JOTE Journal of Occupational Therapy Education

Volume 8 | Issue 2 Article 3

2024

Recommendations for Academic Programs to Best Support Occupational Therapy Students: Student Perspectives

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Abstract

Declining occupational therapy student mental health and well-being is well described in the literature. However, there is a lack of literature describing recommendations from the student perspective that could help academic programs as they develop and implement support programming. Involving students in the process can be beneficial as they are experts in their experiences. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe recommendations current occupational therapy students had for their academic programs to best support them during their educational experience. The study sample consisted of 628 entry-level masters and doctoral occupational therapy students from 31 states. Participant responses to one open-ended question compromised the raw data. Data was analyzed line by line using a multi-tiered coding process. Five themes emerged from the data related to faculty/student interactions, in-classroom learning, out of classroom support, programmatic recommendations, and no recommendations. Many of the participants' recommendations were consistent with the general recommendations found in the literature. However, occupational therapy academic programs could incorporate the participants' recommendations into their local level programming while also highlighting occupational therapy's distinct values. To promote student well-being, consider all contexts and factors that impact their students' occupational performance and incorporating meaningful, occupation-based activities inside and outside of the classroom. As occupational therapy programs are successful in supporting their students, they could contribute to their university systems' wider campus efforts highlighting the profession's unique role in promoting health and well-being.

Keywords

Well-being, occupational therapy students, occupational therapy faculty, recommendations, student/faculty interactions

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Natalie N. Michaels, PT, EdD, GCS Emeritus, ATRIC; Caitlin Bender, OTD; Megan Cusick, OTD; D. Rachel Hicks, OTD; Lavanya Reddy, OTD; and Samantha Wu, OTD for their work on the larger cross-sectional, mixed methods research study that this article's data was collected as a part of.

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ABSTRACT

Declining occupational therapy student mental health and well-being is well described in the literature. However, there is a lack of literature describing recommendations from the student perspective that could help academic programs as they develop and implement support programming. Involving students in the process can be beneficial as they are experts in their experiences. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe recommendations current occupational therapy students had for their academic programs to best support them during their educational experience. The study sample consisted of 628 entry-level masters and doctoral occupational therapy students from 31 states. Participant responses to one open-ended question compromised the raw data. Data was analyzed line by line using a multi-tiered coding process. Five themes emerged from the data related to faculty/student interactions, in-classroom learning, out of classroom support, programmatic recommendations, and no recommendations. Many of the participants' recommendations were consistent with the general recommendations found in the literature. However, occupational therapy academic programs could incorporate the participants' recommendations into their local level programming while also highlighting occupational therapy's distinct values. To promote student well-being, consider all contexts and factors that impact their students' occupational performance and incorporating meaningful, occupation-based activities inside and outside of the classroom. As occupational therapy programs are successful in supporting their students, they could contribute to their university systems' wider campus efforts highlighting the profession's unique role in promoting health and well-being.

Introduction

Stress among occupational therapy students has drastically increased over the last several decades due to an array of academic and personal factors leading to a lack of well-being and mental health (Govender et al., 2015; Laposha & Smallfield, 2022; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) defined mental health as one's state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with various life stressors, determine their capabilities, learn and work effectively, and participate within their community (WHO, 2022). While there is some literature that describes post-secondary students' recommendations for their academic programs to promote mental health, there is limited literature specific to recommendations provided by occupational therapy students. The purpose of this study was to describe recommendations current occupational therapy students have for their academic programs to best support them during their educational experience.

Literature Review

The rising prevalence and severity of higher education students experiencing mental health issues including anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional distress is well documented in the literature (Baik et al., 2019; Douwes et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2023; Upsher et al., 2022). In fact, mental health issues in postsecondary students has become so critical that some have identified university students as a high-risk population and elevated the problem to a crisis level (Baik et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2023). More specifically, health professions students experience unique challenges within their programs (e.g., repeated interactions with others, clinical rotations, service provision to clients and sick patients while simultaneously acknowledging only having novice level knowledge, skills, and experience) that make them vulnerable to mental and physical distress, psychological disorders, and behaviors that compromise their health and well-being (Epstein et al., 2019; Olvera Alvarez et al., 2019; Stillwell et al., 2017; Yusufov et al., 2019). Occupational therapy students demonstrate high levels of stress and mental health challenges, which negatively impact their well-being (Govender et al., 2015; Grab et al., 2021; Laposha & Smallfield, 2022; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021; McCombie et al., 2016). Within the literature, occupational therapy students have reported decreased life balance, less participation in social and physical activities, and lower feelings of self-worth while enrolled in their academic programs (Grab et al., 2021; Laposha & Smallfield, 2022).

