

# REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

The new School of Allied Health Professions building will unify faculty, staff and students for greater success

BY ANNE DREYFUSS

In the winter, first-year physical therapy student Carlin Tettelbach often only sees sunlight for an hour of her day. “We are pretty happy and positive people, but it can be gloomy at times,” the 24-year-old says of herself and her classmates who spend weekdays together at the Virginia Commonwealth University Department of Physical Therapy, which is housed in the basement of West Hospital on the MCV Campus. The perpetually cold and windowless basement is prone to flooding and often smells of mold. “It is a little dreary and very old, but we deal with it because we have such great professors and great classmates,” Tettelbach says.

For 16 years, students have endured the dark, damp and dreary environment in exchange for the opportunity to learn from the world-renowned faculty that the department recruits, but soon students will not have to sacrifice sunlight for academic pursuits. Last spring, the Virginia legislature and the VCU Board of Visitors approved plans for a new School of Allied Health Professions building that will bring all 11 of the school’s units under one roof. Construction for the new building is slated to start this fall, and it is scheduled to be completed by the fall of 2019.

“I have always had it as my goal to get a building,” says School of Allied Health Professions Dean Cecil B. Drain, Ph.D. “It is a phenomenally deserving school.”

## A HISTORICAL UNDERTAKING

When Drain began leading the School of Allied Health Professions in 1997, the previous dean showed him an architectural rendering of a new building for the school that was drawn in 1985. “That was the last time we had a shot at a new building,” Drain says.

Soon after starting as dean, he developed the school’s motto “Strength through diversity,” as the first step toward uniting the various departments. Drain also established the school’s grand rounds, which occur four times a year at the Egyptian Building. During grand rounds, students are presented with a complex patient case, and they take turns presenting to one another on how they would help the patient based on their individual disciplines. “The students started to figure out that it is all one team working together,” Drain says. “That was a method of madness on my part to try to draw them together on the one-building concept.”

Creating a unified space for the school and its top-ranked programs is a priority in VCU’s Master Site Plan, which was developed by university officials with stakeholder input. The plan includes development, renovation and construction on the MCV Campus that enhances academic instruction and health sciences research.

VCU began planning for the new building in the fall of 2013 with a study led by a school-appointed committee that includes faculty, staff and student representatives. In 2014 they conducted a preliminary study to develop a conceptual design of the building. Support from university leadership provided the necessary boost to turn the plan into a reality.

“Our nationally premier School of Allied Health Professions needed space that matched the remarkable talent of the faculty, staff and students who comprise it,” VCU President Michael Rao, Ph.D., says. “Having these renowned researchers, educators and practitioners together under one roof will foster the interprofessional collaboration that represents the future of health care.”



School of Allied Health Professions Dean Cecil B. Drain, Ph.D., and VCU President Michael Rao, Ph.D., discuss the architect’s model of the new School of Allied Health Professions building.

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"With the new building, we will be a unified force," Tettelbach says, adding that the only time she interacts with students from other departments is during monthly student executive board meetings. The majority of her classmates never meet students from other

departments. "It will be a great way for students to interact interprofessionally and be able to practice what the professors are preaching to us about working with other professions."

#### THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

The 154,100-square-foot School of Allied Health Professions building will be located at 10th and Leigh streets, across from the MCV Campus bookstore and the N Deck in the space currently occupied by the aging Bear, Rudd, Warner and McRae residence halls. The LEED Silver-designed building is going to be L-shaped, with a west-facing eight-story wing and a south-facing four-story wing.

Each of the building's eight floors will feature two casual spaces with tables, chairs and electrical outlets where students can mingle. "We will have numerous places for interaction among various disciplines," Drain says. "When these students graduate and start working in hospitals and other health care settings, they will be prepared for working with other occupations."

The building will also feature plentiful outdoor space, with a deck and garden on the fourth floor that will be open year-round for students to meet and study together. The dean's office will be housed in one of the lower levels, and individual departments will largely be collected on the upper floors.

