

WESTERN NEW ENGLAND UNIVERSITY | **WNE**
COLLEGE of PHARMACY and HEALTH SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT of OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

STUDENT DOCTORAL Experiential Capstone Projects

Educate. Engage. Empower



Dear WNE OTD Family and Friends,

We are excited to produce this first annual edition of EDUCATE-ENGAGE-EMPOWER to showcase our doctoral experiential capstone program and student projects. Our aim is to better familiarize you with our faculty, staff, and students so that you can continue to be a part of our endeavors.

The Doctoral Experiential (DEx) Capstone Project is a complex interrelated field experience and scholarly project that is coordinated by a student in collaboration with a university and community team. The purpose of the DEx Capstone is for students to apply the knowledge and skills gained during their OTD academic courses, labs, and fieldwork experiences in ways that challenge and perhaps transform the delivery of health, educational, and social services. Through designing and implementing a community experiential and a scholarly project that specifically responds to the needs of a population and setting, students experience the roles of reflective practitioner, transformative leader, and innovative designer.

Students complete 14 weeks, or 560 hours of work with a community organization during the DEx Capstone. Community organizations include hospitals, clinics, schools, health care, social service, advocacy, or educational organizations. WNE OTD students work in groups of four or five students with a faculty mentor. Depending on the topic, population, and setting they choose, they work with one or more “site mentors” or collaborators. In a typical year, while there, students learn about the population and setting, the organization’s strengths and challenges, and they participate in daily activities. Students also conduct a scholarly project designed to answer a question generated from a needs assessment, literature review and collaboration with faculty, site, and peer mentors. The intention of both the community experiential and the scholarly project are to establish a meaningful connection between WNE and the community, to improve health, education, and social services, and to explore potentially transformative roles for occupational therapists. The ultimate aim of the capstone experience is for our students to apply this concentrated knowledge, skills, and intrinsic development to emerge as OT practitioners beyond a novice level in order to impact communities in addition to individuals and groups.

The following pages offer descriptions of our Faculty Mentors, acknowledge our Community Partners, and illustrate our 2023 student projects. We are so very grateful to all who engage with our program as educators, mentors, reviewers, and consultants. Thank you for your support and contribution to the community and to the profession of occupational therapy.



Debra Latour, OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR
Doctoral Capstone Coordinator

2023 WNE OTD Faculty Mentors and Mentorship Groups



Brittany Adams, OT, OTD, MS, OTR
Diana Beshta, OT/s
Avery Fornaciari, OT/s
Amanda Hill, OT/s
Deanna Padilla, OT/s



Erin Murray, OT, OTD, OTR
Michaela Gallagher, OT/s
Morgan Lukasik, OT/s
Justin Murata, OT/s
Kaeli Serafino, OT/s



Amy Burton, OT, OTD, OTR
Armani Guillama, OT/s
Shannon Lee, OT/s
Caila Nguyen, OT/s



Michael Salemi, OT, OTD, OTR
Richard Amoako, OT/s
Giovannia Casseus, OT/s
Kwaku Frimpong-Boateng, OT/s



Debra Latour, OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR
Eve Celine Alba, OT/s
Alyssa Daniels, OT/s
Danielle Goldberg, OT/s
Amelia Lee, OT/s



Erin Wells, OT, OTD, MSOT, OTR
Ileana Alfonso, OT/s
Alisha Bailey, OT/s
Isabella Lagos, OT/s
Olivia Nappi, OT/s
Vini Thomas, OT/s



Alexis Morin, OT, OTD, MOT, OTR
Jennifer Anderson, OT/s
Jessica Dressel, OT/s
Jacob Dugard, OT/s
Victoria Giaccone, OT/s

Thank you to our 2023 Partnering Sites, and Site Mentors

Apex for Youth, NY, NY
Baystate Health Network/My Sister's House, Springfield MA
Center for Human Development, Goodwin House, Chicopee MA
Connecticut Alliance for Foster and Adoptive Families, Rocky Hill CT
Destiny's Ride Therapeutic Center, Chatham NY
Diane Atkins, OTR, Consultant
Enhancing Skills for Life, Houston, TX
Eastern Connecticut Health Network, Rockville General Hospital, Vernon CT
Handspring Clinical Services: NY,CO,UT
Jewish Community Center (JCC), Springfield MA
Keystone Commons, Ludlow MA
LUK, Inc., Fitchburg, MA
Plymouth Community Intermediate School, Plymouth MA
Single-Handed Solutions, LLC, Springfield MA
Springfield Headstart/Educare, Springfield MA
Springfield Sharks Swim Club, Springfield MA

Ian Yu
Rayna Brown, LCSW
Daniella Grimaldi, MS
Vanessa Williamson, MS
Jodie O'Connell Ponkos, COTA/L

Shawn Swanson Johnson OTR
Lorraine Nalewajk, PT
Megan Hodgson, CPO
Dorothy Linder, OTR
Kerrie Banks
Emily Walker, OT, OTR
Lori Rush

Mahera Chiarizio
Teresa Skelly

Thank you to Our 2023 WNE Site Mentors

Brittany Adams OT, OTD, MS, OTR
Amy Burton, Asst Dean of Student Affairs, COPHS
Kim Geisner-Gross, OT, OTD, M.Ed., OTR, CHT, CKTP
Jessica Hill, Asst VP of Student Affairs
Debra Latour, OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR
Michael Salemi, OT, OTD, OTR
Erin Wells, OT, OTD, MSOT, OTR

Thank you to our Supportive Staff

Judy Anderson, Justin Eck, Julie D'Avanzo

Our Upcoming Projects

Class of 2024 and 2025 Faculty Mentors and Interests

Dr. Brittany Adams, OT, OTD, MS, OTR
Associate Professor
Program Director & Department Chair

Mentorship Interest Areas:

- 2024
 - Trauma-informed coaching for women in college sports in partnership with the Women's Sports Foundation
 - Development of an OT student leadership society in partnership with OT Leaders and Legacies Society
 - Growth and expansion of a functional support group for individuals with brain injuries
 - Nutrition and lifestyle education for high school athletes transitioning to college
- 2025
 - Implementation of OT services in Primary Care
 - Community reintegration programming for Veterans
 - Cooking groups as a tool to promote quality of life for individuals with diverse needs

Dr. Kimberly Geisner-Gross, OT, OTD, M.Ed., OTR, CHT, CKTP
Assistant Professor

Mentorship Interest Areas:

- 2025
 - Implementing stress reduction and mental health support programming for patients currently receiving chemotherapy
 - Implementing evidence-based support groups for parents/caregivers of children with JRA
 - Developing educational resources and tools related to cannabis science and medicine for oncology professionals and clients receiving chemotherapy

Dr. Debra Latour, OT, PP-OTD, M.Ed., OTR
Assistant Professor
Doctoral Capstone Coordinator

Mentorship Interest Areas:

- 2024
 - Upper Limb Absence, pediatric mental health and telehealth: Unlimbited Wellness©
 - Development of an Innovation Society and/or Special Interest Group for OTs
 - Pelvic floor program development
- 2025
 - Upper Limb Absence and Telehealth
 - Doctoral Capstone Site Mentor Resources

Dr. Alexis Morin, OT, OTD, MOT, OTR
Assistant Professor

Mentorship Interest Areas:

- 2025
 - Developing resources and an evidence-based support group with an emphasis on coping strategies for family members of individuals with chronic mental illness.
 - Developing an evidence-based support program/group for caregivers of family members with Dementia.
 - Identifying needs and resources for occupational therapy students completing their Level II fieldwork and creating an evidence-based toolkit and resource guide (advocacy tools for students, mental health resources, stress management, etc.) to optimize students' overall fieldwork experiences and ability to advocate for their learning experience and mental health needs.
 - Creation of a support group for caregivers of children with disabilities utilizing a strengths-based approach and evidence on "playfulness." Topic areas may include stress management, self-care, challenges with social participation, quality of sleep, and how to manage uncertainty.

Dr. Erin Murray, OT, OTD, OTR
Associate Professor

Mentorship Interest Areas:

- 2024
 - Ergonomics for a variety of different clients
 - Breweries
 - ROTC students at WNE
 - Pelvic Health
 - Posture corrector device that can be accessed from an individuals' phone
- 2025
 - Pain management interventions
 - Topical analgesics including CBD
 - Student/faculty with chronic pain and accessibility to campus buildings
 - Cupping
 - Ergonomic education/programming for pharmacy students/undergraduate students

Dr. Erin Wells, OT, OTD, MSOT, OTR
Assistant Professor

Mentorship Interest Areas:

- 2024
 - Exploring inclusive swim lessons for children with disabilities
 - Improving access and occupational engagement for individuals with disabilities
- 2025
 - Improving occupational engagement for individuals with disabilities, including accessible playgrounds/community spaces
 - Sexual education for persons with intellectual & developmental disabilities (I/DD)
 - Assessing and addressing trauma for caregivers of those with disabilities, particularly parents



Apex for Youth: How Community Programs are Shaping the Future Generations of NYC

EVE ALBA, OT/S

PERSONAL STATEMENT – Community programs provide opportunities and services to empower individuals and support them in succeeding personal goals. Specifically, the impact it can have on underserved Asian and immigrant youth is profound. Many children in this population are limited when it comes to mentorship, athletic opportunities, and educational support. Like many of the students at Apex for Youth, I immigrated to the United States when I was only 3 years old, growing up in a lower economic bracket with limited opportunities to explore my interests. Having community programs available to students helps with so much more than just something to keep them busy. It allows them to explore their interests to the fullest and gives them opportunities to make meaningful friendships and build a community.

Apex for Youth drew my interest because, being an immigrant myself, it was important to me to give back to my community and open doors for students to be able to have opportunities that I didn't have growing up. It's been an amazing experience seeing the students grow as individuals and excited to attend the programs here at Apex.

Apex for Youth is a non-profit organization based in NYC that empowers underserved Asian and immigrant youth from low-income families to open a wide door of opportunities. Apex for Youth, originally called APEX, was founded in New York's Chinatown in 1992 by five friends who saw that Asian American youth were lacking the support they needed to thrive. With a budget of only \$2,000, Apex was launched as a volunteer-led mentoring program to inspire youth to open opportunities for their lives. With the help of volunteers, donations, and a supportive community, they serve students from pre-k to post-high school across the boroughs of NYC.

