Generation Healthy

In one sense, the Department of Health & Human Physiology (HHP) has a simple task, for its area of study is a single organism. But what an endlessly intriguing organism it is: the human body. Dazzlingly complex, both delicate and strong, it has been an object of fascination from time immemorial. In an era when our knowledge of the body is expanding exponentially, the task of HHP faculty and researchers is to teach a new generation of students about the interplay of biological, behavioral, and societal factors that influence and sustain our bodies.

The department's graduates use their education in a wide range of careers. Some will become physicians, physical therapists, dentists, optometrists, and physician assistants. Some will help people learn to take better care of their bodies, and some will do biomedical research to find new cures and treatments for illness. Still others will pursue careers in recreational therapy, athletic training, and sports business. In settings ranging from hospitals and corporations to schools and non-profit agencies, graduates of the Department of Health & Human Physiology seek to understand and improve the health of individuals and communities.

Paul Jurgens from Batavia, Illinois, is one of those graduates. Jurgens graduated from HHP's human physiology program—which offers rigorous study of the molecular/cellular, systems, organism, and behavioral aspects of the human body—in May 2011. “I’m now attending medical school at Northwestern University, an opportunity that I credit to the quality of the classes and professors in the department,” he says. “My favorite class was exercise physiology. I learned how even a little bit of exercise on a regular basis can have profound benefits. It’s deepened my appreciation for physical activity, and when I become a physician, I want to make that knowledge part of how I treat my patients. I’ve learned that medicine is about more than just prescriptions and procedures; it’s also about encouraging people to treat their bodies well.”

Students in another of HHP’s programs, health promotion, hope to help people develop behaviors that reduce the need to visit a doctor in the first place. While health promotion programs at other universities tend to focus on areas such as stress reduction or alcohol abuse, the program at Iowa emphasizes nutrition and exercise, seeking ways to encourage people to make good behavioral and dietary choices as well as to create civic environments that support healthy lifestyles.

“Students can get a broad grounding in basic science but also learn how this
knowledge can be used to promote healthy behaviors and prevent illness and disabilities," says Kathleen Janz, a professor in the health promotion program. She points out that this is especially relevant today, given the dramatic increase in the incidence of lifestyle-related conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

Janz appreciates the fact that many of her health promotion students view their studies as a vocation, not just as a path to a job. "I hear over and over how they love studying something that directly applies not only to their own lives, but also to the lives of the people they care about and their larger communities," she says. "They're passionate about wanting to make a difference in the world, and they appreciate the fact that they're going into careers that have a lot of variety and that don't keep them behind a desk."

According to Kevin Kregel, professor and chair of HHP, graduates of the human physiology program have an excellent record of acceptance into medical schools and other graduate and professional programs. And students with concentrations in areas such as health promotion or athletic training can often find entry-level positions in their fields upon earning their bachelor's degree—a significant advantage in a tough economy. Even better, careers in these health-related areas are predicted to grow significantly in the coming years.

These strong job prospects have helped create an enviable problem for the department. "Right now we're experiencing a huge surge of interest, even without actively promoting our programs," says Kregel. "With more than 1,300 students majoring in our programs, we're already one of the largest departments on campus, and I think we could easily grow to 1,500 students in the next five years. That means we're scrambling a bit to hire new faculty and offer enough sections, but it's a good problem to have. We're proud to be on the forefront of educating students who will respond to the growing emphasis on health, fitness, and wellness."

—Lori Erickson

The Department of Health and Human Physiology offers a path to a health-related career for UI students, whether they go on to medical school or choose another profession. Students can choose from degree programs in human physiology, health promotion, health studies, athletic training, or several tracks within leisure studies: child life, therapeutic recreation, or recreation and sport business.