

# Robbins College

2024

OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SCIENCES



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Baylor University





## FROM THE Provost

### Greetings from Baylor University!

It is an honor to introduce you to the inaugural edition of the annual magazine of Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences. Since its establishment in 2014, Robbins College has doubled its enrollment (from 1,679 to 3,635 students). It continues to expand the University's capacity to meet the growing demand for health and human sciences professionals and pursue impact-focused research in these critical fields. Many of Baylor's students experience a vocational calling to serve God by serving others. Robbins College plays a pivotal role in enabling Baylor to prepare these students to respond to this calling.

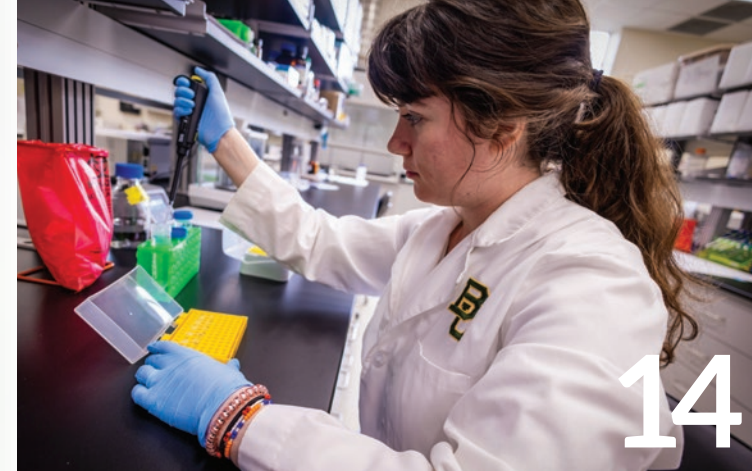
As the College celebrates its tenth anniversary, we are excited to showcase many of its trailblazing activities. In this inaugural edition, you will meet faculty researchers studying food insecurity mitigation, models of care for pediatric rehabilitation, the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases, and the impact of family-based experiences on human development. You will read about Robbins College alums who are making an impact in their communities, a language and literacy intervention program that is changing lives, teachers who are integrating technology and

pedagogical expertise to optimize their students' learning experience, and much more.

Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences is an integral piece of the Baylor University puzzle. As the University launches its new strategic plan, health will continue to be a key element of Baylor's overall strategy. Similarly, the research aims of Robbins College align with and contribute to Baylor's status as a Christian research university. I am grateful to Dean Jason R. Carter for his leadership of our fastest-growing academic unit, and I am deeply appreciative of the faculty, staff, and students who make Robbins College the rising star it is.

I hope you enjoy reading the inaugural edition of the Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences magazine. Sic 'em!

**NANCY BRICKHOUSE, PhD**  
Provost  
Baylor University



*Robbins College Magazine* is an annual publication of the Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences that shares news of interest with the Baylor family. As the University's youngest and fastest-growing academic unit, Robbins College is a community of six academic departments and a partnership with the United States Army. Together, they are preparing leaders in health and quality of life through science, scholarship, and innovation.

*Robbins College Magazine* is produced for the Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences by Baylor's Division of Marketing and Communications.

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# Robbins College

2024  
OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SCIENCES





# *Celebrating*

A DECADE—AND BEYOND—  
OF INNOVATION & GROWTH

BY MAXCEY BLAYLOCK





“Baylor’s name has been synonymous with excellence in healthcare for decades. The creation of the College of Health and Human Sciences at Baylor represents an important step forward strengthening our position in health and wellness-related education, research, and community engagement, within the context of Baylor’s commitment to integrate faith and academic excellence.”

These were the words shared by then Baylor University Executive Vice President and Provost Elizabeth B. Davis, PhD, upon the May 2014 announcement that the Baylor Board of Regents had voted to establish a new college at the University. Several academic units were to be united around their shared health-related emphases to create a forward-looking organizational structure rooted in collaboration.

Now, 10 years later, these initial hopes and dreams for advances in Baylor’s commitments to health education and research are being realized.

DEEP ROOTS

While Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences as an academic unit was formed in 2014, its history stretches back even further with many programs claiming a much earlier inception. The Department of Human Sciences and Design (HSD) originated as the Department of Home Economics in 1933 with a focus on using science and technology to better innovate the home. Degrees were offered in general home economics, general economic education, and fashion merchandising.

The Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) emerged from the Department of Speech and



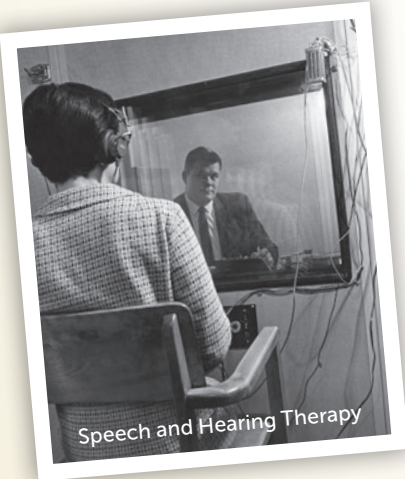
Speech and Hearing Therapy

Radio, with a course in “technique of speech correction” focused on the “diagnosis and therapy of speech disorders” offered as early as 1947. Courses related to “speech and hearing therapy” were offered in the School of Education by 1960. The Baylor Speech Clinic (now the Baylor Speech-Language and Hearing Clinic) opened its doors in 1955, and in 1979, an independent communication disorders department was formed within the College of Arts & Sciences offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees.

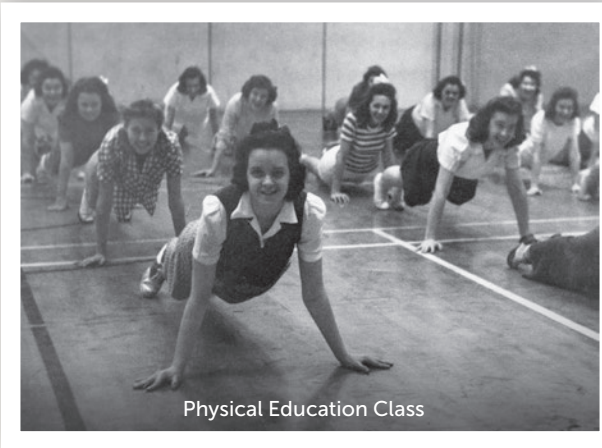
With its roots in the realm of physical education, the Department of Health, Human Performance, and Recreation (HHPR) can trace its origins even deeper in Baylor history. In the

September/November 1909 *Report of the President and Trustees of Baylor University*, new measures were established to prioritize the physical health of Baylor students. Enoch J. Mills, Director of the Department of Physical Education, reported that, “The University authorities have taken direct and full control, financially and otherwise, of all physical training thereby dignifying it in the estimation of the students...”

By the early 1940s, the Department of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation provided health services, instruction, training in health and physical education, recreation, intramurals, and programming to meet the physical education requirements for students set by the University.



Speech and Hearing Therapy



Physical Education Class

Students also could pursue a Bachelor of Science in Physical Education through the College of Arts & Sciences. In 1972, the Department transitioned into the School of Education, where degrees were offered in physical and health education, health education, and recreation.

MODERN HISTORY

The deep roots of the anchor academic units of Robbins College laid the groundwork for the College’s eventual formation. These departments—located across the Baylor campus—were united by a focus on health and quality of life, and bringing them together highlighted the University’s commitments to education and research in these fields.

The launch of the College was not an overnight decision. Prior to that May 2014 Board of Regents meeting, more than three years of evaluation and input from numerous stakeholders took place. These conversations included Regents, the Provost’s Office, deans, faculty and staff, external healthcare partners, and the national consulting firm Grant Thornton.

While the ramp-up was an intentionally slow and deliberate process, it didn’t take long for Robbins College to begin to prove itself as one of Baylor’s most innovative and forward-thinking units. In 2015, CSD received an anonymous \$10 million gift that most visibly led to the relocation of the Baylor Speech-Language and Hearing Clinic to Cashion Academic Center, significantly increasing the Department’s ability to provide clinical services, grow research productivity, and upgrade the educational experiences of its students.

Momentum only grew from there. A new Doctor of Physical Therapy program was announced in 2017, and



Bill and Mary Jo Robbins

At its annual Homecoming meeting in October 2014, the Baylor University Board of Regents announced that the newly established College of Health and Human Sciences would be named in honor of William K. (Bill) and Mary Jo Robbins, longtime supporters of the University.

With a deep sense of commitment to Christian missions, education, and healthcare, the Robbinses have supported important causes throughout the world, both personally and through The Robbins Foundation. The Mary Jo Robbins Clinic for Autism Research and Practice in the Baylor Speech-Language and Hearing Clinic was named as part of a gift by Bill to honor his wife.