I partnered with the Athletics program at Apex for Youth to find ways to improve the students' overall health and well-being. Since the beginning of April 2023, I have been a yoga instructor and provided interventions to their programs to engage the students and help the programs run smoothly.

Though 18% of NYC's population is Asian American, less than 1.5% of social service dollars go to organizations that serve them (NYC DOE, 2021). In addition, suicide is the leading cause of death among Asian American youth, and Asian Americans reflect the lowest rate of any racial/ethnic group in seeking mental health services (NAMI, 2019).

With this in mind, I have incorporated meditation and mindfulness activities into the yoga program and encourage all the instructors to do the same with their athletic programs. I also provided icebreaker games and meaningful activities to help the students learn about team building and how to ask someone for help when they need it. I have worked with multiple departments at Apex to work on increasing their budget, providing opportunities for donations, and helping Apex with their volunteer recruitment.





Empowering Lives: B.E.A.R. P.A.W. Center Life Skills Groups Ignite Occupational Engagement in Participants

ALISHA BAILEY, OT/S, ISABELLA LAGOS, OT/S, OLIVIA NAPPI, OT/S, ILEANA ALFONSO, OT/S

The B.E.A.R. P.A.W. Center (BPC) is a pro-bono student-run occupational therapy (OT) center located within the Department of Occupational Therapy at Western New England University. B.E.A.R. P.A.W. is an acronym that stands for Bringing Equity, Accessibility, and Rehabilitation for People Achieving Wellness. The Center opened fall of 2022 and has been a driving force for students to receive hands-on learning experience by serving clients with a wide variety of conditions, disabilities, and deficits. The student clinicians are able to practice various therapeutic methods under the direct supervision of a licensed occupational therapist.

The course curriculum at Western New England University requires OT students to complete a Doctoral Experiential Capstone project (DEX) that takes place over the course of 14 weeks with a total of 560 hours. As a component of the DEX capstone project, four third-year students Ileana Alfonso, OT/s, Alisha Bailey, OT/s, Isabella Lagos, OT/s, and Olivia Nappi, OT/s, implemented pro-bono life skills services directly through the BPC.

BPC clients and participants recruited through community transition programs within Western Massachusetts participated in life skills groups focusing on areas of health and wellness, social participation, work/education, and instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs). Initial evaluation and screens were conducted on participants to determine client goals and needs to be addressed within the group sessions. Groups were created collaboratively to address these goals and graded based on the clients' strengths and abilities. Each of the doctoral students created groups based on the areas of occupation outlined above.

OT/s Isabella Lagos' groups focused on activities related to health management. "I created these groups to assist individuals of all abilities to prosper in their personal health and wellness goals. Sessions included physical activity/adaptive fitness education, healthy food choices, scheduling doctors appointments, and stress management strategies. I aimed to foster an inclusive environment, ensured equity for everyone to be embraced, and delivered tailored health management services that catered to each person's unique needs."

"IADLs include activities such as managing money, meal preparation, medication management, community access, and light housekeeping skills," Alisha Bailey OT/s explained. "Oftentimes, IADLs is one of the first occupations that is affected by injury, diagnosis, or condition, and these skills are integral for independence and quality of life." Using the Developmental Frame of Reference, which focuses on the promotion of skills and tasks through developmentally appropriate activities, Bailey curated her groups to address important independent living skills in a group setting to encourage and empower participants to work together in order to grow these skills in one another.

Olivia Nappi OT/s aimed to promote social inclusion for the study participants through engaging group activities that addressed learning essential social skills. Nappi reported, "My thought process behind running social participation groups was to not only help the participants learn social skills, but to also help participants build meaningful relationships. It was so special to observe the participants grow more and more confident each week and watching friendships blossom amongst one another."

Work and education skills addressed within groups include self-advocacy, time management, creating a schedule, utilizing technology, and applying/interviewing for jobs. Ileana Alfonso OT/s states "these pro-bono life skills groups provide our participants with a safe and comfortable learning environment to practice skills that can be applied in the local community. At BPC, participants can learn from each other and feel encouraged to try new things that they may not have tried during an individual therapy session."



Occupational Therapy in Sports: A Look Into the Roles and Opportunities to Improve Health and Wellness of Athletes

RICHARD AMOAKO, OT/S

As a former student-athlete, I have always had a strong desire to work with athletes, driven by my knowledge and experience. With a growing interest in mental health and wellness, I found it ideal to create a program to address the mental well-being of student-athletes at Western New England University (WNE). Consequently, I embarked on developing and implementing a mental health coaching program tailored for this purpose as part of my final doctoral experiential capstone project.

Extensive literature and research have consistently emphasized the urgent need for additional mental health services for student-athletes, despite the existence of traditional counseling services offered by universities. In designing this program, my objective was to leverage my insights and expertise as an occupational therapy (OT) student to deliver interventions centered around the needs of the individuals, viewing their occupations and activities as key factors in promoting their overall well-being. The goal was to foster holistic wellness among student-athletes. Throughout the development process, I have had the privilege of collaborating and engaging in discussions with various individuals on mental health and athletes. One particular conversation that remains vivid in my memory is the exceptional dialogue I had with the director of cognitive performance at LA Galaxy, a professional soccer team in Major League Soccer (MLS).

Through mutual friends, I had the opportunity to connect with Michael Rabasca, the director of cognitive performance, via email. I contacted him to discuss his OT role in a professional sports team environment and to gather his thoughts on my doctoral project. We arranged a Zoom meeting, during which Rabasca introduced himself and provided insights into his professional background. He mentioned that he had primarily worked in rehabilitation as an OT, focusing on individuals with acquired brain injuries. Interestingly, he shared that he had also been involved as a soccer coach while working full-time as an OT. This overlap between his occupational therapy work and coaching experiences intrigued me, as it mirrored my own current involvement as a soccer coach. Rabasca expressed a long-standing interest in working with athletes and highlighted how certain techniques and strategies used in his OT practice were applicable to teaching and learning new skills, patterns, and ideas with his players. He emphasized using these strategies to help his patients with acquired brain injuries develop new skills. Rabasca's insights gave me a fresh perspective on how adaptable strategies and ideas can be across different contexts. It heightened my awareness of the significance of programs like the one I developed for student-athletes, as they can draw upon similar foundations and techniques to support their mental well-being. During our conversation, Rabasca delved into his current role within the team and the evaluation process they employ when considering new athletes. He explained that they utilize various assessments, including the MVPT-4, TVP-4, and Beery VMI, to measure players' visual perception and vision. Additionally, they assess personality traits like competitiveness, decision-making/problem-solving skills, and emotional regulation using assessments such as the VARK and GRIT by Carol Dweck. While these metrics differed from the focus of my mental health program, where I measured anxiety levels, depression levels, and overall psychological well-being of the athletes, I found them incredibly intriguing.

Comparing my work to Rabasca's involvement with the professional team was enlightening. Our conversations served as a catalyst for reinforcing my aspirations to work with athletes in the future as an OT. This conversation not only provided valuable insights into the realm of working with athletes, but also reaffirmed the importance of leveraging occupational therapy's knowledge and expertise to foster comprehensive wellness. Rabasca expressed a desire to stay in touch and be updated on the outcome of my study. Overall, this experience was exceptional. It was a powerful source of inspiration, propelling me further toward my professional goals.

Implementation of a Multifactorial Booklet for Residential Substance Abuse Treatment Facility

JENNIFER ANDERSON, OT/S

Western New England University 3rd-year doctoral student, Jennifer Anderson, had the opportunity to work with Behavioral Health Network. Anderson has been working within a residential substance use treatment facility, My Sister's House, for her 14-week capstone project. She created a multifactorial life skills manual to provide and train staff to utilize in sessions with their clients. Anderson also took on a counselor role at My Sister's House, where she worked with clients one on one, along with three psychoeducational group sessions. Some of the highlights of her capstone project include: creating a physical and electronic life skills manual, promoting for self-advocacy and self-efficacy through life skills, improving employee burnout rate and quality of life with providing more resources, and filling a major gap of care within community reintegration programs.

Anderson has always had a passion for advocating for mental health in any setting. She originally sought out working with domestic violence survivors, but she now realizes how much more she gets while working with this setting. "Most of these clients have a history of domestic violence, along with other traumatic events. As somebody who was affected by domestic violence, I had a passion to help others that have been affected by this trauma. Although many clients at My Sister's House have a history with abuse, there is more to their individualized stories. Their stories evoked empathy and compassion to provide them with every means necessary for community reintegration," Anderson reported. Although cognitive behavioral therapy is crucial for mental health interventions, Anderson expresses the need of addressing various life skills through an occupational therapy lens.

For majority of substance use treatments, the focus is cognitive behavioral therapy. This allows practitioners to navigate an individual through their sobriety, reshape their thoughts, and learn how to cope. As these are necessary priorities, the improvement of life skills is equally crucial. Anderson emphasized, "Life skills is the catalyst to recovery and maintaining sobriety once transitioned back into the community. Some clients share that they have never lived in a home where they were taught how to clean or grocery shop." Anderson's program manual consists of topics such as: Mental Health & Trauma, Physical Wellness & Family Planning, Substance Use & Recovery, Home Management, Education, Legal Resources, Housing, Financial Support, LGBTQIA+ Accessibility & Diversity, and Sex Work Resources. Each topic offers various resources in the area, applications, group ideas, QR code fact sheets to access websites, and articles.

Anderson spent the first two weeks of her capstone assessing the needs for her manual and emailed a questionnaire to employees of My Sister's House on their role, how important they feel their role is, their burnout rate, and if they felt they had the tools to share life skills with clients. She began to compile resources that would be beneficial for staff to utilize. By week five, Anderson had the draft of her program manual to begin training staff. Throughout the weeks, she added to her manual and created sections of each topic. She scanned and uploaded her manual by topic online to have an electronic copy as well. One staff member commented, "Providing resources on more controversial topics like sex work and LGBTQIA+ allows us to decrease the stigma and normalize having conversations about it."