Because well-being and mental health is connected to student learning and academic performance, the increasing prevalence of mental health issues in students can negatively impact overall academic motivation, performance, and achievement (Douwes et al., 2023; Lane et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2023; Upsher et al., 2022). Therefore, it is essential for post-secondary institutions to explore ways to provide support to improve student well-being. However, much of the literature related to student well-being has focused on describing the prevalence, contributors to negative trends, and utilization of support services rather than on soliciting feedback from students about their recommendations on what would be most helpful (Baik et al., 2019). Considering students are experts in the student experience, involving students in the evaluation, development and implementation of university well-being programming and supports

would be valuable (Baik et al., 2019; Busher, 2012; Healey et al., 2016). Not only could students provide important insights from their personal experiences, but also inviting student ideas and recommendations increases self-awareness, decreases stigma, and encourages advocacy and empowerment about mental health issues across the educational community (Baik et al., 2019; Douwes et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2023; WHO, 2022).

Of the limited literature available, student recommendations for educational institutions in providing support to promote well-being and mental health have centered around teaching practices, relationships, and support services. Most of the literature related to teaching practices has focused on learning, motivation, and academic achievement rather than on how teaching methods can improve well-being and student mental health (Lindsay et al., 2023; Upsher et al., 2022). However, from what is available, students recommended that instructors could support their mental health by providing manageable workloads, flexibility in learning pace/routes, and clear communication and feedback about assignments all contributing to the students' motivation and feelings of effective learning (Douwes et al., 2023; Lane et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2023; Upsher et al., 2022). Connected to teaching practices, one article included student recommendations of incorporating modules on well-being into curriculums; however, it was important for faculty to make the connection between module content and the students' personal well-being explicitly clear (Upsher et al., 2022). Students also reported that positive student/teacher relationships were a factor in supporting their well-being, particularly when teachers took the time to informally interact with them and recognized that students are whole persons who have roles and circumstances outside of school (Baik et al., 2019; Douwes et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2023). Teachers who exhibit empathy, availability, and approachability play a critical role in decreasing student stress and increasing mental health (Baik et al., 2019; Douwes et al., 2023; Upsher et al., 2022). Finally, students recommended the continued need for services and programming (e.g., counseling, academic advising, skill development workshops, spaces for relaxation) to support their mental health, including information on how to access services (Baik et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2023).

Initiatives to support student well-being are most effective when they are developed and implemented at the school/program level (Baik et al., 2019; Upsher et al., 2022). Addressing student well-being at the micro-level as opposed to the university level allows programs to tailor their programming to the specific needs and stressors of a discipline or cohort as well as aid in accessibility and implementation (Baik et al., 2019; Upsher et al., 2022). Additionally, occupational therapy as a profession supports health and well-being; therefore, occupational therapy programs should design and implement programs that specifically address their student needs based on student recommendations (Laposha & Smallfield, 2022). While there is some literature available regarding general recommendations for supporting student well-being, there is a lack of literature that specifically describes recommendations from the perspective of occupational therapy students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine what recommendations current occupational therapy students have for their academic

programs to best support them during their education. Specifically, the research question was “What recommendations do occupational therapy students have for their academic programs to implement to help decrease student stress during occupational therapy school?”

Theoretical Underpinning

The theory of occupational adaptation provided the theoretical underpinning which guided this study. The study acknowledges the press for mastery and occupational challenges that students experience as they face both an internal desire for mastery and demands for mastery from their occupational environment (Schkade & McClung, 2011; Schkade & Schultz, 1992; Schultz & Schkade, 1992). Therefore, the study results provide the participants’ occupational environment (more specifically academic programs) with recommendations on how to best support occupational therapy students during their educational experience. While occupational adaptation is an internal process and the theory of occupational adaptation anticipates that the participants will need to rely on existing, modified, and new adaptive responses to address their stress and lack of well-being, the recommendations generated could help academic programs identify potential ways to adjust physical, social, and cultural occupational environment subsystems to modify (and potentially lessen) the students’ demand for mastery (Schkade & McClung, 2011; Schkade & Schultz, 1992; Schultz & Schkade, 1992).

Methods

This manuscript describes qualitative findings about recommendations for support from an occupational therapy student perspective. However, the data analyzed was collected as part of a larger cross-sectional, mixed methods research study that explored various facets of occupational therapy student coping skills. The study was approved by the Belmont University Institutional Review Board and participants indicated their consent prior to completing the survey.

Recruitment

Various methods of participant recruitment were conducted to gain the highest possible number of participants. The researchers emailed the letter of invitation, which contained the survey link, to all the program contacts listed on the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education’s website requesting they forward the letter to students currently enrolled in their programs. Snowball sampling was also utilized by asking any student who received the recruitment information to forward the study details to other occupational therapy students they knew (Chaim, 2008). Additional recruitment methods consisted of posting on various occupational therapy student social media platforms (e.g., Tennessee Occupational Therapy Association’s student forum, the Coalition of Occupational Therapy Advocates for Diversity chapter Slack, occupational therapy students’ Facebook pages, Instagram direct messages). Inclusion criteria consisted of students enrolled in either an entry-level Master of Science (MSOT) or Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) program and be at least 18 years of age. Exclusion criteria included students who were enrolled in occupational therapy assistant, occupational therapy bridge, 3+3 programs, and/or anyone who could not read and understand English.

