

Occupational Therapy in Higher Education

Leah Goodman, OTD, OTR/L

Can you describe your OTD project?

My doctoral project focused on building supportive programming for college students with disabilities and mental health concerns. My aim has been to explore how universities can implement innovative initiatives to better meet the needs of students, particularly those who are attempting to navigate the demands of being a college student while also managing aspects of disability. I first conducted a comprehensive literature review about mental health, disability and the needs of college students. I also distributed a campus-wide needs survey to college students with disabilities to glean a deeper understanding of their unmet needs. As part of my project, I also visited universities within the U.S. and Ireland to learn about innovative models of supportive services being implemented by occupational therapists.

For the core of my project, I created, implemented and measured the impact of a for-credit mental health and wellbeing course for undergraduates. I wanted to evaluate the efficacy of integrating occupation-centered mental health and wellbeing topics into college curricula, instead of solely requiring students to seek services on their own. In other words, what is the benefit of offering students course credit for the opportunity to build peer connections and gain skills to support their wellbeing in college and adult life?

How does your OTD work tie with the values you've developed as an OT?

I believe that OT is uniquely suited to address the needs of university students, particularly in managing the many academic, social and health demands within their roles as students, friends, partners, children, employees, and emerging adults. While counseling and other supportive programming are essential services on campus, OT contributes a holistic perspective to addressing day-to-day student needs within real life contexts.

My experiences as an occupational therapist and OTD student have encouraged me to align my own life with the value of meaningful engagement. This value played an important role in the development of my OTD project, emphasizing time use and temporality, self-management, values and roles, and

participation in meaningful activities. In this way, the course taught students to be occupation-centered in the management of their own health and wellbeing, as well as learn practical skills to support wellness.

My time as a Master's student at the University of Southern California emphasized health promotion and wellness as a key tenet in occupational therapy practice. During my OTD coursework at the University of Illinois-Chicago, I have gained a deeper understanding of disability studies, accessibility and the implementation of universal design strategies. This largely impacted the content and structure of my course, encouraging me to integrate wellness topics – such as mindfulness, stress management, and sleep hygiene – as well as disability studies concepts – such as self-advocacy, disability identity, ableism and self-management – into the core of my curriculum.

I believe that my OT education enabled me to support students within the context of all of their roles, not solely their needs as students. Consequently, the skills they gained are applicable to engagement in all areas of life beyond direct academic performance.

Are there challenges or opportunities for this emerging area of practice that you would like to discuss?

I believe there is an incredible growth opportunity to increase visibility of occupational therapy within college settings. OT practitioners support students through high school, and continue to support adults that experience challenges in everyday living. Working within university settings is absolutely in line with OT's practice framework and presents great opportunities for emerging practice.

It has been an incredibly validating experience to see the first-hand impact of integrating OT into college curricula. Students expressed strong appreciation for the relevant and necessary skills they gained. However, the practice area will not grow without proper dissemination within the OT community, as



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well as academic support and mental health communities.

The challenge will be to disseminate the knowledge in a manner that continues to demonstrate the unique value of OT in this practice area. While universities are designed to educate students, they do not typically prioritize or provide opportunities for the development of healthy habits and routines that support mental health and wellbeing. To carve out a place for OT in college support services, practitioners will need to illustrate a clear need for additional services on campus, and demonstrate direct impact on factors such as academic performance, retention, health, and graduation rates.

The mental health of college students is gaining attention in higher education and society at large. The challenge now is to demonstrate that OTs can develop viable programs that effectively support students.

What next steps do you foresee for this work?

I would love to see more OT practitioners advocating for roles within universities. OT practitioners who are already working in this area can develop it further by conducting research, publishing results that validate the impact, speaking

at conferences, and building their programs to a larger scale. OT practitioners who are interested in the area can start to build relationships with other service providers in college settings, get involved with mental health groups, and connect with OT practitioners who are already working in the setting. My hope is that AOTA will begin to recognize university settings as an emerging practice area and that OT programs will be encouraged to discuss it within their own curricula. With rising attention on mental health in college settings, it's the ideal time for OT to further develop our role in this setting.

How can people contact you to learn more?

Please feel free to contact me at Leahgoodman91@gmail.com.

About the Author

Leah Goodman is an occupational therapist and yoga instructor in Chicago. She recently completed her post-professional clinical doctorate in occupational therapy at UIC and aims to design supportive and mental health programming for college students.

Submit Articles to the Communiqué

Each issue of the Communiqué seeks to highlight areas of Occupational Therapy Practice. We appreciate our readers' wide-ranging experiences. Each issue features a different theme:

- **January/February/March:**
Education, Research, Pediatrics
- **April/May/June:**
Gerontology, Home Health, Low Vision
- **July/August/September:**
Physical Disabilities, Hand Therapy, Driving Rehabilitation, Assistive Technology
- **October/November/December:**
Mental Health, Work, Ergonomics

Do you have an article that does not fit the themes already listed? Send it. We welcome articles from diverse and novel perspectives.

Article Guidelines:

- Articles should contain title, introduction, body, summary, and references when appropriate.

- Theme articles might include photos and/or graphics.
- Articles should be approximately 300-1000 words.
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- Passport type photos are recommended for author photo.
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- Please give credit to individuals who collaborated to complete article (e.g., those helping with research, providing background information, helping write article, etc.).
- For the next issue, articles should be submitted by February 15, 2018.

SUBMIT ARTICLES TO:
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