The implementation of the life skills manual provided relief for employees when seeking resources. Both physical and electronic copies allow staff to utilize resources based on the environment they are speaking with their clients in. My Sister's House Clinical Supervisor Rayna Brown reported, "A life skills manual provides the opportunity for the staff here at My Sister's House to encourage clients to take the steps they need to succeed when graduating. We are always looking for new resources." This manual provides relief for both the staff and clients by having resources in one place to ensure a variety of life skills resources for clients. The goal of this program manual was to improve quality of life for staff and decrease burnout, along with an access to life skill resources for clients. Life skills are an essential component to implement into any type of residential community treatment to ensure a successful transition back into the community.



Social and Emotional Learning Promotion and Programming for Faculty Advisors in Higher Education

DIANA BESHTA, OT/S

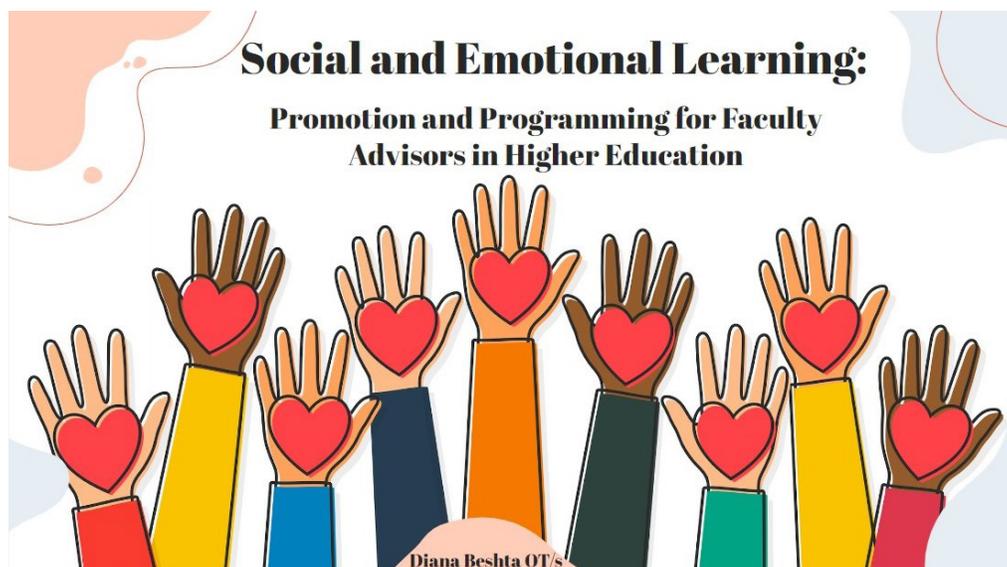
“What the teacher is, is more important than what he teaches.” This quote from Karl Menninger is specifically what paved the way into creating my doctoral capstone project. Developing an interest in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), drew me closer to understanding how higher education students, just like me, should be better supported and surrounded in an environment where their mental health needs are heard, as well as acknowledged. However, prior to assisting students in managing their emotions and helping create a healthy balance of student-life on campus, it is important to understand the SEL skill level of teachers, advisors, and other faculty members at Western New England University (WNE), as they are the ones students look to for guidance.

The pursuit of this 14-week capstone project initially began shortly after conducting a pilot study on campus with a fellow doctoral student. We collaboratively created a survey specifically tailored to WNE undergraduate and graduate students, and walked throughout campus grounds to gauge the general understanding of SEL on campus and if/how students would like to receive more mental health support on campus. Our survey results displayed a commonality in students’ general understanding of SEL on campus, yearly SEL seminars, and other safe spaces where students can address their mental health needs comfortably. Based on information gathered from WNE students, it was determined that there are not enough offerings for SEL support and education on campus. Along with limited offerings, we found less frequent awareness of students’ overall well-being and need for emotional support. This data drew me to conduct a needs assessment on campus researching faculty exposure, efficacy, and understanding of SEL education when assisting WNE students.

After gathering results of this pilot study, my objective was clarified to increase faculty/staff education and awareness to better incorporate SEL skills into daily student life. I collaborated with undergraduate advisors, educators, and other faculty who validated the lack of SEL knowledge amongst the campus community. Therefore, I decided to take the lead and develop an SEL faculty training program with insightful information of SEL components, strategies for addressing students’ mental health concerns, breakout room opportunities for discussion, and identified local resources to utilize.

The program was conducted virtually and involved 7 members of WNE faculty and staff. Pre-survey results displayed that roughly 50% of participants did not feel confident when advising students with SEL or mental health concerns. Approximately 57% of participants reported that they also did not feel assured when providing students with helpful resources on campus to assist with the same needs. After completing my first educational training, participant confidence levels increased by 14% and assurance/education regarding resource opportunities increased in 100% of the participants.

While concluding this training session with the opportunity for questions, comments, or concerns, participants expressed gratitude for the experience. Results of my program delightfully displayed that one educational training was able to increase assurance and assist faculty in addressing students moving forward with SEL needs or mental health concerns. My next step is to develop a SEL Kodiak site for WNE staff to access information, research, and helpful strategies to address students in higher education. This experience has allowed for the start of an educational platform, in order to build greater awareness and better support overall-student well-being. I look forward to seeing this project evolve and continue to benefit the campus community.



Wellness Program for Healthcare Workers at Eastern Connecticut Health Network: How a Wellness Program is Reducing Healthcare Workers Burnout in Connecticut

GIOVANNIA CASSEUS, OT/S

The student-led wellness program is specifically designed to support healthcare workers experiencing stress and burnout at Eastern Connecticut Health Network (ECHN). The wellness program was delivered in a comprehensive and structured manner to effectively support healthcare workers at ECHN. It began with an informative introductory session that emphasized the importance of self-care and stress management in the healthcare profession. Throughout the program, participants were provided with a virtual binder containing valuable wellness resources, including strategies for managing stress and accessing general mental health support.

Burnout is a work-related stress syndrome resulting from chronic exposure to job stress. Healthcare workers (HCWs), specifically those working the front lines at hospitals, seem at particular risk for burnout. Workplace stress can contribute to absenteeism and employee turnover. Additionally, it may lead to substantial negative personal and professional consequences such as poor quality of care and medical errors that may result in high-cost malpractice suits for hospitals.

The objective of this project is to identify the primary factors that influence the burnout of healthcare workers at ECHN and to develop and implement a wellness program to combat the primary factors of burnout.

This program draws upon cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and stress management techniques to help employees identify their stress levels and develop alternative strategies to cope with burnout. By applying CBT principles, employees will gain insight into their stressors, challenge unhelpful thinking patterns, and develop more adaptive coping mechanisms. Stress management techniques are also crucial components of this program. They will include various approaches such as mindfulness exercises, relaxation techniques, time management strategies, positive affirmations, and a mental health tracker. These techniques will empower employees to better manage their stress levels, improve work-life balance, and enhance overall well-being.

So far, the feedback about the program has been positive. “This a much-needed initiative, as we healthcare workers tend to neglect our overall well-being,” notes Sarah H, a physical therapist at Rockville Hospital.

“I’m so glad I was able to create time for myself,” Sarah continues. “Until you came in, I didn’t realize how stressed and overwhelmed I felt. My patients rely on me as a physical therapist to take on their emotional turmoil.”

In addition to offering strategies to address burnout, the wellness program places a strong emphasis on participants’ sleep hygiene and overall sleep health. Recognizing the crucial role of quality sleep in promoting well-being, the program provides innovative methods and techniques to improve participants’ sleep habits. Participants are educated on the importance of maintaining a consistent sleep schedule, creating a sleep-conducive environment, and practicing relaxation techniques before bed. They are also guided on optimizing their sleep duration and quality through effective sleep hygiene practices.

The program introduces participants to evidence-based strategies such as developing a bedtime routine, limiting screen time before bed, managing caffeine intake, and engaging in relaxation exercises. Participants are encouraged to track their sleep patterns. By increasing awareness of the impact of sleep on overall well-being and offering practical strategies to enhance sleep hygiene, the program aims to empower participants to make positive changes in their sleep habits and ultimately improve their overall sleep health.



Unlimited Recreation: Access to Resources for Improved Wellness & Well-being for Individuals With ULL/D

ALYSSA K. DANIELS OT/S

In a demonstration of commitment and expertise, Occupational Therapy student Alyssa K. Daniels from Western New England University in Springfield, MA, embarked on her doctoral experiential project (DEx), to provide program development resources for two nonprofit organizations: Enhancing Skills for Life (ESFL) and Destiny's Ride Therapeutic Program Inc. This collaborative initiative aimed to provide essential resources and services to empower individuals with diverse needs and challenges, including bilateral upper limb loss.

Under the guidance of their experienced Executive Directors Shawn Swanson Johnson, (Enhancing Skills for Life), and Jodie O'Connell Ponkos, (Destiny's Ride), Daniels created individual resources and programs for these nonprofit organizations. The organizations dedicated to promoting personal growth, independence, and quality of life for individuals of all abilities will benefit immensely from Daniels's innovation. Swanson from Enhancing Skills for Life stated, "The amount of work that has been done in such a short period of time has been incredibly valuable to our community at ESFL and me as well. Many of these programs/resources would still be sitting around in my head as wishful ideas instead of tangible results if not for Alyssa."

Enhancing Skills for Life, an organization committed to assisting individuals with bilateral upper limb loss in acquiring essential life skills, received a range of customized resources developed by the occupational therapy student. These resources included grant funding databases, monthly newsletter content, peer connection program outlines, monthly Zoom meeting outlines, and an intimacy tip sheet and resource booklet for individuals with bilateral upper limb loss or more. Daniels leveraged her comprehensive knowledge of occupational therapy to help ESFL enable individuals to overcome obstacles and achieve their full potential through peer connection and therapeutic recreation.

Destiny's Ride Therapeutic Program Inc., a nonprofit organization specializing in equine-assisted therapy, experienced a transformation through Daniels's OT/s capstone project. Recognizing the profound impact of animal-assisted therapy, the occupational therapy student developed a pre-riding Core and More exercise program as an innovative intervention to enhance the therapeutic experience for program participants by increasing their riding abilities. Daniels also created a social media crash course for board members and a nonprofit resource manual to increase program development at Destiny's Ride. Ponkos stated, "Alyssa's creation of the Resource Manual provides a solid foundation for the organization to build upon, offering valuable information for future growth and development. Her dedication and expertise demonstrate the qualities of a strong leader in the occupational therapy profession."