Instrumentation

The larger study survey collected quantitative and qualitative data regarding student coping skills use and effectiveness, including a demographics questionnaire, one standardized assessment (Brief COPE), and nine open-ended questions, related to coping strategy effectiveness and use, resource availability, and recommendation suggestions. The demographics questionnaire included questions to describe the participants (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, marital status, year in academic program, type of academic program, state of academic program). The specific open-ended question that was analyzed for the purpose of this manuscript was: What recommendations do you have for your academic program to best support you during your educational program?

Data Collection

Data was collected via the survey link included in the letter of invitation through Qualtrics, an electronic survey software. The data collection period was open for six weeks, and reminder emails were sent to all recruitment groups three weeks after the initial invitation and one week prior to survey closure to promote maximum participation.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics on participant demographics were evaluated using SPSS version 28. The qualitative data was comprised of the participants' responses to the open-ended question. Every response was open coded line-by-line, and incident-to-incident coding was used to double check consistency between open codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Similar codes were then grouped together into focus codes with themes emerging from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, invivo codes were used when a participant had a unique or particularity well-worded recommendation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Rigor was upheld throughout the qualitative data analysis process in multiple ways including maintaining an audit trail of codes and memos that chronicled major decisions made, and coding was completed over multiple sessions with all three researchers present (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Results

Sample

A total of 1062 survey responses were received; however, multiple cases were removed during the data cleaning process due to significantly incomplete surveys and respondents not meeting the inclusion criteria. The final sample size consisted of 739 entry-level occupational therapy students, with 628 participants specifically responding to the recommendations open-ended question. The participants represented 31 states whose ages ranged from 20 to 47 years, with a mean age of 23.97. Refer to Table 1 for extended demographics.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

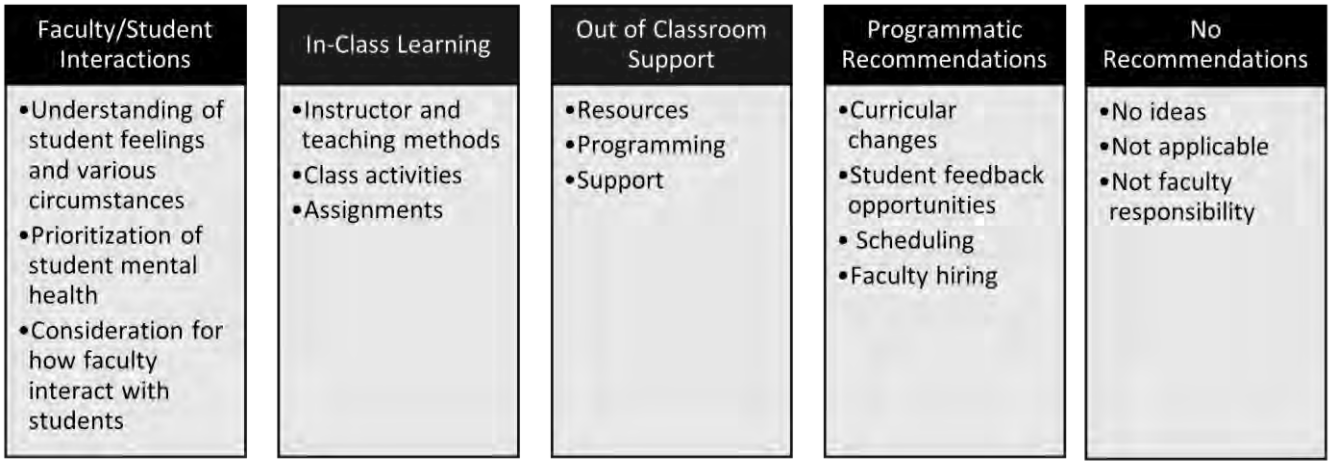
Category	Participants	
	n	%
Gender Identity		
Male	35	4.7
Female	694	93.9
Other	8	1.1
Prefer not to answer	2	0.3
Ethnicity		
Black/African American	21	2.8
Hispanic/Latino	47	6.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	36	4.9
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3	0.4
White/Caucasian	587	79.4
Multiracial or Biracial	32	4.3
Other	6	0.8
Prefer not to answer	7	1
Year in Program		
Year 1	295	39.9
Year 2	330	44.7
Year 3	111	15.0
Other	3	0.4
Program Type		
MSOT	366	49.5
OTD	373	50.5

Qualitative Results

Participants were asked to identify what recommendations they had for their academic programs to support them during their time in their respective educational programs. Five themes emerged from the data including: Faculty/Student Interactions, In-Classroom Learning, Out of Classroom Support, Programmatic Recommendations, and No Recommendations. Refer to Figure 1 for a broad overview of the themes and associated categories.

