UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

College of Health Professions and Sciences

ADVANCE

THE SWEET SOUND OF PROGRESS:

A new vortex whistle will improve diagnosis and treatment of voice disorders

2024-2025 » ANNUAL PUBLICATION

TRANSFORMING HEALTHCARE. IMPROVING LIVES.

EYE OPENING CLASS

What if you could “see” what patients who have eye diseases experience? Students in Lecturer Katia Ferdowsi’s pathophysiology class wore specialized eyeglasses to get a simulated look into how vision is affected in patients with cataracts, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, macular degeneration and retinal detachment. The class helps students better understand these conditions and prepares them for careers as competent and compassionate healthcare professionals.

It’s been a year of wins for us.

We’re committed to preparing our students to become competent and compassionate healthcare providers who graduate ready to serve on a healthcare team. And we were proud to be honored nationally by the Association of Schools Advancing Health Professions this year for our work to do just that, receiving their Award for Institutional Excellence and Innovation in Interprofessional Education and Collaborative Health Care.

It’s a distinction we received in conjunction with the College of Medicine and the College of Nursing, our partners in the Academic Health Sciences Center at UCF.

This year, we united our clinical services with these partners under the established, and highly regarded, UCF Health brand. Together, health experts educate the next generation of healthcare providers as well as provide extraordinary care to tens of thousands of adults and children through our community clinics.

This year also saw two College of Health Professions and Sciences graduate programs rank among the top 50 in the country, according to U.S. News & World Report. The Doctor of Physical Therapy program ranked No. 42, placing it in the top 16% of the nation. Our physical therapy students consistently exceed state and national averages in licensure pass rates and test scores and the Class of 2024 had an impressive 100% employment rate.

The speech-language pathology graduate program in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders ranks in the top 17% of the nation, jumping to No. 48 nationwide, and reaching its highest ranking to date. UCF is the top supplier of speech-language pathologists in Florida, and students receive a comprehensive clinical education through hands-on experience in unique and innovative learning opportunities that range from intensive reading camps to specialty clinics to aphasia treatment programs.

Our research expenditures continue to surge upwards, with faculty focusing on innovations that range from developing assistive robots to creating new clinical tools for diagnosing voice disorders to using AI in new and innovative ways, such as for treating back pain and improving health literacy. We share more about these projects in the pages that follow.

I’ve been truly honored to serve as the interim dean and I’m incredibly grateful and humbled for the opportunity to serve as dean. I’m proud to work alongside such a talented team of faculty and staff and look forward to continuing our collective journey to transform healthcare and improve lives.

CHARGE ON!

Matthew Theriot

Matthew Theriot, Ph.D., MSSW
Dean, Professor
College of Health Professions and Sciences

DESIGNS THAT SERVE

The UCF HealthTech Innovators: VHA Challenge launched in February bringing together graduate and undergraduate students from CHPS and the College of Engineering and Computer Science to tackle real-world health challenges impacting Veterans through technology-driven solutions. Born out of a partnership between the Rehabilitation Innovation Center and the VA Innovation's Simulation Learning, Evaluation, Assessment, and Research Network (SimLEARN), the kickoff event featured an exclusive tour of the VHA's cutting-edge technology, where students identified key health challenges faced by veterans and collaborated to apply their skills and design creative and impactful solutions.

Publication Credits

Heather Lovett, Communications and Marketing Director
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Grayson Keglovic, Communications Specialist II
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ON THE COVER: Research Professor Shaheen Awan holds a small, biodegradable, disposable, 3D printed vortex whistle that measures airflow during speech. It produces sound based on the amount of air passing through, allowing software to analyze respiratory function—an essential yet often overlooked part of voice assessment. Developed by Awan and his colleagues in the Communication Technologies Research Center, this low-cost tool aims to improve diagnosis and treatment of voice disorders by making aerodynamic measurement accessible, precise, and easy to use in everyday clinical settings. Read more on page 10.

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BUILDING MOMENTUM:

THERIOT TO SERVE AS DEAN OF THE COLLEGE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS AND SCIENCES

Grounded in authenticity, Matthew Theriot's leadership prioritizes collaboration and innovation to prepare future healthcare professionals for team-based care.

Matthew Theriot's voice is never the loudest in the room. He'll choose a seat in the middle of the conference table, not at the head. He listens more than he talks. He's more likely to ask an open-ended question than deliver a directive.

His style is to speak selectively. Purposefully.

The new dean of the College of Health Professions and Sciences (CHPS), Theriot has two decades of administrative leadership experience at large research universities. He's directed academic programs, boosted enrollment, implemented new curricula and created innovative faculty development programs.

However, Theriot will tell you that what he's most proud of professionally is not so much what he's done, but how he's collaborated with others to translate ideas into action.

"My favorite memories are of the teams I've built and the people I've worked with, the different projects, the successes we've had, and the journey we took to get there working together," Theriot says. "Sometimes, I think I'm prouder of the experience than I am of the product."

Since being appointed interim dean in July of 2024, Theriot has grown the college's research infrastructure, invested in interprofessional education initiatives, and bolstered faculty and staff engagement activities.

He's laser focused on raising the bar for the college's strategic initiatives, which center around health education, research, clinical practice and service.

A key partner in the Academic Health Sciences Center and the UCF Health clinical enterprise, CHPS' expert faculty clinicians and graduate students treat thousands of patients yearly at the Physical Therapy Clinic, Communication Disorders Clinic and the Aphasia House. Theriot sees potential for growth.

"These are invaluable services that have really significant real impact on people's lives," he says. "There may be opportunities to enrich those experiences and expand those services to be available to more people."

He's also advancing the college's unique work in healthy aging and, in 2024, facilitated a series of information-sharing sessions with college researchers who leverage technology to find new innovations to improve quality of life and longevity.

Students will soon have more learning opportunities. The college has four new graduate degrees and two new undergraduate interdisciplinary degrees on the horizon, all developed to meet workforce demands for future healthcare providers and educators.

"I'm trying to find the ways that we can make the strongest contributions, identify opportunities for us to lead when we can, and forge partnerships with medicine and nursing, and Student Health Services," Theriot says.

With 230 faculty and staff and almost 6,300 students, CHPS spans a range of health and wellness disciplines: health sciences, social work, athletic training, physical therapy, kinesiology and communication sciences and disorders.

"Matthew has gained a deep understanding of our college," Associate Professor of Physical Therapy Matt Stock says. "His clear vision, transparency and honest communication reflect an approachable leadership style that makes him ideally suited to support faculty, staff and students during this pivotal time."

Theriot describes his leadership style as people-centered, grounded in his core, non-negotiables. These are the things he won't budge on: authenticity, honesty, transparency, accessibility, empathy and accountability.

They stem from his orientation as a social worker. Perhaps not surprisingly, he chose a field that centers around connecting with and empowering others.

"If you're going to know me as a leader, you're going to know me as a person," says Theriot, who as interim kept a full calendar of attendance

at events ranging from tailgates to community presentations to birthday celebrations. The emails and updates he sends collegewide are laced with humor, puns and light-heartedness. Events at the college featured coffee chats and ice cream cart visits. He kicked off his remarks at an alumni event by emerging from the college's hologram machine.

"Part of my leadership style, part of the way I relate to people, is being human," he says. "That's just who I am."

Since the beginning of his career, Theriot has wanted to immerse himself in classrooms and campus life. He earned a bachelor's in social work, gaining experience as a school social worker and counselor and then serving as a teaching assistant while working on his graduate degree at the University of Texas at Austin.

He enjoyed teaching other students more than he expected.

"I just found myself very invested in what I was doing and the quality of my teaching and my interactions with students," he says. "I was still a student while I was working with these students, so I did a lot of reflection about what I liked and didn't like in my own class experiences.

His next stop would be the University of California, Berkeley, where he would earn a doctorate in social welfare and prepare to become a professor.

Theriot spent a decade teaching at the University of Tennessee while ascending through a series of leadership positions, serving first as the social work undergraduate program director then doctoral program director.

He infused pop culture and creativity to make learning more interesting for students. His class, Maniacs and Psycho Killers, covered mental health and mental illness, integrating video clips from popular horror movies and using the film's characters as models and points of reference. The wildly popular class filled each semester.

"I loved the idealism of students, especially in social work, with students coming in who really want to make a difference and really want to change the world in big or small ways," Theriot says. "Being able to help shape their passion and give them skills and knowledge and theoretical background to be more effective with what they wanted to do was really very rewarding for me."

His next six years saw him excel in executive leadership roles: associate provost for teaching and learning innovation, vice provost for faculty affairs and associate provost for faculty development and strategic initiatives. He led a two-year, campus-wide effort to develop a comprehensive quality enhancement plan — an initiative designed to both meet accreditation standards and provide a roadmap for continued improvements.

Theriot joined UCF in 2021 as the director of the School of Social Work where he promoted interdisciplinary research and created the Center for Professional and Community Education. Under his tenure, the Master of Social Work program jumped to an all-time high of No. 67 in the U.S. News & World Report graduate rankings, placing it in the top 25% of programs nationally for the first time.

Assistant Professor of Social Work Susanny Beltran says Theriot finds a strong balance between emotional intelligence and strategic thinking.

"Matthew's leadership style is collaborative, compassionate and clear," Beltran says. "He makes others feel genuinely heard and valued, while still confidently guiding the team toward a shared vision."

Away from campus, music is a huge part of Theriot's life and family. He and his wife of 26 years, Emily — a former art and music teacher — will vacation in summer 2025 by going on "tour" with their teenage daughter, whose School of Rock band will perform in venues across the southeast. When she began learning the bass guitar, Theriot picked up the guitar. His son, a student at the University of Florida, plays the drums. Theriot's oldest daughter, a senior at the University of Virginia, is a talented singer.

"We'd be a great band, but they'll tell you the reason we're not is because I can't keep up," Theriot says. "I'm mostly self-taught. And it shows when I play."

As a leader who understands the power of collaboration in music and academia, Theriot looks to continue to build a culture where every voice contributes to the college's collective rhythm and progress.

"I want CHPS to be, and CHPS will be, a destination of choice for faculty and staff — a place where people come and they feel supported, valued and appreciated in the work that they do," he says.

"They see the opportunities for growth and how they can achieve their goals being part of this college."

AT A GLANCE

Research Impact

Total FUNDED research dollars

$10,354,984

Increase in research expenditures since Fiscal Year 2018-2019, the first year CHPS was a college:

103%

Total students enrolled at CHPS

6,282

5,386 **UNDERGRADUATE**

896 **GRADUATE**

2024-2025 Degree Programs

Communication Sciences and Disorders
- Communication Sciences and Disorders, B.S.
- Communication Sciences and Disorders, M.A.

Health Sciences
- Health Sciences, B.S. – Health Promotion Track
- Health Sciences, B.S. – Pre-Clinical Track
- Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences, M.S.

Kinesiology
- Kinesiology, B.S. – Exercise and Sport Physiology Track
- Kinesiology, B.S. – Strength and Conditioning Track
- Kinesiology, M.S.
- Kinesiology, Ph.D.

