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Welcome once again to the Department of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology’s alumni newsletter, NutrEx. The past two newsletters were both a hit – so without further ado, on to the third installment!

At times it is still hard to imagine how something like COVID-19 has swept in to fundamentally change the way we conduct our teaching and research missions, and indeed life as we know it more generally. In these pages, you will learn about how we quickly pivoted to a remote teaching paradigm after spring break, coinciding with the stay-at-home order issued for Washington State on March 23.

Although our instructional approach remains primarily remote as we continue to grapple with COVID-19, we value and appreciate the importance of the hands-on experiences we provide to students. We worked with campus leadership to ensure that undergraduate students were able to continue with in-person laboratory instruction in a safe environment, and worked with our partners to ensure critical undergraduate internship and experiential learning opportunities for our dietetic students.

We welcomed two new staff members and one faculty member to join our team this past year, all of whom you will meet in this issue. Our Alumni Spotlight features Dr. Virginia (Val) Hillers, professor emeritus, Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition, and retired WSU Extension food specialist. Please read further to get a greater sense of the many excellent faculty, staff, and students in our department and how they are making a difference in the various settings in which they are contributing to WSU’s tripartite land-grant university mission.

Great things are ahead for NEP, so please stay tuned.
Cheers!

Glen E. Duncan, PhD, RCEP
Professor and Chair
Nutrition and Exercise Physiology
When a client in the Nutrition and Exercise Physiology (NEP) Health and Fitness Clinic gathered cans of beans and bags of flour on an afternoon in March, she wasn’t looking to cook a meal for her family. Instead, she placed the items in plastic sacks and logged into a HIPAA-compliant Zoom meeting. The sacks would be her dumbbells for the day while her NEP student trainer led her through a personalized exercise routine.

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit halfway through Spring semester and required all courses at WSU Health Sciences Spokane to be taught online felt sudden, yet NEP faculty responded nimbly and creatively to ensure learning experiences for both students and the community continued without interruption. Nearly all 60 clients reported surprise at what a good workout they could get at home with simple equipment. Dr. Julie Larsen, the clinic instructor, met regularly with students to brainstorm exercises and review fitness plans.

“I reminded students that, moving forward, training via Zoom may be a normal part of an exercise physiologist’s career,” Larsen said.

A future that includes educating the public through virtual platforms will likewise be a key practice for community-based registered dietitians. At WSU Extension offices, it didn’t take long after stay-at-home orders went into effect to receive dozens of calls about food preservation methods. Clinical Assistant Professor April Davis and her summer session students in the NEP dietetics program jumped at the chance to heed the call.
The students, who normally would have been on location completing supervised practice hours, instead paired with Extension faculty mentors to review the food preservation techniques and study adult learning theory. Students then worked in teams to develop slide decks and teaching notes about freezing/cold storage, boiling water canning, pressure canning, and drying. The new food preservation class designed by the students can be taught in live or recorded online formats by Extension faculty and staff.

As summer shifted into fall, the WSU president and his cabinet made the difficult decision to continue remote learning on all campuses. However, they left open the opportunity for departments to bring small groups of students to campus for lab courses. The NEP faculty, lab coordinator, and teaching assistants harbored no hesitation about continuing to offer the kinds of experiences that are the hallmark of our program.

Dr. Hans Haverkamp noted, “Meeting with students in-person each week has allowed for a stronger connection with the students and has added an important feeling of reality to the course.”

The NEP juniors, seniors, and MS Coordinated Program in Dietetics students who attend the labs have universally expressed gratitude for the chance to get out of their homes a couple of times a week and learn alongside 5-10 of their classmates.

As they look toward moving into their internship rotations or even graduation, the students understand their experiences will bode well for their careers.

The extra effort to maintain social distancing, doff PPE, and disinfect the lab spaces has added a layer of complexity to each session, but all involved accept the additional work as a fair trade off for the end result.

“We want our students to feel confident and prepared for success,” said Shaekira Niehuser, clinical assistant professor.

“I’m proud of the students’ willingness to adapt in an uncharted situation and their commitment to improving access to nutrition education that is geared toward communities of varying skill levels and backgrounds.”

— April Davis
Clinical Assistant Professor
FACULTY NEWS

NEP in the News
NEP professors are increasingly sought after by local and national media for their expertise on how nutrition and exercise impact our lives. Here are some of the topics they discussed:

RACIAL INEQUITIES IN PREMATURE DEATHS
A report on racial inequities among people of color and low-income communities causing premature death by Ofer Amram and Pablo Monsivais received extensive media coverage, including in The Spokesman Review, Health IT Analytics, Tacoma Daily News, The Inlander and Spokane Public Radio.

HEART DISEASE
Pablo Monsivais, Solmaz Amiri, Ofer Amram and Bob Lutz penned an editorial piece in The Spokesman Review for American Heart Month about improving health care access to reduce heart disease.

COVID-19
Pablo Monsivais was interviewed by KREM TV and The Daily Evergreen regarding his work with Ofer Amram to develop an interactive map that showed areas of highest risk for COVID-19 across Washington state.

