

UNC-CH Department of Allied Health Sciences

Autism Master's Training Grant

Funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs,

U.S. Department of Education

Frequently Asked Questions

Overview of the Project

This master's preparation program is designed to create a diverse cohort of students who, after completion of the program, will provide state-of-the-art services to young children with autism and their families and serve as leaders in their agencies and communities. The program is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing on the resources and expertise from the Divisions of Speech and Hearing Sciences and Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, within the Department of Allied Health Sciences in the School of Medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Graduates will receive their master's degrees in Speech and Hearing Sciences or Occupational Therapy and as a result of this unique personnel program, will have additional knowledge and skills related to evaluating, implementing, and disseminating evidence-based practices in autism within an interdisciplinary framework.

The program of study consists of a unique set of interdisciplinary evidence-based courses, specialized interdisciplinary practica, research and service learning opportunities, and professional development activities targeting specific competencies related to the area of childhood autism. Infused throughout all project activities are strategies to raise awareness, understanding, and competency in working with diverse learners and their families.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is required of me prior to submitting my application for the Autism Master's Training Grant?

- a. Admission to the UNC-CH entry-level master's programs in Occupational Therapy or Speech-Language Pathology is a prerequisite for eligibility to the autism training grant.
- b. Once students are admitted, each student will receive an application for the training grant.
- c. The slots are very competitive as there are only 6 slots available (3-OT and 3-SLP).
- d. The grant faculty will be looking for students whose career goals are consistent with the grant aims and who have an interest in and experience in the area of autism.

2. What can I do to enhance my application for the Autism Master's Training Grant?

- a. Shadowing OT's or SLP's in a variety of settings is a great way to see what these professionals are doing in their fields.
- b. Volunteer or perform paid work with persons on the Autism Spectrum or their families or for agencies/camps that provide services.

3. What coursework is required for this training project?*

EDUC 664 – Working with Families and Teams in Early Intervention: Interdisciplinary and Sociocultural Perspectives. – This course will explore issues, theories, modes, research, and recommended practices related to family-professional and interprofessional relationships in early childhood intervention. Participants will explore the dynamics of interactions with families and teams, including approaches to decision making, communication, and collaboration. A particular emphasis in the course will be on how diversity related to differences in backgrounds, ethnicity, discipline, and individual style influences partnerships in education and the allied health fields. This course is NOT autism-specific, but helps students gain the knowledge and skills for working with children with autism and their families and other professionals.

SPHS 802 Autism in the Young Child - The purpose of this course is to develop a familiarity and understanding of topics related to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). Issues related to characteristics, etiologies, theories, assessment, and intervention will be discussed.

As a part of both course requirements, students will be involved with projects in which they observe and interact with a family who has a child/adult with autism living in the home.

*Students who are not invited to join the training grant can still take the courses as electives as long as they obtain the course instructor's approval.

4. Will the courses “count” for credit in my own program (Speech-Language Pathology, Occupational Science)?

Yes, both programs allow elective credits and the courses taken as part of the grant will satisfy your “elective” credits in your own program. However, one of the courses may have to be taken as an “add on” in the Occupational Therapy program as there are fewer elective slots available.

5. How much financial support does the training grant provide and what are the expectations in terms of my research opportunities?

- a. Yearly Stipend of \$5,334, Instate Tuition Support, Health Insurance, and Conference Travel Support.
- b. The grant requires each student to take part in research opportunities. The number of hours required is 100 hours/year.
- c. Since the grant has already funded one cohort of students (who will graduate in spring 2011) for two years, only those students who can participate for two years (recruited to start fall, 2011) can apply.

6. What kind of health insurance is provided?

Health insurance is administered through Hill, Chesson and Woody, although the insurance is provided through Blue Cross and Blue Shield. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill requires students (both undergraduate and graduate) to have health insurance. Eligible students are required to show evidence of an existing “creditable” health insurance policy (e.g., from your parents or through the grant) or they will be automatically enrolled in and billed for the UNC system-wide student health insurance plan. If selected for the grant, you will receive paperwork to complete so that we can enroll you in the insurance plan.

