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## Aligning Instruction, Programming, and Facilities at Meredith College

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Heather Sanderson holds an innovative appointment at Meredith College, a private women's liberal arts college and coeducational graduate school in Raleigh, North Carolina. Not only is she associate professor of Health, Exercise, and Sport Sciences (HESS), but she also serves as the HESS program coordinator—and as the Lowery Fitness Center director, as well.

Drawing on her years of experience directing fitness centers, working in clinical exercise spaces, and managing facilities, Sanderson continually finds ways to integrate the students' class and research work into the fitness center as well as providing fitness center space for applied research and classroom learning.

Sanderson uses her wide array of expertise to strengthen programming across her areas of responsibility. Stephanie Little, associate professor of Nutrition, Health, and Human Performance at Meredith, says that Sanderson's approach has been a "game changer" for the college because the field of kinesiology is growing rapidly and increasing the opportunities for HESS graduates. As Little points out, Sanderson sees that big picture and has spearheaded inventive curricular changes designed to prepare students for both the work force and for graduate programs. These changes have attracted more students to HESS; Little notes that Meredith now has the largest number ever of students going

to graduate school, where they are having a high degree of success due in large part to Sanderson's resourceful leadership and curricular innovations.

### Integrating Classroom Instruction with Applied Learning and Professionalization

The two required exercise prescription courses for HESS sophomores and seniors that Sanderson has designed showcase her dynamic approach to instruction. These co-curricular experiences require students to apply what they have learned in classroom instruction as they work directly with clients in both the Lowery Fitness Center and the Health and Human Performance Lab on campus. Sanderson's students gain a great deal beyond content knowledge as they move through these courses. They say that the eight weeks they spend working with clients during the term shifts their focus; they become more concerned with finding ways to establish and maintain their client relationships, rather than simply focusing on

the content of the course. They appreciate the opportunity to interact with a professional in a professional environment, and they learn how to adapt their plans "on the fly" when needed. Little points out that the students really benefit from the opportunity to develop these real-world skills as they develop and deliver a customized exercise program for their clients; the faculty members they work with also benefit from the experience. The Human Resources team loves the program as well, because it promotes employee wellness at no cost to the faculty and staff members who participate.

Throughout these courses, Sanderson guides her students in developing the relationship skills that are key to working with fitness clients. She says that new clients—particularly those living with a chronic condition—can be quite nervous and unsure that they will be able to exercise. She instructs her students to comfort their clients by bringing empathy to the conversation while also educating their clients about what level of exercise is possible. Clients may fear that exercise may



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be too painful or tiring, and students can reassure them that they should feel better—and they'll also sleep better after exercise.

Meredith HESS students have their first opportunity to participate in Sanderson's visionary course designs during their sophomore year, when they take Exercise Prescription for Healthy Populations in the spring. To prepare, they take Exercise Leadership in the fall, which Sanderson and her colleagues revamped to become a prerequisite for the spring course. Additionally, Sanderson has established a professional partnership with the American Council on Exercise (ACE) so that students who complete the paired sophomore courses are prepared to take two ACE certification exams, those for certified personal trainer and group fitness instructor. These micro-credentials enable students to begin working on and near campus in positions related to their future professional fields. Sanderson notes that students elevate their level of employability when they add the micro-credentials to their resume, along with the CPR/ first-aid certification required of all HESS students.

Students who have earned the credential to be group fitness instructors can then lead fitness classes on campus through the WOW! (Working on Wellness at Work, for faculty) and AIM (Angels in Motion, for students) programs. Mary Johnson, director of Student Health at Meredith, states that they offer classes such as cardio, dance, Pilates, and strength and conditioning, and she relies on her relationship with Sanderson to staff these positions. Sanderson also steps in to teach fitness classes, and she is skilled in teaching a wide variety of them. Once Johnson plans the semester, Sanderson looks at the schedule to see what class might balance the offerings—and then she offers to round out the schedule by teaching it herself.

Sanderson reports that many graduate programs require direct patient contacts hours for admission, so she and her colleagues require HESS students to complete 300 internship hours prior to graduation. Students usually have these internships at one of the three major area hospitals, in departments like orthopedics and cardiac or pulmonary rehabilitation. These experiences

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prepare Meredith HESS students for entering a wide array of professions, including fields such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, athletic training, cardiac rehabilitation, exercise physiology, and serving as physician assistants.

Another way that Sanderson prepares students for life after graduation is by offering graduate school boot camps—seminars in which she reviews actions they should take to make themselves as competitive as possible in their grad school applications. Little says that Sanderson covers their plan of study, shadowing hours, and other avenues for increasing their chances of acceptance. Johnson reports that Sanderson helps with grad student applications, as well.

