



VCU

College of Health Professions

PHYSICAL THERAPY • SUMMER 2025



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CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF
PHYSICAL THERAPY
VCU COLLEGE OF HEALTH
PROFESSIONS

DRIVEN BY PURPOSE AND IMPACT

As Virginia's top-ranked program, VCU Physical Therapy thrives because of the people who bring our mission to life: our students, faculty, alumni and community partners. In this issue, you'll find powerful examples of how our commitment to innovation and service is transforming lives and shaping the future of our profession. These stories reflect the core values we hold as educators, clinicians and researchers.

From delivering hands-on care at the CARES Clinic to presenting original research, our students are leading with compassion and curiosity. You'll meet inspiring faculty like Dr. Michael Kiefer and Dr. Tamara Buck, whose work, respectively, is improving outcomes for

patients with rare diseases and underserved children. You'll get to know Dr. Joe Wilkins, who spends a day each month as a PT while he serves as a hospital administrator. And you'll read about Feather Wright, a U.S. Army Veteran who found a second calling in physical therapy. These are just a few of the voices helping us extend our reach and deepen our impact.

Our department continues to set the bar high. I hope these stories convey the vital role our program plays in the lives of our patients and the progress of our field. We appreciate your ongoing support as you share this incredible journey with us.

Physical Therapy celebrates Class of 2025 graduates

During Commencement in May, 57 members of the Class of 2025 celebrated earning their DPTs. The department also presented the Susanne Hirt Leadership Award and Terry Wise Memorial Scholarship.

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Help our students reach their goals

Your generous support of an array of scholarships helps our students achieve their goals. Every year, student financial needs are greater, and your gifts are essential in helping many of them manage educational costs. Scholarships are presented during our White Coat Ceremony in the fall.

GIVE NOW

"We were paying for myself and two daughters' college tuition and to have a reprieve to help offset some of the cost was very helpful to my family."

—CLASS OF 2025 GRADUATE

Student pro bono PT clinic CARES for community



For uninsured patients who have nowhere to turn, the CARES Clinic offers something rare: a chance for a better quality of life.

Run by VCU Physical Therapy students, the clinic provides free, high-quality physical rehabilitation to those who would otherwise go without. The integrated team blends hands-on education, compassion and community service into their approach.

"We exist to serve people who have no other option," said Drew Biegner, a second-year student and board coordinator for CARES, which officially stands for Community Accessible Rehabilitative Exercise Services. "Not people with poorly used insurance – people with no insurance. And we don't turn anyone away."

Founded in 2016, the fully student-run nonprofit clinic is backed by the guidance of VCU faculty and licensed volunteer physical therapists, who oversee treatment plans. CARES operates out of the Sheltering Arms Institute location near Scott's Addition two evenings a week. While the time available for the clinic limits the size of the caseload, that volume ensures each patient receives individualized attention – layered with resources, coordinated care and even interpretation services.

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Students present research at APTA meeting

Members of the Class of 2025 represented VCU Physical Therapy at the 50th annual American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) Combined Sections Meeting (CSM) in Texas in February.

Deema Ballout and Jason Hurley showcased "Enhancing Pro Bono Physical Therapy Services with Transportation Support for Underserved Communities," in which they introduced a ride-share partnership at the CARES Clinic. "We found that providing transportation helped patients initiate treatment and maintain consistent plans of care," Ballout said. "We were excited to share the results at CSM and emphasize how addressing barriers like transportation is feasible and can make a difference

in patient care." The Global Health SIG, part of APTA's Academy of Leadership and Innovation, selected the poster for a social responsibility award.

Drawing from Applied Movement Performance Lab research, Lucas McQueen presented "Attentional Demand of Upper Limb Prostheses and Its Relationship with Embodiment." The findings suggested prosthesis users who pay lower levels of attention to their devices are more likely to experience heightened embodiment, or feelings of control and bodily integration. He co-authored the study with Benjamin Darter, PT, Ph.D., chair, and post-doctoral scholar Tanu Bhargava, Ph.D.

On the quest to continue Marquette Challenge streak

VCU Physical Therapy students are looking to extend their five-year streak of winning the Marquette Challenge, a national fundraiser supporting the Foundation for Physical Therapy Research (FPTR). To honor this run of victories, the event has been renamed the VCU-Marquette Challenge for this year.

