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Doctors of Physical Therapy

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At 9:45 a.m. Saturday, May 2, at the University of Dayton Arena, 20 students will become the first graduates of the University's doctor of physical therapy program. Nineteen of the students responded to a recent job outlook survey indicating 14 of the graduates already have jobs waiting for them, with 10 staying in the Dayton area and a total of 12 remaining in Ohio.

"These graduates pioneered our program and set the standard for students to follow," said Philip Anloague, doctor of physical therapy program director. "Through their effort and our use of a challenging problem-based learning method, I am confident these new doctors of physical therapy are ready to serve the community and will continue to learn and contribute to the field."

U.S. News & World Report named physical therapy one of its "Best Careers in 2006." The U.S. Department of Labor predicts employment of physical therapists to increase 27 percent by 2016, much faster than the national average for all occupations. And the American Physical Therapy Association has called on schools to raise the educational standards for practitioners, who will be expected to have doctorate degrees by 2020.

In light of these statistics, the program was created in 2006 with $1.4 million in financial assistance from the Greater Dayton Area Hospital Association when the only local master of physical therapy program closed. The University of Dayton program offers the only advanced degree in physical therapy in the Miami Valley. Entry is highly competitive with as many as 210 applications for the 35 spots in each cohort; 75 percent of students come from the local area.

"The need for physical therapists in the region was very high, and we were extremely concerned about meeting the medical needs for our region without a high-quality DPT program," said GDAHA President Bryan Bucklew. "It is critically important for the medical community and the Dayton region for us to have the University of Dayton DPT program producing a consistent supply of highly educated physical therapists that greatly assists us in meeting the changing medical needs of our community. The University of Dayton deserves a tremendous amount of thanks for working with the region on this critical area of health care."

In addition to providing qualified graduates, the program also serves the local area by offering continuing education classes to hospital staff and current practitioners.

"We are intimately related with the medical community," Anloague said. "We take the service part of our mission very seriously."

In turn, local professionals fill teaching roles for several of the problem-based learning courses where students get real-world experience in focused, small groups. Students also participate in clinicals with local practitioners throughout their education.

"The relationship between the DPT students and the region is mutually beneficial as the students are able to gain a high quality of education and real-world training, and our community benefits from their medical services and knowledge," Bucklew said.

Student Brittany Walliser originally planned to go into chiropractic care like her uncle, whom she worked with while in high school in Tiffin, Ohio. So she pursued a degree in exercise science with a pre-physical therapy concentration at the University of Dayton, the best track to fulfill her goal. Along the way she discovered physical therapy was a better fit.

"I've always been a people-person, and I've always wanted to help others," she said. "I moved around a lot growing up and had to constantly make new friends and adjust to new environments. PT gives me a lot of personal interaction with patients, and it's a way to give back to people the kindness I received."

Walliser received her undergraduate degree from the University of Dayton in 2006, just in time to take advantage of the new DPT program. In clinicals, she focused on pediatrics, home care, outpatient rehabilitation and sports medicine.

Although she has received a job offer, Walliser is keeping her options open. She would prefer to find employment through a hospital system in the Dayton or Columbus area with a focus on orthopedic care and sports medicine. Her ultimate goal is to treat the dance population.

Josh Rayburn of Englewood, Ohio, anticipated going into medical school after graduating from Wright State University in 2003,
but the cost and length of the education prompted him to major in exercise science. For three years he worked as an exercise physiologist in corporate wellness and cardiac rehabilitation for Community Hospital and Mercy Medical Center — now Springfield Regional Medical Center — in Springfield, Ohio.

"I wanted to do more, and the next logical step was to involve exercise as a means of getting people better," he said.

After he graduates Saturday, he will begin work at Step Forward, a Dayton agency focusing on home care and outpatient rehabilitation. He feels confident entering into practice and credits the faculty, clinicals and problem-based learning model of the University's DPT program.

"Rather than being spoon-fed the information we need to know, we learn to research diagnoses and identify specific issues that may arise in the case we are discussing," Rayburn said. "In our future practice, we need to have knowledge of how to identify problems and how to research and find solutions to those problems."

Although he already has job plans, like most graduates, he has his eye on the troubled economy.

"The economy will play a key role in health care as a whole in the years to come, and major changes may occur in the health care system, but we can only guess how they will affect our practice," he said. "However, with the aging population, physical therapy will remain in very high demand, and I have great confidence in the direction of our field."

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