

Faculty as a Catalyst for Occupational Balance and Well-Being in OT Students

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Abstract

As the demand for occupational therapy (OT) practitioners continues to grow, the success and well-being of students in OT programs have become increasingly critical. While much attention is given to academic performance and curriculum design, the role of faculty-student relationships in shaping student outcomes is often overlooked. In my experiences as an OT educator, I have found that positive faculty-student relationships have served as a vital support system, particularly in high-stress programs where students are at risk for occupational imbalance, burnout, and mental health challenges. Drawing on both literature and personal experience as an occupational therapy educator, in this paper I explore how faculty engagement with students, a sense of belonging for students, and supportive learning environments might contribute to student persistence, academic success, and overall well-being. Understanding and strengthening these three elements may have important impacts on the preparation of occupational therapy students.

Keywords: occupational therapy education, faulty-student relationships, student well-being, faculty engagement, student persistence, occupational balance, sense of belonging, ecology of human performance

The importance of occupational therapy (OT) education is rising as the need for occupational therapists grows and the population of the United States ages (Bonder et. al., 2024). Harvison (2022) reported declining occupational therapy student enrollment nationwide, while

Medicare beneficiaries accessing occupational therapy services increased by 48% from 2009–2021. With increasing needs for occupational therapy practitioners coupled with diminishing student enrollment, there is urgency to identify how to maximize occupational therapy student success in college programs (Guzzardo et al., 2021).

Occupational therapy is designed on the premise that occupations are everyday activities people do individually and with other people that occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020; World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2012). According to the Health Resources and Services Administration (National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, n.d.), the demand for occupational therapists will increase by 22% between 2016 and 2030 under either a status quo service delivery model or an evolving healthcare delivery model. A status quo delivery model is when occupational therapy is delivered at the same rate and method to the population as it is currently. An evolving healthcare delivery model considers the possibility of changing locations and types of healthcare delivery, such as increasing telehealth or evolving methods of healthcare delivery over various settings (e.g., home, school, hospital, rehab, congregate living).

Occupational Balance and Student Well-Being

As the demand for occupational therapists continues to rise (Bonder et. al., 2024), the academic success and well-being of students in OT programs become increasingly critical. One key aspect influencing student success is occupational balance, which affects mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. According to Wagman et al. (2011), occupational balance can be defined as the individual's perception of having the right number of occupations and the right variation between occupations in order to maintain one's well-being (e.g., physical, emotional, psychological, social). How people occupy their time as we all try to find the right

balance of work, leisure, healthy living, social interactions, and psychological well-being determine how well we are in our day-to-day lives. Occupational therapists work with their clients in part helping them individually find the best balance for each person. I believe that occupational therapist educators should incorporate their expertise of occupational balance to help develop the positive teacher and student relationships necessary to help all students be successful.

People engage in occupations through the lens of their identities; a role is an aspect of identity influenced by the person's culture and context (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020). Occupation categories include activities of daily living, instrumental activities of daily living (e.g., grocery shopping, money management), health management, rest and sleep, education, work, play, leisure, and social participation (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2020). Hooper and Wood (2019) noted that "in pursuing occupation, humans express the totality of their being, a mind-body-spirit union . . . humankind is, in essence, occupational by nature" (p. 46).

Critical Role of OT Faculty

Given the background of occupational therapy and expertise of understanding humankind as occupational (Hooper and Wood, 2019), OT programs and faculty are uniquely positioned to best support and understand the occupation-based challenges their students face. Broom (2016) found that when students find their professors express care about their students and create engaging and meaningful lessons/experiences for students, then students are more engaged, successful, and their well-being is increased. Hoffman (2014) also found that when professors proactively develop positive relationships with their students, student engagement is enhanced. Additionally, Guzzardo et al. (2021) found that students respond much more positively when

they believe their professors care about their students. Gray et al. (2020) found that caring about students also means that professors take an interest in what their students do outside of class (e.g., clubs, sports, drama). All of the efforts that professors put into their students and their courses should be developed to help all OT students be successful in their courses and in life in general at school, and that is achieved through fostering a culture of belonging for all students (Tyminski et al., 2023; Walton et al., 2023).