"The hidden curriculum of this building is to bring people together so that they have a chance to understand one another's profession," Drain says. "One of the major goals of the building is to facilitate interactions among the various professions."

The first-floor lobby will feature an open-concept space with a student-centric focus and an auditorium capable of fitting 160 students. Classrooms will be furnished to maximize flexibility to accommodate various teaching styles and methods. They will have tables and chairs on wheels so that people can change the architecture depending on individual needs for each class. "The old-style classroom is a thing of the past," Drain says.

In addition to being adaptable, the new classrooms will have advanced telecommunications technologies,

including two-way synchronous video conferencing and satellite downlinks. The school is a recognized leader in distance education both within the VCU community and nationally, having offered distance-learning programs for the past 20 years. Full programs are available in eight of the school's nine departments, and all departments have courses that are available to distance learners. The plethora of new classroom technologies will increase the school's distance-learning capabilities and make it even more appealing for students who don't live in Richmond to enroll in VCU's programs.

The technological advances will extend beyond the classrooms with a state-of-the-art simulation center that will include operating rooms, recovery rooms and patient exam rooms. The simulation center will have lifelike mannequins that simulate heartbeats, breathing and other vital signs to replicate real-life patient care situations.

"We wired the new building to be as high-tech as it could be," Drain says.

#### A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

Suggestions for new technologies, as well as other input for the building's design, came directly from students and faculty, who



At top: first-floor lobby designed to welcome and spark interaction. Above: one of many multipurpose spaces capable of hosting classroom lectures, guest speakers and other forums. Right: a rear-facing view of the building, as seen from Larrick Student Center.

have been involved in planning from the beginning.

"They listened to us, and they know what we would like to have and what would benefit us," Tettelbach says. She would advocate for physical therapy students' needs during the monthly student executive board meetings. During the meetings, she would suggest the type of furniture they wanted in the classrooms and preferences for the layout on each floor. "Dr. Drain is always sharing updates about the building with us, showing us pictures and getting our input," Tettelbach says.

The school also sought faculty input during the architectural planning process. "I wanted to make sure that the needs of our students and faculty were met and to ensure that there would be room for our programs to grow," says Teresa Nadder, Ph.D. (B.S., '78; M.S., '88; Ph.D., '98). The chair and associate professor in the Department of Clinical Laboratory Sciences has been involved in planning from the beginning. She helped with developing the proposal

that was sent to the Virginia General Assembly two years ago and has met with the building's architects once a month for the past year to advocate for the specific needs of students and faculty from her department.

The predominant benefit of moving to the new building will be for students and faculty to have the opportunity to interact with other departments, Nadder says. The Department of Clinical Laboratory Sciences has been housed at Randolph Minor Hall for more than 50 years.

The historic building, which was constructed in the 1800s as the first African American Baptist church in Richmond, is located at the farthest edge of the MCV Campus at 301 College St. "In our current space, the CLS students have very

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— SCHOOL OF ALLIED HEALTH PROFESSIONS  
DEAN CECIL B. DRAIN, PH.D.

From the outset, students, faculty and staff played an integral role in planning the school's new LEED Silver-designed home, creating a space capable of meeting individual departmental needs and fostering collaboration.



few opportunities for interaction with students from other departments,” Nadder says. “The new building will be a wonderful opportunity for them to meet other students.”

Interactions among departments will benefit students from other departments as much as it will benefit clinical laboratory sciences students. The department has the expertise to conduct clinical laboratory testing on research studies that students and faculty from other departments might be working on. “We can be helpful with any type of research project that may involve correlation of laboratory results with patient diagnosis, prognosis or treatment monitoring,” Nadder says. “But we have to advertise what skills we possess and what services we can offer to other departments. This task will be easier when we are in one building.”

