# QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

# MEET THE KIRIGAMI RUGBY CHAIR

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**VOLUME 24, NO. 2 | APRIL - JUNE 2025** 









# PITTSBURGH MARATHON

#### HOW PITT KEEPS HAND-CYCLISTS ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

Excerpt from PittWire - May 15, 2025

On May 4, a dozen hand cyclists crossed the finish line of the 2025 DICK'S Sporting Goods Pittsburgh Marathon — a testament to the mental and physical stamina necessary to traverse 26.2 miles over the city's bridges, through neighborhoods and up a few monster hills.

Hand cycles are bicycles adapted for riders with spinal cord injuries and other disabilities. They contain many of the same components as a bicycle, but a hand cycle is propelled using upper-body strength. A rider, seated or reclined, pushes on pedals attached to a drivetrain similar to a bike's. While a hand cycle's three wheels make it more stable than a bicycle, it still



takes extensive practice to learn how to steer the vehicle. They can flip and even eject riders.

That's where Pitt's Hand Cycle Assistance Team (H-CAT) comes in, providing logistical and onthe-ground support for the athletes, from fixing popped hand cycle chains to staffing medical tents.

"We're the pit crew for the racers. The marathon organizers have sufficient volunteers to give out water, but they want somebody who can be responsive and responsible for the hand cycle division, before, during, and after race day," said Dan Fisher, assistant chair for administration and operations in Pitt's School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences.

He now co-directs H-CAT, which he formed in 2011 with Rory Cooper, an accomplished hand cyclist and founding director and VA senior research career scientist in Human Engineering Research Laboratories. Their goal: Create an infrastructure of support that allows hand cyclists to feel welcome in the Pittsburgh Marathon.

# ACCOLADES & EVENTS

Celebrating our best moments and achievements from the past three months.

irector **DR. RORY COOPER** became the Associate Vice Chancellor for Research for STEM-Health Sciences Collaborations last month. He attended the 2025 National Inventors Annual Meeting and Hall of Fame Induction in April, followed by the HAPS Annual Conference in May where he was the Keynote Speaker. In June, he participated in the judges panel for the Invention Connection US Nationals — a showcase for student inventors held at the Henry Ford museum. Dr. Cooper also gave a lecture at the NSF ReDDDoT Workshop in Case Western University that same month, along with HERL researchers **DRS. JON DUVALL** and **SIVASHANKAR SIVAKANTHAN.** 

HERL participated in various research and community events this quarter, like the 39th National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic held at Snowmass, CO, and the Buckeye Wheelchair Games in April (CLINICAL RESEARCH TEAM in attendance), and the HighMark Walk for Life in June (WILLIAM SCHOY in attendance). Multiple athletes from the labs including JACKSON WILLIAMS and DR. COOPER competed in the Pittsburgh Marathon in May, where team members JOSH MARINO, BEN GEBROSKY, JOSEPH YAP, JEFFREY PETIGROW, DRS. BRAD DICIANNO, GARRETT GRINDLE and JORGE CANDIOTTI formed part of the Hand Cycle Assistance Team (HCAT). In April we hosted the 20th annual State of the Science Symposium in Bethesda, MD, on Rehabilitation in Resource-Limited Environments. We presented our research at RESNA and the VA Research week in May, and the Rehab Institute Research Day in June.

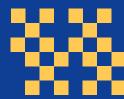


Page 2 - Dr. Cooper at the Pittsburgh Marathon start line.
Page 3 - Speakers at the 2025 State of the Science Symposium.



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#### **Publications** Manuscripts





#### Investigation of Stakeholder Perceptions of the Wheelchair Service Delivery Process

The wheelchair SDP is not viewed as performing well by its stakeholders. Funding, procurement, maintenance, and repairs are viewed particularly negatively, representing opportunities for focused system reform efforts.

Beauregard, T. A.; Schein, R. M.; Berner, T. F.; McKernan, G.; Schmeler, M. R.; Dicianno, B. E.; DiGiovine, C. P. Investigation of stakeholder perceptions of the wheelchair service delivery process. Disability and Rehabilitation: Assistive Technology. 2025



#### **Monofilament Testing to Identify Insensate Regions**

Living with a lower limb amputation is a life-altering complication. This condition is often associated with a high prevalence of pressure ulcers and skin breakdown at the interface between the prosthetic socket and the residual limb. The purpose of this study was to describe a monofilament test method for identifying areas that lack protective sensation in individuals with transtibial amputation (TTA).

