



Best Practices in Child Life Academics: Recommendations from the Child Life Academic Society

Rationale

The Child Life Academic Society was formed with a vision to protect and advance the quality of child life education through its programs, advocacy and research. A foundational piece of this work included defining child life academic professionals and their role qualifications/skills prior to identifying standards for academic child life programs. The Academic Best Practice committee of the Child Life Academic Society engaged in extensive internal and external data collection and analysis to inform this charge. Data sources for this work have included the professional competencies, academic role and program descriptions, and published educational standards of 12 medical, allied, and psychosocial healthcare professions (for full list, see Appendix 1). Systematic insights were also gathered from Child Life Academic Society membership, thereby generating the robust and comprehensive data set that led to the evidence-based recommendations below.

Key Terminology: Child Life Academic Program

A “child life academic program”:

- 1) offers a formally documented child life degree, concentration, or child life option/track as listed in the university/college catalogue, AND
- 2) employs a full-time Certified Child Life Specialist faculty member.

Recommendations: Academic Titles and Roles

Role: “Child Life Academic”

Recommended Role Definition:

An “academic” in the child life profession is a CCLS professional employed full-time by a higher education institution for 9 to 12 months each year who provides teaching/instruction and advising/support to child life students. In addition, an academic in the child life profession engages in decisions about curriculum, engages in inquiry and scholarship related to child life, and represents child life in the academic sphere through presentations and service.

Recommended role prerequisite skills or qualifications:

Minimum of a master's degree, with preference/recommendation of a doctoral/terminal degree. Degree requirements may also be determined by the institution's accreditation standards. Must hold current child life certification and demonstrate professional identity as a CCLS. In addition, prerequisite skills and/or qualification of CL academics should include, but not be limited to: child life clinical experience, extensive educational background in child life competencies and related topics, adult education experiences, teaching and child life curriculum development experiences, knowledge of evidence-based and current practices related to child life activities and experiences with different child life settings, effective communication skills and leadership experiences, and knowledge of student-centered approaches to support, supervision, mentorship, advising, and advocacy.

Role: Child Life Program Coordinator/Director/Chair

Recommended Role Definition:

A child life academic program director is a CCLS who provides oversight of the program including but not limited to student recruitment, admission, enrollment, and advising. They are responsible for the provision of leadership in curriculum and policy review and changes for the maintenance and development of excellence within their program. They oversee faculty selection, assignment of course teaching/duties, and performance feedback to assure quality. They often handle student and/or faculty concerns re. performance issues, disputes and/or complaints. Program directors also serve their larger educational institution by serving on university/college and department committees possessing knowledge of systems and procedures within their educational institution. They prepare reports and information required for accreditation, program appraisal or other duties as assigned by their institution's leadership. Additional responsibilities could include actively securing clinical site affiliation agreements, supporting learners through the internship application and selection process, actively engaging in inquiry and scholarship, and overseeing their program's budget.

Recommended role prerequisite skills or qualifications:

Minimum of a master's degree, with preference/recommendation of a doctoral/terminal degree. Degree requirements may also be determined by the institution's accreditation standards. Must hold current child life certification and demonstrate professional identity as a CCLS.

Role: Child Life Faculty Member

Recommended Role Definition:

A full-time faculty member is responsible for teaching child life program courses, curriculum development, professional and academic service, inquiry and scholarship, and the advising and mentoring of child life students. They also work closely with the program director to support programmatic needs and administrative tasks.

Recommended role prerequisite skills or qualifications:

Minimum of a master's degree, with preference/recommendation of a doctoral/terminal degree. Degree requirements may also be determined by the institution's accreditation standards. Must hold current child life certification and demonstrate professional identity as a CCLS.

Role: Clinical Coordinator/Instructor

Recommended Role Definition:

The clinical coordinator/instructor functions as the liaison between the academic institutions and the clinical site providing support to the student and the clinical educator (supervisor). The clinical coordinator/instructor may teach clinical skills and competency-based courses. Additional responsibilities could include actively securing clinical site affiliation agreements and supporting students through the internship application and selection process.

Recommended role prerequisite skills or qualifications:

Minimum of master's degree. Degree requirements may also be determined by the institution's accreditation standards. Must hold current child life certification and demonstrate professional identity as a CCLS.

Role: Adjunct Instructor

Recommended Role Definition:

An adjunct instructor is an individual who is contracted to teach on a course-by-course basis. Their responsibilities may include developing and teaching the assigned course content. Courses may contribute to the institution's child life curriculum; however, those specific to child life theory and practice must be taught by a CCLS.

Recommended role prerequisite skills or qualifications:

Minimum of a master's degree, with preference/recommendation of a doctoral/terminal degree. Degree requirements may also be determined by the institution's accreditation standards. Instructors of courses specific to child life theory and practice must hold current child life certification and demonstrate professional identity as a CCLS.

Summary of Recommendations

In addition to developing clear recommendations for child life academic professionals, program directors, and instructors, recommendations were also generated for academic entry requirements for the child life profession. External benchmarking information used to make these recommendations can be found in Appendix 2.

As Appendix 2 illustrates, all consulted allied health professions - other than child life - require a degree within their specific discipline to enter their professions. Of these, 2 require a doctoral-level degree, 5 require a master's-level degree, and 4 require a bachelor's-level degree. As a healthcare specialization requiring specific knowledge and clinical skills, **the current requirement for a single course in child life and several courses in specific content areas does not meet minimum industry standards or those set by other healthcare professions.**

Our analysis further identified that competency-based education remains the most utilized system within health professions education. While 9 of the 12 benchmarked disciplines utilize a competency-based educational approach, it is also the standard used across medical education for physicians, physician assistants, sonographers, and technicians of all kinds. Our review highlights that a course-based approach to academic training currently only exists within child life, chaplaincy, and therapeutic recreation.