This DEx project showcases the collaboration between academia and nonprofit organizations, emphasizing the role of occupational therapy in enhancing the lives of individuals facing physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges. The resources the occupational therapy student developed will serve as advanced tools for Enhancing Skills for Life and Destiny's Ride Therapeutic Program Inc. and establish opportunities for future collaborations between occupational therapy students and other nonprofit organizations.



Addressing Gaps in Trauma-Informed Care Education for Foster Parents with an Occupational Therapy Lens

JESSICA DRESSEL, OT/S

Overwhelmed by emotion, occupational therapy student Jessica Dressel held a 4-month-old infant in her arms at the annual Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAF) conference, as his foster parents went to the front of the room to receive an award for “Foster Care Parents of the Year”. They had just adopted the infant’s 6-year-old brother and were about to close their home from fostering, when Department of Children and Families (DCF) called them.

DCF informed them that their son’s biological mother had just had another baby, and they were asking if the family would foster the infant for the time being. The family reported that they prayed on the matter, and then decided to take in the infant, so the brothers could grow up together. As they spoke, the infant sighed and happily fell asleep in Jessica’s arms, as if he knew he was now safe and already so deeply loved.

Although occupational therapists (OTs) have mental health training built into their curriculums, many do not realize that OTs can be of service in mental or behavioral health settings. Jessica Dressel, an occupational therapy student at Western New England University, partnered with the Connecticut Alliance of Foster and Adoptive Families (CAFAF) to complete her doctoral capstone. She decided to complete her research on discerning whether foster care parent trainings in the state of CT contain elements of trauma-informed care (TIC), an effective, research-based approach for understanding and treating trauma. Through her preliminary research, she discovered that children in foster care often enter the system having already experienced multiple traumatic events. Exposure to trauma leads to higher Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) scores, which positively correlates with an increased likelihood of developing mental and physical health conditions. This is because exposure to adversity affects the developing brains and bodies of children. Thankfully, health professionals are starting to take note of this area of research. The American Academy of Pediatrics states: “ACEs are the single greatest unaddressed public health threat/crisis facing our nation today, as they are the number one predictor of health and behavioral issues over anything else. Knowledge of TIC principles, however, would help caregivers, educators, and health professionals address the root cause of these complications and help children heal from their trauma.

With this knowledge in mind, Dressel realized the importance of foster care parents being equipped with this information. To identify if post-licensing courses at CAFAF contained elements of TIC, she completed a content analysis on a few of the training modules and developed a TIC survey to gain subjective feedback from foster parents. Along the way, she advocated not only for TIC to be a part of foster care parent education, but also for the role of occupational therapy within this setting. She advocated for utilizing OT to support foster parents in their occupational roles as caregivers and to help foster youth who have experienced trauma heal through the therapeutic use of activity. She also spoke on how OTs could advocate for children in schools to receive services and address sensory needs that are common in this population due to their experienced trauma. During her time with CAFAF, Dressel ran an in-service and created materials to educate foster parents and the CAFAF staff on the role of OT in addressing the effects of trauma. She also identified gaps in some of their trainings in terms of TIC content and developed goals and ideas for how the trainers and staff could address them. Throughout her experience, she met CAFAF staff members and external trainers who believed in the importance of implementing TIC principles. One trainer clearly demonstrated her understanding of TIC principles in her ACEs training where she states, “Connection is the opposite of trauma, loneliness, and addiction”. Dressel hopes that students behind her in the WNE OT program will continue her research in their future capstone projects, as there is much more work to be done.



Implementation of the Risk of Relapse Screening Tool in Substance Use Populations

JACOB DUGARD, OT/S

Jacob Dugard, a third-year student enrolled in the Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program at Western New England University, undertook his 14-week doctoral experiential capstone project at the Center for Human Development (CHD) in Western Massachusetts. Within CHD, he worked at Goodwin House, a residential rehabilitation center catering to teenage boys ages 13-18 years with substance use disorder and/or behavioral disorders.

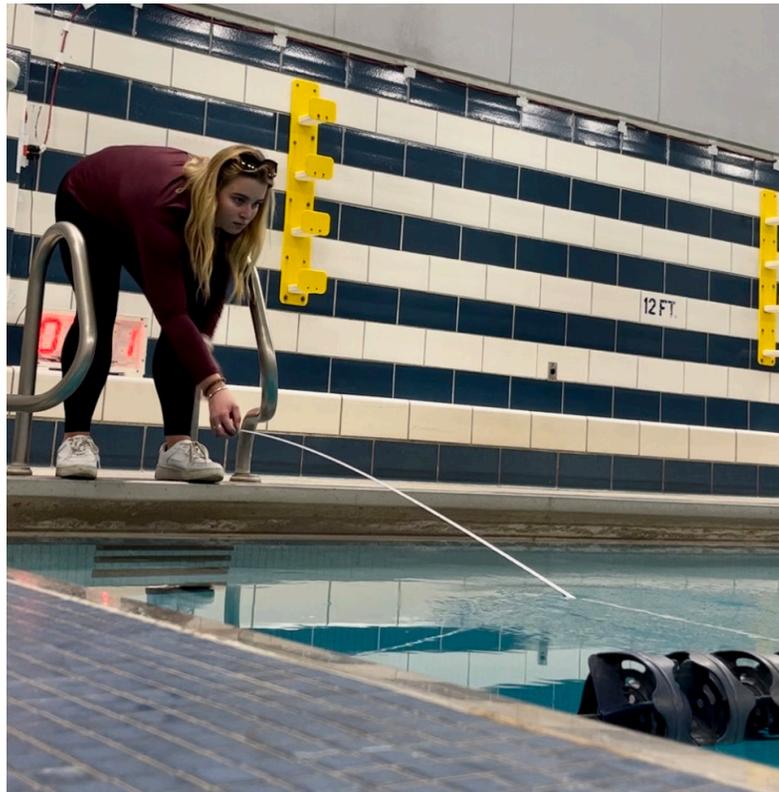
During his collaboration at CHD, one significant outcome was Dugard's creation of the Risk of Relapse Screening Tool (RORST). This questionnaire serves the dual purpose of assessing clients' risk of relapse and identifying their specific needs to mitigate that risk. After familiarizing the staff with the purpose and process of the new screening tool, Dugard and the team implemented the RORST with the clients at CHD. Additionally, Dugard developed an educational website aligned with the questionnaire, providing resources such as community outreach, transportation options, relapse prevention strategies, and more. Through counseling, Dugard applied his occupational therapy skills and knowledge to deliver comprehensive interventions. Noteworthy aspects of his capstone project encompass the development and implementation of the RORST questionnaire, the creation of an educational resource, and the advocacy for occupational therapy in substance use populations.

Expressing his affinity for working with individuals struggling with substance use, Dugard shared, "Having witnessed the impact of substance use on a close friend, I am driven to assist those who seek recovery." Many of the clients at Goodwin House have experienced trauma and come from unsafe environments, which have contributed to their addiction. While addressing substance use is crucial, Dugard's focus is on facilitating a safe transition for these clients into their respective communities, away from substances, to enable them to lead healthy lives to the fullest.

The structure of CHD's Goodwin House includes a daily schedule that encompasses various learning groups, such as relapse prevention, fostering healthy relationships, life skills development, cooking groups, and more. Dugard recognized the need to address the temptations individuals face when reintegrating into the community. He emphasized the significance of "being involved in a secure, drug-free environment, as it plays a pivotal role in preventing relapse." Dugard's RORST questionnaire specifically addresses influential factors related to relapse, including environmental, financial, social, and residential aspects. The RORST is intended for use by the residents of Goodwin House and other rehabilitation facilities.

The implementation of the RORST questionnaire has helped clients acknowledge their personal needs and prepare for a successful transition back into the community. Both electronic and physical copies of the questionnaire will be made available for staff members to utilize. Daniella Grimaldi, the supervisor at CHD's Goodwin House, commented, "The RORST questionnaire will be a valuable tool in addressing the unique needs of each client here at Goodwin House."





Assessing Lanes for Change: Occupational Therapy's Role in Both Water Safety and Athletic Programs

AVERY FORNACIARI, OT/S

Did you know that the number one cause of death in children ages 1-4, the second-leading cause of unintentional death in children 5-14, and what claims approximately 11 lives a day in the United States of America is completely preventable?¹ My name is Avery, and I am a third-year student within Western New England University's Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) program, and when I read those statistics, I knew I had to take action. As a former competitive swimmer and lifeguard myself, I found it alarming how such an important life skill was being neglected. When the opportunity arose to do a capstone project that cultivated both community involvement and research in the aim to address a gap in care, the answer was clear to me. I needed to find a way to provide water safety education within the community.

The preliminary spark for this initiative occurred to me while working as a swim instructor while living in Springfield, Massachusetts and realizing that all of my students lived outside of the city. This then led to me researching and finding out that Springfield as a community faces higher rates of lower socioeconomic status and has a higher prevalence of individuals identifying as non-white than many other areas across the state³. Unfortunately it became clear throughout the literature that minority groups, lower socioeconomic status, and swimming disadvantages are correlated to one another.² From an Occupational Therapy lens, I recognized the importance of addressing this issue from a family-based approach; I wanted to educate the caregivers of children, as these are the individuals that teach the community's youth every day. After discovering various generational correlations throughout the literature as well, I thought to myself, if I can even play a small role in shifting the outcomes positively, that's a huge win.

I was fortunate to meet Teresa Skelly, Head Coach of the Springfield Sharks and incredible community advocate. Together, we organized the opportunity for me to hold free water safety education courses to caregivers involved with the Springfield Sharks. The program was a success, running for two four-week-long sessions, culminating in 12 mini courses. Participant feedback from the program was excellent, with one individual writing, "don't stop, we need more of this in our communities. Especially, because it is free and accessible to all regardless of their identities or different abilities." While running this caregiver program and research study, I additionally worked alongside the coaching staff and Sharks' swimmers. Using an OT approach to look at swimming performance, I recognized that it is a multifaceted process. This capstone experience allowed me to educate swimmers of diverse ages and abilities about hydration, nutrition, mental health, and goal setting, as well as lead stroke-specific dryland workouts. The 14-week capstone experience allowed me to not only network with others, but also provided the opportunity to present in nontraditional settings. When asked about OT's unique role on the team, Skelly stated, "I have seen guardians more engaged in their children's swimming journey. As a result of the parent education courses, swimmers improve their physical abilities through the unique perspective OT can give to the instruction of athletic motions and improved mental focus of swimmers through the mind-body connection that is a specialty of OT. As a coach, I have learned so much by working with OT, and it has helped me with reframing my coaching/instruction more flexibly, especially for more nontraditional learners."

