

By Sharon Smith

OSU-Okmulgee's Orthotics and Prosthetics Technician Program Thrives

STUDENTS LEARN THAT THEY ARE CRUCIAL PARTNERS IN THEIR OWN LEARNING, AND LEARN TO WORK IN TEAMS AS THEY DESIGN, FABRICATE AND MODIFY ORTHOTIC AND PROSTHETIC DEVICES.

STUDENTS IN THE **ORTHOTICS** and Prosthetics Technician Program at Oklahoma State University-Okmulgee are developing multiple skill sets coveted by employers that will land them jobs in the industry as technicians, fitters or pedorthists. The program was recently restructured to become a technically based orthotic and/or prosthetic degree program. Jerry Wilson, chair of OSU-Okmulgee's Health and Environmental Technologies Division, was instrumental in making the changes in response to the growing need of employers for graduates who have multiple skill sets, including technician, fitting and pedorthic fabrication skills.

"Employers nationwide know about our pedorthics program and have encouraged us to consider integrating pedorthics into a technician's program," Wilson said. "This made perfect sense because we have all the necessary equipment, labs, instructional technology and faculty."

In the mid-1990s, the university first developed its Pedorthic Footwear Technology Program in response to the growing need for pedorthic services. In 2002, the university initiated a registered assistant program and in 2003 became recognized as an accredited program by the National Commission on Orthotic and Prosthetic Education. In 2006, the American Board for Certification in Prosthetics and Orthotics (ABC) placed a moratorium on the assistant orthotist and/or prosthetist credential. Students currently enrolled in the program were given until the fall 2007 semester to complete the program and gain the assistant level credential. In response to ABC's actions, Wilson restructured the program to the technician level.

"The vision of this program is to provide

educational opportunities for persons seeking pre-certification coursework in pedorthics, technician training, certification in fitting and clinical internships," says Wilson. "This new program will prepare world-class, high performance technical professionals for the orthotics, prosthetics and pedorthics community. Students will understand that their career goals must match the needs of employers and patients, with patient care foremost in mind."

Keith Crownover, OSU-Okmulgee's orthotics and prosthetics program director, joined the program in August 2006. He has restructured the curriculum and syllabi to reflect a technical-based educational program with the added fitter and pedorthic educational components.

"Today's orthotics and prosthetics professionals must be educated and versatile persons, proficient in multiple levels in order to support the certified clinician," Crownover said.

The university's administrators are enthusiastic about this new approach to educating technical professionals. Bob Klabenes, OSU-Okmulgee president, says, "Orthotics and prosthetics professionals are in demand nationwide, and graduates of OSU-Okmulgee's program will enjoy successful careers."

Program Curriculum

Program instructors, who are all certified, include four full-time pedorthists, a prosthetist/orthotist and an orthotist, as well as several practitioners who teach as adjuncts. Students complete a 61-hour Associate in Applied Science Degree program consisting of 29 credit hours in general education, four credit hours of interdisciplinary coursework, and 28 credit hours of technical coursework in two options: prosthetics or orthotics. Both options include a course in pedorthics, prefabricated orthotic fitting and a one-semester internship.

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Real-world problems and projects drive all learning. Beginning with basic tasks and moving progressively through increasingly complex assignments, students learn that they are crucial partners in their own learning, and learn to work in teams as they design, fabricate and modify orthotic and prosthetic devices. The result is learning that is mastery-driven, fun and engaging, spontaneous, rapid, deep and authentic. Assessments are developed at all levels, and students are exposed to both process and product evaluation.

The program's distance learning tools include self-paced interactive learning modules, coursework objectives, pictures, illustrations, terminology, audio pronunciation, and quizzes for instant feedback. The orthotics and prosthetics program includes more than 5,000 square feet of classroom space, laboratories and computer labs for instruction; there is more than \$500,000 in state-of-the-art laboratory equipment.

More Women Enrolling

While technicians in the field have been predominantly male, more women than men are enrolling in OSU-Okmulgee's program. Of the 14 students in the program this past semester, 10 were women. Wilson said this gender shift is not unexpected.

He added that many of the students currently enrolled developed an interest in having a career in the field because they have had a relative or friend with a prosthetic limb or orthotic device. Others entered the program because they decided it offered the job components that they enjoyed—hands-on skills and an opportunity to work with people and improve the quality of patients' lives. Some of the current students have had careers in other fields and are making a career change.

Stephanie McHenry, a full-time student in the program, has a special reason to be seeking a career in orthotics and prosthetics—she wears a prosthetic leg. She was born without a fibular bone on her left leg and without two toes on her left foot; she has been in and out of hospitals all her life,



▲▲ Amputee Drape Molding Job

Students are drape molding a check socket for a trans-radial amputee. From left to right: Rey Amezcquita and Billy James.

having surgeries and being refitted with new prostheses. Thanks to her prosthetic leg, McHenry was able to have a reasonably normal and active life growing up playing basketball and all the physical games other children played. She has always wanted to help children with disabilities similar to hers, and was inspired by many of the doctors, prosthetists and technicians who helped her.

Connie Murray, a former nurse, says that living with a quadriplegic and having a cousin who was a bilateral amputee inspired her to get a degree in orthotics and prosthetics. After 24 years as a nurse, Murray wanted a career change that would allow her to stay in the medical field. She researched careers on the Internet and found that orthotics and prosthetics is in the top 25 fastest growing and highest paying careers, and that OSU-Okmulgee offered an associate degree program not far from her home in Davis, Oklahoma.

“As a nurse, I was used to seeing patients who were acutely ill and may have lost a limb. Now I want to work with people after they leave the hospital to help them have a high quality of life with the use of a prosthetic or orthotic device.”

Roye Brown is in the program because

her dad found out about it and suggested she apply. Brown, from Las Vegas, is very glad she's here because she loves what she does. “I love helping people, and I enjoy the hands-on aspects of the job.”

Brown says she has known since she was very young that she wanted to go into this field. Her cousin was born without an arm and she watched his development as he was fitted with prosthesis and learned to function as a typical child. Brown also says when she was young she liked to make prosthetics for her dolls.

“I remember I would always rip off my Barbie dolls' legs so I could make prosthetic legs—so it's natural that I want to do this for a career.” She hopes to work in the field for a few years and open a facility in the future. ■

Explore More

To enroll or to find out more information, contact the OSU-Okmulgee Orthotics and Prosthetics Program Director Keith Crownover at 918-293-5320, or e-mail keith.crownover@okstate.edu, or division chair Jerry Wilson at 918-293-5330 or jerry.wilson@okstate.edu.