When students move from their childhood home and K–12 education system into college, their roles shift from high school student to college student, and they take on new challenges to achieve occupational balance (Eklund et. al., 2017; Swanepoel & van Heerden, 2018). College students experience new challenges when needing to oversee their preparatory occupations such as managing their morning routine, packing lunch, sleep management, health management, and rest (Ocampo et al., 2024). Laposha and Smallfield (2022) identified that self-care, specifically exercise and sleep, is important for students' ability to recharge from daily demands in higher education. Students must choose their daily occupations in the new context of their college/university lives, with the goal of creating balance in their new environments (Gabon et al., 2023). Swanepoel and van Heerden (2018) described college students taking on new roles of friend, young adult, student, and campus resident. These complex new roles require students to devote resources to navigating their new lives while also engaging in college classroom environments with rigorous course material.

Academic and Non-Academic Challenges for OT Students

While achieving occupational balance is essential for student well-being, many occupational therapy students struggle to maintain balance due to the rigorous academic demands and personal challenges they face (Gadkari & Dulek, 2023; Grab et al., 2021). These

challenges, both academic and non-academic, can significantly impact students' ability to succeed in their programs. Laposha and Smallfield's (2022) research detailed the high stress levels of students studying occupational therapy. More research is needed to identify techniques occupational therapy programs and occupational therapy faculty can employ to promote occupational balance, minimizing stress and maximizing student engagement and success. The growing need for occupational therapists coupled with the increased mental health challenges college students experience (Healthy Minds Network, 2024) highlight the importance for occupational therapy programs to mindfully approach student faculty relationships in and out of classrooms. Strayhorn (2022) described the challenges first-year minority students experienced: 54% worried about academic success, 31% felt homesick, and 23% experienced loneliness (pp. 48–49). Strayhorn (2022) further noted that unaddressed negative feelings can lead to lower motivation and increased risk for dropping out of college. Thus, I see the role for the OT educator to create similar positive relationships with every student as they do with their clients as a critical aspect of OT teaching.

Navigating higher education, students experience a tug-of-war between academics and leisure time, which decreases their sense of control over their days (Webber et al., 2022). As students try to prioritize academics, they delay or minimize their self-care activities, such as leisure, socializing, and sleep (Gabon et al., 2023). Swanepoel and van Heerden (2018) reported that students are often unable to engage in role exploration other than being students because of the heavy academic workload. Grab et al. (2021) identified that occupational therapy students experienced high levels of stress related to academic workload, financial strain, and time management challenges. When role exploration is limited to that of a college student, it disadvantages each student's ability to find and achieve occupational balance (Swanepoel & van

Heerden, 2018). Occupational therapy students described experiencing guilt when engaging in self-care, describing moderate stress and anxiety levels if they focused on tasks outside academic pursuits (Laposha & Smallfield, 2022; Webber et al., 2022). When students solely focus on their rigorous academics, their occupational balance, having the right amount and variety of activities in their day, suffers (Wagman et al, 2011).

Similar issues have been reported for students in other health science fields. Almost half of nursing students (43%) experienced higher levels of burnout compared to 23% of early education students (Cuevas-Caravaca et al., 2024, Discussion, para. 4). Cuevas-Caravaca et al. (2024) described how curricular structure, nature of professional practice, impaired coping strategies, and lack of social supports put nursing students at a disadvantage compared to early childhood education students regarding burnout prevention. When students experience burnout, their ability to engage in courses with vigor, dedication, and absorption decreases (Aker & Şahin, 2022; Grab et al., 2021; Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2019). However, engagement in self-care is significantly associated with reducing burnout (Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2019). Tapia et al. (2022) found that students who struggled to engage in their meaningful occupations and, therefore, did not recharge and achieve occupational balance, experienced higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Ocampo et al. (2024) described students experiencing time compression or disinterest in occupations due to a perceived lack of time to devote to leisure occupations. Students decreased self-care activities to prioritize academics (Ocampo et al., 2024; Webber et al., 2022), which increased stress levels and impaired their ability to meaningfully engage in their academics (Morales-Rodriguez et al., 2019). Stroud et al. (2025) identified that OT students experienced high levels of stress and examined coping skills utilizing the Coping Orientation to Problem Experienced Inventory (2025). Students coped most frequently using