Baylor continues to mourn the April 2023 passing of Bill Robbins. As Dean Jason R. Carter, PhD, shared at the time of his passing:

“Bill’s commitment to supporting our faculty has left an enduring impact. We are proud to carry forward his name, honoring his legacy through our research, teaching, and mentoring of Robbins College students.”

1909

Baylor claims responsibility for the “physical training” of all students, launching required health and physical activity programming in the Department of Physical Education

1933

Department of Home Economics offers degrees in general home economics, general economic education, and fashion merchandising

Early 1940s

Department of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation provides training in health and physical education

1947

Department of Speech and Radio offers courses focused on the diagnosis and therapy of speech disorders

1955

Opening of the Baylor Speech Clinic (now the Baylor Speech-Language and Hearing Clinic)

1972

Degrees offered in physical and health education, health education, and recreation through the School of Education





Physical Education Class

in 2018, the development of Entry-level and Post-professional Doctor of Occupational Therapy degrees was approved. That same year, Public Health, historically a program within HHPR, was established as a department in its own right. The physical therapy and occupational therapy programs were both designed to be hybrid in format with students engaging in online didactic instruction, in-person lab immersions, and on-site clinical placements. The hybrid nature of these programs was, and still is, a pioneering delivery method within both fields.

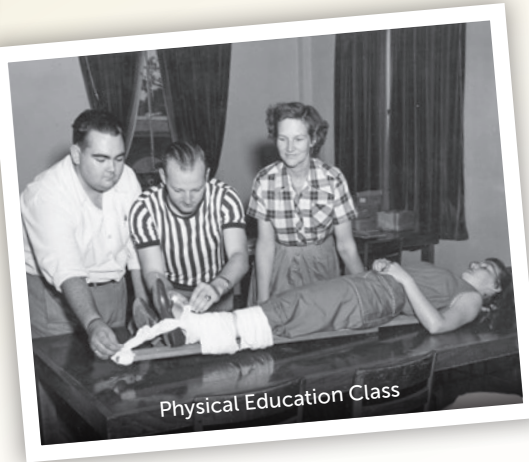


1960s Fashion Show

With each development over the past 10 years, Robbins College has demonstrated a commitment to building. While the foundational pieces of the College are deeply rooted in the University's history, Robbins College is not stagnant. Through advances in research, program innovations, and an unrelenting focus on health and quality of life, the College is building for the future, focused on excellence, disrupting the status quo, and making a transformational impact on campus and beyond.

**“We’re focused on the Christian foundation and the pursuit of excellence—to show others that it can be done. In the next five to 10 years, I look forward to doubling down on that mission in Robbins College.”**

Dean Jason R. Carter, PhD



Physical Education Class

Jason R. Carter, PhD, joined Robbins College as its new dean in Fall 2022. As he reflects back on the history of the College and all its programs, he offers his appreciation for the visioning and implementation that took place to bring Robbins College to where it is today. “Even before Robbins was officially established at the Board of Regents

Looking forward to the next 10 years and beyond, Carter references Baylor’s mission to integrate academic excellence and Christian service.

“We’re focused on the Christian foundation and the pursuit of excellence—to show others that it can be done,” Carter said. “In the next five to 10 years, I look forward to doubling down on that mission in Robbins College.”

In true Robbins College fashion, Carter’s outlook over the next decade is both an affirmation of historical commitments and a constant bend towards innovation. He acknowledges the endless fluctuations and evolutions in the world of higher education and within the health sciences.

“I want to see Robbins College lean into those challenges, innovate, and continue to press forward,” Carter said. “I think people who are attracted to health or human sciences expect to face challenges. I like that. It’s exciting! And as long as we lean into that—and

do it collaboratively and collectively together—then I think the next 10 years are going to be some of the most exciting years our faculty and staff will ever see here in Robbins College.”



Army-Baylor Prosthetics Lab



Public Health Community Outreach



Physical Therapy Lab



Occupational Therapy Lab

# Army-Baylor Programs

For decades, a partnership between Baylor University and the United States Army has educated thousands of Army officers and federal health officials. Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences houses nine of these Army-Baylor programs in collaboration with the U.S. Army Medical Center of Excellence at Fort Sam Houston:

- Master of Science in Nutrition
- Doctor of Occupational Therapy
- Doctor of Science in Occupational Therapy
- Doctor of Physical Therapy
- Doctor of Science in Orthopedic Manual Physical Therapy
- Doctor of Science in Sports Medicine Physical Therapy
- Doctor of Science in Physician Assistant Studies — Orthopedics
- Doctor of Science in Physician Assistant Studies — Emergency Medicine
- Doctor of Science in Physician Assistant Studies — General Surgery



Speech and Hearing Therapy

2014

Baylor Board of Regents votes to establish the Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences

2015

\$10 million gift and relocation of the Baylor Speech-Language and Hearing Clinic to Cashion Academic Center

2017

Doctor of Physical Therapy degree program announced

2018

Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree program announced; Public Health established as an independent department within the College


2023

Baylor Board of Regents approves the development of the Master of Physician Assistant Studies program

2024

10-year anniversary celebration of the Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences





# A Christian R1 Dean

BY MAXCEY BLAYLOCK

**I**n Fall 2021, Jason R. Carter, PhD, was contacted by a search firm to consider the position of Dean at Baylor University's Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences. Within a few months of that conversation, Baylor was named a Research I (R1) university by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. For Carter, who at the time was serving in a leadership role at the already R1-classified Montana State University, the announcement was affirmation that this particular position was worth a more careful consideration.

"It was a really critical factor for me when I was considering the position," he reflected. "Baylor is the preeminent Christian R1 university in my opinion, and it makes for an enriching environment where you can push the scientific boundaries with your research—but do it with Christian colleagues. That's attractive. That's a distinction of Baylor that pulled me in and is pulling more and more faculty in."

When Carter's hiring was announced in May 2022, Baylor Provost Nancy Brickhouse, PhD, commended his remarkable research background alongside his Christian commitment. His appointment represented an investment by the University in a unique type of leader—a Christian research dean.

There are very few deans in the country who have landed multimillion-dollar NIH grants and also confidently proclaim their Christian faith as the inspiration for and complement to their academic work. Carter is leading the way, both at Baylor and beyond, as an academic leader who conducts and leads high-level research while leaning into his relationship with Christ. Through his own research, his approach to mentorship, and his commitment to resourcing and fostering collaboration, Carter is defining what it means to be a Christian research dean.





### ALWAYS A RESEARCHER

While Carter has extensive experience as a leader of a major research enterprise—previously serving as the Vice President for Research, Economic Development, and Graduate Education at the largest research university in Montana—he is also an active researcher himself. No matter whether he was serving as vice president, department chair, or faculty member, Carter always ensured that he had time available for his own research.

He shares that he received this sage advice from an associate dean whom he admired early in his career. When asked about the “secret sauce” to this individual’s institutional and personal success, the colleague replied that, for him, the secret was never giving up his research.

“He told me that any time he had a bad day in the classroom, or with administration, he would have his research to go to. It was his outlet. He said, ‘Carter, as long as you can, keep doing research. Deans at really good institutions can do research. Vice presidents of research can do research.’”

It isn’t always easy, Carter shared, and it isn’t for everyone. It requires disciplined time management and the development of a solid team that can be trusted for delegation. But he concurs

**“Driving my motivation to be in higher education and conduct research is to serve others—as God calls us to do.”**

with the associate dean who originally offered him advice—his research remains an outlet. In addition, it gives him the opportunity to better understand the faculty he is trying to represent and serve.

“I love leadership by example when it is possible. My research keeps me grounded. It keeps me rooted. And it helps me to better understand the needs across the College,” he said.

### MENTORSHIP AND COLLABORATION

As Carter acknowledges, his ongoing research activity fosters a deep appreciation for the work of the faculty researchers he oversees—both their triumphs and their challenges. It also connects directly with his commitment to mentorship and collaboration.

“The more senior I get with my research, the more fulfillment I get from the mentorship side,” he shared. “Some of the most gratifying components of my own research now are helping others think through their research and helping them succeed.”

Carter serves as a mentor and advisor to faculty and postdoctoral researchers within Robbins College, to other Baylor faculty members from different academic units, and to

faculty across the United States who are engaging in work that parallels his own. He credits his own mentors and their impact on him for his desire to mentor others.

“There are so many components of research that are about the intangibles. It can be about persistence or experimental design or networking. The nature of research is so dynamic that if you don’t have people to talk to about your research, then your research is not going to reach its full potential,” he shared.

In addition to developing individual mentor-mentee relationships, Carter also has worked closely with Robbins College Associate Dean for Research Renée Umstattd Meyer, PhD, to develop college-level initiatives that promote collaboration and partnership. The College has hosted multiple “3x3 Quick Talks,” during which faculty members share about their particular research subject and opportunities for collaboration using three PowerPoint slides in three minutes. Carter has also personally offered his own expertise and knowledge during “Research Power Hour” workshops focused on topics like study sections and identifying grant funding.