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Michael Kiefer, DPT, Ph.D.

Kiefer helps pave way for new therapies for inherited muscle disorders

At the intersection of clinical practice, scientific discovery and international collaboration, VCU physical therapy researcher Dr. Michael Kiefer, DPT, Ph.D., is helping rewrite the future for patients with rare and progressive muscle disorders.

With a background rooted in pediatric care and a growing research portfolio in neuromuscular disease, Kiefer is playing a key role in an ambitious international effort to validate new treatments for

myotonic dystrophy, an inherited disorder that takes away muscle strength and movement.

"My clinical passion is pediatrics," he said. "But my skill set is more broadly applicable to kids and adults." That flexibility is critical in a field where symptoms often begin in childhood but evolve throughout a person's life.

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Wilkins blends heart of a PT with vision of a hospital leader

Outfitted in scrubs, Dr. Joe Wilkins, DPT, MSHA, FACHE, CPPS, walks into the Bon Secours St. Francis Medical Center and heads to the rehab unit. Long before he became the hospital's president, Wilkins was a physical therapist — and that part of him shows up every first Friday of the month.



Joe Wilkins, DPT, MSHA, FACHE, CPPS

"I still do the PT thing," he said. "I'm a second set of hands — lifting, walking, stairs, whatever they need. It keeps me grounded in the work that brought me here in the first place."

Wilkins, a three-time VCU graduate—two physical therapy degrees and a master's in health administration — is as comfortable navigating strategic expansion plans as he is adjusting a gait belt. In each role, he keeps a sharp eye on providing the best care for every patient.

Wilkins' calling came in seventh grade, after witnessing the long recovery his father endured following a serious car accident. "He had a compound fracture in his leg, a punctured lung and spent time in the ICU. He actually came to VCU to get his leg saved," Wilkins said. "I didn't even know what a physical therapist was, but, seeing how they helped him walk again, it made a lasting impression. That was it for me. I wanted to help people walk."

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Motivating underserved children to become more physically active

Dr. Tamara Buck, DPT, Ph.D., PCS, is on a mission to get children who aren't physically active moving more.

Through her innovative "Together We Run" program at the Mary and Frances Youth Center, part of VCU, Buck is providing a safe, supportive environment for children from underserved areas to get into running and other physical activities. Her 10-week training program culminates with youths running a 5K race.



Tamara Buck, DPT, Ph.D., PCS

Although running can offer a low-cost entry into sports and exercise, the need for sneakers and a safe place to train can still limit options for many of the youths she's serving. She's eliminating those barriers.

"My passion as a pediatric physical therapist is getting children who are not currently physically active to be physically active," Buck said. In this case, "that is kids from underserved areas that do not have access to sports or the means to participate in sports, as well as kids with disabilities who don't fit into the typical sports realm."

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Feather Wright'

Wright pivots to PT after 22-year military career

Earning her physical therapy degree in May marks the latest milestone for Feather Wright's decades-long relationship with the discipline that began during her initial career in the U.S. Army.

She served much of her 22-year career in her native Texas, ending her tenure in the high-risk infantry. While on duty, she sustained several injuries, including a broken ankle, a torn meniscus and stress fractures in her hip. "My experiences in PT were trying to heal and get back to doing what I had to do to perform for the Army," she said.

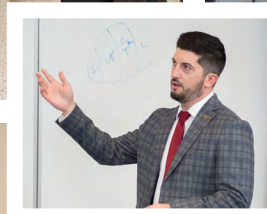
Working with physical therapists helped Wright identify PT as a possible career path after she retired from the military. "They all seemed to really enjoy their job, and I loved being a patient because the



PTs became my friends," said Wright, vice president of VCU's Class of 2025. "It was a very inviting environment."

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REUNION WEEKEND



In April, alumni gathered for a campus visit, with the PT Class of 1975 showing up strong for its 50th reunion. The program included a presentation by Dr. Paul Kline, DPT, Ph.D., on his recent research on improving real-world mobility in people with lower limb amputations. He shared results from intervention studies to improve walking symmetry and increase physical activity to reduce risk of secondary health issues after limb loss.