problem-focused coping, which Stroud et al. (2025) found did not contribute to student support systems overall. Problem-focused coping addressed only the direct problem students experienced through planning, positive reframing, informative support, and problem-solving during the stressful event (Schoenmakers et al., 2015). This process does not develop coping skills with broader purposes, thereby not reducing overall student stress.

Having established that occupational therapy students tended to over-emphasize their academics, which caused an increase in stress and a decrease in occupational balance, this combination manifested in a higher risk for needing mental health support (Young et al., 2023). Zajac et al. (2023) found that receiving mental health treatment correlated with higher rates of dropping out of college. To me, this correlation presents strangely. It does not seem sensible that receiving support leads students to higher dropout rates. However, Zajac et al.'s (2024) findings indicated that students who were struggling enough to seek help were more likely to drop out of college, not that receiving help was ineffective necessarily. I hypothesize that students were receiving help only after they became significantly overwhelmed. According to the Healthy Minds Network (2024) survey, 36% of students in higher education received counseling support over the preceding year (p. 10). Over a 4-week period, 77% of students surveyed reported that academic engagement was impaired at least 1 day due to mental health challenges (Healthy Minds Network Survey, 2024, p. 6). In the same study, authors also noted 45% of students described their mental health negatively impacting academic engagement for 3 or more days over a 4-week period (p. 6).

According to Eleftheriades et al. (2020), there is growing evidence to support those who believe contemporary college students arrive in higher education with a higher frequency of acknowledged mental health needs, which negatively impact the academic careers of many

students. Educators in all area of higher education should consider the evidence about the importance of positive professor and student relationships. It may be even more important in high stress programs, like OT, for professors to understand how to develop and maintain positive and strong relationships with our students.

Role of Sense of Belonging in Student Success

Building upon foundational psychological theories, Maslow (1998) and Glasser (1999) each identified love and belonging as essential human needs that underpin motivation and well-being. Within Maslow's (1998) hierarchy, belonging occupies a central position, bridging basic psychological safety needs with higher-order goals of esteem and self-actualization. Similarly, Glasser's (1999) choice theory emphasized that the need for love and belonging drives human behavior and interpersonal connection. Extending these ideas into educational settings, Goodenow and Grady (1993) conceptualized school belonging as the degree to which students feel accepted, respected, supported, and included within their learning environments (p. 80). However, Allen (2025) observed gaps between the theoretical understanding of belonging and the lived experiences of students in educational institutions.

Strayhorn (2022) identified the value of sense of belonging for ethnic minority students as decreasing stress and increasing well-being, which fosters academic persistence. Tyminski et al. (2023) built on Strayhorn's work, identifying barriers and facilitators to belonging among occupational therapy, physical therapy, and medical education students. Faculty-student relationships including the negative effects of faculty bias and lack of mentorship emerged as one theme (Tyminski et al., 2023). Tyminski et al. (2023) emphasized the critical role of belonging and its impact on academic success, mental health, and professional development. Khan et al. (2025) identified that emotional stressors diminished student sense of belonging,

specifically identifying limited faculty support and engagement as a causative factor for emotional stress. Thus, adding more evidence to emphasize the need for OT educators to actively support our students.