Peterson S, Lee CD, Miknevich MA, Cooper R, Koontz A. Monofilament testing to identify insensate regions of the residual limb of individuals with transtibial amputation. Prosthet Orthot Int. 2025





Monofilament testing to identify insensate regions of

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#### Beyond Buildings: Designing and Maintaining Classroom Laboratory Spaces for Physical Accessibility

We, the authors, are a group of faculty and students with and without disabilities who conduct research in assistive technologies, participatory design, and engineering education. We posit that engineering departments and instructors need increased research highlighting best practices and policies to meet the needs of physically disabled engineering students.

Taylor, N.M., Robinson, J., Rigo, I., Reck, R., Bleakney, A., Cooper, R.A., McDonagh, D. and Golecki, H.M. Beyond buildings: Designing and maintaining classroom laboratory spaces for physical accessibility. J Eng Educ. 2025



#### Association Between Adequate Sleep and Participation in Occupational Areas in School-age Children

Adequate sleep tailored to children's age is important for their well-being. This study aimed to examine the association between adequate sleep and children's participation in occupational areas. This study was a retrospective cross-sectional analysis of secondary data obtained from the 2020 National Survey of Children's Health in the United States.

Ha Y, Park S, Roh G, Kim J, Kim E, Hong I. Association Between Adequate Sleep and Participation in Occupational Areas in School-Age Children. OTJR (Thorofare N J). 2025

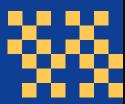


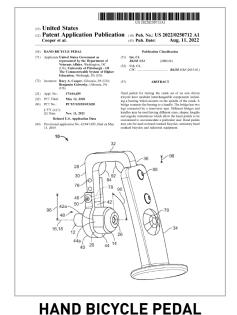


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#### Publications Patents & Other

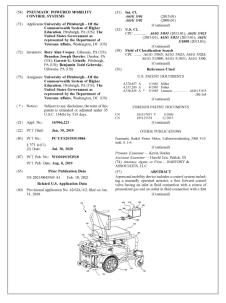




US 12,208,857







PNEUMATIC POWERED **MOBILITY CONTROL SYSTEMS** 

EP 3746022

#### **OUR PROGRESS THIS YEAR**

- 8 prestigious science, engineering, and athletics awards received.
- 8 manuscripts published in respected, peer-reviewed journals.
- 2 patents awarded by the USPTO, and Germany, France, UK.

US 12,208,857 & EP 374602

- 19 lectures and visits from distinguished peers and organizations to our lab.
- 8 individual scholarships for Veterans funded.
- 20 media features of our research.

#### IN 2025, WE'VE PRESENTED LECTURES AND RESEARCH ACROSS

- 2 continents
- 3 countries
- 6 American states + the District of Columbia







JACKSON ROZELL Clemson University Mechanical Engineering

PROJECT: Kirigami Sports Wheelchair



MERYL FREIMAN **Ohio State University** Biomedical Engineering

PROJECT: **VR** Applications for Wheelchair Simulations



Aerospace Systems Engineering PROJECT: Airplane Wheelchair Docking

University of Akron

JOSEPH DAESCHNER

**AARON GRANT** 

Saint Vincent College

Mech. Eng. & Poli Sci

Functional Hand Control

PROJECT:



**ASHLEY MINGRINO** Biomedical Eng. & Applied

PROJECT: **OMNIBot** 

Mathematics

**Duquesne University** 



NAJEE JACKSON Full Sail University Computer Science

PROJECT: Airline Travel Board Game



System

TYLER FRITZ University of Pittsburgh Electrical Engineering

PROJECT: Airline Travel Board Game



JONAS WILBUR University of Pittsburgh Bio Engineering

PROJECT: Rapid Prototyping Simple Devices



ARIANNA CIREGNA Stevens Institute of Technology Systems Engineering

PROJECT: Nickel-Zinc Battery Powered



RACHEL SAENZ Clemson University Mechanical Engineering

PROJECT: Kirigami Sports Wheelchair



**BROC PEARSALL** Robert Morris University Mechanical Engineering

PROJECT: Airport Wheelchair



**KAYLEE URIBE** University of Pittsburgh Biomedical Engineering

PROJECT: **VR** Applications for Wheelchair Simulations



LAUREN STICH Penn State Biomedical Engineering

PROJECT: Air Fluidized Wheelchair Cushion



TRAN AN Georgia Southern Computer Science & Biology

PROJECT: VR Applications for Wheelchair Simulations

#### **Photo Gallery**

Left to right, top to bottom: Rosi and Dr. Cooper with members of the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic; Drs. Sivashankar & Styler at VA Rehab Week 2025; Jackson Williams, Rosi, and Dr. Cooper at the Pittsburgh Marathon; Josh Marino, Dan Fischer, and Dr. Cooper with James Dixon; Wei Deng, Marcel Oliart, Drs. Satpute and Candiotti, William Schoy, Rosi and Dr. Cooper at the 2025 Buckeye Games; Sangmi Park, Wei Deng, Drs. Sundaram, Dicianno, Cooper, Satpute, Duvall and Candiotti at an internal promotion ceremony; Joseph Yap and Jeff Petigrow at the Pittsburgh marathon as part of the Handycle Assistance Team (HCAT); Research Experience (REx) program students, Arianna Ciregna and Jonas Wilbur, dressed to spray paint; Dr. Cooper, Rosi Cooper, and PA State Senator, Doug Mastriano; REx student Broc Pearsall tabling for HERL during VA Research Week; Jonas Wilbur and William Schoy at Easterseals' Walk With Me charity event.























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**MEET THE** 

# KIRIGAMI RUGBY CHAIR



The purpose of the 'Kirigami Wheelchair', from which this spinoff was created, was to create a lightweight, highly customizable wheelchair that is affordable yet fashionable. Named after the eponymous traditional Japanese cut-and-fold art, this lightweight chair is constructed from aluminum sheet metal, laser-cut and bent into shape by a press brake. The mixing of traditional art principles with advanced manufacturing technologies is what makes this design so unique.

Jessica Steinberg, the designer of this chair, explains that the concept stems from a high demand for user-centric mobility devices. She writes:

"Approximately 68,000,000 people worldwide do not have access to an appropriate wheelchair. These chairs tend to have poor ergonomics that restrict people's function and result in high rates of injury. Conversely, higher quality, customized wheelchairs are very expensive and unlikely to be covered by insurance. A driving factor in their high cost is the use of metal tubes that must be bent and welded together by highly skilled welders or robots."

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### **Recruiting Participants.**

#### SIGN UP TO OUR REGISTRY



A research registry is a collection of individuals interested in learning about research studies that may be of interest to them. We are inviting you to join in the Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL) Assistive Technology Registry because you might be interested in participating in our current or future research studies.

# ACCESSIBLE AIRLINE TRANSPORTATION FOR MOBILITY DEVICE USERS: SURVEY



**Purpose:** To estimate pent-up demand among mobility device (MD) users to travel on commercial airlines and identify MD users' needs and pain points.

**Study Requirements:** Complete a survey about your demographics and airline travel experiences. The survey is expected to take no more than 20 minutes to complete.

# 2 GUIDELINES FOR POWERED WHEELCHAIR AND COMMERCIAL AIRPLANE COMPATIBILITY



**Purpose:** This small group interview aims to identify the needs and challenges of power wheelchair users (PWUs) in air travel.

**Study Requirements:** Participate in an interview to share your experiences and perspectives accessing and utilizing air travel-related services.

#### CLINICAL LIMITS OF USE TOOLS (CLOUT) OFF-ROAD MOBILITY DEVICES



**Purpose:** To develop clinical limits of use tools (CLOUT) for offroad wheelchairs and hand cycles to ensure their safe operation.

**Study Requirements:** Participate in one visit lasting up to 4 hours to conduct performance testing and mapping of the features of an off-road wheelchair or hand cycles.

# VIRTUAL PEER COACHING IN MANUAL WHEELCHAIR SKILLS



**Purpose:** To determine the effectiveness of virtual coaching from a peer to improve manual wheelchair skills.

**Study Requirements:** Six, weekly peer coaching sessions via Zoom to improve wheelchair skills, access to a library of wheelchair skills training videos, and completion of questionnaires before and after training.