Social Work
- Social Work, BSW
- Social Work, MSW

Athletic Training
- Athletic Training, MAT

Physical Therapy
- Physical Therapy, DPT

THE SWEET SOUND OF PROGRESS

Shaheen Awan, Ph.D., answers his phone with an immediate apology. “I’m a little hoarse,” he says. “I overused my voice during a two-hour meeting earlier today.”

The irony is obvious. Awan is a speech scientist. Through research, he helps speech pathologists improve clinical services for people with speech disorders. His momentary vocal discomfort creates an opening to discuss — and simplify — his most recent groundbreaking work.

“Being hoarse isn’t necessarily a problem unless it persists for more than two weeks,” Awan says. “When it disrupts daily life beyond an irritation, medical referral and potential speech pathology services come into play. The goal of my research is to help speech pathologists more easily determine the ‘why’ regarding voice disorders.”

With his current research, Awan and his team can literally hear the future of speech pathology. They can see the future, too. In fact, Awan can hold it in the palm of his hand. For more than 30 years, the research professor in UCF’s School of Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) has focused his lifelong interest in acoustics and his expertise in voice evaluation to find the root causes of communication disorders that affect as many as one in 10 people in the U.S. One of the unsolved problems in voice-disorder assessments enticed him out of retirement so he could pursue a simple solution, this time with a $3.12 million dollar grant funded by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NDOCD) and a team of six interdisciplinary researchers from three universities.

Today, Awan and his team believe they have an answer: a whistle. Not a cumbersome costly machine, but a vortex whistle small enough to fit into a shirt pocket. In its final form, it will be biodegradable, disposable and affordable. It will have no moving parts and doesn’t need to be powered. Awan envisions the whistles being as readily available as a bag of dental-floss picks. Accompanying software that captures and analyzes the vortex whistle tone completes the system.

He also sees them changing other people’s lives, soon.

“Our version of the vortex whistle addresses a widely known deficit that speech pathologists deal with in terms of accurately assessing voice-disordered patients,” Awan says.

To uncomplicate the picture, he compares the evaluation of voice to the evaluation of vision. “Imagine if your optometrist said, ‘We really should do one other test to make sure we’re on the right track with your prescription … but we don’t have the equipment because it’s too expensive.’ That’s the scenario that we want to change in speech pathology.”

Voice production, Awan says, combines the voice box, known as the physical laryngeal component, - with respiratory airflow. To properly assess and treat patients with voice disorders, a perceptual analysis,

visual analysis, acoustic analysis and aerodynamics must be performed. Perceptual analysis is when the therapist listens to the patient, describes the voice and categorizes it says Awan. This requires training but no additional instrumentation, while visual analysis involves images of vocal folds, often referred to as vocal cords, taken by a laryngologist, says Awan.

Awan described acoustic analysis as the acoustic signal that is recorded and analyzed for measurements related to a potential voice difference and the severity of the problem. Awan explained that all speech and voice clinicians have access to a computer, microphone and analysis software capable of doing this type of measurement. The final area of measurement is "Aerodynamics," Awan says.

"When you produce voice, the vocal folds vibrate because of air coming up from the lungs. The voice is dependent on the respiratory system's capacity and ability to generate air flow and pressure. If there's a deficit in producing or controlling respiratory forces, the voice is often affected," Awan says "There could be an underlying neurological problem, or a medical issue like asthma or COPD that may require medical treatment or voice therapy. Until now, the respiratory element in speech has been overlooked because there's been no low-cost, accurate, available method to measure aerodynamics. This vortex whistle, with easy-to-use software, will make it possible in a day-to-day clear-cut fashion."

Awan says that the project started at a voice disorder conference. He says that "people were discussing the fact there were no low-cost tools to measure aerodynamics as it relates to voice. In my mind, I knew there must be something out there that could be reimagined."

Awan, the speech scientist who once thought following his graduate work in the U.S. that he might return to his childhood home in London, Ontario, Canada, to pursue a career in music, used his knowledge in acoustics to consider a few ideas. A flute? A referee's whistle?

"Neither produce a sound specifically related to the amount of air flow going into them and then I became aware of the vortex whistle. It has no moving parts," Awan says. "Air enters the cylinder, which forces the air to spiral and exert pressure against the walls of the cylinder before exiting. This creates a signal that has a pitch and frequency that are directly proportional to the amount of air flowing into the whistle. That's the principle."

The frequency of the vortex whistle sound wave can then be converted to measurements of airflow and volume, Awan says.

The vortex whistle's potential is why Awan took up his friend and colleague, UCF Professor David Eddins, on an offer to quit retirement, form a team, and work toward applying the science. The NIDCD-funded grant has accelerated the progress. At Purdue, his son, Jordan Awan, leads data analysis while aerodynamics engineer Jun Chen works on modifications of the whistle for specific tasks. At Emory University, Amanda Gillespie conducts studies with voice disordered human subjects. At UCF, Awan, Eddins and Assistant Professor Victoria McKenna have access to lab space built to spec in the Communication Technologies Research Center in the UCF Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, which has sound-treated booths, an anechoic chamber and a reception area for subjects participating in tests. In the same building are a speech and hearing clinic and capabilities for 3D printing and simulation.

"For the vortex whistle to be ready for use, its construction has to be very precise," Awan says. "It also requires software development to accurately capture and analyze a somewhat difficult soundwave. We're getting close."

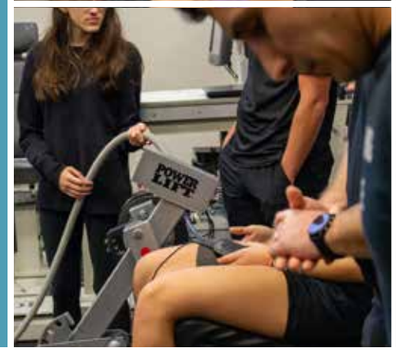
The Journal of Voice has already published the study from Awan's team as an award-winning cover story. Since then, various versions of the whistle have been computer-modeled and 3D printed. The modifications are being tested in the first of three large-scale human subject studies. The second study, taking place in 2025, will look at subjects from 5 to 90 years old to see how well the vortex whistle works to document potential changes in measurements of respiratory volume and airflow during voice production across the lifespan. The final study will utilize the vortex whistle as a treatment-outcome measure before and after medical procedures for vocal-fold paralysis.

From there, the application could be far-reaching.

"My hope with the vortex whistle," Awan says, "is that we start with speech and voice-disordered patients, and then identify its usefulness in other areas of medicine and associated areas such as exercise science and sports physiology. By making it affordable and accessible, there's no limit to how many people can ultimately benefit from it."

FROM MOLECULES TO MOVEMENT

The School of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences held its 5th annual Institute of Exercise Physiology and Rehabilitation Sciences conference on Feb. 7- 8. The highly anticipated event, presented by the De Luca Foundation, took place at the FAIRWINDS Alumni Center and brought together close to 200 students, researchers, clinicians and practitioners from around the world to learn about cutting-edge scientific innovations within their respective fields.



RESEARCHERS RECEIVE GRANT to Develop Intelligent Assistive Robotics

Clinical Associate Professor of Physical Therapy Morris "Rick" Beato is playing a key role in a groundbreaking project to develop intelligent, mobile robotic assistants for adults with upper extremity disabilities. He joins Professors Aman Behal and Edgard Maboudou with the College of Engineering and Computer Science on a team awarded a $600,000, three-year grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research.

The project aims to improve assistive robotics used in daily tasks like eating and grooming, improving independence and quality of life for people with upper extremity disabilities — such as stroke, multiple sclerosis or other conditions. Assistive robots perform tasks better over time by mimicking the user, but in these situations, the person with a disability may not be able to complete the task correctly — or at all.

To overcome this, the team is designing smarter, more intuitive robots with easier control and better human-robot interaction. These devices can be mounted on wheelchairs or follow users, offering assistance on the go. The research spans development, testing, and user feedback, beginning with student studies and expanding to adults with upper body paralysis.

CHPS Researchers Building Holographic Library of Adults Who Use Assistive Technology

The Rehabilitation Innovation Center's hologram technology keeps advancing healthcare education in "out-of-the-box" ways. The next exciting expansion will be the development of a first of its kind holographic library focused on sharing the lived experiences of adults who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), a project funded by a $100,000 grant from the WITH Foundation which will be led by Assistant Professor Julie Feuerstein and Associate Instructor Carolyn Buchanan in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders.

The Center's hologram technology delivers vivid, life-sized video experiences that enable the audience to watch pre-recorded speakers or interact with a live speaker "beamed in" from anywhere in the world, generating a sense of co-presence and connectivity with viewers. The College of Health Professions and Sciences (CHPS) has already created a pre-recorded library of almost 100 patients, clinicians, caregivers and subject matter experts who "appear" in the hologram to share lived experiences and aid students and practitioners in refining their clinical skills. The grant from the WITH Foundation will add 10 more hologram recordings to the library, focusing on adults with disabilities who can face communication challenges — a condition that can affect the quality of healthcare they receive.

"By prioritizing the lived experience of adults who use AAC when developing the HAAC library, this project has the potential to drive meaningful change in healthcare communication between individuals with disabilities and their providers," says Feuerstein. "The HAAC library also will transform the way we instruct students in healthcare and related professions."

The ultimate goal of the Holographic Augmentative and Alternative Communication (HAAC) library is to improve training for students and healthcare providers by providing cases of first-hand experiences from persons who use augmentative and alternative communication (PWUACC) who will share their preferences and priorities related to accessing high quality healthcare.

"Many people who rely on assistive technology experience challenges traveling to educational settings," says Buchanan the project's principal investigator. "Advances in technology, like the hologram, allow us to bring high quality instructional content to pre-service healthcare students."

According to ASHA ProFind, only 6% of SLPs who work with adults indicate AAC as an area of expertise. This directly impacts the approximately 58% of adults with intellectual disabilities who experience communication difficulties, as many rely on the use of AAC in their interactions with providers. The HAAC Library will greatly benefit those who fall within both percentiles — adults with communication difficulties will have their voices amplified, while SLPs that work with them will be able to better understand their needs.

The creation of the library will take place through a 12-month process broken into three phases, each phase lasting three months, and will span from January to December of 2025. In phase one, PWUAACs, caregivers of PWUAACs, and healthcare professionals from both local and national organizations will provide feedback on the library's learning objectives through a series of surveys and focus groups. Phase two will involve the filming of PWUACCs for the hologram library as they relay their lived experiences and what they believe is important for students and healthcare providers to know when administering care. The third, and final, phase is when the full HAAC Library will be shared with community collaborators and national organizations as well as integrated into UCF's coursework for future speech-language pathologists.

The HAAC Library will be the first of its kind in several ways. Creating the library with the option to be used in a hologram machine brings the subjects to scale and in a manner that early studies have shown may link to an increase in provider empathy. The library will also be accessible in traditional video format, giving educators options as to how to present content in courses, regardless of course modality or distance from in-person presenters. Additionally, the new UCF library will focus on adults who use AAC and feature the opinions and experiences of PWUAAC rather than subject matter experts. Other training libraries for the pre-service education of SLPs address treatment needs of children, teens or young adults using AAC.