7. What research opportunities are available?

- a. The best thing to do is check out our PEARLS website (pearls.med.unc.edu). Here you can see a variety of different autism projects that faculty in our department are involved with and some of these may be of particular interest to you. In addition, at times there will be other research projects available beyond the PEARLS projects.
- b. Students who are admitted to the OT/SLP programs and receive a slot on the autism training grant are subsequently able to select from various research project offerings in any given semester.
- c. These research opportunities can include serving as a research assistant to gain work experiences with this population of children/families.
- d. These opportunities can include anything from coding videos, to setting up rooms for assessments or intervention sessions, to scoring assessments and entering data.

8. Will I have choices in the kinds of clinical activities I am assigned?

- a. Research Opportunities and Clinical Placements are a required part of this grant project.
- b. Students will work closely with the Practicum or Fieldwork Coordinator of their program to identify potential clinical sites that serve children with autism. Because of each program's requirements, students will need to also work with other populations and ages, but will be able to indicate preferences for some autism placements.

9. What other opportunities will I have to learn more about children with Autism?

- a. Grant students will also participate in interdisciplinary pairs in a series of observations of a child with autism in a classroom setting (first year spring semester). You will complete an observational tool, work with the child's teacher/parents/other support staff to identify the child's needs in terms of inclusion in the classroom, plan interventions for the child and implement them. At semester's end, you will re-administer the observational tool, write up your findings, and present them to the other students and grant faculty. Some students have found this to be a great opportunity to be in a school-based practicum with a chance to plan an interdisciplinary intervention for a child.
- b. Grant students will have opportunities to participate in monthly forums focusing on a specific topic related to autism. These forums are set up specifically for the students in the Autism Master's Training Grant and students' interests will help guide topic selection. Grant students are required to attend these forums each month. The forums also provide opportunities to share your experiences with other students and faculty.
- c. Other forums through the Carolina Institute for Developmental Disabilities are offered throughout the year and are optional for student participation. The schedule will be provided each semester to students.
- d. Other learning opportunities will be made available to students. Such things include: TEACCH Diagnostic Observations, TEACCH preschool observations, TEACCH home-based observations, informational sessions at the Autism Society of North Carolina, and observations at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Child Care Center, a local inclusion program including children with autism. These opportunities, while strongly encouraged, are optional.

10. Is there travel money that is provided through the grant?

Yes, a small amount of money (\$200) is provided each year (and must be expended in that year) to each student to help defray the costs (e.g., registration, travel, mileage) of attending professional meetings focused on autism.

11. Will I “owe” anything to the Department of Education after taking part in the grant?

Yes, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs of the Department of Education requires all students who receive training grant support to complete a “service obligation” after they graduate. What this means is that after completing your course of study (your Master’s degree and the grant program), you must repay the financial assistance you received under IDEA **by performing work related to young children with disabilities** (e.g., providing direct service, teaching, conducting research, supervising, or taking part in administration, policy, technical assistance, or program development activities or any combination). The majority of the time (51%) should be devoted to work related to young children with disabilities. Such employment must be: (a) For the provision of special education or related services to children with disabilities or the provision of early intervention services to infants and toddlers and their families; (b) On a full-time or full-time equivalent basis; (c) For a period of at least two (2) years for every academic year (full-time equivalent) that you received scholarship assistance (Total for this grant is 4 years); and (d) Provided in a position where you perform work (e.g., direct service, teaching, research, supervision, administration, policy, technical assistance, program development) related to young children with disabilities. The service obligation must be completed within the sum of the number of years of service (4 years for this grant) required plus five (5) additional years after the date the course of study (your Master’s degree and the grant program) is completed for which the scholarship was awarded in addition to any deferral which is allowed by the University. In other words for this grant, after you graduate you will have a 9 year timeframe within which to complete the 4 year service obligation. For most graduates the service obligation will not be a problem as long as you work for 4 total years in one or more positions related to benefitting (directly or indirectly) children with disabilities.

If You’d Like to Talk to A Current Student on the Grant

Contact one of the Speech-Language Pathology and/or Occupational Therapy master’s student liaisons:

Claire Salisbury, OT Student - claire_salisbury@med.unc.edu

Kristin Burgess, OT Student - kdburges@med.unc.edu

Liza Christian, SLP Student - liza_christian@med.unc.edu

Kate Bouser, SLP Student - katharine_bouser@med.unc.edu

You may also contact Sherry Mergner, MSW, LCSW, Project Coordinator for the Autism Master’s Training Grant at smernger@email.unc.edu for more information.