An Interview with Edinboro Alum, Dr. Matina Balou

Interviewed by Lisa M. Cifrulak

A native of Greece, Dr. Matina Balou decided to pursue a career in Speech-Language Pathology after a beloved family member passed away due to head and neck cancer. Dr. Balou earned her Master of Arts degree in Speech-Language Pathology at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in 2008. She then went onto the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, where she received her Ph.D. with a focus in Swallowing Disorders and Head and Neck Cancer. Dr. Balou is currently employed by New York University Medical Center.

Q: Your undergraduate studies were in your native Greece. How did you find your way to Edinboro University to earn your master's degree in speech-language pathology?

The year before I graduated with my Bachelor's Degree, I was discussing my options for the future with my mentor. My mentor, who is American, suggested that I go to the United States to do my Masters. I really wanted to do swallowing disorders, and Europe cannot really offer that. If you go to the United States, you will be able to find what you are looking for easier. There was a financial situation because in Europe, the graduate programs are only 1 year long, while in the United States they are 2 years. So I went to ASHA and got the list of all the Universities offering this program and Edinboro was on it. I saw the percentage of how many students apply, get in, and receive assistantships, scholarships and all of that. I have to say, I applied to many Universities, about 20 because I did not know if I was going to get in because I come from a different country. When I realized I got in, I had to figure out if I would feel safe and for some reason it clicked. As soon as I got the acceptance letter, I did not wait for the other ones.

Q: Given the shortage of SLPs in your native Greece, what drew you to a career in Speech-Language Pathology?

I made the decision about what I wanted to do, not as a speech-language pathologist but as a “swallowing somebody.” I didn’t know what to call it. Someone in my family had a swallowing problem and passed away because of it. At 14 or 15 years old I was thinking there must be a profession to help people so we don’t lose those patients. I had no idea it was speech-language pathology, we did not even have it, at least in Greece. When they opened the department, I asked if swallowing was part of speech-language pathology. They said yes, but it is a little different but that is what you need to be. I made my decision right away.

Q: When you were a graduate student, you introduced a speaker at the Alumni Conference. This year, you were a speaker. How did that make you feel?

I am now on the other side, and it’s so funny because I introduced Rebecca Gould, who is also a swallowing specialist. I cannot really give you details until I finish tomorrow, but it’s really good. It feels like closure, like I started something and now I feel like I’m here to present what I really love. All that knowledge started from those rooms, well not exactly those brand new rooms but this university.
"It feels like closure, like I started something and now I feel like I'm here to present what I really love."

Q: What made you want to pursue a Ph.D. and what led to your selection of University of Arkansas Medical Center as the place to pursue it?
I think that my idea was that I could gain a lot of experience seeing a lot of patients and not do a Ph.D., or I could do a Ph.D. and read all the articles possible about this disorder and go to a different level. Research really is a different level. You can think about a problem, and have a question and you end up finding answers to many different problems, but you do find an answer. I felt that this was the best way to go for my career at that point and then kind of help the patients of the future, so this was the best way to go. I met my mentor, who was also my mentor in Boston, at the University of Arkansas. He was a head and neck surgeon. It was during a conference that we discussed how I was really interested in head and neck and swallowing disorders, and he said “let’s take you on board. You are going to come to the head and neck surgery department and we’re going to train you on our part, and you will also do the swallowing part as well.” They offered the best situation. The other Ph.D. programs that I applied and was accepted to were fine as well but they were not specific to head and neck. They were specific to swallowing, but not head and neck, I wanted someone to guide me to learn more about the head and neck.

Q: What advice do you have for Edinboro students and alumni who might be considering doctoral study?
You have to really want it. It’s a marathon, and it doesn’t work like a graduate clinical degree program. Ph.D. programs are primarily driven by the student. It can take anywhere from 3-10 years to finish. You need to be prepared, and it’s not for everyone. A student or anybody that does not want to do research or teach may lack the necessary drive.