Figure 1

Overview of Student Recommendations for Academic Programs by Theme



Faculty/Student Interactions

Many participants gave recommendations that led to the emergence of the *Faculty/Student Interactions* theme. This theme was multi-faceted with students wanting their faculty to 1) understand their feelings and various circumstances, 2) prioritize student mental health, and 3) consider how they interact with students.

Understanding of Student Feelings and Various Circumstances. Many participants stated that they wanted faculty to have an awareness of what they were going through mentally and emotionally while in school, particularly when students felt overwhelmed or stressed. Participants desired for faculty to "Understand that we are all humans and not perfect," to "Remember students are human and occupational beings too," and to "Treat us as humans and understand our stressful situations." One participant specifically said that "professors might forget what it was like for them so just taking a step back and trying to remember how they felt in school." A participant suggested this type of understanding could be mutually beneficial because "Talking about the professors' mental health helps students remember that the professors are people too and builds some trust."

Participants also reported that faculty/student relationships could improve if faculty members understood the students' need for a mental break. Instead of receiving understanding, one participant reported "Sometimes I feel that I need to take a break from classes, but my program won't allow us to miss." Finally, many students wanted their faculty to demonstrate understanding about additional circumstances they experienced outside of school (e.g., illness, family responsibilities, challenging finances, varying religious beliefs, higher workloads). One student described graduate school as "A busy season of life and many of us have other things that affect us physically, emotionally, and spiritually outside of the program." Therefore, a participant

recommended that faculty “Get to know your students—what their lives are like outside of the one class you see them in.” Another suggested “Be empathetic towards students- we are not treated like adults who have real adult/family issues. We are expected to perform at our highest level regardless if we have had family die or are going through medical issues. We have been told to “compartmentalize” and that school should be our top focus.” Another participant described their workloads as feeling like “it’s week after week of work sunup to sundown” and suggested faculty “Actually consider the weight of expectations.”

Prioritization of Student Mental Health. Participants also recommended that faculty take an additional step beyond understanding and prioritize student mental health to promote positive student/faculty relationships. According to the participants, prioritizing student mental health included actions such as reaching out to students more frequently, particularly in-person. One participant said “For someone who is coming to you for advice there is less of a connection when meeting over the internet. Meeting in person gives that a better sense of comfort and hope.” Another participant suggested that faculty take the initiative to reach out to students because while “our teachers always are available to help us in any way, but sometimes reaching out to them feels bothersome.”

A different aspect of prioritizing student mental health included consistently providing students with encouragement. A participant recommended faculty “Make it more well-known that we are all in this together and that they will do everything in their power to get their students through this.” Another said, “I think reaffirming our decision to be in this program and that although it is difficult, we will get through it” would demonstrate support as “Emotional support goes a long way.” Participants recognized that graduate occupational therapy programs are difficult and were not suggesting an easier path; however, they needed faculty support to succeed. One participant said “Please be patient and understanding of students going through this program. The program is a lot to handle and maintain, however, it is definitely possible to make it through. In order to make it through, students need comfort and patience from professors.”

Finally, faculty could prioritize student mental health by being transparent about the graduate school experience and consistent in encouraging balance. One student said, “I think it would also be better if staff was more open to acknowledging how challenging graduate school is because not talking about it creates a sense of isolation for students when they find themselves struggling to keep up.” Another participant suggested this level of transparency is even more crucial in the first semester as they said, “Encourage all professors to express the importance to balance (life, emotional, and school) over the three years in the program but especially in the first semester.” One participant also emphasized the importance during the first semester in saying “I would recommend that the professors should talk about coping and getting used to school during the first semester which was by far the hardest.”

Instead of transparency, the participants described a disconnect between what they are learning in school and their lived experience related to prioritizing their mental health. One participant reported “As occupational therapy students, we are taught a lot about the mental health of our patients, but rarely speak on the mental health of the students. I just wished my program would practice what it preached. We’re told to find balance and to prioritize things that benefit mental health and then are given a workload that makes that basically impossible.” Another participant recommended that faculty “Practice what they preach about mental health and taking time for yourself. There is a lot of work with an OTD program, and we get that, but we are humans and do enjoy taking time for ourselves without fear of being scolded for taking time to ourselves to take care of ourselves.” Participants offered an alternative perspective saying, “Don’t just set an unhealthy stress level as the “norm”” and “I wish more of the professors prioritized it…some professors don’t seem to care about whether or not we are healthy outside of class.”