“There’s no doubt that science and research is a very competitive business,” he said. “But by collaborating with other people, you can actually advance your career. You can advance your ideas.”

### THE FAITH FACTOR

While Carter’s research success is outstanding and his commitments to mentorship and collaboration are commendable, these factors alone are not what set him apart as a leader. His true distinctiveness is found in a deep Christian faith that inspires and strengthens everything he does.

Trained as an exercise physiologist, Carter now classifies himself as a sleep physiologist. His research focuses on the intersection between sleep, exercise, stress, the autonomic nervous system, and cardiovascular health in humans. This is the general subject of work that has led to more than \$74 million in external research awards. But, the curiosity behind the science is rooted in something more.

“There are countless ways to be a Christian scholar. There are people at Baylor who are researching Christian faith, and right now, that’s not me. Instead, I’m interested in how sleep insufficiencies or disorders impact neural and cardiovascular health. Driving my motivation to be in higher education and conduct research is to serve others—as God calls us to do,” he shared.

Faith and research unite in Carter’s commitment to collaboration as well.

“Jesus didn’t just keep things to himself—he had disciples and he invested in that team of 12. As scientists at Baylor, we can invest more holistically into the intellectual, mental, physical, and spiritual health of the people we’re training and the people we’re collaborating with,” he said. “Life is meant to

be done with other people, and I believe research is, too.”

As he interacts with others, both as a leader and a collaborator, Carter says he often reflects on the “fruit of the Spirit” from Galatians 5:22-23—which he has displayed in large vinyl letters on the wall of his office—to guide him. He espouses patience as a virtue—both in everyday life and, especially, in grant writing. In his work, he pushes boundaries but recognizes the need for self-control. In a realm of work that can at times be frustrating, he seeks to find joy.

“These are the kinds of things I think about as we develop dedicated and resilient faculty members here in Robbins College and at Baylor—individuals who might get knocked down but are willing to get back up because they’re doing it for a bigger purpose,” he said. “My own life has gone through a transformation since truly accepting Christ. It’s about something bigger. And when you have something bigger, you think more clearly and you are able to pursue excellence—but within a Christian framework.

“I love being at an institution where I can embrace my Christian faith while pushing the boundaries of physiological research. I want to pursue and support excellent science. I want to lead our College to that next level of excellence. But, I want to do that in a way that contributes to the greater Kingdom.”





# PLANTING SEEDS for the Future

BY MAXCEY BLAYLOCK

"...the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."

—2 CORINTHIANS 9:6



**M**ike and Micki Maris have sown bountifully. They have sown with their time, with their prayers, and with their gifts—to benefit the growth and flourishing of their beloved Baylor University. Most recently, the Marises have directed their generosity toward Baylor's Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences through the Dr. Mike and Mrs. Micki Maris Endowed Seed Fund for Student Research.

Baylor alumni and longtime University supporters (Mike has not missed a Homecoming since 1957), the Marises were first introduced to Robbins College through their friend Ron Wilson, MD, who was serving on the College's Board of Advocates. After learning more about the complementary academic, research, and spiritual aspirations of the College, Mike joined the Board alongside his friend. Mike and Micki's excitement continued to build as he became more engaged with the College, but it was attending the dedication ceremony for the Mary Jo Robbins Clinic for Autism Research and Practice in March 2023 that got them, in Micki's words, "on fire."

"After touring the Clinic, we were amazed at what they were doing in that building," Micki reflected. "We wanted to get really involved. We knew we wanted to do something, at this time, to make a specific donation."

with their own interests. The proposal for a research seed fund immediately caught their attention.

"Discoveries are made in two different ways," Mike, a practicing dermatologist of 44 years, said. "One is by pure accident—that's probably the exception, rather than the rule. The other is a more intentional process, the development of an idea."

"If you're a famous faculty member, you have all kinds of grant availability to develop that idea. But what if you have someone who's just as sharp—or maybe even sharper—but they're going through graduate school? They have this great idea, but they don't have the resources to develop it. We envision the seed fund will be this bridge from having no resources to developing an idea that might have some great merit."

Through the Maris Seed Fund, Robbins College graduate students, alongside one or more faculty mentors, will have the opportunity to apply for funding to kickstart a specific research project. Applications will be reviewed by a committee, and funds will be awarded to the best and brightest ideas. As Mike noted, the program will give graduate students and faculty alike the resources to dream big, perhaps collect

**"We envision the seed fund will be this bridge from having no resources to developing an idea that might have some great merit."**

Mike Maris, MD

Inspired to make an impact, the Marises met with Robbins College Dean Jason R. Carter, PhD, and Director of Advancement Christa Oudshoorn to learn more about the College's needs and how those needs might align

some preliminary data, and allow a great idea to rise to the surface when it may not have otherwise.

Micki has resonated with the creativity the project encourages. It hearkened back to her days serving



as PTA president for her children's school and overseeing the innovative program grants that were awarded to teachers based on the applications they submitted.

"I love the creativity. Talking to Jason and Christa—they bubble over with ideas. I really appreciate that about them," Micki said. "I love all of the new things that Robbins College is starting. It's not like Jason came in to try to maintain a college. He's really building it. I love the growth and innovation."

For his part, Carter expresses his deep thankfulness to the Marises for their generosity.

"I'm just so grateful to Mike and Micki for their willingness to take a chance on developing something new," Carter said. "What excites me about the Maris Seed Fund is that it's innovative and different, but it's also going to spur collaborative efforts between our faculty and our graduate students."

Mike and Micki Maris are planting something special in Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences. The bounty sown through the seeds of their generosity has gains yet unknown. The harvest will come through the collaboration, the development of ideas, and the opportunity given to bright young minds—for years and years to come.



# Research Endeavors

Through Signature Research Initiatives BY JESSICA YOUNGPETER

In Fall 2022, Baylor University's Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences announced to faculty and staff its intention to establish a set of high-level research initiatives that would inform the prioritization of resources, including faculty hiring, infrastructure enhancements, and fundraising efforts. This kicked off a year-long, college-wide collaborative project.

# Illuminated

**T**hroughout the 2022-23 academic year, Robbins College leadership, faculty, and staff engaged in surveys, a town hall, and robust discussions to determine which initiatives could best represent the broad range of research endeavors being undertaken within the College. One goal throughout the process was for all Robbins College research-active faculty to be able to identify with at least one—if not multiple—of the final initiatives.

After multiple rounds of feedback, the Robbins College Signature Research Initiatives were announced at the Fall 2023 Robbins College faculty and staff semester kick-off luncheon. Here, we introduce those initiatives to you by showcasing a current research project within each initiative.

## Robbins College Signature Research Initiatives

Inspired by our Christian mission, Baylor University's Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences seeks to enhance health, quality of life, and human flourishing for all individuals and communities.

### Behavioral and Human Sciences

Examining and modifying the environmental, psychological, and social determinants that influence behavior and health.

### Chronic Diseases and Conditions

Understanding, preventing, and treating chronic diseases and conditions.

### Health Access and Quality

Investigating and improving access to care and opportunities for healthy living.

### (Re)habilitative Sciences

Optimizing function and independence for those who experience injury, illness, disability, or developmental delay.





# Behavioral and Human Sciences

What does it take for us to feel a true sense of belonging? Our lives were meant to be shared with others in community and partnership. **Karen Melton, PhD**, Associate Professor of Child and Family Studies in the Department of Human Sciences and Design (HSD), believes that God dreams for us a life rich in character, mental and physical health, purpose, and close relationships.

Melton explains that engaging in shared experiences such as gatherings, events, and family activities is the most important way for us to build the world in which we want to live. Her research is focused on designing experiences that result in human flourishing. In turn, she is building a body of guidelines that will help practitioners understand how much social connection is needed in our daily lives.

Rates of loneliness have risen sharply over the last decade—so much so that the World Health Organization, the United States Surgeon General, and other international leaders in health and well-being have now identified loneliness as a global pandemic and public health priority. Melton says that loneliness is a robust predictor of morbidity and mortality, referencing a study that has identified that lacking social connection is more dangerous than smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

“This is where my work enters the story, because social connection is really driven by participation in shared activities,” Melton explained. “Typically, the advice given to people who are experiencing isolation is to join a group or do an activity with others. However, I have always found this advice to be an oversimplification that’s not extremely helpful. It doesn’t recognize that all shared activities are not equal.”

Shared experiences vary on elements of environmental, psychological, and social determinants—and each type of shared experience leaves us feeling differently. Melton’s research suggests that by engaging in the appropriate experiences, our world can become more socially connected and people can enjoy a true sense of connection to God, self, others, and all of creation.

“In understanding the types of shared activities that we have and how much socialization is needed in our daily lives, we can begin to prioritize our social health just as much as we prioritize our physical health,” Melton said. “Intentionality is a core piece of what I’m always thinking about. I believe our shared time together is one of the most sacred things that we have, and we should be more intentional in how we use it and design for it.”