Q: Tell me about your current position, your research, and what you hope to do long-term?
Ok, I’m pretty new in that position. I have a management position and I am a clinical swallowing specialist at NYU. This means I see patients all day but I have people that coordinate how the clinics will run, and we have students who will conduct research. For the future, I would like to build rapport with other professionals in this field as well as others, so we can become a state-of-the-art facility. Research wise, I have been doing research with combined video fluoroscopy and esophagendoscopy, which is a GI test. So we get the pressures at the same time as seeing the physiology of the fluro on chemo-radiated patients.

Edinboro University Graduate Students Win National Award

Thirty students from Edinboro’s speech-language pathology program attended the 2012 national convention of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association in Atlanta. The convention offered three days of presentations from some of the leading scientists and practitioners in the U.S. and the world. The National Student Speech-Language-Hearing Association (NSSLHA) sponsored a full day of activities that were developed specifically for students.

The Career Fair provided students with the opportunity to meet with prospective employers and the Exhibit Hall offered hands-on exposure to various products used in clinical practice. The convention included an opening session keynote by Maya Angelou and an Awards ceremony featuring Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who has received extensive speech and language therapy since sustaining a life-threatening brain injury in 2011.

On the second day of the convention, NSSLHA announced to a large and enthusiastic audience that Edinboro University received a $750 prize for the most students in attendance. The Edinboro students returned to campus with new knowledge and friends, and an elevated level of confidence and inspiration to enter their chosen profession. They are grateful for the financial support of the Graduate Professional Development Program in making this educational experience possible.
24th Annual Alumni Conference Recap

The Speech and Hearing Department hosted the 24th Annual Alumni Conference on Friday, October 5, 2012. The conference, attended by over 100 local Speech-Language Pathologists and nearly 40 students, was held at Edinboro University’s Frank G. Pogue Student Center. Attendees traveled to Edinboro from several states, including New York, Ohio, Virginia, and of course Pennsylvania. This year the Alumni Conference pleased to have Liberty Mutual as the very first sponsor. As always, the conference offered refreshments and a light lunch, as well as both an adult-focused track and a child-centered track.

The speakers this year were Matina Balou, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, an Edinboro University graduate, and Christine Ristuccia, CCC-SLP, owner and founder of Say It Right©. Ms. Ristuccia is a school-based SLP and an expert in /r/ remediation. Although she calls California home, Ms. Ristuccia is an internationally renowned presenter and traveled to Edinboro for the Alumni Conference from a speaking engagement in Italy.

Dr. Balou, who is employed as a Swallowing Specialist at New York University Medical Center, shared her knowledge of evaluation and management of dysphagia in head and neck cancer patients. Ms. Ristuccia presented a phonemic approach to /r/ remediation. Her unique presentation integrated yoga practice with articulation therapy for /r/.

The American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA) mandates that each Speech-Language Pathologist must earn 10 contact hours towards continuing education per year (1.0 CEUs). Each SLP who attended the Edinboro Alumni Conference had the chance to earn 5 contact hours toward his or her yearly continuing education hours, as well as the chance to learn from two esteemed experts. The Edinboro Alumni Conference continues to be a wonderful opportunity for professional growth and development, and is valued by professionals across northwestern Pennsylvania.

Edinboro Utilizing Common Application, CSDCAS

Common application services have been used for many years in medicine, dentistry, and other health professions. They became available to audiology and speech-language pathology programs about five years ago and Edinboro’s program was among the inaugural cadre of participating programs. Today we are one of the 63 speech-language pathology programs in the U.S. that subscribes to the Communication Sciences and Disorders Central Application Services (CSDCAS - pronounced “SID-CAS”). Applicants create an account, submit one set of all application materials online, including academic transcripts, GRE scores, and letters of recommendation. By using CSDCAS, the student completes one online application, submits one set of documents, and identifies the programs to which they wish to apply. CSDCAS then verifies the academic transcripts and sends an electronic file to each program selected. This file includes information about the applicant, descriptions of their academic performance (in a variety of ways), GRE scores, letters of recommendation, and any other submitted information. The applicant can monitor the status of their application and Admissions Committees can review completed applications online after they are verified.

