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Todd Ricketts: Towering In Many Ways!

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Ben Hornsby



When Marshall Chasin, Steve Aiken, and Erin Picou asked if I'd like to contribute to a journal issue honoring the many contributions Dr. Todd Ricketts has made to our field, it was an easy yes. I've known and worked with Todd over a ~25 year span and he has "towered" in them all. Ok, yes,

talking about Todd's height is easy- at 6' 6" he towers over many people, which is likely what many people notice first. But his height is a "small" part of what makes him stand out!

In terms of research, if you have any interest in amplification, you've likely (or should have) read some of his 120+ publications or heard him speak at international/national/state conferences or clinical meetings (he's had >250 presentations and posters). What's particularly impressive is his work has always been scientifically rigorous and clinically useful- i.e., translational, even before that word was used much in Audiology!

For example, his work evaluating the effectiveness and efficacy of directional microphone systems in real-world environments has been crucial in identifying factors that impact directional benefits for adults. This work has guided industry and clinicians on optimizing directional benefit for adults (e.g., Ricketts, 2000; Ricketts and Mueller, 2000; Ricketts and Henry, 2002; Ricketts and Hornsby, 2003).

This same line of research also had significant impact for children in school settings. Todd was the first to systematically examine how the listening situations of children in school settings could interact with directional microphone processing – in fact as part of early work in this area, he and his research assistants followed my daughter around her high school, recording the positions of the talker (teacher or other students) and listener (my daughter) within and outside the classroom. I am sure, at 6' 6", Todd was just a "fly on the wall" observing (you can ask him about the challenges of staying up with a high schooler as they battle through the "hallway crush" between classes).

Thankfully, Todd persevered, and his research provided empirical evidence of the importance of "overhearing" (hearing surrounding comments and conversations other than the teacher) in the classroom (Ricketts, et al., 2007) and how, when misused, directional microphones could reduce overhearing and lead to decrements in listening performance (e.g., Ricketts & Picou, 2013; Ricketts et al., 2017). His work provides critical guidance for audiologists on optimizing directional technologies for children with hearing loss in school settings (Gustafson, et al., 2021).

Todd's long-standing interest in how individual hearing abilities interact with assistive devices to impact real-world experiences led to important work examining speech recognition and localization in adult cochlear implant (CI) users (Ricketts et al., 2006; Grantham et al., 2007, 2008). This work showed the auditory benefits of bilateral CIs were most apparent in complex listening environments. And, knowing that understanding real-life communication challenges requires more than measures of speech recognition, some recent work has focused on how hearing loss and device characteristics interact to affect listening effort and fatigue (e.g., Picou and Ricketts, 2019; Hornsby et al., 2024).

Finally, with his interest in the interplay between device characteristics and the individual, it is not surprising that Todd is engaged in collaborative research examining the benefits and limitations of Over-the-Counter devices and service models (Ricketts, 2020; Ricketts, et al., 2024; Wu, et al., 2024). I could continue highlighting Todd's important and diverse contributions in the research realm, but recall the title—"Towering in many ways!" I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge some of the other "towering" attributes that make Todd Ricketts such an exceptional mentor, colleague, and friend.

My first interactions with Todd were in 1999 when he was recruited to Vanderbilt. Our roles at that time were as PhD mentor and student, and for those of you thinking the old, grey-haired guy (me)

in the picture above (taken in 2023) was the mentor, you'd be mistaken. In 1999 just a few years after receiving his PhD, Todd's reputation as a rising academic star led Vanderbilt to recruit him. In contrast, although his senior in age (and I'm not saying by how much…), I had taken a circuitous path to audiology research and was in the first year of my PhD program. I was looking for a mentor interested in amplification, and good luck to me in towered Todd!

I wasn't just waiting at Todd's office door when he arrived. Two other PhD students in our cohort also had strong interests in amplification. Todd took on the role of primary mentor for all of us, and did so with an excess of patience, grace, and good humor. At the time, I did not appreciate the magnitude of Todd's undertaking: starting a new academic position, setting up a new lab, securing independent funding, AND taking on three PhD students, but in hindsight, I certainly do!

What I did appreciate then, and continue to appreciate today, is the WAY Todd took on those responsibilities. Despite his many pulls on his time, Todd maintained an open-door policy, one I am sure I caused him to rethink at times. He was always available to discuss ideas that may not have been well thought out. In fact, as a PhD student, my go-to approach was "Say it fast and with confidence," an approach that led to (and sometimes still leads to) saying some "not quite correct" things… Fortunately, Todd was a wonderful role model, a patient teacher, graciously explaining things (many times more than once), accessible and willing to help, as needed, whenever asked.

One example of a quality I particularly appreciated as a student came up during one of my project defense meetings. During the meeting I became flustered when a committee member remained confused by my very clear (but totally incorrect) explanation of the relationship between compression ratio, time constants, and hearing aid gain and output (delivered "fast and with confidence"). Flustered but undeterred, I continued reiterating my (incorrect) points. Fortunately, before burying myself any further, Dr. Ricketts tactfully stepped in with "What I think you are saying is…." and then proceeded to correct my error gently but effectively. That simple act of gently intervening to help a floundering PhD student is just one example of what makes Dr. Ricketts "tower" in so many ways. He genuinely cares for the well-being of the people around him- students, faculty, friends, and family.

I'm fortunate to have experienced that care and support not only as a student but also as a colleague. Todd's open-door policy has remained in place, and I've taken advantage of it many times over the past 25 years - OK, in truth it may not be a real policy. Still, he has always been too nice to tell me to bug off, and many such meetings have been held at a bar, making them much more tolerable…. As the consummate colleague, he has always been willing to share his knowledge, insight, and troubleshooting skills (he's been a lifesaver for many a Windows computer quirk). The many hours of insightful, and yes geeky, audiology conversations over the years have been an invaluable resource and wonderful means of growth for me as a scientist. Todd hits the trifecta: outstanding scholar, mentor, and all-around nice guy! I remain incredibly thankful he opened the door to me, an overzealous and inappropriately overconfident PhD student some 25 years ago, and for the continued relationship as it transitioned to colleague and, most importantly, friend.

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