**“Intentionality is a core piece of what I’m always thinking about. I believe our shared time together is one of the most sacred things that we have, and we should be more intentional in how we use it and design for it.”**

Karen Melton, PhD



# Chronic Diseases and Conditions

**Cory Dungan, PhD**, Assistant Professor of Exercise Physiology in the Department of Health, Human Performance, and Recreation (HHPR), is researching the mechanisms that regulate muscle loss and the blunted response to exercise during chronic disease. Driven by a calling to help care for the sick, Dungan is focused on increasing quality of life for the aging population and those who have cancer.

He works with safe, plant-based compounds called flavonoids, which can help extend a person’s ability to exercise or do meaningful activities. As an animal researcher, Dungan uses mice and cell models to identify why various genes and proteins are responsible for muscle loss during chronic conditions. His goal is to translate what he’s finding in mice to humans.

“I can’t necessarily heal you if you’re sick like a doctor can, but I can improve your quality of life,” Dungan explained. “We know that when you lose muscle mass, there are certain proteins that are either not making enough or bad proteins that are making too much. We are trying to identify those,

and once we do, we can try to target them. If someone is not making enough of a good protein, how can we increase the expression of that? If someone is making too much of a bad protein, what can we give them to help reduce the expression of that?”

Dungan keeps an eye on the big picture. He says that if his team can identify something novel, something that may slow muscle mass by 1% or 2%, it would be a win, because it will lead to people living healthier lives as they age, fight cancer, or experience side effects of cancer remission.

“I don’t necessarily want to help you live to 100. I want to make it so that, if you’re going to die at 81 years old, every day of your 81 years you were able to do what you enjoy,” Dungan said.

**“I can’t necessarily heal you if you’re sick like a doctor can, but I can improve your quality of life.”**

Cory Dungan, PhD



# Health Access and Quality

**Katie Janda-Thomte, PhD**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Health, is assessing food insecurity mitigation and improving healthy food access to promote health equity in underserved communities. She works alongside community members to figure out how they can better understand the issues they're facing and develop solutions together.

"I'm looking at where food insecurity is occurring, who's being disproportionately impacted by it, and how we can take some of that information to develop and evaluate programs and policies to try to make our communities, family members, friends, and neighbors more food secure and have healthier food options available in their communities," Janda-Thomte explained.

Quality food must be affordable for those living in the community. Currently, she is part of a team that is evaluating the Double Up Food Bucks expansion in Texas. This incentive doubles the amount of fresh produce a person can purchase at participating farmers markets and grocery stores by matching Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food

**"I think that finding those strengths and celebrating them is a creative Christian approach to looking at some of these access and quality related issues."**

Katie Janda-Thomte, PhD

stamp benefits dollar for dollar. Ultimately, she says, food access is health access. "In some neighborhoods, just because food is there doesn't mean that it's the highest quality of food. If we take that wise adage of 'you are what you eat' and you can only eat what you're able to find or is available within your community, then what we have in our communities is incredibly important to our health," Janda-Thomte said. "It's inherently connected."

Infrastructure also plays an important role in underserved communities. It's difficult to eat healthy if quality food isn't located near your house or if you don't have regular access to transportation. Ultimately, Janda-Thomte

believes it's important to look at the strengths of a community instead of focusing on what's not there. A neighborhood may only have a convenience store, but perhaps there's a strong church network, and a partnership with churches could create pop-up food distribution sites that can have incredible impact.

"I think that finding those strengths and celebrating them is a creative Christian approach to looking at some of these access and quality related issues," Janda-Thomte said. "By working at the community level, there is huge scalability potential. These are entire communities that we're talking about. We're not just impacting one person—it's entire neighborhoods, ZIP codes, cities, and states. That's really promising, because it's not just a drop in the bucket. It really has a ripple effect for a meaningful change in our communities."

## (Re)habilitative Sciences

Two clinical associate professors in the Department of Physical Therapy are focused on "revving up" the nervous system in children. **Elizabeth Ardolino, PT, PhD**, and **Megan Flores, PT, PhD**, provide a type of physical therapy called locomotor training. During sessions, a child is placed into a bodyweight support harness over a treadmill.

"By doing standing and walking activities on the treadmill, we hope to get the child's nervous system excited so that it can change, adapt, and improve," Ardolino said. "The nervous system is very adaptable, and the earlier you can get into intensive therapy, the better."



Their work primarily focuses on children with cerebral palsy, but they also work with children with Down syndrome, spina bifida, and spinal cord injury.

"Kids with neuromotor conditions have developmental delays. They are not performing the gross motor skills that they would be if they were typically developing—they're having trouble with rolling, coming up to sit, sitting by themselves, crawling, standing, and walking," Flores explained. "The intervention that we're providing helps them improve their functional mobility so that they can be more independent as they grow older."

**Cory Smith, PhD**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Health, Human Performance, and Recreation (HHPR), was intrigued by Flores and Ardolino's research and offered an additional opportunity to collaborate by assessing neurophysiological measures. He uses technology to scan a child's brain before and after three weeks of locomotor training, showing exactly how the brain adapts to this type of therapy.

"As physical therapists, we are good at testing that functional piece, looking at how a child moves or how much they can move," Flores said. "Our partnership with Dr. Smith provides images of what this child's brain looks like on the first day and what it looks like on the last day. It's quite remarkable! It's exciting because we are seeing that what we're doing does change the physiology of the nervous system."

Treatment intensity matters at any age, but especially in children, the more intensely the nervous system is challenged, the more progress it makes. They see patients for three hours a day for three weeks straight—in sharp contrast, typical physical therapy for children with cerebral palsy is only once a week for 30 minutes.

"My overarching, long-term goal is to change the face of pediatric rehab for children with cerebral palsy," Ardolino said. "We need to make therapists and third-party payors realize that these kids benefit the most from intensive therapy. We must change the model of care that is currently out there."

**"The intervention that we're providing helps them improve their functional mobility so that they can be more independent as they grow older."**

Megan Flores, PT, PhD



Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences will continue to spotlight faculty research within the Signature Research Initiatives. Visit [robbins.baylor.edu/signature-research-initiatives](https://robbins.baylor.edu/signature-research-initiatives) or scan the QR code to keep up to date with the latest College research stories.





# CAMP SUCCESS

BY JESSICA YOUNGPETER

Twenty years ago, Camp Success was just an idea that originated from research. It has since evolved into a “life-changing experience.”



**L**aunched in 2003 with support from the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry in Waco, this language and literacy intervention summer program has impacted the lives of 1,413 children to date.

Director of Camp Success Michaela Ritter, EdD, CCC-SLP, holder of the Martin Family Endowed Chair in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD), says the relationship between oral language and reading is complex, and proficiency in one often contributes to success in the other. As a speech-language pathologist and researcher, she understands the multifaceted layers of language skills crucial for reading.

A chance encounter between Ritter and Claude Ervin, a Scottish Rite member and Baylor University retiree, led to the realization of a shared dream to help children master language and literacy skills. Scottish Rite has a long tradition of investing in the lives of

children, and Ervin understood the potential of partnering with Ritter’s research.

Held each summer through the Baylor Speech-Language and Hearing Clinic, Camp Success provides intense intervention sessions to children who have been identified with language-based reading impairments. It focuses on improving a child’s vocabulary, sound, word and sentence structures, spelling, writing, and reading. Within the summer program’s four-week schedule, each client receives approximately 50 hours of therapy—equal to an entire year of intervention that a child might receive elsewhere.

“When many children start the program, they may have low confidence and doubt their intelligence, but then we observe a stark contrast four weeks later. Children have said to me, ‘I couldn’t even read a word and now I’m reading a sentence,’” Ritter shared. “That statement holds immense significance. When a





**"I definitely didn't understand the impact until later in my life, but that summer was crucial and formative. Before Camp Success, I remember being incredibly frustrated that I couldn't keep up with other kids. After camp, I immediately became one of the top readers at school and began to excel academically."**

Bethany Neubert



SERVICE

child reads a word or sentence for the first time, it's an incredibly exciting moment. Witnessing the child's perspective of the world change and observing the child's sense of accomplishment and joy is so very rewarding."

Waco's Scottish Rite members continue to partner with Camp Success by donating their time, resources, and funds. Beyond financial donations, many members look forward to designing the program's T-shirts and delivering donuts each morning. At the conclusion of each summer program, Scottish Rite hosts a graduation event to proudly celebrate each child's accomplishments.

"It's a fulfilling feeling that you helped someone and that you aided success in their life," Ervin said. "Reading opens a doorway to the world. If you can read it and comprehend it, then you can visualize it—and if you can visualize what you're reading, you can have an experience beyond your everyday life."

