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Sustaining the heart of practice: illuminating wellbeing in occupational therapy education

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Doctoral Project

SUSTAINING THE HEART OF PRACTICE:

ILLUMINATING WELLBEING IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY EDUCATION

by

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DEDICATION

To my steadfast and loving husband, Mike — your unwavering support sustains the heart of all I do. To my incredible children, Drew and Mitch — your lives inspire joy, laughter, purpose, and perspective. To my parents — your encouragement, support, and belief in me made this journey possible. And to my beloved animals who have walked beside me or kept me company no matter the hour — BabyCat, Callie, Clifford, Hans, Lexie, Theodosia, Zoe, and, of course, Liesl — thank you for grounding me in your rhythms and reminding me daily of the healing power of presence.

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SUSTAINING THE HEART OF PRACTICE:

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ABSTRACT

In American culture, the term "wellbeing" carries various meanings and has a multitude of definitions across disciplines, reflecting its broad and multifaceted nature. At the very foundation of the occupational therapy (OT) profession is the belief that humans are occupational by nature and that "achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation is the overarching statement that describes the domain and process of occupational therapy in its fullest sense" (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020, p. 5). While wellbeing is central to OT, the profession has not yet fully realized the full scope and potential of occupational wellbeing as a key aspect of health promotion, disease prevention, and fundamental human rights, nor has wellbeing content been consistently integrated across OT curricula.

While a few entry-level OT programs are beginning to address this broad topic, many do not yet have formal education in place to support student wellbeing during their journey to becoming occupational therapists, resulting in practitioners with limited capacity to manage their own wellbeing during the stressful early years of their careers. This reality prompts critical reflection for OT educators to collectively ask the questions: How can we effectively center wellbeing in OT education? How do we teach wellbeing

content to our students? Finally, how do we help students build the skills, habits, and mindsets they'll need to sustain both their own wellbeing and that of future clients?

To address this gap in OT curricula, this doctoral project describes the development, implementation, and evaluation plan of a new course at Appalachian State University focusing on wellbeing, *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing.* All Master of Science in Occupational Therapy (MSOT) students at Appalachian State University are enrolled in this first-year, first-semester, one credit-hour course where they learn about and discuss perspectives on wellbeing from various disciplines, and engage in evidence-based, experiential learning related to wellbeing. Informed by OT, psychology, and learning theories, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing* offers students the opportunity to gain knowledge and actively engage in the process of becoming reflective, resilient occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs). Short-term outcomes include measuring students' functional understanding of wellbeing, which will inform future iterations of the course. Long-term outcomes include contributions to the foundational understanding and application of wellbeing within OT education and clinical practice.

This new course has the potential to improve MSOT students' understanding and application of occupational wellbeing for themselves and their clients. The core message of this doctoral work is a gentle yet vital call for OT educators and administrators to advance the integration of wellbeing in teaching, research, and practice, as wellbeing is the essence that makes life worth living, and occupation is how we make it possible.

PREFACE

I never intended to enter academia. After more than two decades in clinical practice across a range of settings and different age groups, I was comfortable in the rhythm of patient care. In the 12 years since moving to my small mountain community, my family and I have navigated early childhood and school, health challenges, and new career paths, all of which have felt overwhelming and impossibly difficult at times. Keeping myself on an even keel became increasingly important as the demands of life and motherhood increased. All those years ago, I would often tell my husband that if I ever pursued a terminal degree, it would be in something "non-traditional": yoga, meditation, integrative health, mindfulness, or any one of the myriad other "rabbit holes" I went down in pursuit of health and happiness. I said it half-jokingly, but I think now that it was a whispering of some future truth. The years in acute care showed me both the wonders of Western medicine and its limitations; the way it too often frames people in terms of disease, deficit, and dysfunction, and does little to promote health and wellbeing as preventative.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while still working in acute care and in response to the devastation that I was experiencing daily, my family and I renovated a small farmhouse. We planted roots, literally and figuratively. Caring for land and animals required presence. It softened me. It slowed me. It required me to pay attention to the quiet, meaningful moment-by-moment occupations that sustain life.

Towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of my most beloved graduate school professors moved to my small mountain town in western North Carolina to begin

a new occupational therapy program. Something stirred in me. I didn't see myself as an academic, but I felt the tug of foundation-building: the opportunity to be part of something meaningful from the ground up. I threw my name in the hat and was given the great opportunity to say yes.