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To Reduce the Feelings of Stress & Burnout Among Direct Care Workers Requires a Concerted Effort

KWAKU FRIMPONG-BOATENG OT/S

To answer the question “Do individual’s feelings of stress impact their occupational functions?” my experiential capstone (Dex) project focuses on the population designated as direct care workers (DCWs), care managers (CMs) or personal care assistants (PCAs) that administer paid support and supervision services to clients in residential living or senior living facilities. Many of these DCWs may experience feelings of stress & burnout with serious consequences on their mental health. Therefore, developing a health promotion program for such employees is imperative. Having worked as a mental health counselor, providing direct care services to individuals with various mental disorders, I have experienced feelings of burnout as well as witnessing many incidents where staff got into direct confrontations with patients resulting in violence with catastrophic consequences. This could be attributed to work-related stress and burnout that staff may encounter.

Although the facility offered in-service training for staff and had in place a telephone hotline that staff could call for emotional support, I still believe the facility needed a mental health promotion program as an intervention strategy for the mental health counselors to manage their stress symptoms. Following my work experience and knowledge in occupational therapy (OT), I decided to conduct a research study that identified: (1) factors that contribute to staff stress & burnout, (2) different experiences that DCWs encounter in residential living facilities and (3) an occupation-based intervention activity as a strategy to manage workers’ stress and burnout symptoms.

The lack of any wellness program at my DEx site (Keystone Commons Senior Living Community in Ludlow, MA) presents a unique opportunity to design and implement a health promotion program that can take care of the mental health of DCWs. With “walking meditation” as an occupation-based activity, the DCWs at the facility can have an intervention strategy to reduce the level of stress and burnout that they may experience. The program/activity will improve their mental health, general health & well-being, quality of life, job satisfaction, and quality of care delivery to residents. Throughout my numerous interactions with many of the DCWs/CMs at the facility, it emerged that a mental health promotion program can help them manage their stress symptoms. For instance, one CM told me that “one day I felt so stressed and traumatized that I didn’t want to come here again when a resident I was trying to help hit me several times. I felt completely burned out because I didn’t know what to do with that stress and trauma.” Another one said “I love my job, but there is too much stress. I don’t get enough time to do anything relaxing, and I don’t know what to do to destress.” Indeed, I learned a lot from these CMs who were in turn impressed with the fact that, as an OT student, I can help them develop some intervention strategies or coping mechanisms to manage their symptoms of stress and burnout. I hope that management of the facility will help implement the intervention strategy (walking meditation) to improve staff mental health for quality-of-care delivery to residents.



Cupping Therapy: Helping Graduate Students Relieve Chronic Pain and Improve Engagement in Daily Occupations

MICHAELA GALLAGHER, OT/S

Students with chronic pain can have a higher risk of developing mental health conditions. These conditions can further increase their pain and impact their ability to engage in daily occupations (Alsaadi, 2022). With knowledge of this information, I collaborated with three other Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) students at Western New England University (WNE) to determine a need for a cost-effective pain management modality that can be accessible to students. After reviewing literature, we found that cupping therapy could be a beneficial modality for this population. Cupping therapy is an alternative pain management modality that can be used as a preparatory method before implementing occupational therapy (OT) interventions. It is beneficial as a preparatory method because it can provide immediate yet temporary pain relief, so it will allow an opportunity to have less difficulties participating in daily activities.

After educating ourselves on the modality, my co-researchers and I developed a research study that investigated the effects of cupping therapy on relieving pain and improving participation in daily activities. This study consisted of two cupping therapy sessions a week for four weeks and having at least one rest day in between sessions. Due to campus closure and summer break, there was a two-week intermission between the first and last two weeks of the study. Although my co-researchers and I similarly focused on the effects of the modality, we individualized our studies by focusing the modality on different parts of the body. The upper extremity was the focus of my study, which includes the arm and shoulder.

My target population included WNE students who experience chronic upper extremity pain, limiting their ability to fully engage in meaningful daily occupations. In total, I had eight consistent participants who received cupping therapy. These participants commonly reported that their pain increased when participating in recreational activities, sitting in class, and driving.

Throughout the study, participants reported feeling “looser” in their muscles and decreased pain for approximately 18-48 hours after each session. Due to a decrease in pain, participants noticed an increasing ability to engage in their daily and recreational activities.

One participant reported: “After my car accident a few years ago, there were not a lot of treatments that would get rid of my shoulder pain. Cupping has been helpful in relieving this chronic pain and allowing me to engage more in my meaningful activities.”

Another participant mentioned: “Cupping was a unique experience that allowed me to not only experience pain relief but relax during my busy academic schedule!”

After reviewing the results of this study and receiving participant feedback, I believe that this modality can continue to be sustainable and available to WNE students for better engagement in their daily occupations. This modality is cost-effective and can be self-administered or assisted by a professional. Learning how to self-administer this modality would be a cost-effective benefit for students. Having a cupping set at WNE would provide an accessible opportunity to students and would allow them to use this modality before activities that typically increase their pain. Overall, access to this modality could improve the wellbeing of students throughout their time at WNE.

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Effects of Reducing Pain and Muscle Tension to Improve Daily Functional Performance Through Myofascial Decompression

MORGAN LUKASIK, OT/S



On May 1st, 2023, Western New England's Doctor of Occupational Therapy Student, Morgan Lukasik OT/s, conducted the first inclusive cupping therapy clinic on WNE's campus. One aim of Lukasik's Doctoral Experiential Capstone project was to track the effects of reducing pain and muscle tension to improve daily functional performance through myofascial decompression on the muscles within the thoracic spine region (upper back). Cupping therapy, also referred to as myofascial decompression, is an ancient technique for managing pain. Cupping therapy has been around for thousands of years as part of healing medicine. Many cultures have utilized this method to provide numerous health benefits including reducing pain and muscle tension. This technique uses therapy cups to provide negative pressure using suction to promote blood flow to the area of pain. Lukasik's capstone research focused on the positive effects of cupping therapy to reduce pain and muscle tension, specifically within the thoracic region of the spine.

For the target population of this study, Lukasik sought out WNE students suffering from chronic upper back pain. As an individual with chronic back pain herself, Lukasik understands the struggle of battling pain while maintaining rigorous responsibilities. After recruiting the target population, Lukasik treated these students for four weeks. Each patient was provided with two eight-minute

cupping sessions per week, for a total of eight total sessions by the end. To determine the effectiveness of cupping therapy, data was collected through quality-of-life surveys and pain management logs.

Lukasik reported, "It was a great experience being able to take my research knowledge and be able to educate future OTD students and other graduate students on all the benefits of cupping therapy." Lukasik provided an educational handout along with other instructional materials to guide her clients in the use of methods for reducing pain and improving their quality of life. Lukasik dove deeper into the research and found that individuals with chronic pain were reported to have significantly lower quality of life.

Lukasik explains her passion and creation of her capstone project stem from, "being in the graduate programs and being under stress and chronic pain, I can relate to my participants that I am not able to perform my best in my work or study when all I can think about is my pain. Finding effective alternative approaches for pain management is important for pain relief and productivity. This was a great experience to use my knowledge and research and apply it through real-life experience and to help my colleagues."

Throughout her study, Lukasik reports how thankful she is for her participants that volunteered their time and dedication. "As much as I am thankful for these students helping within my research study, I am fortunate to be able to alleviate some of their pain."

Some reports directly from the study participants read:

"I feel so much better."

"Felt good."

"I finally got to relax, I feel so much better."

"I feel immediate relief and looser."

Lukasik found that after her study was conducted, there were similar trends between the students and their chronic pain. Students reported having the most pain when participating in recreational activities, sitting in class, and driving. Overall, throughout the data, it was found that cupping therapy did have positive effects on relieving pain and muscle tension. It was reported after each session that the majority of participants' pain was relieved.



The Silent Struggle: College Students and Pain Impacting Occupational Performance

JUSTIN MURATA, OT/S

What happens to your body when you have been a student for more than half of your life? Sleep deprivation, aches and pains, physical and emotional distress.

After enduring two difficult years of didactic course work and another six months of Level II Fieldwork, it was my time for my Doctoral Experiential (DEx) Capstone project to come to fruition. When I first learned about the DEx Capstone project in 2021, I knew I wanted to explore the effects of myofascial decompression on pain and muscle tension present in the lower back because of my mother's experience of suffering with chronic pain from a previous injury.

My mother's pain was debilitating not only physically, but also emotionally, because she never felt safe within her own body and always felt nauseous after taking her prescribed pain medications. This was when I had to explore other pain management solutions and was introduced to myofascial decompression when I traveled to Taiwan in 2014. One particular difference between Eastern and Western approaches to healthcare was the use of myofascial decompression to alleviate pain by using cups and suction to create a negative pressure which lifts the fascia and promotes blood flow to the area.

I remember doing this for the first time on my mother, and she told me she forgot about this modality when she moved to America from the Philippines.

This experience led to the focus of my capstone project: to study the effects of myofascial decompression on pain and muscle tension in the lumbar region of the back. The participants of this four-week study were students from WNE's law program, occupational therapy program, and undergraduate students with low back pain who wanted to participate in the four-week program, all of whom were suffering from lower back pain. One participant of my study is a non-binary law student who had their pain reduced by 60% and was pain-free for more than 48 hours after the study concluded. This law student achieved great results and reported "over suffering" through their pain for over a year due to a stress fracture and mastectomy. Their success story is another reason why I am excited to share it with the world of occupational therapists.

I am inspired to share my research project because myofascial decompression has the potential to relieve pain for up to 48 hours, and people with chronic pain may see better results if this intervention can be coupled with therapeutic exercises or therapeutic activities. Individuals with chronic pain can control of their lives and perform their daily activities once again by utilizing this effective technique.

