The Department of Communicative Disorders (CMD) is an autonomous unit housed within the recently constituted (as of 2016) College of Health Sciences. The combined vision and mission of the department is for CMD graduates and faculty to be prominent in advancing the health and well-being of individuals with communication disorders and their families across the lifespan through the integration of teaching, research and clinical outreach. The strategic plan for the department is aligned with the academic strategic plan of the University of Rhode Island. The strategic goals and objectives for CMD and current progress on outcomes attainment are discussed subsequently.

**Strategic Goal 1**: Consistent with URI’s Academic Plan to enhance student success by focusing on student engagement and experiential learning opportunities, the department has targeted the following objectives: expanding opportunities for problem-based learning; increasing opportunities for InterProfessional Education (IPE); developing additional external placement sites in medical and educational settings (thereby facilitating the ability of students to progress through the program efficiently); enhancing technology infrastructure to support student training; and developing experiences that increase workforce opportunities.

**Rationale**: There has been a growing consensus that IPE and IPP (Interprofessional Practice) are critical to improving communication and collaboration among healthcare professionals and, thus, to improving patient/client experiences and outcomes in ways that (potentially) result in cost efficiencies. In fact, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) now recognizes the importance of providing IPE experiences in the training of professionals. Along with this, there is also a need to bridge the gap between traditional didactic coursework and clinical practicum experiences in which students work directly with clients. Simulated problem-based learning activities can be used to bridge this gap between classroom and clinic. Finally, telehealth models of service delivery are being accelerated, particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Outcomes**: The department introduced Simucase (an Internet platform that utilizes simulation technology to observe, assess, diagnose, and provide intervention for virtual clients with a range of communication impairments) into the graduate and undergraduate curriculum. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, even more use has been made of Simucase to support the clinical training graduate students. Additionally, in collaboration with URI’s Academic Health Collaborative and the College of Health Sciences, the clinical faculty and students in the department are engaging in IPE activities with the Departments of Kinesiology, Nursing, Physical Therapy and
Nutrition & Food Sciences. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the growth of telepractice service delivery. At this point in time (because of COVID-19), the URI Speech & Hearing Center delivers all client speech-language pathology services through a telepractice platform. To expand workforce opportunities in healthcare, the department is also developing a hearing aid specialist track to support those seeking careers in hearing health.

**Strategic Goal 2:** In keeping with the URI Academic Plan to increase research and scholarship in health related endeavors, the department has targeted the following objectives: support faculty efforts to generate and disseminate new knowledge regarding the nature of communication disorders and the effectiveness of clinical assessment and intervention practices; provide adequate student research assistance to support scholarly productivity; and foster the development of a doctoral student pool to support research and scholarship.

**Rationale:** National data reveal that difficulties with language, literacy and communication pose very significant risks to early childhood development. At the same time, communication difficulties (speech, language & hearing) among the aging also pose significant risks to health and wellness among the elderly. Although the CMD faculty members have significant expertise in these areas, additional resources are needed to leverage this expertise to (1) increase faculty productivity in research, and (2) provide additional opportunities for students to engage in scholarship with faculty mentors.

**Outcomes:** In the fall semester of 2018, CMD hired two new tenure-track faculty positions in the areas of childhood language disorders and bilingualism. These two faculty members are Co-PIs on a grant funded by INBRE/NIH that investigates the neurological correlates to language and literacy acquisition among bilingual school-aged children. This grant is supported by the development of a cognitive neurosciences language laboratory that utilizes Evoked Response Potential and Eye Tracker technologies to investigate language processing. Undergraduate and graduate students help staff the laboratory, facilitating the development of a new generation of researchers. In addition, a different tenure-track faculty member was recently awarded a grant from Organization for Autism Research to investigate the fathers as intervention agents among children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. This project is supported by the development of a LENA laboratory that utilizes state-of-the-art technology for collecting, transcribing and analyzing language sample data. Undergraduate and graduate students are also trained to use LENA technology to support research. There are also ongoing research projects that are not supported by extramural funding including those involving adults with primary progressive aphasia, traumatic brain injury and Parkinson’s Disease. Finally, the department participated in the creation of a new multi-disciplinary doctoral program in health sciences that includes a track in communicative disorders.

**Strategic Goal 3:** Consistent with URI’s Academic Plan to advance its international presence, the department seeks to create international learning opportunities for graduate
and undergraduate students that enhance the understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity, and to increase program visibility at state, national and international levels.

**Rationale:** One of the hallmarks of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century has been the migration of people across nation states due to geopolitical unrest and climate change. This has created several different kinds of literal and figurative borderland encounters with difference that involve issues of cultural and linguistic diversity that also impact practice and research in the field of communication disorders.

Outcomes: Previously, the department had taken a limited number of students to Guatemala to examine efforts to reorganize disability services, communication disorders included, across this country. Unfortunately, with the onset of the pandemic, this activity has ceased. However, when travel associated health risks decrease, faculty led international trips will be reinstituted. The department continues to offer coursework in cultural and linguistic diversity and will augment this by developing a special seminar in bilingual assessment and intervention. There are also research opportunities available for students with an interest in bilingualism. In terms of increasing the national and international visibility of the program, the department is developing an electronic newsletter to be distributed to the greater community that highlights programs and activities of faculty and students. The department also continues to support the efforts of students to study abroad through programs offered at the University of Rhode Island.

**Strategic Goal 4:** In keeping with URI’s Academic Plan to streamline processes that promote institutional effectiveness, the department has sought to streamline the process of applying to graduate school, and to enhance the ability of undergraduate and graduate students to earn their degrees in a time efficient manner.

**Rationale:** One of the biggest drags on the U.S. economy is student load debt from attending institutions of higher learning. There is need to institute processes that increase the ability to apply to programs and earn degrees in an efficient manner.

**Outcomes:** The Department of Communicative Disorders was one of the first programs in the nation to develop an accelerated B.S./M.S. degree program that allowed students to earn their graduate and undergraduate degrees in a total of 5 years and 1 summer of full-time study. This program has continued to grow in popularity. In addition, approximately 80% of our undergraduate students earn their degrees in 4 years or less. Finally, after petitioning the URI Graduate School, the department now uses CSDCAS (the common application system) for all graduate school applications. This online platform allows students to complete applications to multiple graduate programs in a more timely manner.