Buchanan and Feuerstein will collaborate with Tracy Rackensperger, a public service faculty member at the Institute on Human Development and Disability at the University of Georgia. Rackensperger is also a person with cerebral palsy who uses a power wheelchair and AAC devices. CHPS Video Production Assistant Maggie Flemming will support the project by assisting with the video creation. Students in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders are expected to assist with data collection and analysis.

"We launched our hologram program over three years ago, and since then, it has grown into a globally recognized model adopted by universities and organizations around the world," says Bari Hoffman, associate dean of clinical affairs at CHPS. "This grant allows the faculty researchers involved to take that same innovative technology known for its high realism and sense of co-presence and apply it to a critical new use case: connecting caregivers with the education and support they often lack. It's a powerful example of how immersive technology can close gaps in healthcare by delivering meaningful, human-centered experiences at scale."

UCF is one of nine organizations receiving grants from the WITH Foundation for healthcare equity projects. This is the second gift from the WITH Foundation for the College of Health Professions and Sciences. The group also provided funding for Project ECHO, in which researchers developed and delivered virtual educational training for speech-language pathologists centered on improving therapy for PWUAACs.

New UCF, Orlando Health Physical Therapy Residency Program Aims to Improve Women's Health

A new women's health residency program launched in conjunction with Orlando Health is preparing more physical therapists to offer specialized care in an emerging area — giving practitioners advanced training, education and clinical practice to help improve the reproductive health of women across the lifespan.

"There's definitely a need," says Clinical Associate Professor Carey Rothschild, one of the UCF faculty who instructs in the program and aided in its development. "Interest in this area is growing, and a 12-month program allows new graduates to get advanced training so they can effectively treat and manage patients with a wide range of concerns."

The residency program focuses extensively on pelvic and obstetric physical therapy and delivers training in pelvic and breast oncology, lymphedema, menopause management, and women's neuromusculoskeletal health.

One third of women in the U.S. suffer from some kind of pelvic floor condition, according to the American Physical Therapy Association's Academy of Pelvic Health. Conditions can include urinary incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse and bowel dysfunction.

Residency programs enable physical therapists to advance their knowledge and clinical skills, preparing healthcare professionals with highly specialized training and increasing the pool of competent and compassionate healthcare providers for the community.

While physical therapy residency programs in orthopedics and neurology are more common, the UCF and Orlando Health Women's Health Physical Therapy Residency Program is just the second in Florida and one of only 22 in the country. The program is currently pursuing accreditation through the American Board of Physical Therapy Residency & Fellowship Education.

Residents in the program receive training and mentoring from Orlando Health physical therapists as well as physical therapy faculty clinicians at UCF's Division of Physical Therapy in the College of Health Professions and Sciences.

The yearlong program, which began in the fall semester of 2024 with two residents, calls for a combination of clinical practice, didactic training and mentoring. Residents spend 32 hours a week at Orlando Health, working with healthcare professionals in a specialty women's hospital acute care setting and in outpatient rehabilitation service.

"Our residency program aims to provide a unique experience of clinical training and mentoring in both acute care and outpatient settings," says Beth Northrop, the program coordinator for Orlando Health. "Women's rehabilitation needs are often not prioritized in hospitals, particularly after childbirth, which can lead to a sequelae of chronic conditions. Our residents are prepared to be experts in caring for women across the continuum of care and providing early, evidence-based interventions for this population."

Residents spend time each week in a didactic training and academic environment alongside UCF faculty. They learn instructional techniques, lecture and present to physical therapy students, and conduct a literature review that culminates in a research report.

Additional hours each week are dedicated to one-on-one formal mentoring by board certified specialists — both UCF faculty clinicians and Orlando Health professionals, who have extensive expertise in women's health treatment. Following completion of the program, residents sit for a national certification exam.

The program marks the second successful physical therapy residency partnership between UCF and Orlando Health. A neurological residency program has been in place since 2017, with program residents attaining a 100% first attempt pass rate on the board specialty examination. UCF and Orlando Health are also collaborating on a sports residency program which is expected to employ residents starting in July 2025.

Laura Arboleda

Laura Arboleda '13 earned a bachelor's in health sciences from UCF and her DPT at the University of St. Augustine.

"When I was treating back pain patients, I don't think I was thinking about the connection to the pelvis," Arboleda says. "Now with the additional knowledge I'm receiving, I can put those pieces together and really help patients get better. I think I was missing this piece when treating orthopedic patients. I didn't have advanced knowledge. Now I'm starting to notice this would have been helpful back then."

MEET THE RESIDENTS

Melinda Honore

Melinda Honore is a graduate of Florida A&M University where she earned a bachelor's in health science and earned a Doctor of Physical Therapy in 2024.

"This program is important because there are so many individuals who have pelvic and women's health concerns and they see them as silent issues," Honore says. "Other areas of physical therapy cover what you can physically see — the physical dysfunctions. This area is powerful because you can give patients the tools they need to deal with their silent dysfunctions, and they don't have to harbor the burden of handling that anymore."

Can AI Provide a Better Way to Relieve Pain for Hundreds of Millions of People?

A clinical researcher in athletic training and a biomedical engineer are exploring new methods for using AI to analyze ultrasounds and improve lives around the world.

In the near future, when people on all seven continents can use AI to heal or prevent musculoskeletal pain, we could very well look to a large room at the back of the Education Complex at UCF and say this is one of the places where everything began to change. It's an interesting space. In fact, if you miss the sign over a threshold in the lobby (Institute of Exercise Physiology and Rehabilitation Science) you might wonder if you've walked into a lab, a rehab clinic, or a fitness center. There are treadmills and mats, resistance bands and treatment tables, and voices of researchers in mid-instruction.

In an area set apart with privacy dividers, Assistant Professor Colby Mangum rolls a chair up to a portable ultrasound machine and a laptop. Aside from the signage, these are the first giveaways that you've entered an important intersection of research, technology, physical health, and profound possibilities.

"We want the lab to be as 'real world' as possible, so we can address real problems with real patients," Mangum says of what she calls the REhabilitation, Athletic assessment and DYnamic imaging (READY) Lab. "It's the only way to make a genuine impact on the future of musculoskeletal health."

Before diving into her research, it's helpful to know something about the researcher. Mangum's career aligns with the cues in this active lab. She started as an athletic trainer while also becoming an expert in the use of ultrasound imaging as a researcher so she could blend all her interests into finding better answers for people with chronic pain and for those who want to prevent it. In 2018, that personal mission led her to UCF where she was asked to grow the athletic training research agenda at the College of Health Professions and Sciences. Today, thanks to internal seed funding, she's ramping up her research focus on improving diagnostics and treatment courses for the most widespread pain in the world: Low back pain, which affects more than 600 million people globally.

Mangum has seen enough cases of lower back pain to spark her curiosity about the source of the pain and how muscles around the lower back and spine are affected.

"It oftentimes seems to connect to the core," she says. "I'm talking about well-conditioned athletes, younger people and older people. It goes back to an imbalance in those three layers of abdominal muscles: external obliques, internal obliques, and transverse abdominis."

MRI and CT are the most often used imaging modalities to assess musculoskeletal conditions, but MRI is expensive and CT exposes patients to radiation. In addition, neither is good at imaging tissue movement, which can yield important information about the physical properties of tissues. Ultrasound, on the other hand, is safe, low cost, portable, and can capture tissue dynamics during rehab sessions.

"Ultrasound has the potential to unlock answers, especially for low back pain for a large population scale," Magnum says, "but first we need to overcome some issues we face."

Those issues primarily come down to the training it takes for clinicians and researchers to acquire good quality ultrasound images and the time it takes for them to manually measure ultrasound readouts. There's also high subjectivity in those measurements. Mangum has believed for years that some ultrasound automation would be the only way to reach hundreds of millions of people and begin making a transformational impact. She also knew she couldn't do something that big alone in this lab.

"It became clear that if I could collaborate with an AI expert," Mangum says, "it would be the gamechanger."

The Power of Two

"The first time I spoke with Laura, I sensed her enthusiasm for this project," Mangum says of Laura Brattain, the College of Medicine associate professor with whom she collaborates with. "We recognize the value of our complementary expertise — mine with ultrasound and patient care in a clinical setting and hers in applying AI to healthcare."

Mangum calls Brattain "a powerhouse" because of her training as a biomedical engineer and fascination with medicine. While at MIT, Brattain developed portable emergency care technologies and, not so coincidentally, AI algorithms for analyzing ultrasound images for disease diagnostics and procedure guidance. She joined the UCF Artificial Intelligence Initiative (Aii) in 2024 as an associate professor in the College of Medicine with an affiliated appointment in the College of Engineering and Computer Science – a position conducive for translational AI research.

"The AI initiatives at UCF provide me with a bigger platform to innovate with clinicians and turn research into something impactful," Brattain says. "As soon as I arrived, I found myself in this great ecosystem, collaborating with hospitals and with researchers who have clinical experience, like Colby."

The combined skillsets of Mangum and Brattain and the far-reaching potential of their low back pain project will start with a seed grant of $12,000 from UCF and a matching grant from the College of Medicine. The funding will allow them to acquire ultrasound data from both individuals with and without a history of lower back pain, use AI and human raters to analyze the images, then establish if there is reliability and agreement between the manual and automated analysis. AI is certainly faster, but is it just as accurate and consistent? Could it one day eliminate the training needed by ultrasound operators as well as improve the data and ultimately, the outcomes?

The researchers will work with students (a health sciences major and a biomedical AI doctoral student) to generate solid preliminary results before seeking larger external financial support. However, the numbers behind these initial dollar signs are not the story.

"I already have the necessary space and equipment for the work," Mangum says. "The strength of the seed funding is in how it merges our expertise so we can stretch the boundaries of what people are capable of doing with ultrasound."

Mangum demonstrates the way a typical ultrasound has been used to address low back pain. A patient lies on a table while the technician uses a transducer to take pictures of the three layers of abdominal muscles. While the study will take similar static images, the UCF researchers will also capture additional, dynamic images with the patient's body in motion – an approach that until now has not been fully explored by others.

"We know the problem is typically a muscle out of balance somewhere in there," she says, pointing to the entire picture on her screen. To pinpoint the "somewhere," the technician has to find the correct orientation of the ultrasound probe and take time to make the manual measurements, which can potentially lead to inconsistencies and delays in rehab.

"As soon as I started doing ultrasound imaging in graduate school, I thought, 'there has to be a better way to get these measurements,'" Mangum says. "AI could certainly be the way. By implementing it into our existing tools, it seems there is a strong potential for improving speed, accuracy and outcomes."

It's easy to understand why these possibilities excite a clinician like Mangum. But what about Brattain, the biomedical engineer?

"I'm currently the chair of AI Community of Practice at the American Institute of Ultrasound for Medicine. Just like Colby, I'm a strong proponent of AI-driven ultrasound applications. I'm an avid pickleball player and work out daily. Before taking on this project, I did a survey on the most common physical issues for active people — low back pain kept coming up. If my skills with AI can help standardize musculoskeletal ultrasound, that means we have potential to improve the current workflow for low back pain rehabilitation and we can eventually scale this up to personalized at-home care and expand to other musculoskeletal injuries. The potential return on investment is high."

Assistant Professor
Colby Mangum

Associate Professor
Laura Brattain

Better Lives for People Far and Near

Mangum and Brattain's skill sets are as complementary as their perspectives. For example, take their concept of scale, which Brattain mentioned.