Effects of Reducing Pain and Muscle Tension and Improving Daily Functional Performance Through Myofascial Decompression Within the Cervical Spine Region (Neck)

KAELI SERAFINO, OT/S

Third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy student Kaeli Serafino had the unique experience of working with students at Western New England University to treat pain and muscle tension in the neck through myofascial decompression, better known as cupping therapy. After recruitment through email and University posts, students who met the inclusion criteria were scheduled to receive treatment twice per week for four weeks. Clients suffering from pain and muscle tension often saw immediate results, while Serafino gained hands-on experience with this technique. Serafino reported “after conducting a needs assessment, it became very clear to me how prevalent pain is within this population. I found it to be very rewarding to offer students an opportunity to reduce pain and muscle tension in a safe, free, and easily-accessible environment. As a student myself, I can understand the toll school takes on your body, especially with sitting in class and studying for long hours. This motivated me to work with this population to not only prove the effectiveness of this modality, but do it while helping a population I know is in need.”



Participants were cupped for eight-minute sessions on the neck twice per week for four weeks. During this period of time, participants completed pain logs to track durations of pain relief and treatment effectiveness. Throughout the time spent at the clinic, participants were able to note an immediate difference in their pain and muscle tension as soon as cups were removed, which then led to helping them engage with their daily occupations. One participant reported “I consistently felt immediate relief and relaxation in my neck after sessions.” She continued, “I noticed that my day-to-day activities and exercise became easier, and my recovery after intense exercise was faster and smoother.”

Not only were participants experiencing immediate relief, the data showed continued reduction of pain and tension with consistent sessions. During this study there was a two-week break, meaning participants had two weeks of consistent intervention, two weeks of no intervention, and then another two weeks of consistent intervention. Participants noted that “during the two-week break between consistent sessions, I noticed a distinct difference in my performance when exercising. Returning back to cupping following the break, I noticed an immediate improvement in the tension and level/quality of performance.” This was a common occurrence for participants who were active in the gym or other forms of exercise. Although exercise often exacerbated the pain, they found immediate relief with the repeated intervention sessions.

Many students who participated in the interventions were students from various cohorts of the OTD program, which allowed for a unique educational experience working with other future practitioners. “I found this study to be very useful to the world of OT to have evidence of an effective and holistic pain management modality” explains Serafino. “By working with many OTD students, it also created an educational environment to teach future practitioners more about this modality in hopes they are able to carry this on in their own practice.” After the completion of the four weeks, students from the OTD program were given educational PowerPoints, presentations, and handouts in hopes that they will be able to use this modality in the future to help others with their pain the same way this clinic helped them.

Enhancing Congregate Care Staff Knowledge and Self-Efficacy to Address Youth Substance Use Prevention Through an Educational Program at LUK

VICTORIA GIACCONE, OT/S

Group or residential care homes provide a home-like environment for addressing adolescents' needs. Individuals who live in these homes typically have significant psychiatric, psychological, behavioral, and/or substance use difficulties and have struggled in other treatment programs (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023). For example, they may have experienced challenges in outpatient treatment, day treatment programs, and other non-secure environments, but have not required commitment to a psychiatric hospital or secure correctional facility (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2017). Youth residing in residential care group homes typically have been exposed to trauma in their lifetime. Up to 92% have experienced multiple traumatic events such as abuse, neglect, and violence (Tyler et al., 2019). Due to their trauma, these youth are at an increased risk of using substances.

Youth in residential care often begin using substances at an early age, resulting in a higher risk of developing substance use disorder (SUD) (Lipari & Van Horn, 2017). Substance use can continue after care if not treated properly. Staff who are employees in residential programs are tasked with educating and providing youth with resources and skills to prevent and decrease substance use. Therefore, a gap in care was identified leading to the creation of an educational program to enhance staff's skills and knowledge in this area to ultimately benefit youth with trauma history to successfully cope following their exit from a residential program

Victoria Giaccone, a third-year doctoral student at Western New England University, has made significant strides in youth substance use prevention working closely with staff at LUK Inc, where she has completed her 14-week capstone project. Her approach involves providing the following to equip staff with the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver optimal care to youth: weekly educational handouts, assessing staff knowledge of newly-learned content via quizzes, and engaging them in case application presentations. She not only lends a supportive ear to staff members who have encountered youth engaging in substance use, but also offers them alternative options and strategies. By doing so, she helps staff members navigate such situations and boosts their confidence and self-efficacy, empowering them to take action and implement effective strategies in addressing youth substance use issues. In addition to working with staff members, she facilitates weekly groups with two of the youth residential houses to provide a platform for open discussions about current stressors and exploration of various coping strategies. Through these group sessions, she empowers youth to identify and adopt effective coping mechanisms to manage their challenges and enhance their overall well-being.

Some of the significant highlights of her capstone project include: creating educational handouts that specifically address various aspects of substance use impacting youth, emphasizing the connection to occupational performance, increasing self-efficacy and knowledge in staff members on substance use presentation techniques, addressing advocacy and stigma to create a supportive and non-judgmental environment, and enhancing staff's knowledge, enabling them to better recognize and understand the behaviors and challenges exhibited by the youth in relation to substance use.

Giaccone has expressed that her passion for working with staff and youth on substance use prevention has grown since she began her journey at LUK. She finds it to be a rewarding experience that demonstrates her commitment to making a positive impact in the lives of both staff and youth. Giaccone originally wanted to work with incarcerated individuals after completing research on drug court consistency in Massachusetts. However, her experience working with youth has sparked a new interest to potentially pursue that path as well, either in conjunction with her work with incarcerated individuals or as a separate focus.

Giaccone receives valuable guidance and support from her site mentor, Emily Walker, an occupational therapist who works with youth that receive residential services at LUK Inc. Walker's expertise and feedback have been instrumental in advancing Giaccone's research and professional development. Reflecting on Giaccone's work, Walker expressed her pride and admiration, stating "As a mentor, I am incredibly proud of research. Her dedication to creating an educational program at LUK reflects her commitment to making a positive impact on the lives of youth in our care. I commend Victoria for her passion, professionalism, and contribution to our organization's mission."

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Unlimbited Wellness[®]; Addressing the Needs of Parents and Caregivers

DANIELLE GOLDBERG, OT/S

The Springfield Jewish Community Center (JCC) is a non-profit that offers programs for all ages including pre-school, youth and teen programs, adult programs, and senior adult life programs. At the JCC, everyone is welcome. Kehillah means “community” in Hebrew; Kehillah is the JCC Special Needs Department. Various programs provide quality recreational, social, and enrichment programs for children, teens, and adults with neurodiverse diagnoses. During these groups, participants develop various skills, relationships, independence, and self-esteem, while also fostering social and life skills.

The Kehillah Department offers a wide range of programming for their participants. These programs include adaptive swim lessons, inclusion summer camp, social groups

for participants of various ages, Project RIDE (recreation, independence, development, and equipment), and Best Buddies. The programs are overseen by Dorothy Linder, OTR, director of the Kehillah Department. As an OT, Linder brings unique expertise to these programming opportunities. Linder mentions, “It is a joy to work with our Kehillah participants; their smiles and joy are contagious! It is wonderful to see the positive impacts our programs have on our participants and in our community. Being able to provide our families with programs, resources, and information to support their needs is one of the many positive impacts we provide.”



Program participants made heat packs as they have various healing properties and can be utilized during stressful events.

Danielle Goldberg, third-year OT student at Western New England University, decided to complete her Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project at the Springfield JCC. She ran a group geared toward parents and caregivers who have or care for children with various physical, developmental, and/or intellectual disabilities. This group focused on five key areas: a purpose in life, supportive networks, care coordination, how to self-advocate in various medical and social situations, and self-care. Too often, when parents and caregivers have a child with complex health diagnoses, their mental health plummets and the adults don’t adequately take care of themselves. Each week, program participants took time for themselves, learned new information, and gained a support network. To create a successful program, participants engaged in activities that corresponded to the weekly topic, and had in-depth conversations about gaining support with one another and resources to best care for their children. Through extensive research, Goldberg created a resource packet for participants that highlighted local community resources available for continued support. The JCC will use this in the future to continue to provide parents and caregivers with these beneficial resources. Program participants all agreed on how this program was too short each week, as they never experienced anything like this before. Their feedback included they wished the weekly group lasted longer than an hour and was a regular program option at the JCC.



Program participants made vision boards to remind themselves to care of themselves when they are busy taking care of others.

“As a child, I often had to spend time at Boston Children’s Hospital, as I had multiple chronic health diagnoses. I know first-hand how difficult it can be for parents to have a child who has a diverse medical team. Goldberg continued “It was extremely eye opening to see how well program participants bonded throughout the five-week group.”



Exploring and Providing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Group Training to Student Leaders in Higher Education

ARMANI GUILLAMA, OT/S

The Division of Student Affairs at Western New England University's (WNE) primary focus is to provide support and resources that enhance the overall student experience on campus while promoting student success inside and outside the classroom for students to reach their full potential. Their student-centeredness approach is what drives the Division to excellence. With an emphasis on empowering/equipping student leaders on campus with the proper training and resources such as social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, third-year OTD student Armani Guillama is finding ways to permanently implement an SEL training component for every student leadership group such as resident advisors (RA), peer advisors (PA), and the connections mentoring program (CMP), to participate in at the beginning of each fall semester. "Allowing for student leaders to engage in an SEL training before they begin classes and interacting with the student body will give them the necessary skills to lead their respective groups properly," said Guillama.

With the semester ending, Guillama partnered with key university stakeholders who are directly and indirectly involved with various student leadership groups to develop the training schedule and topics for the students to participate in simultaneously. "I created a list of seven training topics, each with its description, purpose, and objective for the three groups to participate in together." Guillama continued, "a significant emphasis for combining the training is to improve and encourage collaboration between the three groups and enhance efficiency in training and time." Training topics include civility, culture agility, mental health first aid, SEL, academic success, title IX, and team building.

Staff members recognized the importance of leading by example. This is particularly true when it comes to programs and organizations that involve students. Consequently, there is no more effective approach than learning and undergoing in the very material that will be taught to student leaders in the fall. After the training, one staff member said, "Other faculty and staff would greatly benefit from the SEL training." Another staff member stated she "appreciated that members in the WNE OTD program are advocating for SEL training for the entire WNE community."



Implementation of Driving Services into a Student-Run Pro-Bono Occupational Therapy Center

AMANDA C. HILL, OT/S

Amanda Hill is a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy student with a strong passion for research related to occupational therapy's role in driving. Her doctoral capstone project titled, "Implementation of Driving Services into a Student-Run Pro-Bono Occupational Therapy Center" focuses on the development and implementation of a free driving program into the BEAR PAW Center at Western New England University. The overall aim of her project is to increase access to affordable care for community members, establish safe communities and driving practices, and foster the development of more competent generalist practitioners.