Consideration for How Faculty Interact with Students. Another facet of the faculty/student interactions that emerged was the need for faculty members to maintain or change certain interpersonal characteristics. For example, participants indicated that they would like their professors to be lighthearted and kind, to provide thoughtful feedback, and give grace when needed. One participant provided the recommendation that faculty “make sure they know how to redirect and critique with grace.” Other suggestions included “Encourage professors to be friendly and welcoming to our needs,” “Treat us like real practitioners that will be working alongside you, not just young students,” and “Let students know that they are a valued part of the program.” Participants provided recommendations on what they thought was helpful and not helpful for facilitating faculty/student interactions. One comment from a participant suggested “I would like professors to stop telling us that things were harder back in their day. That just invalidates our feelings and it doesn’t help at all.” Alternatively, others recommended faculty “Continue to remain open and approachable as professors. Being able to tune into the students and observe when we are overwhelmed has helped a lot when we were too nervous to ask for help” which “makes asking help along the way a lot easier.”

In-Classroom Learning

The second theme that emerged from the data is *In-Classroom Learning*. There were three main components within this theme including instructor and teaching methods, class activities, and assignments. Instructor and teaching methods was comprised of recommendations about instructor characteristics and practices specifically related to the classroom and delivery methods. Participants suggested they would feel more supported during their educational experience if faculty encouraged questions in their teaching, provided opportunities for extra help, demonstrated competence with technology and were more organized, including having a completed rather than evolving syllabus. Participants consistently reported that unexpected changes to the schedule and assignment due dates made it difficult for them to plan and create a manageable schedule. One student asked if faculty could “maintain a more structured schedule so I can effectively create a functional work schedule without class times/mandatory events

popping up or switching." Others described the impact that the disorganization had on them as "Students have a lot on their plates and it is very difficult to keep up with everything and prevent missing due dates when the schedule is changed frequently," "There is too much uncertainty and too many abrupt changes to plans," and the "disorganization feels like chaos and is stressful." Instead, participants recommended faculty "Provide timely notice of deadline and events and about changing the schedule often," "Make things concrete and manageable, "and "Be more organized and structured with certain classes." Specific to instructional delivery methods, there was more variation in the recommendations with some participants wanting more asynchronous learning, others wanting less self-paced instruction, some wanting virtual resources, and some participants requesting more relevant teaching (e.g., content to actually prepare students to be licensed therapists, practical treatment strategies, updated information instead of documents from previous years).

Many students also recommended some activities that faculty could implement in the classroom to help them feel supported. Suggestions included doing a "check-in" at the beginning of class to assess how students were doing related to their mental health. One participant said, "sometimes it can be really scary and hard for someone to reach out and initiate that contact because it could be scary or embarrassing for them." However, if faculty took the initiative and provided the opportunity to talk about their stress, students might feel less isolated, and they could build social connections between each other through shared experiences and feelings. Other recommended activities included relaxation activities, hands-on, occupation-based tasks, crafts, and occasionally completing class outside.

Many responses centered around suggestions related to assignments. Some participants recommended having more relevant assignments, assignments that tied directly to the board exam, and less busy work. One participant said, "busy work and assignments that do not benefit or grow students in their education and future practice need to be eliminated." Another participant stated, "Busy work just annoys me and adds more stress." Additionally, students requested flexibility with assignments, including less assignments during fieldwork, optional assignments, and less group work. A participant reported "The workload is occasionally so heavy, and it really feels like there's no flexibility on their end (even though so much flexibility is expected of us)." One of the most significant recommendations from the participants was for faculty to coordinate assignments across classes and to provide more explicit instructions and expectations for assignments. One participant stated, "There is no reason for all classes I am taking to have two weeks in the semester where all assignments are due, and the rest of the weeks be a free for all with zero work due." Another participant's suggestion for faculty was "Not to just get rid of assignments or tests but find a better time that would relieve some stress." Also, one student said, "Give more explanation for assignments and give more direction (not just saying "embrace ambiguity")." Finally, participants thought that assignments that promoted wellness could be helpful, including "Continue integrating assignments that incorporate mental health/wellness reflection into them: mental health/wellness journals or personal reflection/goal setting."

Out of Classroom Support

In addition to in-class learning recommendations, the participants provided suggestions for the theme *Out of Classroom Support* along three categories: resources, programming, and support. Participants provided a variety of topics that they could use more information on including ways to increase physical activity, using meditation for relaxation, and coping strategies. They also suggested resources for diverse, non-traditional students related to childcare, divorce, and finances. Resource distribution timing seemed to be significant as participants recommended academic programs provide resources especially during the first semester and at the beginning of the semester. One participant advocated for "provided materials right at the beginning of the program for mindfulness like activities to start good habits." In addition to providing information, participants also suggested having expanded building access, decreasing tuition through increased financial aid, providing students with "free things," and creating a sensory room would help them feel more supported by "Implementing ways, activities, or designated spaces someone can go to when they feel really stressed."