Since the beginning, Camp Success has been provided at zero cost to all families, regardless of their financial situation. Furthermore, in 2018, Baylor announced a \$1.6 million gift from the Waco Scottish Rite Charitable Foundation, which created a permanent endowment for Camp Success. Both Ervin and Ritter agree this endowment will help ensure equitable opportunities for future generations to be served.

"We are blessed to have the support of Scottish Rite, the University, the Department, and our College," Ritter reflected. "By Scottish Rite giving the generous endowment, this initiative will continue in perpetuity, without a doubt."

### A RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICUM

According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 19% of the school-age population experience a speech or language impairment, with dyslexia among the most common. Early treatment of a communication disorder can change a person's entire world.

"We know what works, and our methodologies are firmly grounded in research. At the same time, we will continue to introduce different components of intervention to assess the impact on learning," Ritter shared. "Our dedication to ongoing research drives us to discover the most effective ways to support children with language and reading disorders."

To ensure an equitable enrollment process, each client receives a comprehensive speech, language, and literacy evaluation. In 2003, Camp Success enrolled just 24 children. However, its popularity grew rapidly to a maximum of 96 children enrolled and a waiting list with more than 200 names.

Under the watchful guidance of certified faculty members, Camp Success also serves as an invaluable clinical practicum for graduate students in CSD. Students pursuing their Master of Science in Communication Sciences and Disorders offer research-based interventions, providing clients with one-on-one sessions and group activities. The experience for novice speech-language pathologists has far-reaching significance.

Bethany Neubert, a former Camp Success student clinician, claims an especially unique perspective—she actually participated in Camp Success as a client when she was eight years old.

"I remember initially being really excited to go to 'camp,' and then confused when I had homework during the summer," Neubert laughed. "I definitely didn't understand the impact until later in my life, but that summer was crucial and formative. Before Camp Success, I remember being incredibly frustrated that I couldn't keep up with other kids. After camp, I immediately became one of the top readers at school and began to excel academically."

In fact, her experience inspired her eventual path to becoming a speech-language pathologist, earning both her undergraduate and graduate CSD degrees at Baylor. During Camp Success 2023, Neubert spent 12 hours each week providing direct treatment with her client, plus planning therapy sessions and attending her Baylor classes.

"In the midst of the busyness and never-ending to-do lists, it was encouraging to remember the impact is long lasting," Neubert shared. "I was

so lucky to be the beneficiary of hours of hard work from my clinician and her supervisor, as well as countless other teachers, mentors, and parents who poured into me, helped me with my homework, and put in hours of their own time to help me succeed."

### A GROWING COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Currently, Camp Success primarily serves children from Waco. That said, Ritter was surprised when a handful of families traveled across the country and rented living spaces simply so their child could attend. To Ritter, this underscores the greater need for access to similar intervention. She speaks at state and national conferences to share her research and program design, and over the years, other small-scaled programs have blossomed in new locations, modeled after Camp Success.

This coming summer, CSD will once again welcome in a new cohort of clients. Twenty years ago, neither Ritter nor Ervin imagined Camp Success would evolve into such a life-changing ministry, but it has.

"It's been a great example of a partnership between Scottish Rite, Baylor, and the Waco community," Ervin stated. "It was an idea that turned into a dream, which turned into a concept, and ultimately, turned into a reality. I believe down deep in my heart that Camp Success has made an impact on our community."







# Revolutionizing EDUCATION DELIVERY.

BY JESSICA YOUNGPETER

Since it was established in 2018, Baylor University's Department of Occupational Therapy has successfully offered a hybrid program with virtual classes and in-person labs, each developed and implemented by the faculty through technology, collaboration, and evidence-based practice. As a result of this commitment to both innovation and excellence, Baylor has quickly become one of the prominent occupational therapy programs in the United States.

WACO, TX

**“W**e are not just reimagining education delivery through our hybrid format,” Marian Gillard, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, Department Chair, Clinical Associate Professor, said. “We are revolutionizing it by offering transformative learning experiences that cultivate exploration, adaptation, and clinical reasoning.”

Baylor's Entry-level Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) degree is offered through a hybrid learning model. Students begin the program by engaging in online didactic instruction (roughly 40% of the curriculum) along with staggered simulated clinical experiences and in-person lab immersions in Waco (12%). After their first year in the program, students begin their fieldwork and capstone experiences at community locations across the country.

“We’ve developed a recipe that allows accessibility for students wherever they are in their lives. The hybrid model allows students to have a high-level graduate school experience, regardless of where they are physically located and without needing to move themselves or their families to wherever the program is located,” Teresa Fair-Field, OTD, OTR/L, Clinical Assistant Professor, said. “In return, it has real potential to resolve a lot of the disparities that we see across the country related to therapy access. Many of our students are interested in staying at or returning to their home communities, in rural or underserved areas, and bringing the possibilities provided by occupational therapy into those communities.”





Baylor's OTD curriculum is designed to be completed within two years. This accelerated schedule differs from most programs, but the Department was intentional in its design, which emphasizes high-quality instruction not only in the classroom, but also in real-world and simulated clinical experiences.

"What we do at Baylor has not been done in other OTD programs—it is a cutting-edge, accelerated, hybrid program that is a pioneer

**"We've developed a recipe that allows accessibility for students wherever they are in their lives. The hybrid model allows students to have a high-level graduate school experience, regardless of where they are physically located and without needing to move themselves or their families to wherever the program is located."**

Teresa Fair-Field, OTD, OTR/L

in occupational therapy education. When we attend conferences, we are frequently asked, 'How can you do that in two years and provide all the information they need?'" Kirsten Davin, OTD, OTR/L, ATP, SMS, Clinical Assistant Professor, added. "It's not just a matter of trusting the people you work with, but it's also trusting the process itself and the design that was put into the program."

Baylor OTD faculty members work closely together to ensure a

harmonious flow between the hybrid classroom, in-person lab immersions, on-site simulated clinical experiences, fieldwork experiences with community partners, and doctoral capstones. Fair-Field and Davin are shining examples of such teamwork—Fair-Field engages students within the didactic coursework, while Davin thrives in leading clinical fieldwork education. They come together at the intersection of the team's on-site time when students complete hands-on learning and demonstrate their clinical skills.

"It requires creativity and innovation at each of these steps, along with a sense of trust and respect in one's teammates. At the end of year one, we make these secure hand-offs to the fieldwork team that result in a successful clinical placement for students in year two," Fair-Field explained. "Each faculty member needs to be well-placed and teaching to their strengths."

Davin described Fair-Field as "the expert of making all things interesting online, complete with outfit changes

and music." She teaches through innovative instructional strategies, creating an engaging and inclusive learning environment.

"I think it's all about building connection," Fair-Field said. "It takes a vital presence on camera, an understanding of gesture and space, as well as an understanding of the technology and how it works."

When it is time for fieldwork education, Davin appoints hands-on, practical experiences that equip students "for the changing demands of the occupational therapy profession," a central tenet of the program's mission. The Department has partnered with a nationwide network of more than 5,500 clinical fieldwork sites, which allows students to be paired in terms of practice setting and geographic region.

"Everything we do, including the technologies that we employ and clinical experiences we provide, all strive to reach that end goal—that when our students leave us, wherever they wind up, they have the skill set and the competence to be successful," Davin said.

The Department recently introduced virtual reality into its latest lab immersion, designed to enhance learning through an interactive environment. Currently, virtual reality is integrated into three courses that OTD students experience during their first year. Faculty believe it holds the potential to enhance theoretical knowledge, refine practical proficiencies, and elevate overall learning satisfaction.

"We can fit a lot of learning—very dynamic learning—into a short period of time, and there's a lot of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning going on, so it's very contextualized," Kayla Collins, MOT, EdD, OTR/L, Entry-level OTD Program Director, Clinical Associate Professor, explained. "Our students can move through a virtual reality scenario in 15 minutes and have this really rich learning experience, one that might have taken us hours to do otherwise. We have an accelerated

program, so we must use our time efficiently. Virtual reality helps us create more efficient learning experiences that are just as rich and deep—if not deeper—than what we can do with other types of activities."

The Department celebrated the graduation of its second cohort of practitioners in December 2023. Asked what her hope is for the recent graduates, Fair-Field said, "Hands down, I hope our students walk away with curiosity. One of my favorite things to hear students say is 'The more I learned, the more I realized what I don't know.' I think that's one of the most powerful insights one can have. We are providing them with the tools to develop lifelong learning practices, because there's no way that you can teach every clinical scenario, regardless of a program's length. So, I think it's vital to build in that curiosity, especially when it comes to understanding the human experience, because our circle and our

own community is such a limited view of humanity."

Technology and teaching methods will continue to evolve. That said, Baylor's OTD students will continue to find innovative, engaging, and meaningfully designed courses. Collins, Davin, and Fair-Field are adamant that the technology used by the Department is something that is critical to the program's success, along with recruitment and retention of faculty who understand how to leverage that technology successfully into the classroom.

