



# TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

REGULAR CALENDAR ITEM: I.C.

**MEETING DATE:** May 15, 2025

**SUBJECT:** New Academic Program  
Tennessee Technological University  
Child Life, Master of Science (MS)

**ITEM TYPE:** Action

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

<b>Title and Designation</b>	Child Life, Master of Science (MS)
<b>Concentrations</b>	None
<b>Accreditation</b>	No programmatic accreditation applicable.
<b>CIP Code and Description</b>	<b>19.0799 (Human Development, Family Studies, and Related Services, Other)</b> Any instructional program in human development, family studies, and related services not listed above.
<b>SOC Code and Title</b>	11-9111 (Medical and Health Services Managers) 21-1021 (Child, Family, and School Social Workers) 21-1094 (Community Health Workers) 31-9099 (Health Support Workers, All Other) 29-1129 (Therapists, All Other) 21-1091 (Health Education Specialists) 25-1071 (Health Specialties Teachers, Post Secondary) 25-1192 (Family and Consumer Sciences Teachers, Post Secondary)
<b>Credit Hours</b>	36
<b>Implementation Date</b>	August 1, 2026
<b>Modality and Delivery Site</b>	Fully Online
<b>Department/College</b>	School of Human Ecology, College of Agriculture and Human Ecology
<b>Governing Board Approval Date</b>	March 6, 2025

## ALIGNMENT WITH STATE MASTER PLAN AND INSTITUTIONAL MISSION/STRATEGIC PLAN

Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) typically work in pediatric healthcare settings and provide psychosocial interventions to prevent harmful impacts from stress among child patients and their families, thereby contributing to patient experiences and wellbeing. The proposed Master of Science (MS) in Child Life at Tennessee Technological University (TTU) aims to develop graduates with advanced competencies in psychosocial intervention, research methodology, and evidence-based practice, enabling them to deliver high-quality support to children and families navigating healthcare experiences. The proposed program was developed in response to critical shifts in the healthcare

landscape, particularly the current certified child life specialist staffing crisis and the growing preference for graduate-level practitioners. These shifts are evident in recent trends within the field, where graduate students are now significantly more likely to secure clinical internships compared to undergraduates. Additionally, the evolution of interdisciplinary healthcare teams has established graduate education as the standard among social workers, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and other allied health professionals, making advanced degrees increasingly vital for child life specialists to maintain professional parity with their colleagues.

The proposed program addresses multiple priorities within the THEC State Master Plan. The combination of competitive state tuition rates and a fully online delivery format removes traditional barriers to graduate education, particularly benefiting adult learners and healthcare professionals seeking career advancement. This advances the State Master Plan's family prosperity priority by extending educational access across Tennessee's distressed counties and the Upper Cumberland Region. Additionally, by focusing on the high-demand fields of health sciences and human services, the program strengthens Tennessee's healthcare workforce while creating strategic alignment between industry needs and academic programming.

The proposed program aligns with TTU's institutional mission of creating, advancing, and applying knowledge through enduring education, impactful research, and collaborative service. By preparing graduates for the competitive healthcare industry, the program expands career opportunities and enhances the economic mobility of child life professionals. As Tennessee's first state university to offer an online Child Life master's degree, this program represents TTU's dedication to educational innovation and accessibility. The program will also expand upon TTU's established leadership in child life education, building on its undergraduate program's achievement as one of the first five nationally to earn the Association of Child Life Professionals' (ACLP) Academic Program Endorsement.

## **PROGRAM DUPLICATION**

There are no other public universities offering a master's level program in Child Life. Vanderbilt University is the only institution offering graduate-level child life training in Tennessee, but it is not an ACLP-endorsed program or offered online. TTU's proposed program will also be more financially accessible for students across the state.

## **WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT**

The proposed MS in Child Life at TTU addresses critical workforce needs in the healthcare sector, particularly responding to the current staffing shortage across the child life profession due in part to the inadequate number of qualified Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) credentialed professionals needed to fill open child life positions. According to a 2023 survey of 74 child life clinical programs across 33 states, only 28.4% of the child life clinical programs were fully staffed, with 17 programs reporting four or more job openings. Despite these staffing challenges, the majority of surveyed child life programs project growth in the next five years, with most expecting to add one to three new child life specialist positions. This growth aligns with broader healthcare employment projections from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which forecasts the healthcare and social assistance sector to create the most jobs between 2021 and 2031, with healthcare professions specifically expected to grow by 13% over the next decade.