When I joined the new OT program at Appalachian State University as the Academic Fieldwork Coordinator, I was thrilled to work alongside my former mentor, now Program Director, and a legend in the field. She saw something in me that I hadn't fully seen in myself: a quiet passion for health promotion, disease prevention, and overall wellbeing. She invited me to teach the Client and Practitioner Wellbeing course. I said yes without hesitation and then quickly realized that despite the buzz around wellbeing in popular culture, our profession hadn't clearly defined what it meant. Nor had we created a framework to assess and address it meaningfully in practice.

That gap became the seed of this work. And while I initially underestimated the value of the things I did to sustain myself — movement, tending, pausing, reflecting — I began to recognize them as essential occupations. Not just for me, but for everyone. For our clients. For our students. For our profession.

I also want to name something that may seem small but feels significant: I use wellbeing as a single compound word throughout this work, rather than the hyphenated well-being. While some may see this as a matter of style, I see it as a reflection of meaning. *Wellbeing*, unbroken by a hyphen, reflects the wholeness of the experience I'm describing — a state of being that is intentionally and meaningfully cultivated. It is not merely the absence of illness or a fleeting moment of "being well". The word, like the

experience it names, represents a pursuit of living a meaningful life, filled with harmony and intention.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACOTE ..... Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education

AFWC.....Academic Fieldwork Coordinator

AJOT.....American Journal of Occupational Therapy

ANOVA ..... Analysis of Variance

AOTA ..... American Occupational Therapy Association

AOTF.....American Occupational Therapy Foundation

AOTJ..... Australian Occupational Therapy Journal

BU.....Boston University

CDC .....Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

CETLSS ..... Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for Student Success

CJOT..... Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy

COVID-19..... Coronavirus Disease 2019

EI ..... Emotional Intelligence

GAP&P ..... Graduate Academic Policies and Procedures

HOWJ .....Human Occupation and Wellbeing Journal

IRB..... Institutional Review Board

IRM.....Intentional Relationship Model

JOTE..... Journal of Occupational Therapy Education

MSOT .....Master of Science in Occupational Therapy

NC..... North Carolina

NCOTA..... North Carolina Occupational Therapy Association

OT ..... Occupational Therapy

OTD ..... Doctor of Occupational Therapy

OTP ..... Occupational Therapy Practitioner

OTPF-4 .... Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process – 4th Edition

PERMA .. Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment

PPCT ..... Process-Person-Context-Time

SACSCOC ..... Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges

SMART ..... Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound

SoTL ..... Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

SPSS ..... Statistical Package for Social Sciences

UDL ..... Universal Design for Learning

US ..... United States of America

UT ..... Utah

WFOT ..... World Federation of Occupational Therapists

WHO ..... World Health Organization

GLOSSARY

ACOTE Accreditation Standards

The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) accreditation standards provide "the required elements for educational programs, and establishes critical competencies to prepare students to become entry-level occupational therapists or occupational therapy assistants" (ACOTE, 2023, p. 1).

Entry-level Occupational Therapy Program

Either a master's level or doctoral level program which prepares students to become entry-level occupational therapists, which is accredited by the university's accrediting body (e.g., Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges) and the ACOTE.

Occupational Therapy

The only profession that enables people "of all ages to participate in daily living" by using everyday occupations to promote health and wellbeing (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2025, para. 1).

Occupational Therapy Practitioner

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants that provide occupational therapy services to help people engage in everyday activities that are meaningful and purposeful (AOTA, 2025).

Wellbeing

An evolving concept that includes satisfaction with participation in occupations and daily activities that enhance quality of life (AOTA, 2019), as well as the presence of "positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive function" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018, para. 1).

CHAPTER ONE – Introduction

Wellbeing

In American culture, the term ‘wellbeing’ carries various meanings and has a multitude of definitions across disciplines, reflecting its broad and multifaceted nature. Its expansive scope encompasses numerous domains, profoundly impacting various aspects of life. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines wellbeing as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions” (WHO, 2021, p. 10). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) expands on this and acknowledges the multifaceted nature of wellbeing, emphasizing its comprehensive scope, which includes having “positive emotions (e.g., contentment, happiness), not having negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning” (CDC, 2018, para. 1). In simple terms, wellbeing is feeling good and judging life in a positive way.

Occupation, Occupational Therapy, and Wellbeing

In the field of occupational therapy (OT), ‘occupations’ are the personalized “everyday activities that people do as individuals, in families, and with communities to occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life” (World Federation of Occupational Therapists [WFOT], 2012, para. 2). OT is a “client-centered health profession concerned with promoting health and wellbeing through occupation” (WFOT, 2012, para. 1). Unique to the OT profession, meaningful occupations serve as both intervention approach (e.g., skill development through engagement in an occupation) and outcome (e.g.,

achievement of increased independence as a result of OT intervention via skill development and/or environmental modification). At the foundation of the OT profession is the belief that humans are occupational by nature and that "achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation is the overarching statement that describes the domain and process of occupational therapy in its fullest sense" (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020, p. 5). Within the OT domain and process is the term 'wellbeing', an evolving concept that includes satisfaction with participation in occupations and daily activities that enhance quality of life (AOTA, 2020) as well as the presence of "positive emotions (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive function" (CDC, 2018, para. 1).