"I think this is where education needs to go. You cannot solve really difficult problems with only one model. If you're protective of education in the way that it's traditionally been performed, you can't bring the creativity that those difficult problems require," Fair-Field stated. "It takes thinking in new ways to really tackle some of these issues."





# Home IS WHERE THE Heart Resides

BY ALYSSA ERCHINGER

Anjelica Elizondo's desire to work in the health profession was first inspired by her mother's childhood stories. The daughter of migrant farm workers, Elizondo's mother struggled as a child to interact with healthcare practitioners when she was sick or injured because her parents spoke no English and she herself spoke very little at the time.



Hearing about the traumatic experiences of her mother and knowing that these challenges are not unique, especially in Latino communities, Elizondo felt driven to pursue an education, and ultimately a career, that would allow her to address issues plaguing the United States healthcare system, like language as a barrier to medical care.

When she first started seriously considering colleges, Elizondo and her mother drove up to Waco to tour Baylor University. She loved it.

"I was previously convinced I would attend a different college—one closer to my mom in San Antonio," she recalled. "However, after the tour, I kept comparing every school to Baylor."

It turned out her mom had fallen in love with Baylor too, so in 2016, Elizondo enrolled at Baylor as a Health Science Studies major on the pre-physical therapy track. However, an experience during her freshmen year offered a slight shift in direction.

"There was a class we were required to take that introduced us to various healthcare disciplines," she said. "This class ultimately introduced me to the public health profession and an entire realm outside of being a clinical physician."

The following semester, Elizondo changed her major to Public Health, believing this was the educational trajectory that could truly equip her to work towards addressing the issues her family experienced while trying to access care.

"I want to study the numbers behind why things happen on a large scale," she explained. "I want to see the statistics, the objective side, and try to rectify that with the disproportionate access to medical care there is currently throughout the U.S."

Elizondo knew that the field of public health would allow her to make an even broader impact across populations. As a

physician, she would have been treating individual patients. As a public health practitioner, she would be addressing the health and wellness needs of entire communities—hopefully preventing the doctor's visit from even happening.

She has since earned her Bachelor of Science in Public Health and a Master of Public Health (MPH) from Baylor. Currently, Elizondo is working toward her PhD in Public Health—also at Baylor—diving into cervical cancer research with her Baylor faculty mentor, Matt Asare, PhD, Assistant Professor of Public Health.

"Dr. Asare has quite a lot of experience in this area. Most recently, we have conducted research regarding increasing cervical cancer screening among underserved women through self-sampling tests," she said. "I hope to take the experience and knowledge I have gained in this field and apply it to my dissertation research in the near future."

On the track to becoming a Baylor graduate three times over, Elizondo looks back on her life and her time at Baylor, reflecting on what swayed her choice to remain a Baylor Bear over the past eight years. She believes the answer lies with the people she has met along the way, both professors and peers.

"My favorite thing about Baylor has been the niche experiences I have had the opportunity to be a part of, both academically and socially," she reminisced. "Some of my favorite memories with my peers were made at Baylor events like Christmas on 5th Street, Mosaic Mixer, or the Hispanic Student Association's Fiesta."

**"I loved the idea of remaining at Baylor for my master's degree, and now for my PhD—if my mom can get over continuing the three-hour distance, then I can, too."**

In addition to the larger Baylor traditions and community, Elizondo has found real connection within the Department of Public Health as well. When applying to MPH programs, she received an offer from two universities. Her relationships with the Baylor Public Health faculty ultimately kept her in Waco.

"After I made that decision for the MPH program, my mom told me that she knew Baylor was still the place for me. I love that my mom never gave her opinion upfront so as to not influence me into a decision," she reflected. "I loved the idea of remaining at Baylor for my master's degree, and now for my PhD—if my mom can get over continuing the three-hour distance then I can, too."

Her career at Baylor has been long and full, but as she is closing in on her projected graduation in 2025, she has begun to think of what is next. Elizondo looks to bring her knowledge to San Antonio and bridge the gap between the current healthcare system to create inclusive and affordable care methods in all communities.

"I want to work for the city or the state health department," she said. "My ultimate goal is to help vulnerable communities, specifically African American, Latino, and low-income communities."

While open to going where she is most needed, Elizondo ultimately hopes it's a return to her hometown—because while her heart may bleed green and gold, it resides wherever her mother is.



# Love Thy Neighbor

BY JESSICA YOUNGPETER



Alumni of Baylor University's Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences are striving to improve health access and quality of life within their communities. While their professions differ, they all lead with a desire to "love thy neighbor" and to make an impact for those in need.

## EMPOWERING UNDERREPRESENTED WOMEN

It's a common health issue few people talk about: pelvic floor dysfunction. As a pelvic floor physical therapist, Monioluwa Otubaga, PT, DPT, is working to normalize this conversation by providing targeted care to women dealing with prenatal, postpartum, and sexual dysfunction issues.

"It's about giving individuals the tools and support to regain control over their health and live without enduring unnecessary challenges and pain," Otubaga explained. "I've witnessed transformative experiences that go beyond addressing the immediate physical symptoms. Patients often report restored relationships and an overall improvement in their quality of life."

For Otubaga, the catalyst to work in this specialized field was the stark realization concerning maternal mortality rates in the United States. Black women have the highest maternal mortality rate in the U.S.—almost three times the rate for white women, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Statistics like these are what motivate Otubaga's commitment to improving access to pelvic care in her community.

"I've held firm to the belief that every obstacle has a purpose, and I find myself in this position for a reason," Otubaga said. "I'm here to be a voice for those who unfortunately no longer have one."



"It's all about integrating faith into the healing process for me, fostering an environment of compassion and understanding during treatments."

**MONIOLUWA OTUBAGA**  
Physical Therapy '20

Throughout Otubaga's professional journey, she has faced challenges with peers and patients, and even grappled with occasional imposter syndrome. According to the American Physical Therapy Association, less than 5% of all physical therapists are Black. Even fewer work within the pelvic floor specialty, yet the incidence of pelvic floor dysfunction and pain

is higher in this population. Otubaga advocates and empowers these women, providing culturally competent care. She views her role not only as a healthcare provider, but as a catalyst for change, actively contributing to diversity within the pelvic health profession.

"Being an African American woman in this setting is, to me, a blessing. My goal is to educate my patients, arming them with knowledge so that they enter a delivery room feeling empowered and ready to advocate for themselves and their safety," Otubaga said. "This commitment goes beyond the treatment room. By the grace of God, I strive toward creating a more inclusive and representative landscape in women's healthcare."

Rooted in Christian values, Otubaga elected to earn her Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree through Baylor's hybrid program. This education helps to reinforce the holistic approach she uses to navigate common misconceptions about pelvic floor dysfunction.

"It's all about integrating faith into the healing process for me, fostering an environment of compassion and understanding during treatments," Otubaga explained. "This choice not only shaped my professional approach but also contributes to a broader commitment to improving health access and quality while upholding the Christian values instilled during my time at Baylor."

## ADVOCATING ALONGSIDE HOUSTON'S YOUTH

Established in 190 countries and territories, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) fights for a more equitable world for children and is often visible during times of crisis as it focuses on the safety of the most vulnerable children. The USA division advances this global mission through fundraising and education.

Child rights advocate Maryann Wanjau is inspired by the younger generation. As a Community Engagement Associate with UNICEF USA, she works to lift the voices of young adults.

"The youth I work with really try to raise awareness about health access being a human right. We must honor access to education, physical health, mental health, and nutrition—all basic things that UNICEF focuses on in terms of a child's wellbeing. If it's a human right, it should be provided to anyone—no matter where you're born, what family you're born into, or how much money you have," Wanjau said. "The youth often have such a grounded, wise understanding of our world. It's really encouraging—these people are going to be our leaders in the future."

In August 2023, Houston was officially recognized as the first UNICEF Child Friendly City in the United States. In support of this initiative, Wanjau and her team focus on advocacy and engagement in Houston, encouraging people to support UNICEF's mission by volunteering, raising awareness, and educating community members—specifically, she supports youth who want to do that work in high schools and colleges.



“It was really great to hit the ground running to support Houston’s youth in facilitating mental health trainings, advocacy trainings, and presentations at mental health conferences. I was able to provide a UNICEF perspective and support their activities. Some of those youth even started their own organization, called AliefVotes, which encourages civic engagement for youth in underrepresented communities,” Wanjau stated. “It’s been a great experience and is really an integral part of me.”



**“The youth often have such a grounded, wise understanding of our world. It’s really encouraging—these people are going to be our leaders in the future.”**

**MARYANN WANJAU**  
Child and Family Studies ’16

Wanjau credits her time at Baylor as foundational for her career. Her passion for children’s development prompted her to earn a degree in Child and Family Studies, through the Department of Human Sciences and Design (HSD). This led to pursuing a Master of Education degree, and then to her current job. With UNICEF USA, Wanjau enjoys being able to work with like-minded people who advocate for children, no matter their background. She says it is the best combination of her passion for youth and her global perspective.