# 5 ASSESSING THE CAREGIVER ASSISTED TRANSFER TECHNIQUE (CATT) INSTRUMENT



**Purpose:** To validate the caregiver Assisted Transfer Technique Instrument, a new tool to assess the assisted transfer performance of individuals with disabilities and their caregivers.

**Study Requirements:** The study takes place over two visits in your home or our lab (your choice), each visit is no longer than two hours.

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#### **POWERED PERSONAL TRANSFER SYSTEM** (PPTS): FOCUS GROUP



**Purpose:** To study the design of controls to better meet user needs of a robotic, independent-use, Group 3 Powered Personal Transfer System.

**Study Requirements:** You will be asked to watch a PPTS demonstration video and provide group feedback. The focus group will take no more than two hours.

#### **AIRPORT MANUAL WHEELCHAIR: FOCUS GROUP**



Purpose: To design a manual wheelchair tailored for airport use, addressing the current practice of airlines requiring wheelchair users to travel in regular passenger seats which poses significant challenges.

Study Requirements: Participation will take no more than two hours.

#### **DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION OF THE PPAL BEDSIDE COMMODE**



Purpose: To evaluate the PPAL, a new powered bedside commode that facilitates level transfers between a wheelchair or bed and commode seat, reducing effort on the person and their caregivers.

**Study Requirements:** The study requires one in-person visit during which the participant will be asked to perform a series of transfers with the PPAL and complete surveys and an interview about your experience.

#### **EVALUATION OF POWERED EXOSKELETON FOR VETERANS WITH KNEE OSTEOARTHRITIS**



Purpose: To compare the performance of the Keeogo knee stressrelief powered exoskeleton to a passive knee brace in people with knee osteoarthritis (OA).

**Study Requirements:** The study requires the participant to answer questions and perform tasks during two separate visits to HERL.

#### MEET OUR RESEARCH PARTICIPANT ADVOCATE

#### WILLIAM SCHOY

At HERL, every participant is a valued partner in discovery. As your Research Participant Advocate I, William Shoy, see it as my mission to provide a welcoming, respectful, and responsive experience from start to finish.

Because you generously share personal insights to advance care and technology, I prioritize clear communication, prompt assistance, and genuine courtesy at every step. Whether scheduling sessions, answering questions, or guiding you through data-collection visits, I strive to make the process comfortable, efficient, and centered on your needs.

I look forward to meeting you at the community events I'll be attending and to welcoming you as a research participant here at HERL.



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2025 APR-JUN

# In the News

APRIL 7

#### PRINT

#### **Our Experts**

HERL and Dr. Cooper featured in this retrospective of VA Research's 100 years in 2025.

# **VA CENTRAL OFFICE**

APRIL 7



#### Live Interview NDVWG

Dr. Cooper is featured on an interview at the National Disabled Veterans Wheelchair Games.

## DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

APRIL 9 & MAY 2



#### Pittsburgh Marathon

A series of features on handcyclists and Dr. Cooper at the 2025 PGH Marathon.

WTAE

MAY 15



#### How Pitt Keeps Handcyclists on the Road

Dr. Cooper interviewed on HCAT and the 2025 Pittsburgh Marathon.



MAY 22



## **Shapiro Pushes for \$50M Innovation Investment**

Attendees for this announcement included representatives from key Pittsburgh organizations including HERL's director.

# PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETE

JUNE 2

**NEWSLETTER** 

# EasterSeals Walk With Me Pittsburgh

William Schoy featured prominently representing HERL in this feature on the annual event.

## RESEARCH ROUNDUP

# SAVETHEDATE

**JULY 17-22** 

**National Veterans Wheelchair Games** 

**JULY 18-26** 

**DoD Warrior Games** 

**JULY 25** 

Research Experience (REx) Student Symposium **AUG 22-23** 

Adaptive Lacrosse Games PGH

**AUG 24-27** 

**PVA Summit** 

**SEP 20** 

**Disability Pride PGH** 

# **RUMINATION OF THE QUARTER**

"FROM CO-OP, TO RESEARCH ASSISTANT, TO RESEARCH ENGINEER, HERL HAS TAUGHT ME EVERYTHING FROM HANDS-ON ENGINEERING AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT, TO PEOPLE SKILLS AND LAB PRIDE. I WOULDN'T BE HALF THE ENGINEER TODAY WITHOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY."

- Maddi Viteri

Outgoing Research Engineer, Keeogo Exoskeleton

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