Certified Child Life Specialists have diverse employment opportunities across multiple healthcare settings, including children's hospitals, pediatric units within general hospitals, pediatric outpatient clinics, pediatric hospice and palliative care facilities, pediatric oncology centers, pediatric mental

health centers, pediatric rehabilitation centers, private practice healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations. According to the 2021 ACLP Salary Survey, child life professionals across southern states earned average salaries between \$49,000—\$53,000 annually, with higher salaries reported for those with graduate degrees, more experience, and leadership roles. THEC's 2023 Academic Supply for Occupational Demand report states that healthcare occupations constitute 11 of the top 15 positions experiencing the greatest supply gaps in Tennessee, based on job openings exceeding available qualified candidates. Recent workforce data from February 2025 underscores this critical need, with 119 certified child life specialist positions listed on Indeed nationwide and significant vacancies at Tennessee children's hospitals, including seven openings at LeBonheur in Memphis, six current vacancies at Monroe Carell Jr. at Vanderbilt, and four unfilled positions at Niswonger Children's Hospital. East Tennessee Children's Hospital has reported particular difficulty filling positions, with their last opening taking eight months to staff.

The employment outlook extends beyond traditional hospital settings, with program completers in health sciences demonstrating some of the highest employment rates across career clusters. This trend is particularly significant in Tennessee, where healthcare and life sciences are designated as a Tennessee Economic and Community Development (TNECD) target industry. The state's investment in universities and research facilities within this sector aims to complement and enable the development of a capable workforce. This proposed program directly supports this goal by preparing advanced practitioners for pediatric healthcare settings with a documented staffing crisis and growing demand for graduate-level preparation.

## CURRICULUM

The proposed MS in Child Life will have two tracks: a 36 credit degree-only option and a 43 credit experiential learning option. The degree-only track, designed for working Certified Child Life Specialists seeking career advancement, can be completed either full-time or part-time through a fully online format. As the program transitions to the graduate level, the undergraduate Child Life concentration will be phased out, retaining only two sophomore-level courses to introduce undergraduates to the field and foster interest in the master's program. The curriculum integrates advanced coursework in child development, family science, psychosocial practice, and research methodology, and will require 14 newly developed courses aligned with the Association of Child Life Professionals' Certification Eligibility Requirements and Child Life Competencies.

The experiential learning track includes the same 36 credit core curriculum plus seven credits of structured clinical experience for those students who plan to sit for the Child Life Certification Exam. This track follows a cohort model with full-time enrollment to prepare students for competitive clinical placements. The additional experiential learning includes a one credit introduction to clinical experience course, a three credit pre-internship practicum (minimum 120 hours), and a three credit clinical internship (minimum 600 hours). Both tracks incorporate the same rigorous coursework across four domains: Care of Infants, Children, Youth and Families; Professional Responsibility; Education and Supervision; and Research Fundamentals. The program culminates in a capstone course, Professional Topics and Ethical Practice, requiring completion of all other coursework and development of a professional portfolio demonstrating mastery of core competencies.

## PROJECTED ENROLLMENT AND GRADUATION

The enrollment and graduation figures below represent full-time and part-time enrollment.

	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	2030-31
<b>Enrollment</b>	7	11	14	18	20
<b>Graduates</b>	0	0	2	4	6

## STUDENT INTEREST AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

In 2023, TTU surveyed current undergraduate child life students and recent program alumni to determine interest in the proposed program. TTU distributed the survey to 29 current undergraduate students and received 11 responses, resulting in a 37.9% response rate. Among current students, 72.7% (n=8) expressed significant interest in the program and indicated plans to enroll. The survey was also sent to 11 recent alumni, with seven responses received (63.6% response rate), of which 57.2% (n=4) expressed interest in enrolling. Additionally, the School of Human Ecology received 54 student contacts through their website between May 2019 and September 2023. Of these contacts, 50% (n=27) specifically inquired about master's-level training in Child Life, while 26% (n=14) asked about online program delivery options.

