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**UW-Stevens Point’s Doctor of Physical Therapy program finds success with community engagement**

Written by University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point

Since its creation in 2022, the [**Doctor of Physical Therapy**](https://www.uwsp.edu/programs/degree/doctor-of-physical-therapy-dpt/) (DPT) program at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point grew to 133 students in four cohorts, with its first class of 31 graduating in December 2024, and 36 students joining the program this June.

“Since the beginning, our vision has stayed the same,” said Kathy Zalewski, director. “We remain deeply committed to engage with our community and look to how we can improve that every day.”

Zalewski came to UW-Stevens Point in 2019 to build the DPT program with a focus on training physical therapists for rural communities and a vision to connect to the area with community-engaged learning and immersion experiences.

“We are anchored in our community,” she said. “It’s not just altruism; we want to educate our students to meet the needs of rural areas, know the people there and be able to get them the best resources. These skills can also be applied in an urban environment.”

Students begin hands-on experiences in week two of the program each June, working along with second-year students who take on a leadership role.

“We don’t keep them in a classroom,” she said. “These are young people who want to make a difference. We give them that chance.”

Throughout their education, students have opportunities to serve as volunteers and interns in private practices, home health and hospital-based clinics, schools, community centers and long-term rehab centers. Within Portage County, students have helped with a local police-sponsored youth group, Aging and Disability Resource Center fall prevention clinics for seniors, coordination of FunFitness in partnership with Special Olympics and a free, public clinic offered at the Stevens Point YMCA, all under the supervision of DPT faculty.

Zalewski said the program is looking for students “who find joy in learning by doing, are willing to work in a team and are good science learners.” The curriculum includes anatomy, physiology, biomechanics, movement science and neurorehabilitation.

The next growth opportunity for the program is serving its new alumni, including creation of professional development programs and ways to connect them with current students, said Zalewski.

“Our alumni group will get bigger year after year. We want to take their experience, knowledge and voice and bring it back to our program to help it endure.”

Of the 31 December graduates, 24 have earned their license and all are employed, with 75 percent of the graduates working in Wisconsin.

Abby Scaffidi, Amherst Junction, a 2024 graduate of the program, is a licensed physical therapist at Advanced Physical Therapy in Plover. She chose the DPT program at UWSP for its affordability and closeness to home, but also for its culture and the personality of the faculty.

“The people at UWSP felt genuine, honest and safe,” she said. “There was support and a real connection between us. All my teachers responded when I had questions or self-doubt. They supported us then and still do. My mentor, Chris Durall, was the best and we still talk.”

“Seeing that first cohort graduate was powerful,” said Durall, a clinical associate professor in the program. “They were risk takers as the first students in a new program. They learned and grew together, becoming adaptive learners who can be flexible in different circumstances. Speaking as a dad, it’s like watching your kids go into adulthood. They are bright people with wonderful ideas.”

Scaffidi said that students who chose UWSP for its DPT program will find it costs less than most other programs while offering “a big bang for your buck.”

“I always felt like a person and not just another number,” she said. “There was support and a real connection with the faculty and other students. I was also ready when it came time for my clinical experience, and I felt prepared for my certification test.

“It is one of the best things I ever did.”

The UW-Stevens Point DPT program is held year-round over eight semesters, with new cohorts starting each June. The first six semesters include academic coursework, active learning labs, clinical education and research activity. The final two semesters center on full-time clinical rotations along with coursework. Learn more about the affordable tuition and application information at [**uwsp.edu/dpt**](http://www.uwsp.edu/dpt).