“My heritage is Kenyan and Nigerian. I was born in Nigeria, where my parents met, and we came to the U.S. when I was two years old,” Wanjau explained. “I think that visits back home to Kenya and Nigeria really give me a passion not only to be zoned in on what’s going on locally, but to have a very global and international mindset of how we’re all connected. All our experiences might seem very different on the surface, but they’re essentially all the same.”

**CLOSING GAPS IN HEALTHCARE**

“As an occupational therapist, I just want people to get back to what they love,” Lauren Reightler, OTD, said.

While Reightler was earning her Post-professional Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) degree through Baylor’s hybrid program, the world began to shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a medical professional, she continued working at Lehigh Valley Health Network in Pennsylvania. There, she noticed that as patients were discharged from the intensive care unit (ICU), they had no true direction on the next steps necessary in their recovery, and many struggled with cognitive, physical, and psychological issues.

“I feel like being in the ICU is such an isolating, traumatic experience—few go through it, luckily—but I don’t necessarily think our healthcare system is set up to address the patients who go through such an intense hospital stay and have so many deficits afterward,” Reightler reflected. “Many get lost in the cracks.”

Reightler’s observations sparked an idea just as she was working on completing her capstone project for the Baylor OTD program. She did a case study on a patient in his early 20s with COVID pneumonia who had a very complex ICU stay. After the individual returned home from rehab, Reightler noticed a significant gap. Health services had stopped, but the patient had not returned to work and was having increasing mental health concerns. This prompted a conversation around post-ICU syndrome and the desire to start a clinic at the hospital where she worked.

Soon, the Successful Post-ICU Recovery Interprofessional Team (SPIRIT) clinic was established at Lehigh Valley Health



**“Having something like this clinic, where we can check in with people to see what they need—even just from a mental health perspective—is huge.”**

**LAUREN REIGHTLER**  
Occupational Therapy ’21

to close the gaps in care that Reightler had observed. The team includes a critical care pharmacist, a licensed clinical social worker, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, a registered nurse practitioner, and a pulmonary/critical care physician. Together, they ensure patients know about available resources and assist if patients have issues obtaining them.

The SPIRIT team aims to make contact the first week that a patient arrives home. Because many are not driving yet, they offer both virtual and in-person appointments. Reightler describes it as a “one-stop-shop” where the patient can meet with all the disciplines together so that they can make recommendations. The team follows up with the individual again after one month to ensure they have what they need to continue their recovery.

“Having something like this clinic, where we can check in with people to see what they need—even just from a mental health perspective—is huge,” Reightler shared.

Reightler remembers why she chose to pursue her post-professional degree, and she’s proud to have helped spur a positive difference in healthcare access.

“I loved that Baylor was so focused on current practice. A lot of classes were focused on looking at how you could implement changes in your current practice and how you could analyze what you’re doing,” Reightler said. “It was all so relevant, and it helped me develop this SPIRIT clinic and guide my practice as a new clinician.”

**REMOVING BARRIERS IN THE OUTDOORS**

A touch of warm sunshine on your skin... Laughter inside a camping tent... Breathing a deep breath of fresh air...

While nature may often surround us, not everyone has the capacity or desire to enjoy it. According to Gabe GarMelo, low socioeconomic status families often find difficulty in getting out to these places, and people of color, women, and minorities are not well represented as outdoor program coordinators. Further, he said, some communities don’t value being in nature, they’re afraid, or they view it as a burden.

Driven by a belief in the value of outdoor experiences, he co-founded GTG Outdoors with his wife, Megan. The organization’s mission is to introduce Waco’s underrepresented populations to nature experiences and the outdoors. Experiences are accessible to people of all ages, with a strong focus on removing barriers.

“If you have no barriers, we want you to come. If you have barriers, we’re going to work with you to remove those barriers,” GarMelo explained. “We want to give the autonomy to the community. It’s important that we have everyone along for this.”

In addition to hosting camping trips for families, summer camps, and other activities, GTG Outdoors has a partnership with Mission Waco, providing outdoor adventures to youth after school. The youth can choose from any outdoor activity they find exciting, often electing to bike, fish, kayak, or rock climb.

“Kids who spend time in nature tend to be more creative, their behavioral issues tend to be buffered, and they’re able to problem solve better because of the abstractness of outdoors,” GarMelo said. “Everything in nature is not perfect, but that’s what makes it perfect for learning.”

GarMelo earned undergraduate degrees in psychology and religion at Baylor, but after graduation, he still felt that something—some training or experience—was missing that would best equip him to pursue his goals.



**“Everything in nature is not perfect, but that’s what makes it perfect for learning.”**

**GABE GARMELO**  
Public Health ’20

“I knew I wanted to help people. My degrees were to help people, but how I was going to do that was still up in the air,” GarMelo explained. “I had my psychology degree for mental health and my religion degree for spiritual health, but I felt there was still something that could be added for a holistic approach.”

That’s when he discovered Baylor’s Master of Public Health (MPH) program. Rather than focusing on one particular area of expertise, GarMelo’s public health degree taught him how to communicate and navigate the skillsets he had developed as an undergraduate for the population that he aims to serve.

As GTG Outdoors continues to bring nature experiences to underrepresented populations, GarMelo is intentional to run the organization in a way that allows Wacoans to feel like they belong, to have autonomy, and to have a voice at the table. He emphasizes that the nonprofit is successful only through local community support, funds, prayers, and insights.

“I feel like it’s my calling, and God has allowed me to do this by opening a lot of doors,” GarMelo said. “I can’t do it alone. At the end of the day, it’s the people who have come through financially, volunteering, or just supporting GTG Outdoors—giving us vision, hope, and excitement.”



# Faculty Scholarship

Baylor University's Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences is home to top-of-their-field researchers who are consistently making academic contributions that ultimately seek to enhance health, quality of life, and human flourishing for all individuals and communities.

In 2023, Robbins College researchers published more than 150 articles in peer-reviewed journals and publications. Below are examples of publications from across the College, as well as a selection of grant-funded projects from the last year—all supporting and strengthening the Robbins College Signature Research Initiatives (see page 15).

## BEHAVIORAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES

**Burnout and Adverse Outcomes in Athletic Training Students: Why All Healthcare Educators Should Be Concerned** in *The Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences and Practice*

by Ashlyne P. Elliott, **Andrew Gallucci (HHPR)**, Leslie Oglesby, **LesLee Funderburk (HSD)**, **Beth A. Lanning (Public Health)**, and Sara Tomek

**Military-Related Stress, Self-Efficacy, and Anxiety: Investigating the Role of Marital Quality in Military Couples in Fam Process**

by Mallory Lucier-Greer, **Nick Frye-Cox (HSD)**, Kayla Reed-Fitzke, Anthony J. Ferraro, and Jay A. Mancini

### FUNDED PROJECT:



**Black Perceptions of Hunting Study Project: Reclaiming the Tradition**

Awarded by: Wildlife Management Institute

Scholar: **Chris Wynveen (HHPR)**

## CHRONIC DISEASES AND CONDITIONS

**The Effect of Acute Aerobic Exercise on Biomarkers of Renal Health and Filtration in Moderate-Chronic Kidney Disease** in *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*

by **Jeffrey S. Forsse (HHPR)**, Matthew N. Peterson, Zacharias Papadakis, J. Kyle Taylor, Burritt W. Hess, Nicholas Schwedock, D. Crawford Allison, Jackson O. Griggs, Ronald L. Wilson, and Peter W. Grandjean

**Variable Body and Tissue Weight Reporting in Preclinical Cachexia Literature May Alter Study Outcomes and Interpretation** in *Disease Models & Mechanisms*

by **Anna G. Beaudry (PhD student, HHPR/HSD)** and **Michelle L. Law (HSD)**

### FUNDED PROJECT:



**Decoding the Role of Bacterial Outer Membrane Vesicle and Small RNAs in Host Inflammation**

Awarded by: National Institutes of Health

Scholar: **Leigh Greathouse (HSD)**

## HEALTH ACCESS AND QUALITY

**Assessing the Efficacy of the 3R (Reframe, Reprioritize, and Reform) Communication Model to Increase HPV Vaccinations Acceptance in Ghana: Community-Based Intervention** in *Vaccines*

by **Matthew Asare (Public Health)**, Peter Agyei-Baffour, Adofo Korantent, Mary E. Commeh, Emmanuel Sarfo Fosu, **Anjelica Elizondo (PhD student, Public Health)**, and Rodney X. Sturdivant

**Food Insecurity Disparities and Impact on Academic and Social Experiences Among College Students at a Large Public University** in *Journal of American College Health*

by Krisha Tripathy, Ria Bhasin, Riley McKinzie, Abigail Sackett, Martha-Ellen Storrs, and **Kathryn M. Janda-Thomte (Public Health)**

### FUNDED PROJECT:



**Physical Activity in Underserved Populations: Using Epidemiologic Assessments to Inform Sustainable Intervention**

Awarded by: National Institutes of Health  
Scholar: **Kelly Ylitalo (Public Health)**

## (RE)HABILITATIVE SCIENCES

**Collaboration from a Distance: Remote Simulation in Hybrid Healthcare Education** in *Health and Interprofessional Practice*

by Catherine M. Andrea, Jason E. Cook, and **Anne H. Boddy (Physical Therapy)**

**Functional Literacy Intervention for Postsecondary Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: A Pilot Study** in *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*

by **Alison Prah (CSD)** and Carly Gilson

### FUNDED PROJECT:



**Speech Perception Enhancement Using Novel Signal Processing in Bimodal Hearing**

Awarded by: National Institutes of Health  
Scholar: **Yang-Soo Yoon (CSD)**

# Awards and Honors

In 2023, many Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences faculty and graduate students were recognized for professional excellence and for significant contributions in their respective fields. A few highlights include:



**Jeremy Bigalke (Postdoctoral researcher, HHPR)**

was awarded the **2023 SRSF Small Research Grant** by the Sleep Research Society.