Edinboro’s deadline for submission of complete applications to CSDCAS is February 1 and then one month is given for processing time by CSDCAS. By mid-March, our Admissions Committee has reviewed each of the applications and made recommendations for admissions and graduate assistantships for the next academic year.
Off to Atlanta: ASHA Convention 2012

When did you first consider attending the ASHA or PSHA Convention?
I have been interested in attending an ASHA convention since I started my undergraduate degree in Speech-Language Pathology. When I learned that Edinboro’s Graduate Professional Development Program (GPDP) provided would provide funding to attend the ASHA Convention I knew I would attend.
- Tayler Stanley, first year MASLP student

How much did the trip cost and how much financial support was available?
ASHA cost almost $750 (excluding some food and all extracurriculars) which was covered by financial support through the GPDP office; however, the money had to be fronted until 2 weeks after the conclusion of the conference.
- Melanie Faber, second-year MASLP student

How did you manage your course obligations while you were away?
I tried to work ahead as much as possible and brought the homework I couldn’t finish along with me.
- Alex Flanick, first-year MASLP student

How did you manage food and lodging at the convention site?
Several hotels were available to book within the city where the convention was held. If the hotel was not within walking distance taxi transportation was very easy to locate! At the convention site there were many food vendors and many restaurants located within walking distance from the convention center!
- Kaiti Lawrence, first-year MASLP student

What part of the convention was most beneficial to you?
Meeting professionals and attending the seminars. Small sessions and meetings were nice because I had the opportunity to meet people I couldn’t have in the exhibit hall or a large seminar.
- Jaclyn Lorraine, first-year MASLP student

Are you glad you attended the ASHA convention?
I’m very glad that I decided to go! A few times throughout the process I’d wondered if it had been the right decision, because of the time away, but I found that it was a welcome respite from my day to day life as a graduate student. I formed deeper friendships with the other graduate students and enjoyed getting to know them outside the confines of Leader Center. I also enjoyed seeing and meeting many SLPs from different parts of the country. The experience allowed me to see the profession in a new way; to see myself as part of a bigger picture.
- Kim Kerstetter, first-year MASLP student

What advice would you offer to next year’s incoming class about participating in state and national conventions?
Definitely go to ASHA if you can - it is an extraordinary opportunity that you should not take lightly. Peruse the Convention program book and identify the sessions that you are interested in. Don’t go to sessions just because your friends are going, but rather attend the ones that you feel would help you. Try to attend 3-5 sessions per day to maximize your time, but don’t go overboard because you will have information overload. Definitely attend the Opening Ceremony and the Awards Ceremony because the speakers are usually reputable and inspirational. Additionally, travel around the city and explore while you are there to make the most of your visit.
- Preety Sardesai, second-year MASLP student
Kimberly Wade is a recent graduate of Edinboro University’s Master of Arts in Speech-Language Pathology. She is currently in her clinical fellowship year as a speech-language pathologist and early intervention consultant at the Northwest Tri-County Intermediate Unit #5. Kim travels from preschool to preschool in the city of Erie and Millcreek Township, working with three to five year old children who have a wide range of needs. Kim works with children who have articulation and phonological disorders, expressive language disorders, autism spectrum disorders, as well as some children with behavioral issues. A typical day for Kim starts out with paperwork, IEPs, ERs, log notes, ACCESS billing etc. The paperwork can also involve setting up transportation and tuition services for people who receive them. The rest of her day has her travelling from preschool to preschool; she provides services for preschools in the Millcreek Child Development program as well as private schools in both Millcreek and Erie. Mondays are particularly fun for Kim because she co-teaches a Therapeutic Learning and Communication classroom with a special education teacher. This classroom is designed for children with speech and language needs and provides a language rich classroom environment with individualized activities to target students’ communication needs.

“Our job as consultants is to not only work with the child one on one on their specific goals, but also to push in to the classroom and prepare the classroom teacher to help work on the goals for the time that I am not there. We give teachers visual strategies, visual schedules, classroom activities, lesson plans, etc. to help best meet the child’s needs.” Kim feels like the most rewarding aspect of her position in EI is seeing the children make progress and meet their goals. She finds it gratifying when children can exit services before beginning Kindergarten. However the job is not without its challenges, including the amount of paperwork, staying in touch with parents and teachers, and just finding a balance between work and home life. She does complete paperwork on her own time, and is looking to find a way to balance that. The advice that Kim has for graduate students on how to choose a placement or a clinical fellowship year that would be to find a good fit it to find somewhere with a mentor on site, that way there is always someone there to help. She also recommends not just accepting the first position that comes along if it is not a good fit.