Ofer Amram, Pablo Monsivais and colleagues were featured in The Spokesman Review and The Inlander for their statistical model to help hospitals forecast supply needs and capacity challenges related to rising rates of COVID-19.

Pablo Monsivais was quoted in The Spokesman Review regarding his work sampling Spokane’s wastewater to track COVID-19.

Ofer Amram and Pablo Monsivais were highlighted by Spokane Public Radio and KHQ and for their work developing a COVID-19 tracker to compare cases in rural and urban areas.

Ofer Amram was interviewed by Spokane Public Radio, Northwest Public Radio and The Spokesman Review about his $100,000 grant to study the impact of COVID-19 on cancer patients.

Glen Duncan and colleagues received extensive local and national coverage including in WebMD, Post and Courier, and Day Spa Magazine for a report indicating that individuals who increased their physical activity during COVID-19 had higher levels of stress and anxiety.

PLANT-BASED DIET
Franck Carbonero was quoted in The Spokesman Review about how plant-based diets boost immunity.

LIVING TO 100
A report on the living environment factors that determine one’s ability to reach centenarian status by Ofer Amram and colleagues received extensive local and national media coverage including KXLY, Yahoo! News, The New Daily, International Business Times, and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.
Research Round-Up

NEP faculty were busy conducting and publishing their research, as well as securing grants for research efforts in the months and years ahead. Here is some of the work from the past year:

**Glen Duncan**
- Continues to work with faculty and students on cutting-edge research related to multiple environmental influences on lifestyle behaviors and health. Registry activities are summarized in the latest annual report: [https://wstwinregistry.org/for-researchers/annual-reports/](https://wstwinregistry.org/for-researchers/annual-reports/).

**Hans Haverkamp**
- Co-investigator on $25,000 grant to study lung function after contracting COVID-19 in NCAA division-I athletes.
- Co-investigator on a NIH R21 to study the influence of forest fires and poor air quality on lung function in asthmatic adults. The PI for the grant is Julie Postma from WSU Nursing.

**Lindsey Miller**

**Franck Carbonero**
- Will serve as Co-PI on a four-year, $2 million grant from the Health-Agriculture Nexus Challenge Area of the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR) for ‘Enhancing Human Health and Nutrition from Soil to Society using Quinoa as a Model Crop Species.’
We salute alum Virginia ("Val") Hillers, MS, PhD, a graduate of the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition when nutrition education and research was solely on the Pullman campus. She is Professor Emeritus of the department and retired from her role as a food specialist at WSU Extension.

Val began her WSU career by teaching a variety of nutrition courses including Human Nutrition, Nutrition Education for Teachers, Nutrition through the Arts, and Maternal Nutrition. After years of delivering information about the science of nutrition, she sought to understand the motivators of food-related behaviors and switched focus to consumer food safety education.

In her role as a WSU Extension food specialist, she helped people understand the science of food safety and learn how to change their behaviors to reduce their risk of foodborne illnesses. Many of her research projects focused on pregnant women and Hispanic grandmothers who made queso fresco (fresh cheese) with unpasteurized milk, and her students’ research evaluated the food safety education programs she had developed in collaboration with her team.

At the beginning of her professional career, Val noted that behavioral research was considered less valuable than laboratory research, but fortunately those attitudes changed. Val’s work on behavioral determinants of food safety has been widely disseminated, including through the U.S. Food and Drug Administration which distributed Spanish and English versions of her work on food safety at health fairs throughout the U.S.

Val benefited greatly from scholarships and assistantships to support her education at Montana State, Iowa State, and Washington State universities. In turn, she has graciously provided student support in the Department of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology.

Thank you, Val and all alumni, for your generous professional and monetary contributions to the NEP program and the field of nutrition and exercise science.
STUDENT NEWS

We caught up with some of our recent MS CPD NEP graduates to ask, “what are you doing now?” Check out where our talented alumni have landed and what their favorite parts of their professional jobs are.

CHAR-LEE CASSEL  
MS CPD NEP ‘17  
Zerbe Sisters Nursing Center  
Favorite part of job: “It is the perfect balance of clinical, community, and food service nutrition.”

VICTORIA (TORI) HUSEBY  
MS CPD NEP ‘18  
Sanford Health  
Favorite part of job: “Working at our Coordinated Treatment Center with adult neurology (Parkinson’s Disease, Huntington’s Disease, and ALS). It is fun to see all of the multi-disciplinaries coming together to provide our patients with the best care.”

EMILY KELLOGG  
MS CPD NEP ‘18  
Healthcare Services Group (HCSG)  
Favorite part of job: “Talking with residents.”

MCKAYLA MADISON  
MS CPD NEP ‘20  
Eating Recovery Center  
Favorite part of job: “Helping people repair their relationship with food!”

RAWNIE OEHLER  
MS CPD NEP ‘18  
St. Luke’s Rehabilitation Institute  
Favorite part of job: “Helping cardiac and pulmonary patients reach their health and fitness goals!”