The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process (Fourth edition; OTPF-4) describes the central constructs of the OT profession upon which the concepts of evaluation, intervention, and outcomes are built (AOTA, 2020). OT has historically organized occupations into three categories: self-care, productivity/work, and leisure/play (Kilehofner, 2008). Jonsson (2008), however, argued that these categories do not convey the complex relationship between occupational engagement and human wellbeing, even as wellbeing continues to evolve in the OT profession (Reitz & Scaffa, 2020). Further highlighting the centrality of wellbeing to the profession of OT, Hammell (2017) argued that focusing only on self-care, leisure, and productivity has limited the profession's ability to clearly articulate the unique contribution of OT to individuals and society: that wellbeing is inevitably enhanced through engagement in personally

meaningful, health-promoting occupations. While wellbeing is central to the OTPF-4, OT has not yet fully realized the full scope and potential of occupational wellbeing as one of health promotion, disease prevention, and fundamental human rights.

Occupational Therapy Practitioner Wellbeing

While some occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) might consider issues relating to wellbeing with their clients, they may also experience work issues that impact their own wellbeing. For many OTPs, career burnout is often due to difficulty balancing the ever-increasing demands of work and life. Psychological exhaustion and burnout in healthcare workers, stemming from prolonged emotional stress, have detrimental effects on health and can diminish work quality and the level of service provided. Recent data shows that 49.9% of rehabilitation practitioners in clinical settings reported increased burnout after the COVID-19 pandemic, with OTPs reporting more burnout than practitioners in other professions (WebPT, 2021). Several other studies show that burnout among OTPs is particularly high (Kim et al., 2020; Park, 2021).

In response to elevated levels of psychological exhaustion and burnout, the wellbeing of OTPs is a topic of increasing interest and an area of focus for researchers to identify strategies to support OTPs and decelerate professional exit. Brown & Pashniak (2018) have suggested that promoting psychological health is a critical issue in workplace health and safety that requires immediate attention. Shin et al. (2022) suggest that further research, advocacy, and policymaking are necessary to implement structural-level interventions that foster workplace cultures and conditions, safeguarding the OT workforce against burnout and field exit.

Wellbeing of Occupational Therapy Students

Like many other graduate education programs in other professions, entry-level OT programs have students with high levels of stress, despite the profession's roots in mental health. Consistent with national trends, Grab et al. (2021) found that most students in ACOTE-accredited, entry-level OT programs experienced stress due to a variety of factors, including personal, financial, and academic pressures. Recently, student stress has been compounded by prolonged anxiety, sadness, and anger that 80% of adults experienced as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic (American Psychological Association, 2021). With the responsibilities of school, clinical placements, boards, and the stress of attaining their first professional job, in addition to the challenges of attempting to balance school and family obligations (Pfiefer et al., 2008), it is not surprising that many OT students are struggling to manage their stress levels. This is especially the case if they have limited personal wellbeing tools in place to help them navigate life after graduate school. Thus, as Popova et al. (2022) found, both OT students and OTPs alike report lowered levels of wellbeing and elevated levels of stress. Indeed, stressed OT students may become practitioners with limited ability to manage the daily stressors of clinical practice and life, potentially leading them to exit the profession.

Wellbeing in Occupational Therapy Education

Entry-level OT programs in the United States consist of Master of Science in Occupational Therapy (MSOT) and Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) programs that prepare students to become entry-level occupational therapists, and are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE). All ACOTE