“I felt prepared to enter the workforce with a good understanding of all areas with our scope of practice.”

-Kim Wade

Make sure to ask the right questions in the interview so that you know you will be comfortable with what you will be doing. Some of the recommended questions she thought best to ask were: will a CFY mentor be on site? Are CEUs offered on site or are they reimbursed? Is licensure reimbursed? Those are all perks of Kim’s current position and were helpful in making her decision. When asked about her experience at Edinboro University and whether or not she felt it prepared her for her current position, Kim said she felt that this program provided her with a solid body of foundational knowledge and skills to help her to be successful. “I felt prepared to enter the workforce with a good understanding of all areas with our scope of practice. No program can teach you everything, but I felt what Edinboro couldn’t teach me, it gave me the knowledge of resources I could go to in order to find answers and get more information.”
The 2012 Dr. Randy Rodak Memorial Award was presented to Jenna McCabe. This scholarship is awarded to a first year graduate student in Speech-Language Pathology interested in experiencing a 14 week internship at the Erie Veteran’s Administration Medical Center in the summer of 2012. By receiving this award and internship placement, Jenna was able to fulfill all of the required adult clinical hours, and will be eligible for employment approximately 8 weeks earlier than the rest of her class. It is funded by Dr. David Potoker, a speech-language pathologist in Erie and former faculty member at Edinboro University. Jenna attended the University of Toledo where she graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Communication Sciences degree in 2011. She was a poster presenter at the 2012 PSHA Conference and represented the Department at the 2011 Edinboro University College Bowl.

Jacqueline Weber was the recipient of the 2012 Brock Tropea Speech-Language Pathology Award. This award is presented to a first year graduate student in Speech-Language Pathology with a strong record of volunteer public service. This award is funded by alumnus Brock Tropea (class of ’01), who currently practices speech-language pathology in southern California. Jacqueline was a Peer Leader at Thiel College, where she attended as an undergrad. She also participated in the Alzheimer’s Walk, the Adopt a Highway Program and sang carols each Christmas for the residents of the local nursing homes for four years with her sorority. As a member of Thiel’s NSSLHA, Jacqueline participated in the Snowflake Ball at St. Paul’s Nursing Home, where members of the club would escort the residents to the ballroom to have dinner, dance, and socialize.

Chantal Haase, a native of Conneaut Lake, received the Dr. Frank Johnson Scholarship, presented to a first year graduate student in Speech-Language Pathology who graduated from Edinboro University with a B.A. in Speech and Hearing Sciences with a cumulative GPA of > 3.0. Chantal was originally enrolled at Mercyhurst University on a fulltime athletic scholarship to play Women’s Volleyball. After job shadowing a speech-language pathologist, Chantal knew she wanted to pursue speech-language pathology as a career. Mercyhurst did not offer that major, so she decided to give up her athletic scholarship and transfer to Edinboro University to major in speech and hearing sciences.
Kelly Watkins received the Dennis Rannali Award, which is presented to a first year graduate student in Speech-Language who graduated from Edinboro University with a bachelor’s degree in Speech and Hearing Sciences with a GPA of 3.0 or higher. It is funded by Dennis Ranalli, who received his B.A. in Speech and Hearing at Edinboro University, and friends of the Speech-Language Pathology program. During her time as an undergrad at Edinboro University, Kelly spent a year as the Scholarship Chairman for her sorority and another year as the Secretary. She also was an active participant in the Speech and Hearing Club and worked for the Student Government Association convenience store and game room. Kelly graduated Magna Cum Laude majoring in Speech and Hearing Sciences, with a minor in Psychology.