LEANNE WENTWORTH  
MS CPD NEP ‘17  
Vida Health  
Favorite part of job: “I have been able to transition to working from home during the global pandemic and get to work with people all over the country in providing MNT, DSME, and health coaching in a video-telehealth format. I set my own hours and have unlimited communication with a network of 400 other RD’s doing the same across the US.”

Retirements

Kevin Stevens, RN, MSN, MS, RD, CHSE  
Congratulations to alumna Kevin Stevens, RN, MSN, MS, RD, CHSE on her upcoming retirement from WSU College of Nursing Center for Clinical Performance & Simulation. Kevin has worked at WSU for the past 11 years and has been integral in developing simulations for the MS CPD NEP Medical Nutrition Therapy course. Kevin is looking forward to spending more time with her family and plans to continue working in the sports nutrition field after retiring from WSU.
STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Annika Vahk, MS entered the WSU NEP PhD program as a member of its inaugural class in 2019. After immigrating from Estonia with her family in 1996, she grew up in Moses Lake. Annika completed the Running Start program at Big Bend Community College in 2010, followed by bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Exercise Science at Eastern Washington University (EWU) in 2012 and 2014.

Following attainment of her degrees, Annika joined EWU as an instructor where she taught courses on consumer health, nutrition, physical fitness, strength and conditioning, and personal training. As a lifelong learner with a passion for teaching and conducting research, getting a doctoral degree was the natural next step for Annika. However, it was not a straight or easy path to WSU. Instead, Annika describes her decision to attend WSU NEP as “a rollercoaster ride.”

After giving up her teaching job at EWU, Annika relocated to Germany with hopes of pursuing an international doctoral program while her husband was stationed there in the Air Force. Unfortunately, the graduate programs offered did not have the combination of nutrition and exercise physiology; components that Annika desired in her degree. When she learned about the WSU NEP PhD program during a visit home to Spokane a mere 48 hours before her return flight overseas, she decided the program was the perfect fit for her to pursue.

Since Annika began the program at WSU she has excelled academically and professionally, though it has not been without its challenges.

“I have faced many challenges throughout my life, but I think the biggest has been the separation from my husband,” said Annika. “I commend all who make long distance relationships work. While the separation is tough, I can truly say that I feel blessed to be here as I know this is a great academic opportunity.”

Additional challenges stem from being a part of the first cohort in the WSU NEP PhD program.

“We are setting the pace for those that will follow in our footsteps,” said Annika.

“Previously, my research was focused on the college population, however, this has changed, and my current interests lie in community-based approaches to battling food insecurity among locals. This topic is even more important to address amidst the COVID pandemic we have all been challenged by.”

— Annika Vahk, MS
A true trailblazer, Annika ‘sets the pace’ in other aspects as well. She serves as the Northwest American College of Sports Medicine student representative and has been involved in several community service activities such as distributing food with WSU campus pantry, providing health education to the Fairchild military community, and participating in the Spokane River clean-up.

In addition to her rigorous studies, she also serves as a teaching assistant for Cardiopulmonary Physiology and Rehabilitation courses.

Regarding her teaching abilities, Dr. Hans Haverkamp commented, “Annika has done an extraordinary job as a teaching assistant. She is everything one could ask for: dependable, organized, enthusiastic, and conscientious. The students and our department have benefited greatly from her energy and support. We certainly are very fortunate to have Annika in our first doctoral cohort.”

To top it off, Annika is also an accomplished competitive runner, having placed multiple times in her age brackets. Her greatest running achievement has been helping EWU win the Bloomsday Corporate Cup in 2016.

Annika has also been highly productive in research. Over the course of her academic career, Annika has delivered numerous research presentations at regional and national conferences on topics including metabolic syndrome in football players and post-training recovery fuel in tennis players. As her interests continue to evolve, she plans for her research work to follow suit.

Though Annika plans to pursue her passion for teaching and research in a higher education setting, it’s unknown where those plans may take her in the future as they depend on the location of her husband’s next military assignment. What is certain is how proud NEP is of Annika and how much we look forward to her continued success.

GIVE TO NEP

The Nutrition and Exercise Physiology Excellence Fund nourishes our students with support for scholarships, innovative thesis projects on community health, faculty development and promotion of critical partnerships to ensure the growth and maturity of our degree programs.

“The generosity of donor support helps relieve some of the financial debt and stress that comes along with pursuing an advanced degree. I deeply appreciate the financial support and can assure that this assistance is an investment; the return being the influence and changes I hope to make in peoples’ lives and within the field of nutrition upon graduation.”

— Katherine Stutz

NEP student

Please consider a gift to the Nutrition and Exercise Physiology Excellence Fund by visiting medicine.wsu.edu/give/.
WSU NEP Facts

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The Department of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology seeks to promote the health of individuals and communities through research, teaching, and service activities in human nutrition and exercise physiology, and the application of these sciences in academic, clinical, public health, and industry settings.

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Support NEP with an end-of-year gift. Donations to the Excellence Fund support student scholarships and financial aid, student travel to professional conferences, new equipment, and faculty recruitment and retention. To donate, click here, visit medicine.wsu.edu/give, or contact our development office at 509-358-7616 or nancy.fike@wsu.edu.

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