Programming revolved around academic programs providing events and programs for occupational therapy students. Not only would students appreciate having group programming (e.g., in-services, workshops) on the topics of stress relief, time management, work/life balance, but participants also recommended occupational therapy programs offer fun activities such as field days and crafts. One participant said, "To have a group outside of class, where we can meet and socialize and also just talk about our stressors and support one another" would be beneficial. Others suggested "Taking a day mid semester to do a day of occupational therapy related crafts or activities just to have fun for a day" and "Creating designated time for stress relief, like cancelling classes one afternoon to do a wellness day." Another participant described how their specific program provided fun activities saying, "I love the activities we receive during the week like bamboo plant making and pumpkin painting." An important consideration related to programming was scheduling as a participant said, "I found that the program schedules wellness activities outside of class time and by that point we all just want to be home and not at school anymore. I think doing stuff at lunch would be great too."

Lastly, support was recommended in the form of peer mentors and faculty advisors. Many students reported they wished academic programs would provide them with individualized advisors who would offer regular and frequent one-on-one meetings, especially during their off-campus experiences (e.g., fieldwork, capstone). Others suggested "advisors who are not professors where we can go to get help and speak with about issues in classes. Having an advisor that is also one of my professors makes me feel that I cannot open up about my struggles in other classes." Several participants also recommended that support could be communicated in course syllabi with faculty making their office hours visible and accurate and including information about mental health resources and supports available through the program and university.

Programmatic Recommendations

While the other themes were specific to faculty/student interactions and support within and outside of the classroom, the *Programmatic Recommendations* theme described suggestions that applied to the broader academic program. These recommendations included suggestions about curricular changes, scheduling, student feedback opportunities, and faculty hiring. Participants suggested recommendations for changing the curriculum such providing a more balanced workload by spacing out the more challenging courses, incorporating classes specific on promoting student wellness in the curriculum, and requiring periodic, yet required, mental health checks or self-assessments. One participant said, “Pace out the harder courses: Anatomy and neuro.” Also, another student suggested, “I would recommend a course at the beginning of the program to teach students ways to manage their stress, whether it be for a full semester or just a half-semester course that will prepare them for how to handle graduate school.” Participants also emphasized “how much the importance of grades adds to stress.” They recommended academic programs be more consistent in their communication with students as programs “keep talking about getting off the ‘A’ train” and yet, seem to place significant importance on students maintaining high grades. Specific to fieldwork, participants suggested information about fieldwork requirements (e.g., expected travel distances, associated costs) and fieldwork progression be provided earlier in the program so students could plan ahead and know what to expect.

Scheduling changes were also highly recommended among the participants, including implementing mental health days and breaks, creating opportunities for flexible attendance, and having a reasonable class schedule. One student recommended “allowing 1-2 unexcused absences for mental health days, so long as it does not interfere with any tests, quizzes, or major assignments.” Another suggested “Building in a day of rest once or twice a semester to catch up on project, studying, or even sleep without any new material piling on.” A participant asked that programs exercise support and “Don’t schedule assignments to do over breaks. We have breaks for a reason and they are important for our mental health.” In addition to full day breaks, participants recommended programs provide smaller breaks as “Providing breaks can be as simple as giving short breaks during classes or ensuring that classes end on time so students can have breaks in between classes.” One participant said built-in breaks was particularly important with longer classes and suggested programs “allow students to take breaks throughout 2+ hour lectures—our brains can only hold so much info at once until it needs a break.”

Some additional programmatic recommendations included providing students with opportunities for shared decision making and outlets to provide feedback through anonymous concern forms. One participant stressed the importance of not only receiving feedback but implementing suggested changes when possible, saying, “Actually read the course reviews and change the things that need to be changed to relieve stress for the next semester.” Lastly, a few students recommended programs hire more competent faculty members who are compatible with the current students.

No Recommendations

Within the theme of *No Recommendations*, participants responded with comments such as “n/a, none, or no ideas.” However, several students stated they did not have any recommendations because they felt well supported by their current program. One student stated “I think my school has a good framework for addressing student concerns and wellness. I appreciate both the informal and formal supports in place to help us through the program.” Other participants did not have any recommendations because they did not think that it was the faculty’s responsibility to provide students with support. One participant said, “It is not necessarily their responsibility to accommodate since they are going through similar struggles.”

Discussion

The five themes, *Faculty/Student Interactions*, *In-Classroom Learning*, *Out of Classroom Support*, *Programmatic Recommendations*, *and No Recommendations*, which resulted from occupational therapy students’ recommendations were consistent with the general student recommendations found in the literature. These themes take a micro to macro approach to providing student support ranging from personal interactions between faculty and students, to classroom level learning, out of classroom learning, and ending with the larger scale programmatic recommendations.