accredited programs must meet a set of accreditation standards that outline the required content the programs must teach, the knowledge and skills graduates must possess, the requirements for student fieldwork, and the institutional responsibilities in relation to faculty qualifications, resourcing, administration, and evaluation, among others. Previously, all entry-level OT programs had to meet the ACOTE (2018) standards; however, these have recently been replaced by the ACOTE (2023) standards, with full implementation of the new standards by all programs required by July 2025. A notable change in these two versions of the ACOTE standards is an increase in the number of standards relating to wellbeing. The ACOTE (2018) standards include wellbeing in only two standards, whereas the ACOTE (2023) standards discuss wellbeing in eight standards. Clearly, wellbeing is becoming increasingly important in OT education, as the updated standards address student, client, and practitioner wellbeing. For example, ACOTE (2023) standard C.1.8 requires programs to "demonstrate support for enhancing supervision…including [sic] student wellbeing…" (p. 38). Related to practitioner wellbeing, standard B.2.9 states that programs should educate students on how to "create and implement a plan to address individualized personal and professional responsibilities that are consistent with current accepted standards and long-term professional goals…and must address the following: personal well-being" (ACOTE, 2023, p. 25). Related to the wellbeing of the client, standard B.3.6 states that programs should educate OT students on how to "recommend and provide direct interventions and procedures to persons, groups, or populations to enhance safety, health and wellness, chronic condition management, and performance in occupations…including [sic] interventions to support

well-being" (ACOTE, 2023, p. 28).

The increasing number of standards pertaining to wellbeing suggests a growing recognition within OT education and practice of the importance of wellbeing to students, practitioners, and clients. This evolving understanding of wellbeing necessitates enhancements to the curriculum to incorporate concepts related to wellbeing in OT education.

For educators, there is a responsibility to instruct OT students on two crucial fronts. First, it is important to ensure that students understand how they can effectively support and enhance the wellbeing of their clients. Second, educators must guide students' understanding of and encourage strategies around cultivating their own personal and professional wellbeing. By providing OT students with a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing and tools to promote wellbeing, educators can help students and future OTPs prioritize both their own and their clients' wellbeing, foregrounding wellbeing as a fundamental component of their professional ethos. This preparation not only serves to empower students to thrive throughout their careers but also underscores our commitment to their longevity and success in the profession.

Current Gap in OT Education

If OT students experience high levels of stress before they enter an OT program, there is a need for educators to imbue wellbeing into the OT curriculum as well as into the daily lives of OT students to meet their needs and fulfill the requirements of the ACOTE (2023) accreditation standards. As a new faculty member in an MSOT program, the author of this doctoral project was curious about how educators support students to

cope with the stress of graduate-level education. Instead of assuming that students can manage and successfully complete the rigors of a graduate-level OT program, educators can equip students with a better understanding of how to maintain their own wellbeing. OT students can be empowered to identify their individual needs relative to stress and coping and encouraged to develop their own path to thriving in every stage of becoming an OTP. Their wellbeing should be central to their understanding of themselves, a cornerstone of their OT education, and enable them to chart a course towards flourishing throughout their journey to becoming an OTP, and vital to their lifelong journey toward fulfillment and thriving.

Personal Perspective

As an occupational therapist with over 20 years of clinical experience and currently working in academia in a developing OT program for more than two years, the author of this doctoral project has a unique perspective on wellbeing. Through experience with the "work" of wellbeing and understanding of the power of occupation, the author has transformed her perceptions of health via meditation, mindfulness, gratitude, journaling, and a growth mindset as contributors to stress management, perseverance, and ultimately, cultivation of wellbeing. These wellbeing modalities helped the author overcome the numerous challenges, including multiple career twists and turns in clinical practice, balancing family obligations and work, navigating health challenges alongside family members, starting a career in academia later in life, and the work of pre-accreditation in a new OT program while completing a terminal degree.

As the Academic Fieldwork Coordinator (AFWC) in the MSOT program at Appalachian State University, the author's primary responsibility is to ensure students succeed in their fieldwork settings. Additionally, the author is responsible for developing and teaching a course centering on client and practitioner wellbeing. This doctoral project aims to students them understand wellbeing, maintain a healthy work-life balance, and provide them with tools to promote wellbeing in the client populations they will serve during their fieldwork and as future OTPs.

Proposed Project

To address this perceived shortcoming in OT curricula, this doctoral project describes the development, implementation, and evaluation plan of a course for students in the MSOT program at Appalachian State University to help them understand their own occupational wellbeing needs and begin to explore the occupational wellbeing needs of their clients and themselves as future OTPs. All first-year MSOT students are enrolled in a first-semester course, *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing*, where they learn about and discuss perspectives on wellbeing from various disciplines, and engage in evidence-based wellbeing opportunities. Throughout the course, students are encouraged to determine which modalities work best for their individual needs. Follow-up questionnaires are used throughout the program to help gauge their growing understanding of themselves as occupational beings and their responsibility for nurturing their own occupational wellbeing.

Summary

This doctoral project aims to address the growing recognition of wellbeing as a vital component of OT education by developing and refining a new course, *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing*, at Appalachian State University's MSOT program. Grounded in current literature from a variety of disciplines and guided by ACOTE (2023) accreditation standards, the course is designed to equip students with an understanding of wellbeing from the perspectives of the student, client, and practitioner, fostering a lifelong commitment to wellbeing as a core element of OT students' personal and professional identity.

