



VCU

College of Health Professions

PHYSICAL THERAPY • WINTER 2026



Benjamin Darter, PT, Ph.D.
CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF
PHYSICAL THERAPY
VCU COLLEGE OF HEALTH
PROFESSIONS

Unlimited by campus boundaries

The stories in this issue remind us that the power of a VCU Physical Therapy education stretches far beyond our campus. From welcoming 56 students at the White Coat Ceremony to training in upgraded simulation labs and learning alongside alums who return to mentor, our program continues to surround students with the support and real-world experiences that shape confident, compassionate practitioners.

Our faculty are also pursuing the questions that move our field forward. Research such as Dr. Paul Kline's effort to improve mobility after amputation

and Dr. Chelsea Duppen's quest to support people with Parkinson's disease reflects our commitment to inquiry that directly improves patient lives.

And across our community, the desire to give back remains strong. Alumni volunteering in clinics and classrooms, the CARES Clinic providing essential care and students like Zion Segears earning national recognition all show how service and opportunity reinforce one another. Together, these stories demonstrate a department driven by purpose, curiosity and care for the communities we serve.

White Coat Ceremony welcomes Class of 2028

Before the Physical Therapy Class of 2028 donned their white coats for the first time, Cameron Massumi, DPT, asked them to close their eyes and raise their hands if they had ever doubted their worthiness to wear one.

"Okay, now open your eyes and look around," he said. "You are not alone."

Massumi was speaking at the annual Department of Physical Therapy White Coat Ceremony on Sept. 5, where the program welcomed 56 new students in the College of Health Professions program. He told the students that he, too, once shared that bit of self-doubt.

"Your career isn't a straight line. It's a series of pivots. The things you think disqualify you might be your greatest superpowers," said Massumi, Virginia's chief delegate to the American Physical Therapy Association's House of Delegates.

The ceremony recognizes students' commitment to the standards of their chosen field. Donning a white coat marks the students' commitments to the ethical and professional standards of the field.

▶ [READ MORE](#)



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



Rob Landel, DPT

Lamb Lecturer calls for 'expertise without borders'

At this year's Robert L. Lamb Distinguished Lectureship, Rob Landel, DPT, challenged VCU physical therapy students to seek out opportunities to specialize – but learn to cross lanes because therapists can best help patients when they do.

After all, today's cases from post-concussion dizziness to long COVID are getting increasingly more complex. Meeting them will require clinicians who refuse to choose between depth and breadth.

Established to honor the late Robert L. Lamb, a VCU PT leader renowned for scholarship, editorial service and association leadership, the lecture recognizes impactful contributors to physical therapy research and practice.

► [READ MORE](#)

Sim lab upgrades raise the bar for PT training



Katie Schaab

When they stepped into the simulation lab on the [second floor of the College of Health Professions](#) this fall, physical and occupational therapy students found it had undergone considerable changes. Thanks to a \$108,000 allocation from the Higher Education Equipment Trust Fund, it now features a more immersive, hands-on training environment that reflects the evolving demands of modern health care.

► [READ MORE](#)

APTA honors VCU alum for excellence in academic teaching

Anne Lorio, DPT, Ph.D., a 2001 graduate of VCU's physical therapy master's program, received the Dorothy E. Baethke-Eleanor J. Carlin Award for Excellence in Academic Teaching. The American Physical Therapy Association presents the award annually to educators who demonstrate exceptional teaching effectiveness, creativity in learner engagement and mentorship across all levels of academia.



Anne Lorio, DPT, Ph.D.

► [READ MORE](#)

Congratulations to Wheeler on her retirement

Emma Wheeler, DPT, has retired as director of clinical education and the chair of the admissions committee for the entry-level DPT program. After earning a bachelor's degree from Wake Forest University, Wheeler came to VCU where she earned bachelor's, master's and DPT degrees in physical therapy.

Her research focused on fall prevention in the elderly and predictors of student success in the DPT program. Her teaching included biophysical agents, geriatrics and clinical education. She also was active nationally with the APTA and ACAPT.