"End users might access this kind of ultrasound technology on something like a smartwatch," she says. "So, it would be available anywhere, even in rural communities and in extreme environments like the battlefield and in space."

From her lab space near the center of campus, Mangum says, "We could walk just beyond this door and find people on campus with low back pain." This is why her lab will become a low back pain research clinic in the coming months. The 40 participants for the project will be a mix of people at UCF and from the greater community. Mangum and her student researcher will perform ultrasounds and send the images to Brattain and her team, who will conduct the AI analysis.

"And then we're off to the races," Mangum says. "By leveraging each other's strengths, we can improve rehab, apply what we learn to other musculoskeletal needs, and help more people. That's where we can go with this because of the power of collaboration."

IN THE COMMUNITY

Ready to Lead

Master of Social Work student Drew Greenwald completed his field internship at Sage Living, an independent living facility supporting young adults who have aged out of foster care. There, he taught life skills classes and provided one-on-one counseling, helping residents build independence through lessons on hygiene, budgeting, cooking and applying for college. Greenwald says the hands-on experience was crucial in applying classroom theory to real-world practice and shaping his identity as a future social worker. With goals of working with veterans and young adults, and eventually teaching at UCF, Greenwald is one of many MSW students benefiting from the program's 1,000-hour field education requirement, fulfilled through partnerships with over 850 agencies across the country.

Fighting Hunger

The Department of Health Sciences joined the fight to end hunger with a large-scale meal-packing event focused on supporting last-mile communities most affected by food insecurity. More than 60 students and faculty came together on a Saturday morning to pack 10,000 meal packets (the equivalent of 66,000 meals), which have since been shipped to Haiti to aid children and families in need. The event was held in partnership with Rise Against Hunger, a global organization dedicated to addressing immediate hunger needs while supporting long-term solutions.

Seasonal Celebration

The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) and non-profit Providing Autism Links and Support hosted the 7th Annual Festival of Holidays Around the World, creating a festive, sensory-friendly space for children with autism and their families. The three-hour celebration took guests on cultural "tours" of different countries and featured interactive games, delicious treats, live entertainment, a bounce house, and even a snow cone machine powered by a hamster wheel, making it a joyful and inclusive global celebration for all.

Social Work Students Provide Support to Caregivers at the Aphasia House

Graduate social work students are now serving alongside communication sciences and disorders (CSD) student clinicians at the UCF Health Aphasia House as part of a new interprofessional learning opportunity designed to provide additional support to stroke survivors and their families while teaching students more about the value of comprehensive interprofessional rehabilitative care.

The program, which began in Spring 2024, aims to offer support for the caregivers of patients seeking treatment at the Aphasia House. Caregivers can participate in individual therapy sessions with social work graduate students while their loved one receives six weeks of intensive speech-language therapy from Aphasia House student clinicians from the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders. Master of Social Work (MSW) students must complete 1,000 hours of field experience to graduate, a requirement that provides a valuable learning opportunity and helps better prepare them to enter a wide variety of careers with schools, healthcare facilities, non-profits, government entities and private facilities.

In 2024, CSD and MSW students attended several focus groups with patient families to better understand their needs as caregivers, and the effectiveness of the social work services provided. In 2025, MSW student Caitlyn Pettway has further broadened the range of services that MSW students provide to clients and their families at the Aphasia House.

Pettway, who began participating in her field experience at the Aphasia House in January of 2025, attends clients' speech-language therapy treatment sessions and weekly staffing meetings where she learns from CSD student clinicians about the challenges people with aphasia face and how those challenges could impact progress. The CSD students offer knowledge about multiple means of supported communication, including both low- and high-tech augmentative and alternative, communication (AAC), as well as provide perspectives on patient challenges and progress.

In turn, the CSD students receive reports from Pettway about the social-emotional support she provides to clients and their families, as well as strategies to support the clients during speech and language therapy sessions while maintaining client confidentiality.

"This position has already taught me a lot since I am the sole social worker here at the moment," Pettway says. "It's taught me how to shift the way that I communicate to further meet my clients where they're at."

Whether Pettway is having a private session with a client who has aphasia or with the caregiver of one, she says that her position has taught her what works best when navigating the healing process. Pettway says a trial that is seen more often than not, is accepting care when you believe that you're not the one who technically needs it.

Rachel Potvin unexpectedly took on a caregiver role after her husband experienced a stroke that affected his speech and mobility. Potvin has completed six weeks of sessions with Pettway while her husband has undergone treatment at the Aphasia House and says that she and her husband both see a difference.

"I initially was like 'this isn't for me; this is all for him. We're here for him,'" Potvin says. "This experience has been so beneficial to me because I've seen the importance of the caregiver taking care of themselves and getting the care that they need because, sometimes, you can't do it yourself, you're doing everything else yourself."

Pettway says that she is an advocate for the idea that "you can't take care of others if you aren't taking care of yourself," and she worked to help Potvin understand that in their first session.

According to Potvin, factoring in professional care for herself during her family's journey with aphasia has given her "an emotional foundation," allowing her to better regulate her emotions and manage stress.

Angela Ziegler, a clinical instructor in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, serves as a liaison to the MSW students. She introduces Pettway to each new family that walks through the Aphasia House doors.

"I make sure to let them know what her hours will be and what services she's able to provide and ask them to please make themselves available during these times, so that while their loved one is getting care, they can get care too," Ziegler says. "Aphasia is such an isolating experience, not just for the person who has aphasia, but for everybody who's involved."

Zeigler, who has more than a decade of experience working in inpatient rehabilitation and acute care of adults who have suffered neurological injuries, says support for care providers is just as essential to provide the best quality care. She said that treatment without interprofessional collaboration is like driving a car with one wheel.

The need for a comprehensive approach to aphasia treatment is why clients and their families seeking treatment at the Aphasia House can also receive assistance through a host of other clinical services from the College of Health Professions and Sciences.

At the client's initial evaluation, clinicians administer a hearing screening and can provide a comprehensive audiology exam and offer loaner hearing devices to those who need them.

Additionally, the Florida Alliance for Assistive Services and Technology Atlantic Region Demonstration Center (FAAST ARDC) affords clients access to a variety of assistive technology to improve client's lives across all domains, including adaptive gaming equipment, speech generating devices, kitchen and home aids. FAAST provides Aphasia House clients with access to free assistive technology demonstrations, trainings, loans, and information and assistance services throughout their stay.

And, the UCF Health Physical Therapy Clinic, with specialty practice areas that include geriatrics, neurology and orthopedics, is also available to support the physical and mobility needs of clients during their participation in the Intensive Comprehensive Program (ICAP) at the Aphasia House, and beyond, if desired.

"Speech pathology is an incredible field, and we do important work, but without social work, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and other healthcare providers to help drive the engine, the car's just not going to go as far as it could," Ziegler says.

New Graduate Degree Prepares Students for Careers in Health Education and Wellness

A new semester usually means new opportunities. In the fall semester of 2024, students striving to further their education in health sciences had more opportunities to prepare for wellness careers with a new master's program designed to help individuals and communities develop healthy lifestyles.

The College of Health Professions and Sciences (CHPS) commenced the Master of Science in Health Promotion and Behavioral Science (HPBS), making it the first graduate program within the Department of Health Sciences. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, occupations for health education and promotion specialists are expected to grow 7% nationally by 2033, faster than the average for all occupations.

The program will provide students with job opportunities in careers such as health education, health and wellness research, positive lifestyle coaching and more. Coursework covers topics such as health education and promotion; community program assessment, planning and evaluation; lifestyle medicine; health and wellness coaching; health promotion advocacy and campaigns; research planning; and systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

Students will also have the opportunity take the Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) exam, and with the completion of 50 coaching sessions, the National Board of Health and Wellness Coaching certification exam. These exams test one's preparation for delivering evidence-based health promotion and education programming and health and wellness coaching, respectively, says Department of Health Sciences Chair Gail Kauwell. "Students also complete part of the requirements for becoming a Diplomate in Lifestyle Medicine," says Kauwell.

"Potential employers of our graduates include health care facilities, government health facilities, nonprofit organizations, schools, universities and private corporations that initiate health and wellness plans," Kauwell says. "We have a really great opportunity here for people who want to enter into the workplace, but also for those who want to go on for further education."

Jillian Weathington '23 is one of 10 graduate students in the program, after obtaining her bachelor's in health sciences with a preclinical track. Weathington says she is determined to become a physician.

"All of the classes combined are helping me to understand how to implement different health policies and health initiatives and why it is important," says Weathington, who is also a graduate teaching assistant and research assistant in the Department of Health Sciences. "I think this is a good degree for CHPS to offer for people to learn the more preventative side of medicine. Even if people don't want to go into the medical field specifically, understanding public health and policy in general is always good."

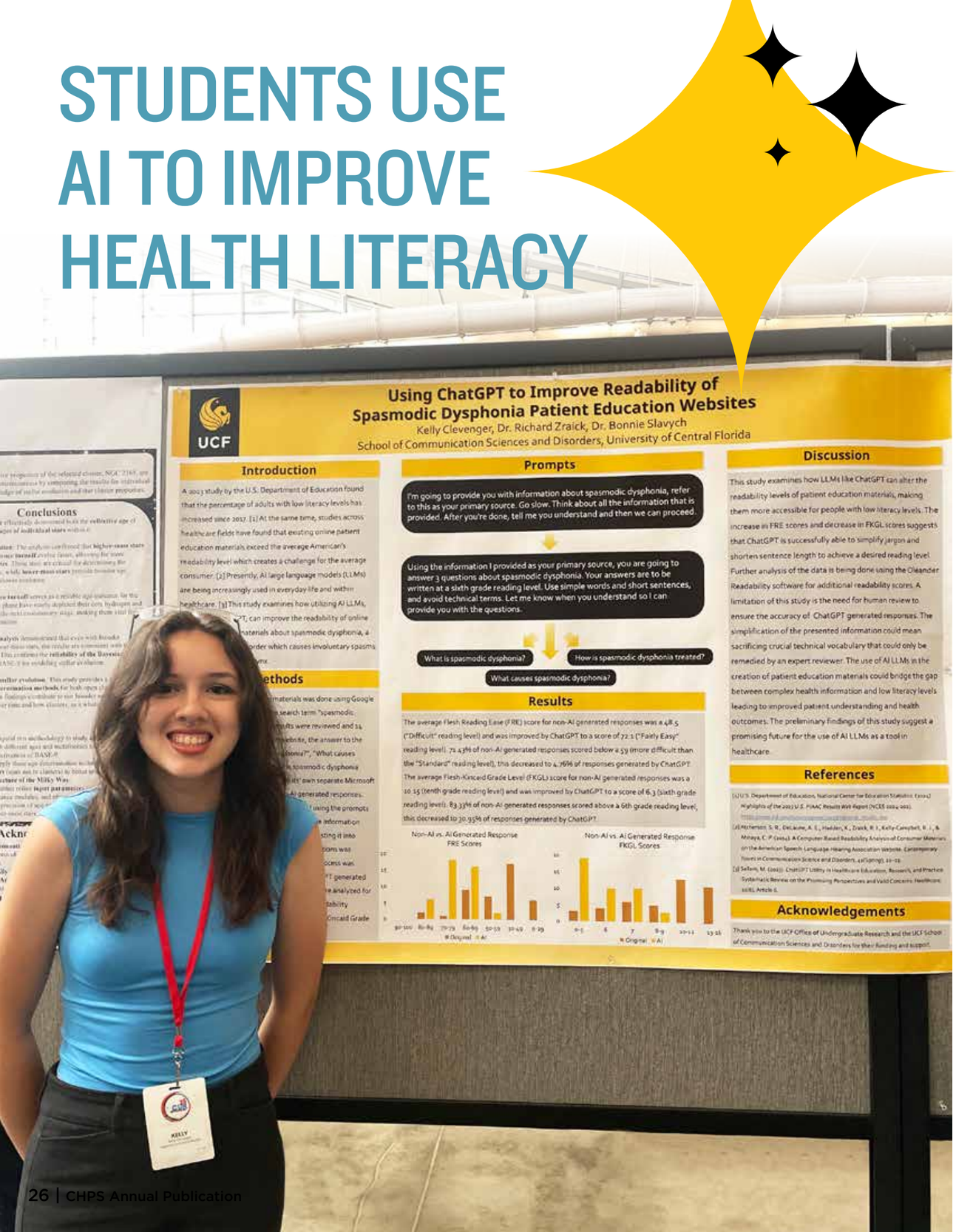
The program itself consists of two tracks: nonthesis, which requires 30 credit hours over the course of three semesters (fall, spring and summer), and thesis, requiring 36 credit hours spanning five semesters (fall, spring, summer, fall and spring.)

