

CHAMPIONS IN LIFE

As a field hockey goalkeeper in college, Dr. Erin Reifsteck was no stranger to long hours in the gym. But, after graduation, she found it difficult to keep up the regimen.

“My college athletic experience was a big part of my identity, and that transition out was challenging,” says the assistant professor of kinesiology. “You lose part of who you are. I wondered if others faced similar problems.”

Being a physically fit college athlete doesn’t mean someone automatically knows how to become a healthy adult. Many struggle to find the right path.

“They know how to intensely train, but in many cases, they don’t know as much about maintaining a healthy lifestyle,” explains Reifsteck.

Recent studies indicate college athletes may be at risk for developing a range of chronic health problems once they stop competing, she says. “Coupling regular physical activity with healthy eating is key to preventing this.”

The two-time Academic All-American and Northeast Conference Scholar Athlete of the Year began her investigation into the issue as a graduate student at UNCG. Reifsteck wanted to know what motivates student-athletes to stay active after college and how they view themselves post-graduation. By surveying former student-athletes, she developed a theoretical model for how identity and motivation impact health behaviors.

Enter the “Moving On!” program. Reifsteck launched the initiative as a postdoctoral fellow at the UNCG Institute to Promote Athlete Health and Wellness, collaborating with UNCG Associate Professor of Nutrition Lenka Shriver and Salem College Associate Professor of Exercise Science DeAnne Brooks. The program helps former college athletes transition to healthy post-college lifestyles.

The three researchers are all former Division I student-athletes. “It has a personal connection for us,” explains Reifsteck.

With funding from the National Collegiate Athletic Association, they

designed four, 90-minute, weekly sessions that introduce participants to lifelong exercise options, as well as smart food choices. The program, which includes facilitator and participant workbooks and a website with instructional videos, helps student-athletes create a positive post-competition identity and set realistic goals for designing and managing their new lifestyle.

Reifsteck tested “Moving On!” with Division I and III student-athletes. Participants reported improved knowledge about physical activity and nutrition, and feeling better prepared for a healthy transition out of college.

In October, Reifsteck received the Association for Applied Sport Psychology’s Distinguished Applied Contribution Award for her work. Other schools are now adapting “Moving On!” for their student-athletes.

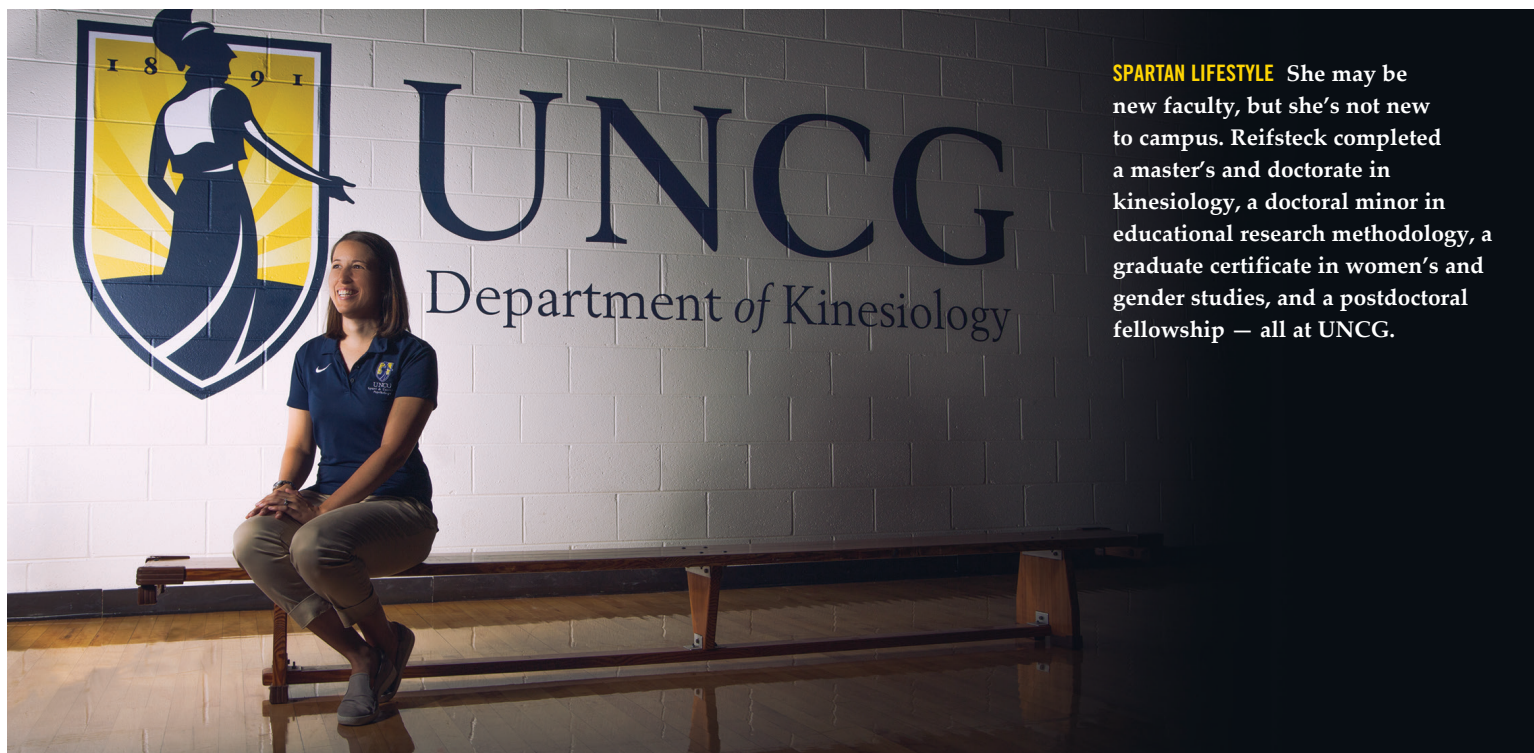
Currently, Reifsteck is continuing this line of research by following a cohort of college athletes through their final competition season, and then post-season until graduation. Students will wear accelerometers, report on their nutrition and physical activity, complete fitness testing, and have their blood drawn periodically.

The goal, she says, is to assess early changes in fitness and cardiometabolic disease risk as participants move on from university athletics, and to continue to develop evidence-based strategies that motivate this group to stay healthy.

“Obviously, their lifestyle will shift,” she says. “We want to help them learn how to keep moving, stay active, and eat healthfully without the constant supervision and structure of college athletics.”

It’s a forward-thinking approach. “Here at UNCG, we say we’re developing champions in life. To do this, we must care about what happens to student-athletes after they graduate. We need to provide resources and services that promote their long-term health and well-being.”

By Whitney J. Palmer • Photography by Mike Dickens
Learn more at <https://go.uncg.edu/erinreifsteck>



SPARTAN LIFESTYLE She may be new faculty, but she’s not new to campus. Reifsteck completed a master’s and doctorate in kinesiology, a doctoral minor in educational research methodology, a graduate certificate in women’s and gender studies, and a postdoctoral fellowship — all at UNCG.