Dr. Frank Johnson Scholarship II

Karen Kersterholt was the 2012 recipient of the Dr. Frank Johnson Scholarship II. This award is presented to a second year graduate student at Edinboro University enrolled in the Master of Arts in Speech-Language Pathology program with a GPA of 3.5 or higher. It is funded by Dr. Frank Johnson, the Johnson family and friends, and the Edinboro University Alumni Board. Karen is from Saint Marys Pennsylvania and received her undergraduate degree from Penn State University. Karen is a member of the Edinboro University of Pennsylvania NSLHA chapter and served as the 2012 treasurer. She is also a member of Alpha Epsilon Lambda National Honor Society, and co-presented a poster at the 2012 PSHA conference.

Dr. Richard Forucci Scholarship

The 2012-2013 Dr. Richard Forucci Scholarship was awarded to Blake Ebbitt. This award goes to a second year Edinboro University graduate student with a GPA of 3.5 or higher. This scholarship was established by Hal Blount (class of ’83) and other friends and alumni of the Speech-Language Pathology programs. Blake graduated from Edinboro University’s Speech & Hearing Sciences program in 2011 Magna Cum Laude, making the Dean’s List every semester. She also is a current member of NSLHA, and PSHA, and a former member of the Edinboro Speech & Hearing Club. Blake has had a variety of work experience on the Edinboro campus including prep room monitor, Peer advisor, and Writing Center Consultant. She was the recipient of the Dr. Frank Johnson Scholarship in 2011.
In Memorium: John Simmons

Former Edinboro Professor John Simmons died peacefully at his home in Edinboro on November 13, 2012. Born in Chicago in 1930, John attended Eastern Illinois University, where he was the placekicker for the football team and earned his B.S. in 1953. He earned an M.A. in Speech-Language Pathology at Penn State University in 1955 and then moved to northwestern Pennsylvania to serve as an itinerant speech pathologist, traveling between Albi-on, Fairview, and Girard school districts for 12 years. John then joined the faculty at Edinboro University where he served from 1971-91. Many young people chose to enter our professions because he was such an enthusiastic advocate for students. Known for his engaging and outgoing personality, John will be missed by many.

John was preceded in death by his devoted wife of 56 years, Marjellyn Voigt Simmons, who served as secretary for the Leader Clinic. Both of their sons, Fred and Martin, earned bachelor’s degrees in Speech and Hearing from Edinboro. Fred later earned M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Audiology and Martin earned an O.D. in Optometry.

Memorials may be made to the Erie City Mission, 1023 French St., Erie, PA 16501 or the Dr. Frank Johnson Scholarship, c/o Edinboro University Alumni Association, 210 Meadville St., Edinboro, PA 16444.

NSSLHA Chapter Update

Both within Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, as well as the surrounding communities, the Speech and Hearing Department is well renowned for our astute standard of higher education alongside our efforts to give back. Although there are many charitable and community events to come, some of our most successful and well recognized events in the past semester include: the attendance of over thirty of our graduate students at the national ASHA conference in 2012, for which our graduate department won the NSSLHA Charge Up Your Chapter award which recognized EUP as having the most students from one school to attend, over sixty graduate students attended and raised monetary donations to support the Walk to End Alzheimer’s in Erie, PA, and various other community fundraising events have been held including: canned goods and clothing drive, donations for the ASH foundation and Smile Train, and hearing loss preservation and education at a local Justin Moore concert. A sampling of our upcoming events for spring 2013 include: 2013 PSHA student poster presentations, volunteer work with local nursing homes (BINGO, “prom”, craft activities), and fundraising and support for the local Autism walk in Erie, PA.

Our graduate students are exceedingly dedicated to our studies and clinical work as beginning clinicians. Despite our busy schedules, we are always looking for more ways to give back to the community by providing support, hope, and smiles to those in need. For those who are natural caregivers, this notion is easy to resonate with. No matter how busy our day, there is always time enough to give back for that is what makes it all worthwhile. With the framework of an incredibly encouraging faculty, our department’s graduate students go above and beyond, achieve success, and turn goals and dreams into reality. We strive to be our best selves, for the good of our profession, but even more so for our clients.

Overall, the graduate program here at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania is not only strong in a sense of educational standards, but we are further committed to providing unwavering support to our clients, their families, and to our outreaching communities.

- Casey R. Grimm
Edinboro Graduate Student & NSSLHA Chapter President