The degree program trains students for work in public health through conducting systemic reviews, participating in hands-on scientific research, practicing health communications and more. Students learn how to design and implement health education and promotion programs aimed at reducing the risk of chronic disease and its associated impacts.

While the HPBS master's program is very new, plans are already in place for future expansion. Kauwell says she hopes to see the program flourish in growth over the next five years.

"We want to build our enrollment to have somewhere between 30-40 students per cohort while collaborating with community leaders to extend our reach and impact that we have in the community," Kauwell says. "In the end, we want to gain national attention for having a reputation for producing really high-quality graduates."

STUDENTS USE AI TO IMPROVE HEALTH LITERACY



Anyone who has ever walked out of a doctor's office feeling confused or overwhelmed will appreciate the work Professor Richard Zraick is doing to make patient education more accessible.

"Health literacy surveys have revealed that 1 in 3 adults in the U.S. has difficulty understanding basic health information," Zraick says.

Zraick is a leading expert and advocate for health literacy in the discipline of communication sciences and disorders. In one of his research mentoring classes, he and his students in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders are exploring whether the artificial intelligence (AI) website ChatGPT can improve how healthcare information is created, conveyed and understood.

This is one of many projects at UCF that is unlocking the future of AI.

The group is gathering existing materials from key websites that address common medical conditions faced by patients with communications disorders — information ranging from hearing loss to swallowing challenges to voice disorders. The content of this material is then entered into ChatGPT using prompts — text-based input, such as a question or instruction. Students develop and refine prompts that seek to simplify the language and apply readability formulas to assess if the new text is more readable — or not.

Upon completion of the project, the team will have evaluated and revised about three dozen web-based patient education documents.

They plan to submit their findings to a peer-reviewed journal in 2025. The goal is to better understand if AI can be an effective tool for simplifying complex medical information and improving health literacy and patient education. Tools like ChatGPT, a large language model developed by OpenAI, may offer healthcare professionals new ways to efficiently deliver patient education materials. The technology may not only streamline the process but also enhance the clarity of information delivered to patients, improving understanding of their own health conditions and treatment plans and ultimately leading to better health outcomes.

One of the most promising applications of ChatGPT in patient education is its ability to simplify medical jargon and make health information more accessible to the public, Zraick says. "If you give AI, for example ChatGPT, the correct prompt, it will either create, edit or suggest revisions to an existing document that you might be trying to create for a patient, or that exists for a patient or their family."

This ability could allow healthcare professionals to quickly produce patient-friendly materials that meet readability standards recommended by institutions like the Institute of Medicine, which suggests health information be written at a fifth or sixth grade reading level.

AI also has clear advantages in terms of speed. "You can ask ChatGPT to give you a script…that somebody with limited health literacy could understand, and it will do that in 20 seconds," Zraick says.

He emphasizes that while AI serves as a helpful starting point, students still need to ensure the information is accurate and apply it in their interactions. While AI tools like ChatGPT offer efficiency, they are not flawless and Zraick emphasizes that the role of the content expert remains crucial.

"We are the content experts, so I never trust CHATGPT 100%, but it's a starting point. And then I review it for content," he says.

Human review ensures that the information is not only accurate, but also contextually appropriate for the intended audience.

Beyond simplifying language, AI can assist in evaluating the readability of existing documents.

"There's no one readability formula that captures all kinds of documents. We usually use more than one formula to get a variety of metrics, and they tend to agree with each other," Zraick says. Materials that are easier to understand are also more actionable, increasing the likelihood that patients will follow through with medical advice.

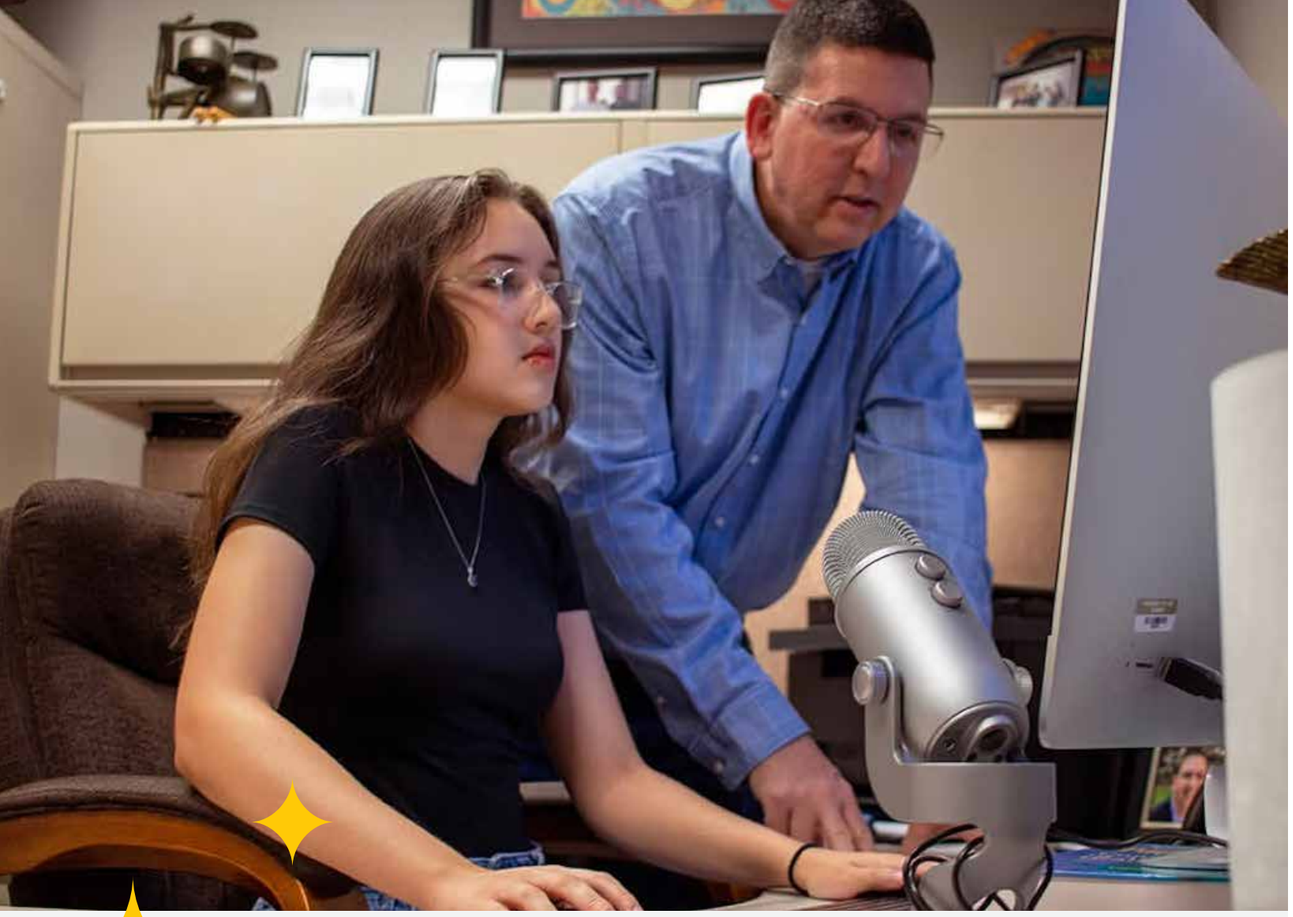
For Kelly Clevenger, a School of Communication Sciences and Disorders student, the project gave her an opportunity for a deeper dive into AI, something she had only used superficially for things like checking grammar for class assignments. As part of the project, she attended a "prompt engineering" workshop designed to fine tune her ability to leverage ChatGPT's functionality.

"People kind of think it just runs itself, and I think something that people should realize is that you really need to have a good idea of exactly how you want it to work before you even start prompting," Clevenger says. "If you don't give it specific enough direction, it won't give you exactly what you want."

She notes that while the tool isn't perfect, it significantly cuts down the time required, enabling researchers to focus on higher-level analysis and interpretation.

This is not Zraick's first foray into the world of exploring the use of AI in health communications. This year, he and colleagues published an article in a journal of American Speech-Language-Hearing Association examining the use of ChatGPT as a tool to teach students in communication sciences and disorders how to write in plain language. The researchers believe that AI tools hold promise; the tech can enhance students' abilities as well as offer an interactive environment that encouraged active participation and critical thinking.

AI adds a new element for Zraick, who, for decades, has taught students about health literacy. Some of his courses include class assignments that have students complete written assignments describing medical concepts using



> "Health literacy surveys have revealed that 1 in 3 adults in the U.S. has difficulty understanding basic health information," Zraick says.

plain language and participate in role playing exercises that stress clear communication. His ongoing research is assessing how effective this work is and whether teaching new graduate clinicians to use plain language will enhance the clarity and actionability of their patient reports.

Students will one day serve different audiences as speech-language pathologists and audiologists, and there's a difference between writing for professionals and for patients, Zraick says. "If a student is writing a report or a treatment update for another healthcare provider, it's a technical writing exercise," he says. "But for patients, they need a plain language summary."

Clevenger also underscores the challenges of using AI in research.

"You can't just throw any dataset at it and expect good results," she says. "We've been working on refining the prompts we use to get better, more accurate outputs from the model. It's a learning process, but the more we work with it, the better it gets."

As the use of AI in healthcare continues to expand, the focus will likely shift toward refining these tools to ensure even greater accuracy and relevance, Zraick says.

"Clinicians and educators have more tools to fine-tune skills and expand the skill set of a speech-language pathologist, or an audiologist, beyond the core content knowledge that they have to have," he says. "It's like practicing for the 22nd century, not just the 21st century."