Physical layout of a space, which impacted the ability of faculty and students to experience out-of-classroom interactions and social relationships, had the greatest impact on sense of belonging for both students and faculty (Khan et al., 2025). Strayhorn (2012) described physical layout as including physical layout, structural design, and accessibility where students “feel that these spaces are welcoming, affirming, and conducive to learning and interaction” (p. 19). Physical layout is critical to a sense of belonging for both students and faculty. According to Campos et al. (2021), teachers, educational leaders, sociologists, and psychologists have expressed how well-designed physical spaces acquire the power of fostering motivation in students for all educational activities. A sense of belonging is clearly associated with the physical spaces designed to help people gather and work together. A sense of belonging is negatively impacted when students experience that faculty members are inaccessible (Khan et al., 2025). The same is true when professors have minimal opportunities to interact with students outside of class. Espiritu et al. (2024) presented similar findings from a survey gathering data from 628 occupational therapy students, noting that students expressed that OT departments would better support students through more empathetic, supportive faculty, and more student feedback opportunities. Aker and Şahin (2022) found in their study of over 600 students that a stronger sense of belonging reduces burnout, which in turn supports academic performance.

Quality of life and sense of belonging may be linked to successful occupational balance. When students feel comfortable, welcome, and safe, they are able to interact more productively with their high-stress academics (Khan et al., 2025; Strayhorn, 2022; Torkani et al., 2025;

Tyminski et al., 2025). Torkani et al. (2025) utilized a short form health survey with 262 nursing students and identified that health-related quality of life decreases burnout among students. Health-related quality of life indirectly improved academic success through reducing burnout and improving intrinsic motivation for academic performance (Torkani et al., 2025). A key factor in fostering a sense of belonging is the quality of faculty-student relationships. Supportive faculty interactions can help students feel valued, engaged, and motivated, ultimately influencing their academic performance and well-being (Khan et al., 2025; Strayhorn, 2022; Torkani et al., 2025; Tyminski et al., 2025).

Strategies for Supporting Student Success

Given the significant impact that faculty-student relationships and sense of belonging have on student success, I believe it is essential to explore concrete strategies that OT faculty and institutions can implement to enhance support for occupational therapy students. These strategies aim to address both academic and well-being challenges, ensuring students are better equipped to navigate their educational journey. Tapia et al. (2022) found that increasing students' occupational engagement opportunities helped protect against adverse mental health outcomes. Black et. al. (2019) described occupational engagement as a multidimensional interaction of the body, mind, and spirit, acknowledging the connections between physical health, mental health, and spiritual health. Occupational therapy programs have the opportunity to improve student success through supporting student occupational engagement on campus.

Morales-Rodriguez et al. (2019) found that self-care engagement supported student academic engagement; self-care includes time with friends and other leisure activities (Gabon et al., 2023; Webber et al., 2022). The resilience of students improved with greater breadth and diversity of friend groups (Fernandez-Martinez et al., 2017), indicating that socializing outside of

program-based friend groups, or peers who are also studying in the same program, supports student success. Finding time to socialize outside of OT department connections indicates positive occupational balance, whereas students who are unable to focus energy away from academics lack that occupational balance. The difficulty of adjusting to the academic environment is eased when students experience social support and a sense of belonging among their peers (Swanepoel & van Heerden, 2018). Walton et al. (2023) performed a randomized controlled trial with nearly 27,000 participants piloting a social-belonging intervention for first-year students. The researchers recommended that prioritizing pedagogy that affirms students, identifies their strengths, and promotes a growth mindset would promote social belonging and progress for students. Walton et al. (2023) hypothesized that if all 749 institutions from the study utilized a 10–30 minute online belonging module with incoming students, that an additional 12,000 students would complete their first year (Generalizability, para. 1).

Strayhorn (2022) identified that students feeling more connected to their school community and confident in utilizing campus resources are protective factors. Feeling connected to or belonging is important for students at institutions of higher education. According to Strayhorn, when students feel like they belong, they do better personally, academically, and socially. When students perceive that faculty and other students care and offer social support on campus, students' feelings of connectedness increase, they experience feeling cared about. Strayhorn also explained that when students feel accepted, respected, and valued as an important part of the community, those students become empowered to work hard and be successful in their education.