### ROOM TO GROW

As with every other department in the school, the Department of Clinical Laboratory Sciences will benefit not only from the change in location, but also from the increased space of the new building. The new building will allow for separate instructional and research spaces, which currently overlap in the department’s 7,000-square-foot facility. A recent study by an outside firm recommended an increase to at least 11,000 square feet for the department to adequately meet the existing need. “Being in the new building with more space and laboratory equipment will make it more attractive for students to conduct research,” Nadder says.

The increase in space will provide room for the department to grow as well. As the Master of Science in clinical laboratory sciences has continued to evolve over the years, the program has outgrown the available lab space at Randolph Minor Hall. “We don’t have the space

downstairs to comfortably accommodate our master’s students,” Nadder says, adding that the program will go from having 32 bench spots to 48 when they move to the new building.

Drain estimates that the school will have about 20 percent more assignable space with the new building than it currently occupies across its myriad homes. The increase in space will help to expand enrollment, which is limited primarily by space restrictions. The Department of Health Administration, which is now housed in the William H. Grant House on the MCV Campus, is limited literally by the number of chairs that can fit into the classrooms. “There are just enough chairs there to fit the number of students in the program,” Drain says. “They cannot physically fit in one more chair.” With the new building, the department will be able to increase enrollment by 10 percent.

The appeal of the new building combined with the ability to accept more students will augment the school’s capability to attract and retain the best students and faculty in a variety of health sciences fields. “We get the top students now, but we are going to get even better students with the new building,” Drain says. “We are going to be able to play in the big leagues in terms of faculty recruitment.”

Five of the school’s nine programs are ranked among the nation’s top 50 by U.S. News & World Report, including nurse anesthesia at No. 1, health administration at No. 3 and rehabilitation counseling at No. 4. The benefits of consolidating into one building will bolster the success of those programs, while further improving the other departments that are housed at the school.

“Having the new building is going to enhance the stature of the school immensely,” Drain says. “We are headed into exciting times.”



Jennifer Amster

Rob McClure

Eric Kern

# Meet the architects

A Q&A with EYP Architecture & Engineering project designer Rob McClure, academic planner Jennifer Amster and project director Eric Kern

### Where did the design inspiration come from for the new School of Allied Health Professions building?

The design concept stemmed from the idea of reinforcing a diagonal pedestrian path from the northwest corner of the site to the southeast corner. A big aha moment was when we developed a strategy that created an eight-story tower to the west and a four-story podium to the east, which allows for more daylight from the south to make its way into the new courtyard created by the structure.

### How will the building’s design support key values of the school such as interprofessionalism and community engagement?

The goal from the onset of the project was to avoid planning one level that was all offices and one level that was all classrooms. This motivation to mix up the different user groups in the building is intentional because it reinforces academically effective collisions among students, faculty and staff. We want people to run into each other a lot in order to avoid the ivory tower effect and promote alliances among all users. Another aspect of the design that supports collaboration is a number of more casual meeting areas that we located throughout the building. These spaces come in the form of living rooms, break rooms and seating nooks that are equally distributed throughout the building. The street-level design is also very important to the mission of the school. Considering the recent and future development in

this area of Richmond, we wanted to make sure the new School of Allied Health Professions building would be a good neighbor to its surroundings. The street level is intentionally transparent to ensure that when pedestrians are passing the building, it is warm and inviting. This transparency also serves to take advantage of the new courtyard green space that will be an amenity to the entire precinct.

### How do you expect the new building to improve the academic experience for students and faculty at the School of Allied Health Professions?

One of the key project goals was to fulfill the academic promise of bringing together so many different departments that often have been working in isolation in order to provide new research and learning opportunities. An example of this is the shared simulation spaces that will be available for all the departments to use. The simulation spaces will feature state-of-the-art equipment and fully immersive environments where students can practice varying forms of health care delivery and therapeutic care. Trends in health care and the education of health professionals are toward team-based care, and the design of the new building fully facilitates that. The building will significantly help to further modernize VCU’s approach to the teaching of the allied health professions in a beautiful, well-lit, convenient, state-of-the-art new facility.