Emma Wheeler, DPT

Richmond-area alums prioritize giving back to PT program



Gabrielle Griffin, DPT, works with a young athlete in her clinic.

Three graduates of the Physical Therapy program — Ben Klingelhofer, DPT, Hayden Smith, DPT, and Gabrielle Griffin, DPT — are proving that packed schedules and major life changes don't diminish their commitment to giving back. Each in full-time practice, they continue to carve out time to support the students and programs that shaped their own careers.



Ben Klingelhofer, DPT



Hayden Smith, DPT

Researcher expands understanding of mobility after amputation with NIH-funded study



Paul Kline, DPT, Ph.D.

Understanding how individuals with lower-limb amputations navigate their communities – and why many remain dissatisfied with their mobility, even after successful rehabilitation – is the focus of a new research project led by Paul Kline, DPT, Ph.D..

The two-year study, supported by a career development award through the Clinical & Translational Science Awards (CTSA) Program to VCU from the National Institutes of Health, builds directly on [Kline's earlier work](#), which focused on how well and how much individuals move after amputation. This new research adds a vital third dimension: where that movement happens.

▶ [READ MORE](#)

Klingelhofer, who balances relocating across Richmond, running his business Bend Movement and raising three dogs, still made room for a student panel to share honest insights about life after graduation and the business side of PT. Smith, a neuro PT at VCU Health Short Pump Pavilion, regularly mentors residents and brings patients into neuro rehab labs so students gain hands-on experience early in their training. Griffin, founder of GRIT Physical Therapy + Performance, invites students to shadow her in her one-on-one sports and orthopedic clinic, while also hiring fellow VCU DPT grads and planning to return as a guest lecturer.

▶ [READ MORE](#)

Duppen driven to improve mobility and independence for people with Parkinson's

When Chelsea "CJ" Duppen, PT, DPT, Ph.D., began treating patients in rural North Carolina, she was one of only two clinicians in her county trained to handle neurologic diagnoses.

"Because of that, I was treating a lot of people with Parkinson's disease," she said. Working so closely with them completely changed her outlook. "There's no cure for Parkinson's, and people often understand early on how the disease may

affect their lives," she said. "As a clinician, you care for them from the time they're diagnosed all the way through end-of-life, and you build strong relationships with them and with their families."

Today, her research focuses on improving mobility and independence for people with Parkinson's disease.



Chelsea "CJ" Duppen
PT, DPT, Ph.D.

▶ [READ MORE](#)



Congratulations to all the teams who participated in the CARES Clinic Classic: Rally for Rehab Pickleball Tournament on Sept. 28.

Tournament raises funds for CARES Clinic

The CARES Clinic Classic: Rally for Rehab Pickleball Tournament was hosted on Sept. 28 at Bangers and Dinks Indoor Pickleball. The tournament featured 70 players in five different brackets. The event raised \$3,630, which will support the student-led CARES Clinic and its efforts to provide free PT care to underinsured and under-served patients in the Greater Richmond area.



Zion Segears

Student honored with national Rizing Tide Scholarship

For first-year student Zion Segears, the Rizing Tide Scholarship is fuel for his dream. A Northern Virginia native and proud VCU alumnus, Segears found physical therapy after a long recovery from a torn hip labrum that sidelined him from high school basketball. Years of rehab showed him how powerful the field could be.

Segears now joins a national network committed to elevating underrepresented voices in PT — gaining mentorship, professional connections and momentum toward opening his own practice.

[▶ READ MORE](#)

Fiorante takes 'beautiful game' of soccer to new places



Michael Fiorante,
DPT

For Michael Fiorante, DPT, soccer has always been more than a sport. It's a language that anyone can speak.

That belief now guides Fiorante's work as a physical therapist for [U.S. Soccer's](#) extended national teams, which include athletes in the deaf, cerebral palsy, power, beach and futsal programs. Fiorante began his new position in September, just weeks after completing the 13-month [VCU Sports Residency program in the Department of Physical Therapy](#).

[▶ READ MORE](#)