Occupational therapy professors play key roles in helping OT students feel like they belong to and are an important part of the higher education community. As experts in

occupational balance, OT educators can develop their in- and out-of-class experiences for students to assist all OT students in pursuing occupational balance. Through leading by example, professors can develop positive classroom cultures where every student is treated with respect, demonstrating that every student is important. Second, OT professors can utilize classroom expectations where every student is expected to be helpful and respectful to each other. These skills will be vital in the students' professional lives as clinicians following their studies. OT professors should build their curriculum to promote occupational balance within their OT classes. Third, OT professors should develop a mindset that each student is intelligent and will be successful. Then, professors need to assess each student's capabilities and determine where each student may need assistance. Following up with students to engage them in the learning process to gain knowledge and skills needed to move forward is vital to developing each student's success trajectory. Encouraging students to work together in peer study groups to provide and receive feedback is another valuable practice that prepares students for their clinical future. Developing the ability to provide feedback that is useful, positive, meaningful, and constructive in ways that promote the feeling that teachers and peers are supporting their progress builds community among peers and clinical skills for the future. Finally, OT educators should support students through interactions outside of class. Student OT Associations (SOTA) are valuable places where students can engage with their peers, perform service projects, and receive support from faculty members. SOTA organizations also provide opportunities for socialization, leisure pursuits (promoting occupational balance), and peer-to-peer support.

Faculty Role in Supporting Occupational Therapy Students

Determining the role of faculty in occupational therapy student success is beneficial to occupational therapy programs because it is an OT variable over which faculty have control.

Miller and Mills (2019) described faculty caring as being apparent to students when a faculty member demonstrates empathy, relatability, approachability, and encouraging enthusiasm in the classroom. Hoffman (2014) found that proactive faculty investment in student relationships, when faculty demonstrate interest and investment in their relationships with students, promoted engagement in the course. Faculty who demonstrated care and concern for students developed a culture of trust in their classrooms. Broom's (2016) findings aligned with the importance of faculty-student relationships. Broom measured rapport between faculty and students, identifying two important factors: "professor cares about students" and "professor creates engaging and constructive atmosphere." Caring about students is an investment in student success, well-being, and demonstrating a willingness to connect (Broom, 2016). Students described evidence of a faculty caring for them when faculty acknowledged students' lives outside of academics and the classroom (Miller & Mills, 2019). Caring as a teacher is expressed through effective teaching, and Miller and Mills (2019) identified adaptive teaching, adjusting, and asking for feedback as a priority for student success.

Grab et al. (2021) identified via a survey with 799 respondents that faculty did not recognize the severity of student stress or the negative impacts on student occupational balance. Gadkari and Dulek (2023) examined faculty perceptions of student resistance to learning behaviors. Similar to Khan et al. (2025) and Grab et al. (2021), Gadkari and Dulek (2023) found that faculty lacked awareness of student stress levels. Faculty assumed a lack of motivation from students when students were struggling with stress, anxiety, and systemic pressures. Outside the classroom, faculty support student success by building the faculty-student relationship while maintaining responsibility for boundaries in all interactions because of the power dynamics involved (Marmet, 2023). Marmet (2023) found that faculty building high-quality relationships

with students yielded improved student outcomes when compared to student performance without relationship-building efforts. Creating an engaging and constructive classroom atmosphere encouraged student engagement, particularly when the classroom structure was designed to support student participation (Broom, 2016).

Guzzardo et al., (2021) described four themes that support student-faculty relationship building in class: (a) creating pedagogical space that is flexible to students' unique needs, (b) being inclusive by demonstrating that students belong in class and faculty value their presence and believe in their success, (c) engaging with students to push them to grow with support, and (d) doing more than teaching. Other authors found that personalized feedback, flexibility, and targeting student learning needs in teaching were identified as valuable themes to promote academic success and student belonging (Espiritu et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2025; Kubiak et al., 2025). Faculty actions that support positive student-faculty relationships include listening, being invested in student well-being and achievement, responding to implicit and explicit emotional needs, being available for office hours or questions outside of classroom time, and asking for feedback from students (Guzzardo et al., 2021; Hoffman, 2014; Miller & Mills, 2019; Wang et al., 2023). Positive student-faculty relationships led to better learning, achievement, and subjective well-being (Guzzardo et al., 2021).

