Students in the Baltimore City Community College Physical Therapist Assistant Program finished lab preparations for their end-of-summer practical exams, Wednesday, Aug. 14, where they perfected skills in ultrasound heat therapy and electrical muscle stimulation. “This isn’t about how well you THINK you have it,” Dr. James Dyett, coordinator of the program, told his students. “It’s about how well you HAVE it.”

Khadija Maski enrolled in the BCCC program to increase her earnings and work experience and take advantage of the hot job opportunities in the field. For Khadija, who comes from Morocco, it was also time to develop the skills to help kids in her home country who have very little access to the therapy they need to treat sports injuries. “There’s a huge need for these services but very few people qualified to give them,” she says. “Thus, the children stay injured.”

Marianne Sorteberg came from Denmark and has worked off and on for 17 years as a physical therapy technician. She even has a degree from Denmark to do physical therapy work but the degree is not recognized in the U.S. “It’s important to me to make this official,” she said. “Physical therapy has always been my profession.” She then turned to explain the difference between conventional heat therapy and ultrasound. “Heating pads allow you to penetrate only the first few layers of tissue. Ultrasound goes down a few centimeters.”

To Baltimorean Melody Lynch, the opportunity to become a physical therapist assistant represents the perfect career change. “I was doing behavioral research and health education, so this allows me to keep my focus on patients,” she said. “And I’ve always liked medicine and the previous programs of study I’ve been involved with.”

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, physical therapist assistant occupations will grow 45 percent between 2010 and 2020, or much faster than average. Physical therapist assistants work under the direction of physical therapists and help patients who are recovering from injuries, illnesses, and surgeries to regain movement and manage pain.

“We focus a lot on the skill, from evaluation to plan-of-care,” says Dr. Dyett. “Typically our graduates achieve a 100 percent licensure exam pass rate, which usually leads to a good reception wherever they decide to work. Last year, 22 of our graduates took the exam and 22 passed.” According to Dyett, opportunities are ripe for physical therapist assistants right here in Baltimore City, for work in hospitals, private practice, home health agencies, nursing homes and sports medicine. “More than 50 percent of our students come from other countries,” he says.

For Nigerian Owotutu Oluwasuji, the program has provided lots of hands-on experience. “We’re always teaching each other, always together.” she says. “I think my most memorable moments were practicing physical therapy in a clinical setting, as today.” At about that moment, fellow Nigerian Mikhail Olaia raised his leg involuntarily from a lab table as an electrical current was administered by fellow student Kadrik Henry. Kadrik hails from Jamaica and coincidentally served as president of the BCCC student government in 2012.

To Benard Agyingi, from Cameroon, study as a physical therapist assistant is the way to capture his lifelong interest in science and soccer. “I’ve always played soccer and I’d like to apply this to sports medicine,” he said.

For more information about the BCCC Physical Therapist Assistant Program, contact Dr. Dyett at 410-462-7723. Registration for fall classes has been extended through Wednesday, August 28, 2013 at BCCC. For more information, call 410-462-8300.