it. If you don't get in there's lots of options. I have had friends who have gone into supported child development careers or careers as SLP assistants or careers in behavior intervention. There's ways to work in what you love about this position into everything you do really if that's something important to you.

I would say once you get here, feel comfortable knowing that you're never going to know everything so it's OK. Even after graduating from your masters there's lots of certifications or programs that you can continue to delve into that a lot of SLPs do delve into, whether that's certifications in various programs there's always something more which is a big exciting part about it! I always have some other goal that I can be pursuing and learning more about.

Thank you so much for your time Megan!