**Catherine Bigbie (PhD student, Public Health)**

was recognized for the **Highest Scoring Student Abstract** by the American Public Health Association—Breastfeeding Section.



**Germaine Ferreira (Physical Therapy)**

was inducted into the **Academy of Advanced Item Writers** for the Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy.



**Nicole McAninch (HSD)**

was elected as **Academic Representative to the Certified Family Life Educator Advisory Board** for the National Council on Family Relations.



**Kim Smith (HHPR)**

was named to the **Publications & Media Committee** for the National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions.



## In Memoriam...

In February 2024, Dr. Jeff Forsse, Clinical Assistant Professor in the Department of Health, Human Performance, and Recreation (HHPR), passed away tragically following a farming accident. Dr. Forsse was a beloved teacher, faith-inspired researcher, and cherished colleague. His students greatly admired him, and his commitment to their success was evident—both academically and personally. Dr. Forsse's loss will continue to be mourned by the Baylor Family, but his impact will be seen and felt far into the future.

**Jeffrey Stephen Forsse, PhD**

Oct. 16, 1986 – Feb. 24, 2024

Clinical Assistant Professor,  
Department of Health, Human  
Performance, and Recreation





In his Fall 2022 semester kickoff address to college faculty and staff, Jason R. Carter, PhD, Dean of Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences, described his vision for developing a culture within the College that emphasizes valuing employees and encouraging collaboration. He shared his four priorities moving into his new position: (1) The Road to J.O.Y., a nod to Baylor Men’s Basketball Coach Scott Drew’s commitment to Jesus, Others, and Yourself—in that order, (2) Alignment with *Illuminate*, the University’s academic strategic plan, (3) Valuing lopsidedness of people, and (4) Building Community.

One of the ways these priorities took shape in that first semester was through the launch of the Robbins College Pure Gold initiative.

“It’s easy sometimes to take people for granted. We don’t take the time to pause and actually acknowledge people, recognize them, pat them on the back,” Carter shared. “The genesis for Pure Gold was to create a mechanism for that acknowledgement—to recognize individuals who are doing a great job and to inspire others to nominate their peers.”

In particular, Pure Gold honors “lopsided” individuals—a phrase Carter once heard from a guest speaker to illustrate how people with differing

strengths can come together and make an even greater team through the diversity of their skillsets. You don’t need 11 quarterbacks to play football. You need individuals with distinct talents to make the whole more effective.

In this spirit, the Pure Gold initiative recognizes Robbins College faculty and staff in four categories: Research, Teaching, Service, and Culture. The Culture category was added in Spring 2023 to offer more award opportunities to staff members who are typically not engaged in research or teaching activities. Nominations are submitted for faculty and staff members by their peers, reviewed by College leadership, and award winners are announced each month. At the end of the semester, a special celebration is held for the award winners, along with their nominators.

“I’ve been really encouraged by the sheer number of nominations. It’s clear that there’s a lot of collegiality within the College, and a program like Pure Gold just brought it out and elevated that underlying value of caring for one another at a Christian university. It gave people a megaphone to encourage one another,” Carter said.

His favorite part of the program, Carter admits, is the portion of the end-of-semester celebration when nominators ascend the stage alongside their awardee and read the nomination

statement they submitted out loud to all those gathered. It’s a powerful moment that illustrates the immense value of both nominator and awardee to the College as an academic unit and as a community.

*In each future edition of this publication, a list of the Robbins College Pure Gold awardees will be included. In this issue, you will find award winners from Fall 2022 through Fall 2023.*

**PURE GOLD AWARD CATEGORIES**

**RESEARCH:** Awarded to a faculty member who demonstrates excellence in research through impact, innovation, and/or collaboration.

**TEACHING:** Awarded to a faculty member who demonstrates excellence in teaching through inspiration, creativity, scholarship, and/or student care.

**SERVICE:** Awarded to a faculty or staff member who demonstrates excellence in service through accountability, work ethic, and/or exceptional achievement or contribution.

**CULTURE:** Awarded to a faculty or staff member who demonstrates an exceptional commitment to building and nurturing a culture of faith, collegiality, and excellence.

# Pure Gold Award Winners

## FALL 2022

### RESEARCH

- Kelly Ylitalo, Public Health
- Michael Wiggs, HHPR
- Leigh Greathouse, HSD
- Alison Prahl, CSD
- Yang-Soo Yoon, CSD
- Shane Koppenhaver, Physical Therapy
- Beth Lanning, Public Health

### TEACHING

- Christy Gantt, Physical Therapy
- Margo Shanks, Public Health
- Kelly Layne, Occupational Therapy
- Brittany Perrine, CSD
- Emmanuel Akowuah, Public Health
- Kelli McMahan, HHPR
- Elise King, HSD

### SERVICE

- Nicole McAninch, HSD
- Tricia Blalock, HHPR
- Chris Kuhl, Advising
- Teresa Bachman, Physical Therapy
- Heather Hudson, HHPR
- Karen King, HSD
- Michaela Ritter, CSD

## SPRING 2023

### RESEARCH

- Christopher Wynveen, HHPR
- Anne Boddy, Physical Therapy
- Matt Asare, Public Health
- Cory Smith, HHPR

### TEACHING

- Ruthie Davis, HSD
- Justin Adeyemi, HHPR
- Andrew Meyer, HHPR
- Katie Janda, Public Health

### SERVICE

- Lori McNamara, Occupational Therapy/Physical Therapy
- Victoria Crenshaw, HSD
- Noelle Rogers, HSD
- Deborah Rainer, CSD

### CULTURE

- Kimberly Hammond, Advising
- Alyssa Harrington, Advising
- Casey Unverzagt, Physical Therapy
- Maxcey Blaylock, Office of the Dean

## FALL 2023

### RESEARCH

- Karen Melton, HSD
- Megan Flores, Physical Therapy
- Kristen Muller, CSD
- Cory Dungan, HHPR

### TEACHING

- Jeremy Hathway, CSD
- Kayla Collins, Occupational Therapy
- Jacob Brewer, HHPR
- Nadine Welch, CSD

### SERVICE

- Emily Sandvall, Occupational Therapy/Physical Therapy
- Amanda Singh, Physical Therapy
- Jessica Feda, Physical Therapy
- Eva Doyle, Public Health

### CULTURE

- Ashlynn Kilpatrick, Occupational Therapy
- Victoria Willigar, HHPR
- Marian Gillard, Occupational Therapy
- Susan Sherman, CSD





Baylor University

ROBBINS COLLEGE OF  
HEALTH AND HUMAN SCIENCES

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ROBBINS COLLEGE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SCIENCES

## Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS)

Baylor University's Master of Physician Assistant Studies program is offered through an innovative hybrid format that combines online learning experiences, intensive on-site lab immersions, research curriculum, and Simulated Clinical Practice Experiences. This new, career-focused program develops highly skilled, mindful, and empathetic physician assistants equipped for the challenges of clinical practice.

Baylor University has applied for Accreditation - Provisional from the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA). Baylor University anticipates matriculating its first class in Fall 2025, pending achieving Accreditation - Provisional status at the June 2025 ARC-PA meeting. Accreditation - Provisional is an accreditation status granted when the plans and resource allocation, if fully implemented as planned, of a proposed program that has not yet enrolled students appear to demonstrate the program's ability to meet the ARC-PA Standards or when a program holding accreditation-provisional status appears to demonstrate continued progress in complying with the Standards as it prepares for the graduation of the first class (cohort) of students.



For more information, visit  
[physicianassistant.robbs.baylor.edu](https://physicianassistant.robbs.baylor.edu)  
or scan the QR code.