



SIUE Alumna Alexa Knuth thriving in competitive Scottish Physical Therapy PhD Program

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EDWARDSVILLE - Southern Illinois University Edwardsville alumna Alexa Knuth is putting her passion for research into practice as she pursues her doctorate in physiotherapy from Robert Gordon University (RGU) in Aberdeen, Scotland.

SIUE's strong emphasis on student research and experiential learning, uniquely prepared Knuth for RGU's competitive program which is among few in the world that offers applied work and high-level research opportunities in the field of physical therapy.

“If it had not been for SIUE, I would not be able to experience this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity at RGU,” said Knuth. “Unlike many physical therapy programs, at RGU, we begin clinical placements after the first 16 weeks, and they take place all over Scotland.

The Peoria native earned a bachelor’s in exercise science from the SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior (SEHHB) in 2015 and a master’s in kinesiology in 2017.

During her undergraduate studies at SIUE, Knuth participated in the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program, which engages students in scholarship, connecting them more fully to their educational process.

“The URCA program is an invaluable opportunity for undergraduate students at SIUE,” said Lindsay Ross-Stewart, PhD, assistant professor in the SEHHB’s Department of Applied Health, and director of the exercise and sports psychology graduate program. “It gives students an inside look at what it takes to complete a study, teaches them how to be critical thinkers, and allows them opportunities to be active learners. Many schools reserve these opportunities for graduate students, so for our students to have such large roles in our research labs as undergraduates truly sets them apart from other students when they graduate.”

As an URCA assistant, Knuth explored a plethora of research opportunities within the SEHHB. Her research career began under the mentorship of Elizabeth McKenney, PhD, and Joel Nadler, PhD, associate professors in the Department of Psychology. She worked to collect and analyze data on Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and participated in a research lab that studied sexual harassment in the workplace.

Knuth earned authorship credits on several presentations that were submitted to the 2013 Midwestern Psychological Association annual conference, the 2014 North American Society for Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity conference, and the 2014 Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) conference.

In 2014, Knuth joined the team of student and faculty researchers in the Sport and Exercise Psychology Research Lab. It was in this laboratory environment where her interest in the use and application of psychological interventions with occupational and physical therapy truly evolved.

During her graduate studies, under the mentorship of Ross-Stewart, she explored occupational therapists’ understanding of the role of self-efficacy in recovery. Her thesis on “Psychological Aspects of Rehabilitation as Perceived by Physical Therapists” was

published in the February 2018 edition of the Journal of Physical Fitness, Medicine and Treatment in Sports.

“Based on the findings of my first study, I conducted another study to explore how an individual’s injury or disability treatment is influenced by emotional, behavioral and situational factors from the perspective of the physical therapist,” said Knuth. “This later became my thesis, which I presented at the 2016 AASP national conference.”

In 2017, after a strenuous application process and a flight to Toronto for an interview, Alexa received notice that she was accepted into RGU’s physiotherapy Ph.D. program.

“I was thrilled for Alexa when she was accepted into the program at RGU,” Ross-Stewart explained. “Alexa worked hard as a student to gain experiences that would prepare her for future schooling and her eventual career, and to see her embrace her role as a research practitioner has made me very proud.”

Moving forward, Knuth hopes to incorporate psychosocial interventions into the field of physical therapy. She also is preparing to submit her thesis for publication.

The SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior prepares students in a wide range of fields including public health, exercise science, nutrition, instructional technology, psychology, speech-language pathology and audiology, educational administration, and teaching. Faculty members engage in leading-edge research, which enhances teaching and enriches the educational experience. The School supports the community through on-campus clinics, outreach to children and families, and a focused commitment to enhancing individual lives across the region.