

M. Dawn Nelson, PhD '94

As a child, Dawn Nelson imagined herself in a teaching or health care career. Given a “jobs almanac” by her mother, she found herself drawn to audiology, speech pathology, and special education, ultimately choosing Communication Sciences and Disorders as her major. Further focusing to audiology at the encouragement of her undergraduate advisor, she has concentrated her career in the areas of vestibular and electrophysiology issues including best practices in vestibular assessment, auditory electrophysiology, and auditory processing disorders.

Her current research and clinical interests have been focused on dizziness, falls and hearing loss in individuals living with Sickle Cell Disease. Dr. Nelson has testified before the FDA regarding pediatric sickle cell disease and its impact and has presented her research findings at NIH during a “Sickle Cell in Focus” conference. She is coinvestigator in a multi-site prospective study between Johns Hopkins University, Kennedy Krieger Institute, and Central Michigan University to provide unprecedented clinical data on the vestibular and auditory characteristics of pediatric and adult subjects with sickle cell disease. The study will also collect important risk-of-falls data on this population.

Dr. Nelson credits her time at Vanderbilt with laying good groundwork for her success. “While in graduate school, I was trained to help identify and solve problems within audiology. I was mentored to focus my thoughts and to develop areas of expertise. I was also exposed to international leaders in the field as well as state of the art clinical practice which I found to be inspiring. Ultimately, I was introduced to and given an opportunity to work with world-class investigators in an environment that would further develop my research skills.”

Dr. Nelson recalls Dr. Fred Bess' doctoral grant writing class. “About 4-5 of us would meet around the table in his office. He told us the intricacies of grant writing including his secret tips. He shared his method for writing research papers. He told us that he would always be professionally available to for the rest of our careers—that we would always have access to him. That has proven to be very true. He called and checked up on me when I started my career. He has always been available for professional advice and encouragement even until today. He kept his word.”

Encouraging diversity and equity in the field of audiology is important to Dr. Nelson. She has written on the subject of patient bigotry in audiology and praises Vanderbilt DHSS and Dr. Bess for recruiting women of color to the doctoral program in the 1990's. “Currently in the US, there are only four or five persons of color who are practicing PhD audiologists. Three of them (me, Dr. Diane Scott, and Dr. Pam Birch-Sims) received their PhDs at Vanderbilt. This investment in diversity continues today under Dr. Tharpe's leadership.”

Dr. Nelson's work extends beyond the lab and classroom. She is a member of the US Cochrane Affiliate and a former member of the ASHA Academic Board, working to make sure the next generation of investigators and clinicians have access to best practices in research and treatment. Vanderbilt Hearing and Speech Sciences is honored to have M. Dawn Nelson as an alumna and proud to have been a part of the journey made by the child who dreamed of being a teacher and health care provider.