Sanderson's students see and appreciate the many roles she serves on campus and the efforts she makes on their behalf. As Sierra Grande, a Meredith junior in the HESS program,

states, "Dr. Sanderson is an incredible role model; she is a dedicated professor and group fitness educator. She's fantastic at building and maintaining relationships with others, whether it's students, colleagues, or fitness trainees. It's been a privilege to be taught by her."

To prepare for Sanderson's second groundbreaking exercise prescription class, HESS seniors take Exercise Testing and Measurement with one of Sanderson's colleagues each fall. They learn how to accurately administer an array of biometric tests, such as measuring blood pressure, finding glucose and cholesterol levels, administering cardiac stress tests, and assessing a client's mobility and stability.

While the students are learning some of the skills they will need to work with their assigned faculty and staff members, Sanderson is working behind the scenes to populate the program. After reaching out to the campus

to find interested faculty and staff members, she then contacts their medical providers for clearance to participate in an exercise-prescription program. Once the faculty members are cleared, the students can begin learning about the medical conditions that their assigned clients have. Each student researches approaches for working with the chronic condition and its associated challenges; they also find out what treatments the client is currently receiving.

The final project for Exercise Testing and Measurement is a pre-test report on the client. The students conduct all of the tests they have learned to administer during the course, then write up the results. They also discuss how their findings relate to their clients' medical conditions.

With that careful preparation in place, HESS seniors are ready for Sanderson's impressive Clinical Exercise Prescription for

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Clinical Practice course in the spring. In this unique, integrated curriculum, each student learns how to train a Meredith faculty or staff member who is experiencing the chronic conditions they have studied. Their clients may be living with respiratory or metabolic issues, or they may be under the care of an oncologist. Early in the term, Sanderson teaches her students to account for pathophysiology—"the functional and biochemical changes that are associated with or a result of disease or injury," according to the National Institutes of Health. They also learn some pharmacology so that they can consider how their clients' prescribed medicines may affect their ability to exercise.

The students then use everything they have learned to develop eight-week clinical exercise programs for their clients. Each pair meets twice weekly during the lunch hour, once in class and once on their own in the Lowery Fitness Center. Sanderson teaches her students  
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the medical notation standard of keeping SOAP—subjective, objective, assessment, and plan—notes, coupled with the exercise protocol for each session throughout the term. At the four-week mark, Sanderson has the faculty and staff members complete a mid-program evaluation. She shares the evaluations with her students so that they can adjust their exercise programs or approaches as needed.

At the end of the term, the students return to the Health and Human Performance Lab to complete post-testing with their clients. The culminating project for the class is the final report, which includes the pre- and post-test results, the eight-week exercise program they developed and administered, and a “ninth week” exercise plan for the client to complete on their own. Students also send Sanderson a separate report in which they discuss what they learned through the intensive and immersive experience, as well as what they would do differently if they repeated the course. All Meredith students complete an inventory of their own strengths through its StrongPoints program, so HESS students address how those strengths interacted with their work in the Clinical Exercise Prescription class. Sanderson

appreciates seeing the elements come together as her students apply what they have learned throughout the clinical exercise prescription courses.

### **Lowery Fitness Center as Campus Research and Wellness Hub**

Sanderson also applies her many talents in bringing people and resources together in her position as director of the Lowery Fitness Center. Sanderson sees the fitness center as vital to supporting the health of the campus community. She points out that the wellbeing of a college student is an important contributor to their academic success and persistence to graduation. She also notes that people can’t flourish if they are not feeling healthy, so the fitness center can play a vital role in helping students, faculty, and staff feel well and be successful.

Reflecting Sanderson’s signature approach to integrating campus populations and resources, the Lowery Fitness Center strives to promote whole campus community wellness while also acting as a research and teaching laboratory. In addition to housing a research methods class taught by one of Sanderson’s colleagues, the Center space

also accommodates undergraduate research, along with some ongoing kinesthetic research on range of motion and exercise and stress. Additionally, the fitness center houses courses in health and physical learning that Meredith requires for graduation. Each student must complete four one-hour courses under this umbrella, and offerings include pickleball, mindfulness, archery, and outdoor leisure pursuits. Sanderson has observed that more students now arrive on campus with diagnosed medical conditions, and this graduation requirement can help them engage with different types of activities to better manage their long-term health and wellness.

Johnson recommends that small teaching colleges be open to establishing more dual positions like Sanderson’s. She points out that the campus would lose out if Sanderson were limited to just one role; the way she makes connections across her areas of responsibilities helps her to succeed in all of them. Johnson also points out that the students benefit from seeing the range of strengths that their faculty members have, and she hopes that such appointments become more common in the future.

Sanderson provides an exemplary model for blending campus academic and administrative positions by continually seeking out ways to promote increased interactions between classroom instruction, academic research, fitness spaces, and the campus community. These interactions enrich all involved, and Sanderson’s inspiring example demonstrates the benefits of purposefully developing dynamic relationships between campus populations and resources.



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