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UNH Media Relations

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Media Relations

February 19, 2015

Unique Internship Brings UNH Occupational Therapy Students to Disabled Skiers



University of New Hampshire occupational therapy student Caitlin Hubbard (Lyman, N.H.) skis with a student at Loon Mountain as part of her internship with New England Disabled Snowsports in Lincoln. Credit: Jeremy Gasowski, UNH Communications and Public Affairs

DURHAM, N.H. – Five University of New Hampshire [occupational therapy](#) students are honing their craft with a unique 12-week internship teaching people with disabilities to ski and snowboard in New Hampshire’s White Mountains. It’s the first fieldwork placement of its type for occupational therapy (OT) students anywhere, organizers say.

The students -- Risa Le Pera (Bedford), Kailee Collins (Cumberland, R.I.), Andrea Blodgett (Scarborough, Maine), Lindsay St. Cyr (Barrington) and Caitlin Hubbard (Lyman) -- are teaching at [New England Disabled Sports \(NEDS\)](#) in Lincoln, an organization that provides sports opportunities to people with disabilities, primarily at Loon Mountain and Bretton Woods ski areas.

The fieldwork placement was developed by associate professor of occupational therapy Barbara Prudhomme White and OT department alumna Rina Drake '88, both longtime NEDS volunteers, in conjunction with UNH OT academic fieldwork coordinator Susan Merrill. The goal of an occupational therapist, says White, is to help people with any sort of disability learn or relearn skills to live a full life. “OTs think of everything from daily living to what’s meaningful to you,” she says. For many, that

means self-care, contributing to family life or reengaging in the workforce. And for some people, living life to the fullest involves participating in a leisure activity like skiing.

“I’ve always thought that occupational therapy is inherent in what we do here,” adds Drake, an OT in Nashua. “We are helping people return to their lives, using occupational performance and adaptive sport as a tool towards that end.”

While the vast majority of OT fieldwork placements are in hospitals, rehabilitation and skilled nursing facilities or schools, where OTs are most likely to practice, the NEDS interns and their supervisors believe this fieldwork placement is providing them with solid hands-on experience and career preparation. One of the largest adaptive snow sports programs in the region, NEDS teaches students with both cognitive and physical disabilities to ski or snowboard using a wide range of adaptive equipment, from sit-skis tethered from behind to headset microphones used to guide a visually impaired participant.

“I’ve been exposed to so many different diagnoses, from spinal cord injuries to kids on the autism spectrum. You wouldn’t get to see such a wide variety in other settings,” says Blodgett, who like the other interns is in the first year of her master’s in UNH’s combined five-year B.S./M.S. OT program.

“This is out of the box, not quite as clinical as I would get in a hospital or a school,” adds Collins. “But we’re still evaluating, treating, using so many different pieces of adaptive equipment. It’s drawing all my clinical experience and all my school experience into one.” The environment — cold but far from clinical — flexes the interns’ creativity, as well, as they problem-solve their students’ challenges on a chairlift or at the top of a ski slope. To meet accreditation standards, the students are supervised by professional OTs licensed in New Hampshire; Drake and White share the duties with two other NEDS volunteers who are OTs.

The internships also fill a critical need for mid-week instructors at NEDS; most of the organization’s volunteers hold full-time jobs and teach snow sports only on weekends. NEDS executive director Ralph Nelson has high praise for the interns, who teach nearly every day and assist with other NEDS duties like fundraising. “They’re enthusiastic, they’re intelligent, they all have a really nice way with our students,” he says. “They’ve surpassed all of our expectations easily.”

Long days in the cold followed by evenings of writing evaluations or supervisor meetings notwithstanding, each intern is grateful for the opportunity to advance her professional skills sharing an activity she loves. And the impact on their students, the interns say, goes far beyond learning to slide down a mountain, embracing the “meaningful occupation” White and Drake describe.

“Skiing has been Dan’s life. He would be lost without skiing,” says St. Cyr of a 70-something with vision loss she guided down an expert trail. “It’s really exciting to watch him in action, to help him do what he loves.”

The [University of New Hampshire](http://www.unh.edu), founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,300 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

Read more in UNH Today: <http://unh.edu/unhtoday/2015/02/out-clinic-out-box>

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnyIM7IsSjs>

Photographs available to download:

http://www.unh.edu/news/releases/2015/02/images/7093_cpa_ot-student-interns-at-loon_gasowski_dsc9446-web-888.jpg

Caption: University of New Hampshire occupational therapy student Caitlin Hubbard (Lyman, N.H.) skis with a student at Loon Mountain as part of her internship with New England Disabled Snowsports in Lincoln.

Credit: Jeremy Gasowski, UNH Communications and Public Affairs

http://www.unh.edu/news/releases/2015/02/images/7093_cpa_ot-student-interns-at-loon_gasowski_dsc9191-web-4638.jpg

Caption: University of New Hampshire occupational therapy student Lindsay St. Cyr (Barrington, N.H.) leads a blind skier down Loon Mountain as part of her internship with New England Disabled Snowsports in Lincoln. UNH OT student Risa Le Pera (Bedford) follows.

Credit: Jeremy Gasowski, UNH Communications and Public Affairs

-30-

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