IN THE COMMUNITY

Behind the Wheel

Learning how to drive can be a stressful venture, and a collaboration between CARD and The Neuro Hub makes things easier for teens to feel comfortable behind the wheel. This year marked the second year CARD has offered a driving school specially designed to support young adults with autism. Instruction is provided through a driving rehabilitation specialist, a professional who is an occupational therapist and a driving instructor. Six students completed this year's 8-week program, which covers the required skills and proficiencies to pass the driving examination. The course contains both classroom instruction and time on the road, with students learning in vehicles outfitted with adaptive equipment. Parents or caregivers participate in each session, serving as observers and learning the techniques used by the instructor to carry forward into practice sessions outside the course. Families pay a portion of the course cost, and the program is supported through donations and funding from the Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation for Autism/Armani Williams Partnership and the Florida Autism License Plate Fund.

Library Learning

Story time with a purpose! Students volunteered with the Mighty Knights program at the Chickasaw Branch Library, creating an interactive reading experience for children with complex communication and motor needs. The event brought together students from physical therapy, kinesiology, health sciences and communication sciences and disorders.

CHANGING HOW WE CARE FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA

patients with dementia, Dawson says.

You can hear the emotion in Nicole "Nicki" Dawson's voice when she talks about her early work as a physical therapist working with patients with dementia living in a secured facility.

"You just see that there's this 'loss of self' happening," Dawson says. "And when you sit and you talk to them, you know they're there. Other healthcare providers would say that there's little we can do, and I just didn't agree with that. I knew there had to be something better."

She would set off on a path to help develop exactly that.

Dawson and her collaborators have created LEAD – Leveraging Existing Abilities in Dementia — a treatment framework designed to provide daily guidance to rehabilitation professionals such as physical therapists, speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists and to improve outcomes for patients.

The publication, Dawson's labor of love for seven years, is a culmination of decades of clinical experience, an extensive literature review across multiple disciplines, and hundreds of hours conceptualizing the model's framework with her collaborators and co-authors Katherine Judge, a professor at Cleveland State University, and **Ashleigh Trapuzzano '18**, a former graduate student of Dawson. It was published in Spring 2024 in the journal OBM Geriatrics.

At the foundation is the Strength-Based Approach, a common and well-established concept often used in counseling, psychology and social work that hadn't been brought over to medicine and physical rehabilitation, a key move Dawson and her collaborators wanted to make. The premise is to treat the patient in a manner that targets their capabilities, abilities and interests, rather than try to remedy their deficiencies.

Dementia is complex; it can affect cognitive, behavioral or neuropsychiatric symptoms. And step one of the LEAD framework addresses the simple yet pervasive myth that has troubled Dawson from the beginning.

"I think in our traditional medical model, we focus on deficits, and what they can't do," she says. "Whereas with focusing on what they can do. What strengths are still available that we can use to help this person manage this chronic illness?"

Judge, a psychologist who was also Dawson's mentor as a doctoral student, was already using the Strength-Based Approach in practice, specifically for psychosocial intervention and training dementia caregivers on strategies and techniques. Dawson, who earned her doctorate in adult development and aging psychology, drew from her physical therapy clinical expertise, in particular building strength and balance in geriatric populations. The LEAD framework gives clinicians a roadmap for daily practice, providing specific techniques and interventions for addressing barriers to care, managing behaviors, and engaging effectively with patients and their caregivers.

The program is structured around the three key areas that Dawson and Judge call "the 3 C's": communication, cognition and coping.

For example, communication strategies may include tactics such as rephrasing questions to focus on immediate rather than short-term memory, using physical cues, avoiding unnecessary details and asking questions that can be answered in short responses or by selecting from choices. The framework's cognitive strategies recommend the therapist use spaced-retrieval, external memory aids and teaching activities by modeling, among others. Coping strategies can include adjusting the environment to correct under- or over-stimulation, substituting behaviors, and reframing issues to decide whether it truly presents as a concern.

The approach is tailored and highly personalized to the patient, incorporating their abilities and interests. It's what they like and want to do. It's what they do well.

A therapist with a patient who is an avid gardener may incorporate gardening activities into therapy sessions, encouraging using a sitting stool rather than squatting to ensure proper balance. If a patient responds well to visual cuing, the clinician can be sure to demonstrate tasks rather than rely solely on verbal instructions. If a patient was formerly a schoolteacher, a therapist could incorporate activities using a chalkboard or whiteboard to facilitate standing activities.

"It's really me as the therapist that has to shift," Dawson says. "If my patient has high blood pressure, the way I approach them has to be different. If my patient has Parkinson's disease or dementia, the way that I approach them is different. It doesn't mean that because of their diagnosis, that they can't benefit from the work that we're doing together. I just have to make adjustments based on their abilities."

An estimated 5% to 7% of the population are living with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias worldwide and these numbers are expected to double every 20 years.

Dawson wants to reach more of this population and further test out her framework. She and Judge have developed a 12-hour training program for rehabilitation professionals based on the LEAD framework and completed a pilot study with published findings in the journal Dementia. Results showed it increased the therapists' knowledge about dementia, improved their confidence and changed their practice patterns when providing services to those with dementia.

The researchers are actively looking for partners, ideally a large nursing home or a major outpatient rehabilitation center, where they can deliver the same training to the rehabilitation professionals on staff and conduct research on efficacy.

Dawson wants people to share the confidence she has that people with such conditions can actively improve the quality of their lives.

"It's all about helping clinicians, families and researchers understand that while there's not a cure or treatment for the disease process, that there's still a way to help manage it so these patients can be as functionally independent as they can for as long as they can," she says.

UCF Awarded $1.25M to Prepare Special Educators, Speech-language Pathologists in Autism

For two decades, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has provided funding to prepare UCF graduate students to serve the growing number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Now, its latest contribution will support another iteration of this project.

Supported by a five-year, $1.25 million personnel preparation award from the ED, Project ASD 7 aims to increase the number of fully credentialed special education teachers and speech-language pathologists in the workforce. The Toni Jennings Exceptional Education Institute (TJEEI) and the School of Teacher Education — both housed within the College of Community Innovation and Education — is partnering with the UCF School of Communication Sciences and Disorders in the College of Health Professions and Sciences to facilitate preparing scholars to do just that.

"This project is a collaborative grant that continues the work of Project ASD 6," says Kelly Schaffer, associate director of the TJEEI and principal investigator for the project. "With this new funding, 46 scholars will be supported as they complete their master's degrees in either exceptional student education or communication science disorders while working together to earn the graduate certificate in ASD."

The graduate certificate in ASD consists of four courses that constitute the requirements for endorsement by the state of Florida. By incorporating these requirements into both degree programs, Project ASD 7 ensures students in both disciplines receive state endorsement.

Since January 2004, various iterations of Project ASD have addressed the critical need for special educators who serve school-age children identified with intellectual disabilities and emotional disorders. The program provides funding for up to 36 credit hours and has seen over 600 graduates to date.

Qualified special education personnel are in high demand. The Florida Department of Education ranked autism second on its list of teacher certification shortage areas for the 2022-23 school year. A 2024 USDoE report shows 49 of 50 states reporting insufficient numbers of special education teachers and speech-language pathologists. Additionally, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national employment rate for speech-language pathologists is projected to grow 19% from 2022 to 2032 — much faster than average.

Jacqueline Towson, associate professor in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders and co-principal investigator of the project, reiterates the need for trained and credentialed specialists. She says this latest version of Project ASD is especially exciting due to its focus on increasing the number of specialists.

The central benefit of the program is its interdisciplinary structure. With a strong focus on collaboration, the project prepares scholars to work with professionals in different areas of specialization. Schaffer says this approach not only reflects the daily reality in the field but also has a positive effect on individuals with ASD.

"By building interdisciplinary collaboration, we develop strong skillsets so that teams who support people with ASD can work together more effectively," Schaffer says. "A team consists of multiple professionals providing a variety of services — this might include a psychologist, a speech-language pathologist, a behavior analyst and an educator. Working together with a common goal for a child is the best way to set that child up for success."

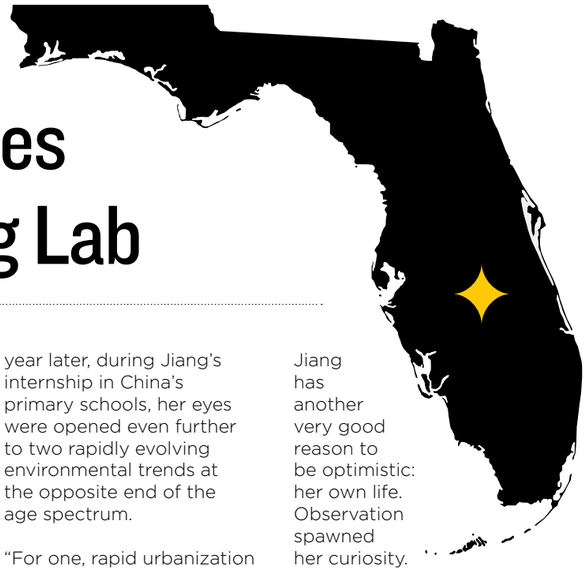
Towson adds that interprofessional education and practice is essential to working as a special education teacher or speech-language pathologist. "Project ASD gives our students the opportunity to learn with and from each other to provide better outcomes for the children and families they will serve in the future," Towson says.

The project offers a wealth of valuable advantages. Enrolled students are eligible to receive a scholarship of $250 per course. They may also attend state and national conferences and complete internships with UCF-affiliated schools, organizations and educational agencies in the Central Florida region. To help scholars integrate coursework and field experiences, the program uniquely incorporates the use of mentor demonstration sites via live seminars, synchronous and asynchronous online presentations, and video streaming.

Many students and graduates consider Project ASD instrumental in shaping their career path. Kyra Liebertz, a current scholar, says her drive to become an effective and knowledgeable speech-language pathologist motivated her to apply. "The opportunity to specialize in autism studies aligned perfectly with my professional goals," Liebertz says. "Through coursework and hands-on experiences, I've developed skills in assessment, intervention planning and collaboration with multidisciplinary teams. Joining Project ASD has inspired me to pursue a career in high-needs schools."

Going forward, Schaffer is confident Project ASD will continue to meet the needs of the workforce and provide scholars with the optimal training necessary to excel in their careers.

Health Sciences Researcher Embraces Florida as Her Living Lab



Assistant Professor Qianxia Jiang arrived at UCF's Department of Health Sciences in 2024 as a researcher, teacher and optimist. With her interest in the environmental influences on healthy living, Jiang the researcher is fully aware of the alarming rise in childhood obesity rates in the U.S. — nearly 20% of children 2-19 years old were considered obese by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2024 compared to 10% in 1990. She's witnessed firsthand the beginning stages of a similar trajectory in the country of her youth, China. Yet Jiang is undeterred in her certainty that she and her colleagues can influence a shift in the other direction. It's why she's come to UCF.

"The idea of integrating healthy lifestyles into communities is a complex issue that will require experts in a variety of fields working together," Jiang says. "I knew UCF would offer me the unique opportunity to interact with educators, students and policymakers. It's why I'm excited every day."