The driving program encompasses many facets. One of these facets is the initial evaluation called a driver risk assessment (also referred to as a supportive driver assessment). A driver risk assessment involves an evaluation of the participant's baseline skills related to driving, including vision, cognition, and physical function and mobility. Various assessment tools and driving equipment including the MoCA, the Trail Making Test Part A and B, the OPTEC 5000, and the reaction timer are used throughout. Following a driver risk assessment, outcomes are discussed with the participant as well as any areas that can be further addressed during individual sessions. A driver risk assessment has a run time of approximately two hours, with the time for individual sessions running around one hour.

The driving program is tailored towards pre-drivers, individuals who have concerns about their current driving, and individuals who want to get back to driving following an injury, illness, or diagnosis. Currently, Hill works with participants ranging in age from 18 years old to 72 years old. Each participant presents with a unique set of skills as well as areas that require further occupational therapy services. Participants are provided with the opportunity to set their own goals, which typically include strengthening their visual scanning skills, improving their reaction time, and further understanding the rules of the road. Additional goals have been developed by Hill that focus on areas such as lower extremity range of motion, depth perception, driving scenarios, single- and multi-step direction following, and completion of complex tasks.

In preparation for her doctoral capstone project, Hill completed the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA) Driving and Community Mobility Micro Credential. She also attended the 2023 Aging and Safe Driving Symposium and the annual AOTA Conference 2023 to further her driving competence and skills. In addition, Hill has spent time reviewing driving and equipment manuals, trialing driving equipment, conducting research, and reading driving articles and books in preparation for working with participants to strengthen their driving skills.

Hill's passion for driving started when her stepfather was diagnosed with Huntington's disease in 2012. She was fortunate to learn about occupational therapy and gained a sense of the broad scope of practice. During this time, she learned about occupational therapy's role in driving, which sparked her early interest. As Hill's interest evolved, she began to conduct research and discover the gap in care with addressing driving during occupational therapy interventions, the cost of access to driving services, and the lower socioeconomic status of community members in the surrounding area. As she prepares to enter the field, she is looking to gain more experience with driving in an outpatient setting and eventually complete an additional certification to become a certified driver rehabilitation specialist.

Increasing Occupational Engagement for Individuals with Partial Hand Loss Through Telehealth

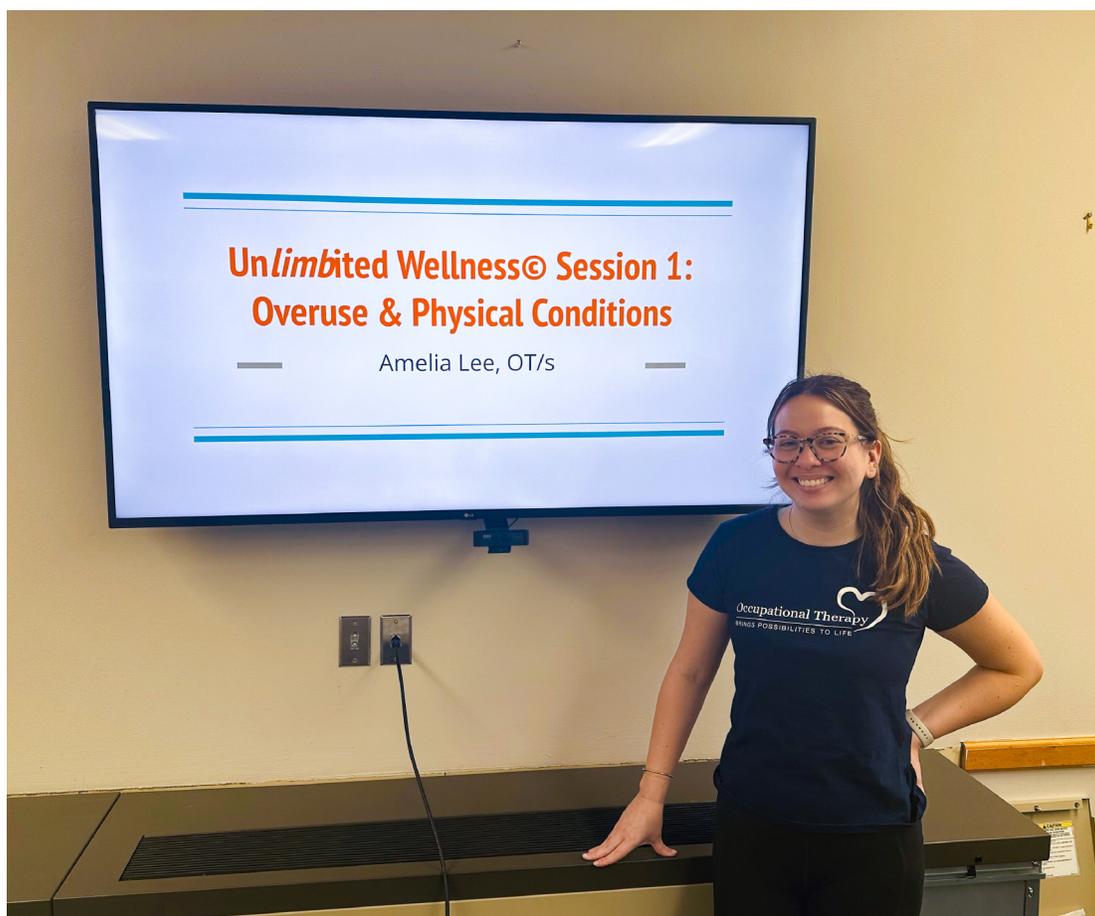
AMELIA LEE

When Amelia Lee was searching for occupational therapy programs to apply to, she discovered Western New England University's OTD program and the emphasis the curriculum had on population health, a field of study that focuses on health outcomes and their distributions in a group of individuals. "I've had such a passion for public health, so Western New England was a top choice for me. Having population health at the center of our different courses helped shaped my perspective on the future of occupational therapy and how healthcare in general is changing."

Motivated by her desire to develop a program that would empower individuals with partial hand loss to reintegrate into the workforce, Lee drew inspiration from her fieldwork experience in outpatient rehabilitation, where she predominantly encountered patients striving to return to work. As the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for the widespread adoption of telehealth among healthcare professionals, occupational therapy emerged with a unique opportunity to extend its reach to clients across the United States and cater directly to vulnerable populations. With her capstone project centered on telehealth, Lee faced the additional challenge of planning her program accordingly

Lee's project emerged from the original Unlimbited Wellness© program that was started by her faculty mentor, Dr. Debra Latour. "When I first read about this program, I was intrigued. I didn't know that telehealth was an option for occupational therapists. I had used telehealth before as a patient myself, so I was excited to be able to expand the program as a student." The original goal of Unlimbited Wellness© was to educate, engage, and empower individuals with upper limb absence through education and connection with others who have similar experiences. Because of her faculty mentor's connections, Lee was able to work with Diane Atkins, an occupational therapist who is an expert in partial hand loss research. In addition, Dr. Latour connected Lee with Handspring Prosthetics, a prosthetics company that has offices throughout the United States.

As the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for the widespread adoption of telehealth among healthcare professionals, occupational therapy emerged with a unique opportunity to extend its reach to clients across the United States and cater directly to vulnerable populations. Lee's capstone project delves into enhancing occupational engagement for individuals grappling with partial hand loss through telehealth interventions. Enthusiastically expressing her interest in this population, Lee highlights the diverse needs encompassed within the scope of occupational therapy practitioners. She believes that her capstone project is a crucial puzzle piece in bridging the gaps in care experienced by individuals with partial hand loss.





Teens Support Teens: Coping Skills to Combat Anxiety in Middle School

SHANNON LEE, OT/S

With new data released at Plymouth Community Intermediate School (PCIS) from the PreVenture Program, an evidence-based prevention program using individualized interventions personality targeted interventions to improve mental health. A psychologist team from the PreVenture Program recently reported a 202% increase in student anxiety sensitivity since the COVID-19 pandemic. The PreVenture is an evidence-based prevention program that targets skill development to reduce use of substances with youth. PCIS is one of two middle schools in the town of Plymouth, Massachusetts, with 1,200 students enrolled each year for grades 6-8. The school psychologist at PCIS, Lori Rush, states "action is needed to help our students thrive and to address students' mental health needs in our community."

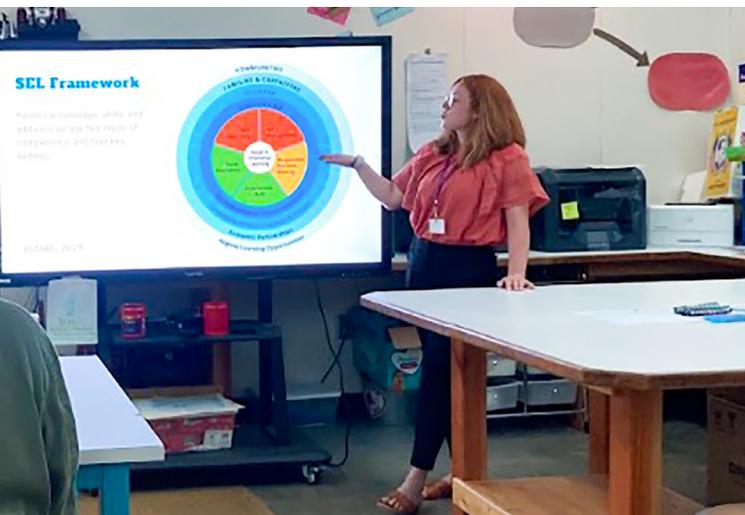
In partnership with Western New England University (WNE), Doctor of Occupational Therapy student, Shannon Lee, has developed innovative peer-based groups focused on developing coping skills for students in their classroom and beyond. A Tier 2 education approach was utilized to address students as a pull-out method from their typical enrichment classes. Groups focused on teens supporting teens to discuss, collaborate, and utilize coping skills to address

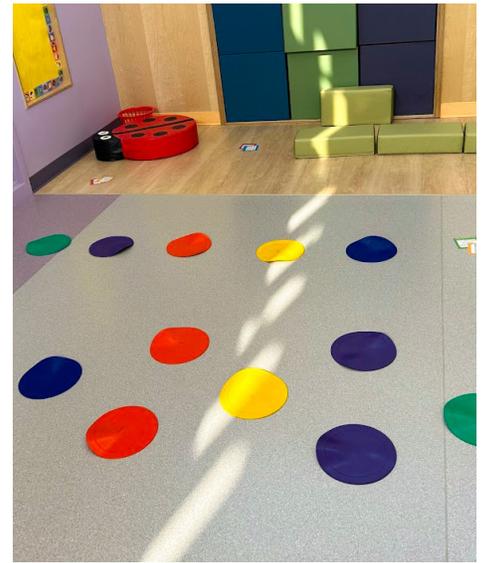
their anxiety at school. Group topics included an introduction to anxiety management, challenging negative thoughts, managing feelings, acceptance, mindfulness, and self-empowerment.