Relationship building to support student success also manifests outside of the classroom. Gray et al. (2020) found that socializing with peers and role models, who could be professors or professionals in the community, supported professional identity in occupational therapy students. Wang et al. (2023) identified that student resilience was supported by stress management, problem-solving, and engagement in self-care. Greater resilience and comfort in the classroom promoted students to grow their abilities to establish strong relationships with patients in

occupational therapy fieldwork placements (Wang et al., 2023), an important piece of occupational therapy degree programs, often the final step of graduate school before pursuing occupational therapy licensure.

Implications for Providing Support in OT Education

In the context of occupational therapy education, the ecology of human performance model (EHP) (Dunn et al., 1994) helps explain how student success is shaped not just by personal abilities, but also by the environmental factors such as faculty support, peer relationships, and academic workload (Khan et al., 2025). Dunn et al. (1994) developed the ecology of human performance model to emphasize the interaction between a person and their environment to understand human performance. The EHP model asserts that physical and social contexts are central to how people engage in tasks (Dunn et al., 1994). Khan et al. (2025) utilized focus group discussions and interviews based on the ecology of human performance framework to identify barriers and facilitators to a sense of belonging for OT students and faculty. Physical layout and social relationships had the greatest impact on sense of belonging for students and faculty (Khan et al., 2025). Developing awareness of classroom layouts, office arrangements, and open-door policies for OT faculty could support improved sense of belonging for students and faculty.

Providing intentional support in occupational therapy education has far-reaching implications beyond individual student outcomes. When faculty and programs adopt strategies that enhance belonging, promote occupational balance, and reduce stress, they contribute to the development of more resilient, engaged, and prepared practitioners. This, in turn, strengthens the occupational therapy workforce and improves service delivery to diverse client populations by supporting more prepared new graduates. By integrating supportive practices—such as

mentorship, flexible pedagogical approaches, and inclusive physical and social learning environments—programs not only address student well-being, but also help close equity gaps that disproportionately affect students from underrepresented backgrounds (Banks, 2022; Khan et al., 2025). These efforts align with the profession’s broader goals of advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion, ensuring that future occupational therapists are equipped to meet the complex needs of the communities they serve.

Given the expected increased need for occupational therapists and increased utilization of occupational therapy (Harvison, 2022), identifying techniques to support occupational therapy student success while studying is beneficial to individual occupational therapy programs, the profession of occupational therapy, and the healthcare system in the United States as a whole. Occupational therapy students’ success is not only built upon academic performance prior to college admission, but also academic success in college occupational therapy and foundational courses (Brzuz et al., 2024). Academic success that supports student preparation for their certification exam is achieved through fostering a culture of belonging for all students (Tyminski et al., 2023; Walton et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the success of occupational therapy students is deeply influenced by the quality of faculty-student relationships, which serves as a critical buffer against the high levels of stress and occupational imbalance commonly experienced in rigorous academic programs. As the demand for occupational therapists continues to rise alongside declining student enrollment and the demographic cliff, it is imperative that OT programs take proactive steps to support student well-being and persistence (Brzuz et al., 2024; Tyminski et al., 2023; Walton et al., 2023). Faculty members play a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment by fostering a sense of

belonging, demonstrating empathy, offering personalized feedback, and creating inclusive, flexible learning spaces. Grounded in the EHP Model (Dunn et al., 1994), this approach highlights the importance of the interaction between person and environment in supporting student engagement and resilience. By intentionally cultivating positive faculty-student relationships and addressing both academic and non-academic challenges, occupational therapy programs can enhance student outcomes, reduce burnout, and contribute meaningfully to the development of a diverse and well-prepared healthcare workforce.

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