This also explains why, shortly after unpacking her belongings in Central Florida, Jiang actively met not with exercise and nutrition experts, but with experts in urban planning.

"We discussed the health aspects of plans to keep up with the needs of a growing population. More roadways are important, of course, but at the same time we can shape healthier lifestyles with safe sidewalks, wider bike paths, access to parks and other enticements for people to move around outside. It's all part of a bigger picture."

Jiang and her husband have become part of that bigger picture in the Orlando area, which she calls "a living lab" for her research interests. The population is growing. People come from around the world to visit and to settle, bringing with them a melting pot of cultural norms and habits. New communities are being built. Some are purposefully designed to promote health. Others are not.

"We need to understand that health is not always as simple as making a personal choice," Jiang says. "It's influenced by the environment where we live."

She started to become aware of this connection when she traveled to Taiwan as an exchange student from southeast China.

"I thought it would be nice to experience the beauty of the island, but my eyes were opened in a different way." In Taiwan, she noticed an emphasis on community engagement and volunteerism. Older people were active community participants, leading tours and telling stories in museums. One year later, during Jiang's internship in China's primary schools, her eyes were opened even further to two rapidly evolving environmental trends at the opposite end of the age spectrum.

"For one, rapid urbanization has created a fast-food culture in parts of China," she says. "Also, the pressure on students to do well academically has diminished the importance of physical activity. We see that in U.S. schools, too, but in China the academic pressure is greater because the school-age population is so much higher than the available spots in good colleges. Observing this gave me a clear vision of what I wanted to research: environmental factors on healthy lifestyles. It's how I felt I could make a positive difference in peoples' lives."

If the idea of shaping healthy lifestyles sounds daunting, you wouldn't know it after spending time with Jiang. She politely makes a case that other efforts to do the same could be too narrow in focus, with the expectation of all-or-nothing results.

"There's a growing awareness among educators and policymakers about the research I'm doing. As a teacher at UCF, I can use it to engage discussions and plant seeds with students. Then they can go out and influence their own communities through their fields of interest."

Jiang has another very good reason to be optimistic: her own life. Observation spawned her curiosity. Curiosity inspired her research. And the knowledge from her research has changed her daily behaviors. She now prepares her own food more often so she can see the ingredients in it. She takes stairs more frequently instead of elevators. And she enjoys kayaking and paddleboarding with her dog, Poppy, which has prompted another possible research cycle.

"Having a dog inspires me to explore outside more often," Jiang says. "It's also made me curious enough to possibly conduct research about the impact of dog ownership on healthy lifestyles."

And with that, Jiang would again merge her personal and professional interests, her research with real-life impact, observation with optimism, all in the living lab of Central Florida.

CHPS Program Helps Kids with Hearing Challenges Become Better Readers

Seven-year-old Dylan Fox has a big smile on his face as he bursts through the classroom door at UCF Downtown. He was ready for summer camp — and this one would be complete with toy axe throwing, board games, arts and crafts and a day full of friendly competitions, all centered around making children better readers.

Fox is one of 32 students ages 6 to 17 who participated in iREAD, an intensive reading program developed by the UCF Health Communications Disorders Clinic to improve reading comprehension, spelling and writing. The four-week summer program completed its fourth year in Summer 2024. It's become so sought out by parents — some of whom travel from across the country — that the clinic began offering the same specialized individual therapies by appointment throughout the year.

When Fox arrives at camp, he high-fives his campmates, drops off his backpack and scampers to the side of the room where his hearing technology is tested. A student clinician affixes a tiny remote microphone on her collar to be sure it's transmitting correctly to his cochlear implants.

Fox, who was born with hearing loss in both ears, was one of four children in the summer's iHEAR program (part of iREAD) who have atypical hearing. Three campers who attended have hearing loss, and a fourth has an auditory processing deficit, which causes a breakdown in how the central auditory nervous system efficiently processed speech information, particularly in noisy listening situations. The iHEAR participants learned alongside other campers with typical hearing who were also there to gain additional help with reading and language development. Their camp fees were waived, thanks to the generous support of alumni **Manish Hirapara '98** and **Vieng Hirapara '99** who created an endowed fund, the Hirapara Enriching Audiology Resources (HEAR) at UCF, to help people with hearing loss.

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, hearing loss in children causes delays in the development of speech and language, which leads to learning problems that can result in reduced academic achievement, as well as social isolation and low self-confidence. Reading is particularly an area of difficulty for children with hearing loss, but the ultimate impact is less serious when the problem was identified and intervened early.

Like Fox, some of the children in iHEAR have their own hearing aids and accessory technology they're still learning and adjusting to. Other campers were outfitted with ear level hearing technology and remote microphone assistive technology by the camp which was a chance to test out a new device or even use one for the first time. Faculty clinicians partnered with multiple hearing manufacturers, such as Sonova, Cochlear Americas and Oticon, who offered financial support and access to a variety of products and technologies for the camp.

Other communities have reading programs for children that may offer reading programs for the deaf and hard of hearing, but the UCF program is unique in that it combines the two, says Associate Lecturer Janel Cosby '04 PhD, an audiologist and one of the iHEAR coordinators.

"We have the expertise to develop children's literacy and language skills and we have the expertise to match children with the right technology, specific to that child's auditory system deficit," Cosby says.

Cosby works hand in hand with Clinical Instructor Whitney Haas, who is a speech language pathologist and listening and spoken language specialist. Haas' certifications focus on helping children and families of individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing.

For the children in iHEAR, their days involved a series of one-on-one speech therapy sessions, group sessions and hands-on activities, all carefully structured to target speech and language development. The program is based on the science of reading and uses evidence-based strategies largely centered around multi-sensory, physically engaging activities.

"We've seen what works well with typically hearing children to enhance their literacy abilities," Haas says. "So, we've taken that approach and applied it to children who are deaf and hard of hearing, because it supports their development from an auditory standpoint, as well."

Camp iHEAR also serves as a training opportunity for the more than two dozen graduate students in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, who provide the therapy sessions in the camp under the supervision of faculty clinicians.

"As future clinicians who will be working with deaf and hard of hearing individuals, our students need to learn how to manipulate the technology, know when it's working, know when it's not working, and know where the proper placement of the microphones should be so that that brings in the best auditory signal for the patient," Cosby says. "In addition to earning the clinical hours required to graduate, they're learning how to better serve the needs of this special population."

"It's so wonderful to be able to modify, not change, but just add in extra things that we know our kids that are deaf and hard of hearing need," Haas says. "It gives them the opportunity to work alongside typically hearing peers, have that connection, and to have fun while learning and to have the experience of applying what they've learned with other kids. It makes my heart so happy."

HONORS AND ACCOLADES

Faculty

Excellence in Research

Humberto Lopez Castillo
Assistant Professor,
Health Sciences

Excellence in Graduate Teaching

Carey Rothschild
Clinical Associate Professor,
Physical Therapy

Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching

Ethan Hill
Assistant Professor, Kinesiology

Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching

Eunkyung "Muriel" Lee
Associate Professor, Health Sciences

Research Incentive Award

Keith Brazendale
Assistant Professor, Health Sciences

Research Incentive Award

Susanny Beltran
Assistant Professor, Social Work

Teaching Incentive Program Award

Kim Anderson
Professor, Social Work

Teaching Incentive Program Award

Morris "Rick" Beato
Clinical Associate Professor, Physical Therapy

Teaching Incentive Program Award

Matthew Stock
Associate Professor, Physical Therapy

Teaching Incentive Program Award

Asli Cennet Yalim
Assistant Professor, Social Work

Emeriti

Emeriti faculty have retired from UCF and are recognized for having achieved a distinguished record of research, teaching, or service during their academic careers. The title serves as an honor to the individual and to the university.

Joseph DiNapoli

School of Communication Sciences and Disorders

Linda Rosa-Lugo

School of Communication Sciences and Disorders

Denise Gammonley

School of Social Work

Martine Vanryckeghem

School of Communication Sciences and Disorders

National Academies of Practice Induction

From left to right:

Director for the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders Ann Eddins, Department of Health Sciences Chair Gail Kauwell, , Associate Professor Nicole Dawson, Associate Professor Susanny Beltran, Clinical Associate Professor Carey Rothschild, Associate Dean of Research Jennifer Kent-Walsh, and Dean Matthew Theriot were inducted as Distinguished Fellows of the National Academies of Practice. Fellowship is an honor extended to those who have excelled in their profession and are dedicated to further interprofessional practice, scholarship and policy in support of interprofessional care.

Tenure and Promotion

Matthew Stock,

Doctor of Physical Therapy Program – promoted to professor

Carlos Gual

Master of Athletic Training Program – promoted to professor

Kimberley Gryglewicz

School of Social Work - promoted to professor

Susanny Beltran**

School of Social Work - promoted to associate professor

Shuang "Bella" Lu**

School of Social Work – promoted to associate professor

Asli Cennet Yalim**

School of Social Work – promoted to associate professor

Keith Brazendale**

Department of Health Sciences – promoted to associate professor

Humberto Lopez Castillo**

Department of Health Sciences – promoted to associate professor

Colby Mangum**

Master of Athletic Training Program – promoted to associate professor

Ethan Hill**

School of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences – promoted to associate professor

Anna Valdes

School of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences – promoted to senior lecturer

Katia Ferdowsi

Department of Health Sciences – promoted to associate lecturer

Martha Garcia-Stout

Department of Health Sciences – promoted to associate lecturer

Nancy Harrington

School of Communication Sciences and Disorders – promoted to senior instructor

Debra Knox

School of Communication Sciences and Disorders - promoted to senior instructor

Shelley Hall

School of Social Work – promoted to associate instructor

*Promotions effective August. 8, 2025 \ **Recommended for tenure

Students

Order of Pegasus

Bedis Elkamel
Health Sciences

Ayaka Kimura
Health Sciences

Yuka Kimura
Health Sciences

Chloe Milliron
Health Sciences

Apoorva Palled
Health Sciences

Roshna Cherugail Ramadoss
Health Sciences

College Founders' Award

Samantha Migliore
Health Sciences

Outstanding Master's Thesis

Brandi Antonio
Kinesiology

30 Under 30

Gillian Anderson
'21

Béthanie Derice
'20

Brianna Laurenceau
'18

Staff

Employee of the Year Award

Lana Gidusko
Academic Support Services Manager, Kinesiology

Gidusko (right) is pictured here with School of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences Director Jeff Stout.

Extra Mile Award

Lana Kiswani
Graduate Admissions Coordinator I, Social Work

Kiswani (right) is pictured here with School of Social Work Interim Director Shawn Lawrence.

Excellence in Teamwork Award

Contracts & Grants Specialists IV **Eduardo Ortiz and Abigail Ruoss** and Contracts and Grants Specialist II **Cameron Wood**, Office of Research

Pictured from left to right: Ruoss, Wood, Ortiz and Associate Dean of Research Jennifer Kent-Walsh.

Customer Service Award

Zackery Dunaway
Human Resources Coordinator II, Human Resource Business Center

Dunaway (right) is pictured here with Dean Matthew Theriot.

Rookie of the Year Award

Cameron Wood -
Contracts and Grants Specialist II, Office of Research

Wood (right) is pictured here with Associate Professor of Physical Therapy Matt Stock.