Letters of support were received from leading pediatric healthcare institutions that emphasized the critical need for graduate-prepared Child Life Specialists and expressed interest in hiring program graduates. Support letters were provided by administrators and practitioners from Vanderbilt University Medical Center, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, and Texas Woman's University. St. Jude Children's Hospital has specifically committed to expanding regional student internship opportunities. The program's strong industry connections are further evidenced by TTU's program director serving as chair of the Southeastern Association of Child Life Specialists (SEACLP) and the undergraduate program's endorsement from the Association of Child Life Professionals (ACLP).

## EXTERNAL JUDGMENT

An external review of the proposed program was conducted on October 25, 2024, by Dr. Jenny Chabot, Professor and Child Life Graduate Program Coordinator at Ohio University. The site visit included meetings with university leadership, faculty, students, and healthcare industry partners. Dr. Chabot strongly endorsed the program, noting that "the curriculum is extensive, rigorous, and meets the content and course requirements for the Association of Child Life Professionals (ACLP) Endorsement." She also emphasized the program's national prominence through its designated director, Dr. Sisk, who currently serves as a founding member and current co-chair of the Child Life Academic Society.

Dr. Chabot highlighted the critical need for the program, particularly its online delivery format, stating that "the cost of relocating to a new college town, paying living expenses and tuition that includes fees tied to in-person services universities provide, tied with the cost students must already put into often relocating for their final 600-hour internship and the fee to sit for the certification exam, collectively contributes to the great need for on-line programs in child life." Dr. Chabot concluded her report by strongly recommending approval, noting that the program meets "the high standards of the profession, of the associations that oversee the profession and credentialing, and of the hospital programs looking for well-trained candidates."

## PROGRAM COSTS AND REVENUES

The proposed expenditures for the MS in Child Life are listed in Table 1 below. Start-up costs are minimal, and most expenditures are for consultants, equipment, and marketing. A 12-month lecturer will be hired in the first year to teach, coordinate clinical experiences, market and recruit students, and address the profession's competitive nature and need for extensive clinical preparation. Adjunct instructors will be hired to teach the undergraduate child life courses, allowing the program director to teach the graduate-level courses. A graduate assistantship will be offered in Year 2 to assist with administrative support, and a one-time ACLP academic endorsement application fee of \$1,750 will be needed for accreditation purposes, as well as an annual maintenance fee of \$250.

**Table 1: Estimated Costs to Deliver the Proposed Program**

<b><i>Estimated Costs to Deliver the Proposed Program</i></b>						
<b>One-Time Expenditures</b>						
<b>Category</b>	<b>Planning</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Year 5</b>
Faculty & Instructional Staff	\$2,000					
Non-Instructional Staff						
Graduate Assistants						
Accreditation						
Consultants	\$4,000	\$1,500				
Equipment		\$2,500				
Information Tech						
Library						
Marketing		\$1,000				
Facilities						
Travel						
Other						
<i>Total One-Time Expenditures</i>	<i>\$6,000</i>	<i>\$5,000</i>	<i>\$0</i>	<i>\$0</i>	<i>\$0</i>	<i>\$0</i>
<b>Recurring Expenditures</b>						
<b>Category</b>	<b>Planning</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Year 5</b>
Faculty & Instructional Staff		\$103,248	\$105,048	\$106,884	\$108,756	\$110,665
Non-Instructional Staff						

Graduate Assistants			\$25,000	\$26,000	\$26,040	\$26,041
Accreditation		\$1,750	\$250	\$250	\$250	\$250
Consultants						
Equipment						
Information Tech						
Library						
Marketing						
Facilities						
Travel						
Other						
<i>Total Recurring Expenditures</i>	\$0	\$104,998	\$130,298	\$133,134	\$135,046	\$136,956
<b>Grand Total (One-Time and Recurring)</b>	<b>\$6,000</b>	<b>\$109,998</b>	<b>\$130,298</b>	<b>\$133,134</b>	<b>\$135,046</b>	<b>\$136,956</b>
<b>Projected Revenues</b>						
<b>Category</b>	<b>Planning</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Year 3</b>	<b>Year 4</b>	<b>Year 5</b>
Tuition		\$72,060	\$112,442	\$155,860	\$208,646	\$242,110
Grants						
Other						
<b>Total Revenues</b>	<b>\$0</b>	<b>\$72,060</b>	<b>\$112,442</b>	<b>\$155,860</b>	<b>\$208,646</b>	<b>\$242,110</b>