A course-based approach provides a more traditional education eliciting grades to reflect a student has met course specific standards. In contrast, an outcome and competency-based approach scaffolds the progression of competencies across a degree's curriculum, so learners develop and are assessed to have the desired performance characteristics (e.g. knowledge, skills, critical thinking, real-world application of concepts, professional behaviors, etc.) for their discipline.

As the Association of Child Life Professionals (ACLP) and the Child Life Certification Commission (CLCC) strive to promote and foster excellence in child life service provision, it is critical to incorporate recognized best practices in education and training. This is urgently needed not only to meet industry standards but, most importantly ensure required performance standards and enhanced clinical practice are met for the care of children, youth, and families. The Academic Best Practice Committee of the Child Life Academic Society, therefore, brings forward the following evidence-based recommendations:

- *A minimum* of an undergraduate degree in child life or a concentration in child life should be the academic requirement to enter the child life profession. The child life degree or concentration must be formally documented in the institution's academic catalog. This change is urgently needed. Work by

Wittenberg and colleagues (2023), and additional data from Boles and colleagues (under review), have demonstrated that clinical internship sites are already preferentially selecting candidates from graduate programs over those in undergraduate programs. The industry is already changing academic preparation requirements as internship sites select which candidates continue down the path to certification. Although data collection is ongoing, the evidence indicates CLCC should be responsive to the shifts observed. We recommend an academic requirement for a master's degree in child life or with a concentration in child life as the end goal. The dietetics profession recently completed their [evolution to a master's degree requirement](#) which provides both an example and precedent for this type of change to a profession's eligibility standards over time.

- Instead of prescribed courses, child life academic programs should use an outcome and competency-based framework scaffolding the progression of child life competencies across a degree's curriculum. Several other evidence-informed recommendations are also brought forward below following extensive internal and external data collection and analysis.

Additional Academic Program Structure Recommendations

Topic	Recommendation
The child life academic faculty member to student ratio	<p>Teaching ratio* – 1 faculty to 10-20 students</p> <p>There must be <i>at minimum, 1 FTE child life faculty member</i> who holds child life certification and demonstrates professional identity as a CCLS to establish and teach within their program's outcome and competency-based framework.</p> <p>Advising ratio – 1 faculty to 10-20 students</p> <p>*Ratios take into account that programs may serve both undergraduate and graduate students</p>
Engagement of child life academics in continued education/professional development	Professional development should be in alignment with professional development requirements for child life recertification. It is recommended that this position also seeks professional development related to academics (teaching, curriculum development, research, diversity, adult learning).
Communication with clinical internship sites for coordination and support of students	Communicating with the clinical internship site is one of the responsibilities of an academic program to meet the needs of students, academics, and clinical internship sites. The program director/chair or clinical

	coordinator/instructor should conduct direct communication with clinical internship sites.
Collaboration between academic institutions and clinical internship sites	Partnership between academic programs and clinical sites are necessary and essential for students' learning and experiences. Continuous collaborative communication between academic programs and clinical sites during clinical experiences is recommended with monthly meetings or at minimum participation in students mid-term and final evaluations. Usage of a virtual platform for evaluation meetings is acceptable. Intern evaluation meetings should be done virtually or in-person with a faculty member present. Students should be enrolled in a Child Life academic program to receive the support and appropriate mentorship during internship by a faculty who is also a CCLS.
Establishing a child life CIP code	A CIP code for child life instructional programs should be created and adopted. 55% are ready to do this, 18% cannot make this change, and 36% are unsure or need more information about CIP codes (CLAS member survey data, 2024).

Appendix 1

Health Professions Included in Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected from the following health professions to inform recommendations made by the Academic Best Practices Committee.

1. Chaplaincy/Spiritual Care
2. Child Life
3. Clinical Psychology
4. Marriage and Family Therapy
5. Music Therapy
6. Nursing
7. Nutrition/Dietetics
8. Occupational Therapy
9. Physical Therapy
10. Social Work
11. Speech/Language Pathology
12. Therapeutic Recreation

Appendix 2

Entry to Practice Degree Requirements for 12 Health Professions

Of the 12 healthcare disciplines benchmarked, **all required a degree in their specific discipline except child life**. Two required a doctoral degree, 6 required a minimum of a master's degree and 3 required a bachelor's level degree **within their specific discipline to enter their professions**.

Profession	Degree requirement to enter profession
Clinical Psychology	Doctoral degree in this field
Physical Therapy	Doctoral degree in this field (United States) Minimum of master's degree (Canada)
Marriage and Family Therapy	Master's degree in this field
Occupational Therapy	Minimum of master's degree in this field
Nutrition/Dietetics	Master's degree in this field
Speech Pathology	Master's degree in this field
Social Work	Master's degree in this field
Chaplain/Spiritual Care	Master's degree in this field
Music therapy	Bachelor's degree in this field
Nursing	Bachelor's degree in this field
Therapeutic Recreation	Bachelor's degree in this field
Child Life	Bachelor's degree in any discipline/field

This report was prepared by the Academic Best Practices committee with the support of the Child Life Academic Society Board of Directors.

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