Students expressed the need for support in areas such as anger management, bullying, managing schoolwork, grades, time management, missing assignments, confrontation with peers, and worrying about the past or future.

"I really liked recognizing our strengths and ways to cope with different situations. Also hearing everyone share helped me realize I'm not alone!" reported a PCIS student group participant.

"The rise of student anxiety and need for mental health support is an increasing concern for our nation's youth. Support is needed in Massachusetts public schools internally and externally to support students at risk for future mental health conditions and long-term health implications. Occupational therapists have a unique role for intervening with students with a therapeutic lens that supports the needs of students, families, and professionals, Lee reported.





The Effectiveness of a Social-Emotional Learning and Motor Skill Enrichment Program with Preschool-Aged Children

CAILA NGUYEN, OT/S

What are we doing about the rise in behavioral concerns of young children? Occupational therapists have the answer and the power to mold minds of the future! Caila Nguyen is a young researcher with a doctorate in occupational therapy from Western New England University. She voices her passion for pediatric health and wellness, sensory integration, and other pediatric-related areas of need. She especially loves the practice of social-emotional learning and motor skill development for young children, so she decided to further the current research on its effects in preschool-aged children.

Nguyen began her research by making connections with local preschools in Springfield, Massachusetts. Preschool environments are optimal for the promotion and organization of activities to improve motor skills in a way that encourages the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the child (Salaj and Masnjak, 2022). She fell in love with Educare Springfield and its mission to ensure young children from underserved communities have the best possible chance for success in life. She eventually got connected with a site mentor, Mahera, who guided her throughout her capstone journey.

Over several weeks, Nguyen created and implemented a social-emotional learning and motor skill program with the preschool-aged children at Educare Springfield. It was created to improve children's academic performance within the realms of social and emotional competence. SEL is a growing area of interest in childhood development due to its increased need, especially for children at risk. Not only does SEL play a critical role in improving children's academic performance and lifelong learning, it also shares an important role in nonacademic outcomes (Zins et al., 2007). Motor activities also can support social-emotional learning competencies in younger children, particularly those with disabilities (Cheung et al., 2021). A child's motor and emotional systems must work simultaneously and are regulated through overlapping neural networks in order to monitor, adjust, and regulate behavior (Rueda et al., 2004). A combination of both SEL interventions and motor skill activities may help to promote core academic development and social-emotional learning skills, including self-regulation, self-awareness, relationships with others, and accountability.

The implementation phase of the research study was completed over a span of four weeks where the researcher worked with two classrooms, each twice a week. Individual, pair, and group interventions were done to ensure quality occupational therapy-based activities. Each week focused on one of the four competencies combined with functional gross motor activities, fine motor activities, accountability games, and more. "Can we play Miss Caila's games?" asked several kids at Educare Springfield. One of the best activities Nguyen did was a bean bag toss game when one of the kids said, "That was so much fun!" Nguyen chose each activity for different purposes that may include turn-taking, listening to directions, and establishing relationships in a functional and fun way!

Afterward, Nguyen obtained some data through an SEL observation checklist, for which she found positive outcomes. The program has improved the children's social and emotional behaviors. Nguyen then began to create a program manual of all the interventions and explained why and how it was done in hopes that the activities will be incorporated during the daily routine of preschool classrooms. The teachers were amazed and excited to start using her activities in the classroom to continue her work and impact on the children. Her mentor, Mahera, mentions, "We were so happy to have Caila join our Educare team. She made such an impact on the children and the facility. We are excited to continue her work!"



Implementation of Pediatric Services at a Pro Bono University OT Center

DEANNA PADILLA, OT/S

In the fall of 2021, Deanna Padilla, a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OT) student from Western New England University took on the project of developing the pediatric component of the BEAR PAW Center (BPC) to enhance accessibility and affordability of pediatric occupational therapy (OT) services in the Greater Springfield Area. This student-run pro bono center has become a redeeming opportunity for the community, serving as a model for other institutions nationwide.

The BEAR PAW Occupational Therapy Center, which stands for Bringing Equity, Accessibility, and Rehabilitation to People Achieving Wellness, opened its doors in the fall of 2022, initially catering to the adult population. However, recognizing the need to extend its services to children, Padilla embarked on her Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project to establish a pediatric wing within the center.

After careful redesign and preparation, the pediatric component of the BPC officially opened to the community, marking a significant milestone in pediatric therapy services. This student-led initiative aims to provide hands-on, experiential learning opportunities for WNE Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) students through their offering of free OT services for the Greater Springfield community under the supervision of OTD faculty.

To meet the needs of the pediatric population, the BPC offers two distinct services: weekly playgroups and direct therapy services. The playgroups were held once a week on Wednesdays, for a duration of four weeks for two sessions, providing a structured and purposeful OT-based environment for children to engage and learn. With a custom playgroup protocol developed as a component of her Doctoral Experiential Capstone Project, each session revolves around a theme, incorporating toys, books, puzzles, arts and crafts activities, sensory bins, and gross motor exercises tailored to the theme.

Additionally, direct pediatric OT services were introduced, with three children signing up for interventions. Under the supervision of the Year 3 student researcher, Year 2 OTD students from WNE conducted initial evaluations and delivered interventions to the young clients.

To gain valuable insights into the caregivers' perspectives on the pediatric center space, Padilla conducted a survey following the playgroups. When asked what they enjoyed most about the environment, a caregiver wrote, "We loved how organized the space was. The number of toys was not too high or overwhelming, and the rotation of toys each week kept kids engaged. The timing of activities was perfect for this age group. As soon as kids were beginning to get restless it was time for the next activity. As an elementary school teacher, I was very impressed with how this program was run."

The information gathered from the survey will contribute to the refinement of service delivery, ensuring the center meets the needs and expectations of clients and their caregivers. The insights will inform future treatments and sessions, facilitating continuous growth and improvement of the center. Moreover, the success of the playgroup has revealed a demand for a free, purposeful, and OT-based community playgroup, highlighting the importance of expanding these offerings to meet community needs.

Looking ahead, the pediatric component of the BPC aims to continue providing direct services during the fall, while exploring opportunities to sustain the purposeful playgroups for the community. The recruitment ages for the playgroup were 18 months to 3.5 years old. However, when Padilla realized the level of need for a free purposeful and OT based playgroup, she extended the opportunity to any older and younger siblings of the initial targeted population. The need and interest for a free playgroup, with purposeful developmental components, came to light during the recruitment process, and the positive impacts soon began evident. Now, the pediatric component of the BPC is working to continue the direct services at two different times in the fall with the goal of continuing further offerings of purposeful playgroups for the community.

Motherhood: Maternal Mental Health for Women of Color (WOC) through the Lens of Occupational Therapy (OT)

VINI G. THOMAS, OT/S



Stress, anxiety, depression...mental health. You've heard these words throughout your daily life or even on social media. As many individuals have gone through these feelings and conditions, pregnant women and new mothers are certainly more vulnerable to these experiences. Up to 1 in 5 women experience a range of negative emotions during pregnancy leading to anxiety and depression^{1,2}. Almost 40% of Black women experience maternal mental health (MMH) conditions⁴. 50% to 60.9% Latinx women experience Postpartum Depression (PPD)⁵. 63.3% of Asian mothers experience PPD, where 6-23% mothers are from India and 55% are Indian mothers in the United States³.

Vini Thomas, a third-year Doctor of Occupational Therapy student, explored the role of OT in MMH for women of color (WOC) by identifying and enhancing the education of OTD students and faculty. She developed lessons within the program curriculum focused on MMH, the effect on childhood development, the global perspective, and its impacts on their functional performance in daily activities. Overall results showed OTD students had a vast improvement in knowledge and confidence to advocate, identify the needs, and provide services. To further develop the OTD students' knowledge in this area, Thomas explored developing WNE's first ever service-learning opportunity.

The concept of service-learning allows students to combine community service with academic learning objectives based on the needs of a community. Allowing students to reflect in these experiences provides them with an opportunity for skill development and supports the core values of OT. Due to the unique qualities of the profession, OT students can utilize service-learning opportunities to address the impact on roles, transitions, occupations, and life situations pregnant women of color encounter. OT students can play a role in understanding the needs and advocating for underrepresented communities and nontraditional settings, such as maternal mental health for women of color. A holistic approach can be taken by practitioners and will consider each woman's strengths as well as her mental health, physical, learning, and cultural needs, and choices.

While exploring numerous local community organizations in Springfield, MA, Vini came across Christina's House. This organization was developed to meet the needs of women and their children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the Springfield area. The homes serve to provide emotional, spiritual, and physical support and education for families as they transition from homelessness to permanent and stable living environments. Christina's House follows a holistic approach, treating each person with dignity and respect and working with them to help meet their individual goals. Once Thomas met with the organization's representatives, creation of self-care baskets for the moms became a vision.

From vision to reality, Thomas generated a donation drive within WNE University, allowing all members to donate items of self-care. In collaboration with WNE's COTAD Chapter, Thomas hosted the service-learning event on campus. Students were able to use their knowledge and creativity to create personalized baskets for moms. Items included face masks, essential oils, journals, and a mini-MH tips & tricks toolkit. Students then were asked to put together an educational tip sheet on the benefits of self-care. The event concluded with a short reflection, where students expressed the most challenging and rewarding factor of this task. Students expressed, "It was fulfilling to create self-care baskets and knowing that it is going to a vulnerable population made the event all more worth it."

Lastly, baskets were delivered to Christina's House, and Thomas provided education on the importance of self-care.

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