SIMULATION SHOWCASE

Department of Health Sciences Instructor Steven Burroughs transformed a complex case study into an interactive experience using holograms to illuminate a patient's lived experience and immersive technology to explore 3D anatomical complexities at the Rehabilitation Innovation Center's "Sim Pop In" on Nov. 21. Together, Burroughs and participants worked to navigate a case of chronic parenteral nutrition and Lactobacillus bacteremia. The demonstration was one of multiple sessions held in Fall 2024 to engage faculty and students in using simulation technology to practice assessment, treatment planning and interprofessional collaboration skills.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHTS

Building a Business

At just 21-years-old, first-generation college student **Alyssa Wilbanks '24** *has learned that success knows no age. She has spent her adolescent years embracing education and using the knowledge she has gained to assist individuals obtain Social Security benefits through Unbound Disability Claims — a startup business she co-founded.*

Wilbanks graduated with a bachelor's in health sciences and two minors: one in business and the other in health services administration. She says her time at UCF has helped her navigate the road map to creating her business.

Read more about her here:

Lasting Impact

Kinesiology student Connor Humphreys completed an internship at the Center of Recovery and Exercise (CORE), gaining hands-on experience with individuals facing neurological conditions like spinal cord injuries, stroke, and Parkinson's disease. A student in the Exercise and Sport Physiology track, Humphreys applied classroom knowledge in real-world therapeutic settings, including pool-based locomotor training, helping clients regain mobility and independence. He credits the internship for boosting his confidence, deepening his understanding of neurorehabilitation, and solidifying his path toward becoming a Doctor of Physical Therapy.

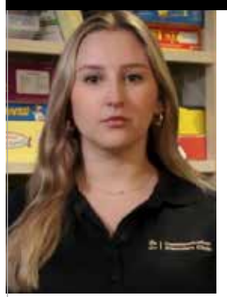
Watch Connor at his internship here:

Helping Domestic Violence Survivors

Each year, intimate partner violence affects more than 12 million people, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Social work graduate student Lana Kiswani is working to change this statistic by building a stronger, more sensitive support system for domestic violence survivors through her field experience with Survivor Link. The AmeriCorps program equips community members, agencies, professionals, and students like Kiswani with the tools and knowledge to deliver trauma-informed care to those in need. Kiswani is one of 12 MSW students from UCF who participated in the 2024-2025 Survivor Link cohort.

Learn more about Lana's work:

SLP Superstar



Marisol Freytes '23, *a trilingual CODA (Child of Deaf Adult) and future speech-language pathologist, is on her way to be a proud double Knight. Having earned her bachelor's degree in communication sciences and disorders from UCF in 2023, she is now pursuing her master's degree in the same program. During her time at UCF, she's been awarded three scholarships: the Dr. David B. Ingram Memorial Scholarship, the Invincible Knights Scholarship, and the Learning Institute for Elders at UCF Scholarship.*

See Marisol share her scholarship application in ASL:

Graduation Spotlights

Zoe Owens ***Bachelor of Social Work***

"My dream job is to work in a pediatric department, specifically in pediatric neurology, to help children emotionally with what they're going through. I want to help people with the emotional aspect, instead of the physical, and that sometimes is most important because without a good mindset or perspective then we probably won't get anything done."

Kylie Mcglone ***Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology***

"I am starting a Masters in Kinesiology in the 2025 fall semester. UCF has pushed me to explore new interests and opportunities. I cannot thank this school enough for helping me become who I am today!"

Samantha Migliore ***Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences***

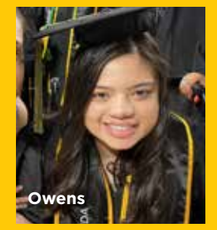
"After graduation, I'm keeping my momentum at UCF going as I work towards my Doctor of Physical Therapy. Volunteering with Hearts for the Homeless connected me with other students going into healthcare who are passionate about compassionate care. My internship with Limbitless Solutions allowed me to work with students from a wide variety of majors, like game design, engineering and everything in between. Being exposed to many perspectives allowed me to expand my breadth of knowledge."

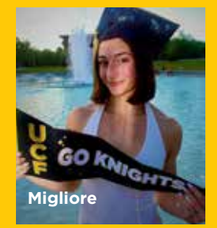
Payne Sewnarine ***Doctor of Physical Therapy***

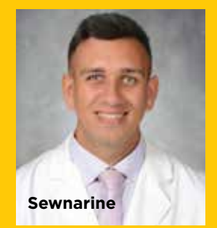
"I loved the opportunities that UCF has given me, like to serve individuals in the community and to be able to advocate for the profession of physical therapy. My peers, faculty and friends supported me and to them I am eternally grateful."

Ashlei McGhee ***Bachelor of Science in Communication Sciences and Disorders***

"My long-term career plan is to build a practice with a team of therapists who truly understand and support both children and adults. I also envision incorporating music therapy into the services offered. Over time, I hope to expand to multiple locations to reach even more communities. Ultimately, my goal is to establish a 501(c)(3) organization that provides therapies to individuals who cannot afford them due to lack of insurance or financial resources, ensuring that everyone has access to the care they need."







A LASTING VOICE

Vanryckeghem Establishes Scholarship to Support Future Fluency Experts

Pegasus Professor Martine Vanryckeghem retired in Summer 2025 and her legacy continues through the Martine Vanryckeghem and Gene Brutten Endowed Scholarship. The award, which also bears the name of her late husband and research partner, will support graduate students in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders who are passionate about fluency disorders. Vanryckeghem, a globally respected expert on stuttering, has spent her career breaking stigma and fostering open dialogue. Her clinical tools, including the internationally adopted Communication Attitude Test for Preschoolers and Kindergartners (KiddyCAT) and Behavior Assessment Battery, empower clients to share their experiences and develop personalized strategies. With the scholarship, she hopes to inspire future specialists — especially international students — to continue advancing care and compassion in fluency treatment.

“Stuttering isn’t a bad word,” Vanryckeghem says. “We need to talk about it and reduce the stigma instead of pretending it doesn’t exist. This is a global issue that impacts millions of people.”

Community Grants Received

>> **Amber’s Antibodies** supported the **Mason Moore ’97** Fund for Testicular Cancer Research and Awareness during Testicular Cancer Awareness Month.

>> The Social Work Scholarship Fund received an estate gift from alumna **Annie Neff Hatfield’s Family Trust**.

>> **Brooks Rehabilitation** sponsored the Division of Physical Therapy’s White Coat Ceremony.

>> **The Doug Flutie, Jr. Foundation for Autism** sponsored the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) Driving program.

>> **Irma and Orville Parker Charitable Trust** supported the Mighty Knights program which provides community-based, adaptive play experiences for children with complex communication and motor needs and their families.

>> **The Chesley G. Magruder Foundation** provided its third year of a three-year grant for the Empowered Futures Program, an initiative in the Florida Alliance for Assistive Services and Technology (FAAST) designed to connect community members with assistive technologies for hearing, mobility and communication, provide new community programming, and generate awareness about resources available. The gift will also provide an emergency and disaster preparation training event for first responders and community members with communication disabilities.

>> **Dr. Phillips, Inc.** supported the Turning Pages program, a partnership between the Communication Disorders Clinic and the Office of the State Attorney to help juvenile offenders in Orange and Osceola counties strengthen reading and literacy skills.

>> **Orlando Health and Variety – The Children’s Charity of Florida** both continued to support UCF Go Baby Go! The program provides children in the community who have mobility limitations with modified, ride-on cars. Mobility has been demonstrated to positively affect a child’s physical, cognitive and social development.

>> **The DeLuca Foundation** once again supported the Institute of Exercise Physiology and Rehabilitation Sciences by serving as the event sponsor for the annual conference.

>> **The Paul B. Hunter and Constance D. Hunter Charitable Foundation** supported the Aging Well Hub —a dedicated space within the Rehabilitation Innovation Center designed to support older individuals by integrating immersive technologies, fostering inclusivity, reducing the digital divide and reducing mental stress often caused by loneliness and caregiver burden and burnout.

>> **The WITH Foundation** supported the creation of the Holographic Library for AAC which will provide innovative provider training by leveraging holographic technology and the lived experiences of people who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). Centering the expertise of people who use AAC, this library seeks to improve provider competency, empathy, and quality of care.

>> **The Winter Park Health Foundation** provided a grant to the Community Ambassadors program - an outreach program that engages students pursuing careers in healthcare in community health improvement initiatives.

Endowments

>> Anonymous donors created the **Knight Light Endowed Scholarship fund** for students who are the primary caretaker of a minor child or an adult with special needs. One creator of this scholarship is a testament to perseverance. As a single mother, she faced significant challenges while completing her degree, but thanks to scholarships, she achieved her goal. She aims to give back by establishing an endowment to provide scholarship assistance for students who are navigating similar family responsibilities. In her own words: "The Knight Light Scholarship was born out of my journey as a single mother, determined to finish my college education. Along the way, I was fortunate to receive the support of scholarships and the kindness of individuals who believed in me. They became a light on my path, guiding me through the challenges and helping me reach my goals of earning both my undergraduate and graduate degrees. Through this scholarship, I hope to be that same light for others, helping them navigate their own journeys and achieve their dreams."

>> Elizabeth Bomhard created the **Alex Loves CARD Endowed Fund** to support UCF CARD operations due to her appreciation of the support her grandson Alex receives from CARD.

Named Programmatic and Scholarship Funds

>> **Alumnus Dr. James Palmer '04** created the Palmer Concierge Physical Therapy Scholarship to provide scholarship support for DPT students.

>> **Providing Autism Links and Support, Inc.** created the UCF CARD Vocational Coaching Support Fund to support vocational coaching program at the center.

Annual Gifts

440 Donors

Total Faculty & Staff donors
increased
from **20%** to **38.8%**

Total dollars raised
increased 24.4%
and now sits at a college all time high

Student Scholarships

CHPS Awarded
64 Scholarships

For a Total of:
$116,300

2025 Day of Giving

Total Gifts:
566

Total Raised:
$64,242

IN FOCUS

HEALTHY AGING FAIR

Aging and innovation worked hand-in-hand at the 3rd annual Healthy Aging Fair. On Friday, March 7, seniors, caregivers and family members had the opportunity to connect with expert faculty and dozens of community resources to explore a variety of health and wellness products and services and get free health screenings.

Stations and booths lined both the inside and outside of UCF's Rehabilitation Innovation Center, each showcasing technology and products to help people live a healthier and more independent lifestyle. Attendees had their blood pressure taken in the UCF Mobile Health Clinic, learned about the power of food from 4Roots Farm and participated in screenings in the Alzheimer's Association Brain Bus. Physical therapy students and students from the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders assisted in conducting cognitive, balance and hearing screenings.

ON THE BACK COVER: CHPS launched TWO exciting new alumni traditions this year, an **Alumni & Friends Celebration** and the first-ever **Alumni Tailgate Party.** From an elegant evening with live music and holograms to a spirited game-day gathering with barbecue and camaraderie, more than 130 alumni, faculty, staff, and friends came together to celebrate milestones, reconnect, and build community. These events mark the beginning of new traditions that honor the past and look toward a bright future together.











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