At the core of these recommendations, as evidenced by being recommended the most frequently, was the importance of solid relationships between students and the faculty members as instructors are more likely to affect the well-being of students compared to any other university stakeholders (Lindsay et al., 2023). The participants wanted their professors to understand their situations and circumstances beyond their student roles and help them prioritize their well-being while demonstrating empathy, availability, and approachability (Baik et al., 2019; Douwes et al., 2023; Lindsay et al., 2023). The occupational therapy profession acknowledges that different factors interact and impact occupational performance; therefore, considering multiple roles and contexts is particularly important for occupational therapy students (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020b). Having these types of student/faculty interactions and building significant relationships requires time and intentionality. However, unfortunately, student and faculty relationships were overall negatively impacted by the pandemic as technology was a barrier to building relationships and students missed out on quality interactions with their peers, professors, and their overall educational community (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Galanek & Gierdowski, 2019; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). While the pandemic allowed for more innovative and convenient ways for faculty to meet and interact with students (e.g., Zoom, work from home, scheduling meetings through electronic scheduling programs), perhaps these virtual options have provided less opportunities for more spontaneous and informal exchanges and check-ins such as students dropping into faculty offices, chance meetings in the hallways, and brief conversations in elevators. It might be in those times where faculty could learn more about student lives outside of the classroom and offer support beyond academic topics. When they felt supported by faculty, the students believed they could handle their program demands and maintain their mental health.

Also consistent with the literature were the recommendations related to teaching methods such as scheduling to make workloads more manageable, structured and organized course outlines, and clear and consistent communication and feedback about assignments (Douwes et al., 2023; Lane et al., 2018; Lindsay et al., 2023). When students felt like they were learning effectively and were completing assignments that were directly preparing them for their board exams and future practice versus busy work, they felt supported and their mental health improved. However, what was reflected in the occupational therapy students' recommendations that had not been suggested in the available literature was the recommendation of incorporating occupation-based classroom activities (e.g., crafts, hands-on, relaxation, holding class outside) to support student well-being. The importance of participating in meaningful occupations for promoting health and well-being is well-documented in occupational therapy literature; therefore, all students, not just those enrolled in occupational therapy programs, could benefit from more occupation-based activities within the classroom (AOTA, 2020a, 2020b; Black et al., 2019; Kennedy & Davis, 2017; Meyer, 1922, 1977; Saraswati et al., 2019). This recommendation could be a means for occupational therapy programs to contribute to the wider university's efforts to address student well-being. Also, participants recommended a combination of formal and informal ways to feel supported with an emphasis on informal methods. While they did include in-services and workshops in their recommendations, there were more suggestions related to events (e.g., field day), craft activities, check-ins at the beginning of class as opposed to formal modules on well-being content being embedded into their curriculum (Upsher et al., 2022).

Another area of significance within the results was the participants' recommendations related to traditional academic life, specifically grades and attendance requirements. The participants did not necessarily desire a less rigorous program or workload as they wanted to best prepare for their future career. However, they communicated the pressure they felt related to maintaining high grades, which was described in the literature suggesting that academic standards are not always consistent with promoting student well-being (Lindsay et al., 2023; Upsher et al., 2022). Grades are an essential part of post-secondary educational systems; however, finding the balance between the necessity of giving grades and well-being may require academic programs and faculty members to shift in how they assess student learning and understanding (e.g., ungrading, pass/fail, demonstration and performance, formative versus summative assessments, reflection). Also, there is a strong relationship between class attendance and grades and many academic programs have attendance requirements only allowing students to miss class when they have specific excused reasons (Credé et al., 2010). However, the participants advocated for academic programs to allow them to have flexibility in their attendance, giving students the option to take an unexcused absence from class for a mental health break. Academic programs could positively impact their students' overall mental health by allowing them some flexibility in attendance including missing class without penalty assuming their absence did not interfere with exams, presentations, etc. When students know that they have the option to take a mental health break as needed and are encouraged to actually take their break, their well-being may improve as they have a designated space for restoration and renewal (Saraswati et

al., 2019). While missing class may suggest a student will lose valuable academic content, allowing students to exert some autonomy, self-awareness, and personal decision making, which may be professional skills that are just as important for them to develop as they prepare to be practitioners.

Many participants within this study recommended increasing the amount and type of resources they have access to during their time in occupational therapy school. However, participants also reported they needed increased communication by faculty regarding the available resources on campus, suggesting knowing about the available resources might increase the likelihood that students would use the resources. This concept is supported within the literature as students indicated that increasing awareness, promoting the use of campus services, and improving the accessibility and quality of these services would be beneficial in supporting their well-being (Baik et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2023). Because occupational therapy programs traditionally use a cohort model, their courses are often housed in a single floor/building, so graduate students have limited interactions with students and services outside of their programs. Because of this, the participants may have been isolated from the larger university efforts to promote student well-being. Therefore, centering support programming primarily at a local micro level within occupational therapy programs with avenues to connect students with the university macro programming and services could offer increased levels of student support and utilization (Baik et al., 2019; Upsher et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The data was collected in Fall 2021, at a time where the level of in-person and asynchronous learning varied by program because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, as programs have returned to in-person experiences, some of the participant recommendations may not be as pertinent as previously. Also, the participants self-selected to participate in the study; thus, the recommendations expressed by the participants may not be shared by all occupational therapy students. The question was broadly stated, and the participants could have interpreted support in a variety of ways. It is possible that participants might have responded differently if the question stem specifically mentioned mental health or well-being as the type of support being asked about.

