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Name change at Health and Human Performance shows program growth

BILLINGS, Feb. 18, 2014 – Visitors to the Fortin Education Center at Rocky Mountain College notice a lot of student activity. The action springs in part from substantial growth in the athletic training and exercise science concentrations in the newly renamed Health and Human Performance department. The new departmental focuses have made a name change imperative, said the program’s professors.

Until the 1990s, the longstanding Physical Education and Health program at RMC focused on physical education and health education. Personnel in PEH have re-crafted the program focus in response to two evolving and expanding cynosures of society: fitness and sports, said Professor Paul Roper. Of 118 students in the department in 2014, two-thirds are in either the exercise science or athletic training programs, even in a department with four major concentrations and four minors. “We feel it's time to change the name to Health and Human Performance, to rightly shift the focus that folks have of our area – PEH to HHP,” said Professor Clarece Lacy.

About one-third of the 118 HHP students now concentrate in exercise science. They follow a course of study that points them toward careers in physical therapy, athletic training, or a pre-med or pre-health focus. “This career field is predicted to grow 27 percent in the next 10 years,” said Amanda Botnen, assistant professor of physical education. Botnen teaches courses focused on athletic training, strength and conditioning instruction, biomechanics, and therapeutic modalities. She also works at Billings Clinic as a certified athletic trainer, and she coordinates strength and conditioning for RMC athletic teams.

Athletic training, the department concentration with the highest enrollment, has two prongs through which students can undertake their career path, “Best of both worlds we like to call it,” said Lacy with a laugh. After all of the hands-on experience and career-guiding internships they get within the program, students can get straight out into the workforce using a bachelor of science degree, or stay longer and complete a master’s degree. The M.A. in Athletic Training is offered in conjunction with Montana State University Billings. Lacy elaborates, “One really nice thing about our M.A. offering is that it is completed, along with the bachelor’s, in five years rather than the normal six.”

Roper celebrates the change in his departmental focus. When he started at RMC in 1990, the modest program had students spread within three concentrations: physical education,
exercise science, and athletic training, with a few in a coaching minor. In 2014, just 10 of the 118 students are physical education majors. Roper is excited though: “Not only have we seen significant changes in the distribution of students, but we have a new growth area in our sports management degree, which points to a continuation of these changes.”

While they commit to continuing to better their existing programs, Lacy said the department hopes to capitalize on the growth in sports management, a program that integrates courses from the RMC business department. She explained, “Sports management looks to classes in ethics, accounting, economics, marketing, and introduction to coaching.” As the look and feel of the department evolves, RMC stays ahead of these trends that Roper and his colleagues call “exhilarating, demanding, and refreshing.”

“We have magnificent students in our program,” said Roper, “such as soccer player Oliver Gore, first RMC student in the major league soccer draft, who plans to play semiprofessional soccer. In his standout career at RMC, he was NAIA [National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics] Player of the Year, honoring his character.”

The devoted faculty themselves carry health practice forward with heart and soul as well as academics. Roper remained undefeated for life in his years-long challenge to both male and female RMC students to defeat him in a tourney of racquet sports. He never lost the $50 bet he offered to scores of upstart sports team members who hoped to beat him across a slate of games chosen from pickleball, squash, badminton, and racquetball. Sixty-eight-year-old Roper only retired his challenge after having both his knee joints replaced a few years ago.

Lacy, an Army veteran who in her 34 years at RMC has served students as Director of Academic Advising and on a score of committees, teaches anatomy and physiology classes along with sports sociology and management courses. Meanwhile, she shares her hobbies of endurance horse and bicycle racing with her students.

As the department changes focus, the professors continue to practice what they teach. A hallmark of RMC health education, Lacy said, remains the development of the whole person in social, emotional, and practical skills, as well as academic mastery.

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