Most of the recommendations seemed to stem from negative experiences that the participants had related to their academic programs and faculty member actions, with little responses reflecting position actions that programs have taken to promote their well-being. Future research could include a study that focused on positive actions that programs have taken to promote student mental health. Also, considering engaging in meaningful occupation for improving well-being is a hallmark of the occupational therapy profession, a study that explored specific ways that occupational therapy programs incorporate occupation-based activities into their program to promote student well-being could be warranted (AOTA, 2020a, 2020b; Black et al., 2019; Kennedy & Davis, 2017; Meyer, 1922, 1977; Saraswati et al., 2019). Additionally, while the construct of occupational engagement for well-being promotion is well known within the

occupational therapy community, it might not be as prominent within campus wide efforts. A research study or scoping review surveying occupational therapy's distinct role in promoting well-being more broadly across university campuses could be completed. Finally, some participants did not feel like it was their faculty members' responsibility to promote their well-being. In recognizing that the available literature and this study's findings strongly support a relationship between student well-being and faculty actions, perhaps a study investigating this counter opinion would provide a broader understanding of the topic.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Many of the student recommendations centered around student/faculty interactions and in-class learning, which are highly dependent on faculty behaviors and abilities. Therefore, programs need to generate specific and realistic ways that faculty members can relate to students and integrate activities into their classrooms to provide student support. These behaviors and class exercises may require faculty members to exhibit creativity and flexibility as they venture beyond their course content and traditional ways of interacting with students. Implementing and in some cases changing behaviors may be difficult for some faculty members. Therefore, it is imperative that faculty are provided with support and resources that equip them to feel confident that they can address student mental health and well-being (Baik et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2023). Faculty support can come in a variety of resources (e.g., skill building workshops, committee work) and topics (e.g., effective teaching/learning, mental health counseling). These types of trainings are particularly important for adjunct faculty as they might not have access to as many resources as full-time faculty (Lindsay et al., 2023).

Student well-being initiatives are best implemented at the school/program level as opposed to the university level because faculty have the most opportunities for direct touch points with students, allowing programs to target issues that specifically concern their students, especially related to discipline/career matters (Baik et al., 2019; Upsher et al., 2022). While services may be available at the university level, students have more connection with their school/program. Therefore, occupational therapy programs are encouraged to develop local programming to promote their students' well-being. However, as programs design and implement programs, they should rely on the university's macro-level resources for support and work in conjunction with the university's larger efforts to promote campus-wide well-being.

Traditional components of academic life have not always contributed to students' health and well-being (Lindsay et al., 2023). Students have reported inconsistencies between what is communicated by faculty members and programs related to academic expectations and the importance of promoting student well-being. Typically, occupational therapy programs stress the value of being in a rigorous program, coming to class prepared by completing all reading and pre-work, and enforcing grade requirements for program progression. However, they also speak to students about

being occupationally balanced, engaging in self-care, and maintaining their holistic health. Occupational therapy programs are encouraged to explore ways to maintain academic rigor and integrity, while also finding a balance of providing students with the support needed for mental health and well-being.

Finally, while this paper specifically addressed recommendations that occupational therapy programs could implement to demonstrate student support, it is essential to acknowledge that student mental health and well-being is not the sole responsibility of academic programs and faculty members. Considering health professions students are at a greater risk for mental and physical distress, psychological disorders, and behaviors that compromise their health and well-being, occupational therapy students need to develop an awareness for, and skills needed to address their well-being within a safe and supportive environment (Epstein et al., 2019; Olvera Alvarez et al., 2019; Stillwell et al., 2017; Yusufov et al., 2019). As students learn to advocate and care for themselves, they can develop skills in resilience, self-regulation, independence, and communicating needs (Douwes et al., 2023). By giving students the opportunity to foster in themselves a reflective and empowered practitioner, academic programs prepare them for life and occupational therapy practice.

Conclusion

Decreased mental health and well-being in occupational therapy students has become an increasing concern as it can negatively impact overall academic performance (Govender et al., 2015; Laposha & Smallfield, 2022; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). Because students are experts in their own experiences, it is important for educational systems to ask students their recommendations on how to best design and implement efforts to promote student well-being (Baik et al., 2019; Busher, 2012; Healey et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to describe recommendations current occupational therapy students have for their academic programs to best support them during their educational experience. Participants provided recommendations focused around five themes related to faculty/student interactions, in-classroom learning, out of classroom support, programmatic recommendations, and no recommendations. Academic programs could use the recommendations provided to develop and enhance programming to support their students while also highlighting occupational therapy's distinct values. Specifically, occupational therapy faculty members can consider all contexts and factors that impact their students' occupational performance, not just the student role, and incorporate meaningful, occupation-based activities inside and outside of the classroom to promote student well-being. As occupational therapy programs work at a micro, local level to support their students during the students' academic experience, they can serve as an example and contribute to wider university efforts to increase student mental health.

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