CHAPTER TWO – Project Theoretical and Evidence Base

Theoretical Framework

Bioecological Theory of Human Development

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a prominent developmental psychologist, introduced the Ecological Systems Theory in 1977. This theory emphasizes the intricate interplay between human development and the various environmental contexts in which individuals grow. He described the interactions between the individual and their environmental system as nested structures, known as the *microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem,* and *macrosystem*. Bronfenbrenner embraced an interdisciplinary approach that bridged psychology, sociology, education, and public policy. While the theory was originally developed for use in developmental psychology, it has since been applied in several other disciplines, including education, sociology, human geography, public policy, nursing, business, and organizational studies.

The original theory has seen multiple iterations, as Bronfenbrenner was an exceptionally reflective theorist. Bronfenbrenner (1999) noted that his initial theory, which included conceptualizations of a person's context that describe the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem*, focused too much on context and lacked insight into the role a person plays in their own development. His later theory, the Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), focuses on Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT), which foregrounds the process or interactions between the individual and their environment as well as the individual characteristics of the person, yet continues to incorporate contextual systems and time (Tudge et al., 2009).

The first concept, *Process*, refers to the interactions between the individual and their environment, called proximal processes, that are the engines of development. Proximal processes occur regularly over extended periods of time and are bidirectional, meaning the individual and the environment influence one another. Proximal processes become increasingly complex over time, as individuals develop and are influenced by the broader environmental context.

Bronfenbrenner (2005) recognized that while environmental factors are crucial, the unique attributes of an individual play a key role in their developmental experiences. The second concept in the PPCT model, *Person*, includes their role in shaping their development, which encompasses a person's choices and preferences and plays a crucial function in individual development. There are three components to the Person aspect of the model, which include:

1. **Demand Characteristics**. These characteristics can invite or discourage certain responses from the environment and include personality traits, behaviors, and physical attributes.
2. **Resource Characteristics**. These are the mental, emotional, social, and material resources an individual brings to a situation that interacts with their environment and can facilitate or hinder development.
3. **Force Characteristics**. These characteristics include a person's internal motivation and temperament, personal agency, resilience, and self-regulation.

The third concept is *Context*, which refers to the nested system of settings in which development occurs and recognizes how these environments shape and are shaped

by the developing individual. The four layers include the *microsystem,* the *mesosystem,* the *exosystem,* the *macrosystem,* and connecting those layers, the *chronosystem*. The *microsystem* is the immediate environment where the individual directly interacts with other people and activities. The *mesosystem* includes the interconnections between the different microsystems in which the individual is involved. The *exosystem* includes the settings that the individual does not directly participate in, but which still influence their development. The *macrosystem* encompasses the cultural, social, political, economic, laws, and societal norms that influence all other systems. Finally, the *chronosystem* represents a dimension of time, highlighting how changes over time, such as personal transitions and historical events, affect development.

The final concept is *Time*, which considers the immediate timing of interactions (micro-time), their consistency over longer periods causing cumulative effects (meso-time), and the influence of broader historical contexts (macro-time), which interact to shape developmental outcomes over the lifespan.

Application of the PPCT to the Development of Personal and Professional Wellbeing

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) mature version of the Bioecological Theory of Human Development, which incorporates the PPCT, guided the development of the explanatory model problem presented later in this chapter. While the Bioecological Theory of Human Development is complex, it effectively acknowledges the bidirectional influence of the person and the environment.

Applying the first aspect of the Bioecological Theory of Human Development, described as *Process*, to the model of the problem relates well to the education of MSOT

students. Throughout their two-year journey through MSOT programs, students engage with payment systems, fieldwork educators, various models of practice, and a wide variety of populations as part of their educational experience. Content increases in complexity over the course of the program as students develop their understanding of entry-level OT practice. Concurrently, the broader national educational landscape, ACOTE (2023) requirements, and the university system are influencing how students are educated, combining to impact students' preparedness to care for their own wellbeing and meaningfully address the wellbeing of their clients.

The second aspect, *Person*, informs a more individualized understanding of how a student might experience content and develop an understanding of wellbeing. Each student brings their own demand characteristics, such as personality traits, emotional resources, and physical attributes. They also bring resource characteristics such as their mental, emotional, and social preparedness to receive and integrate wellbeing content. Finally, students bring force characteristics such as their internal motivation, personal agency, resilience, and ability to self-regulate, which may contribute to or detract from their ability to integrate content around wellbeing.

The third aspect, *Context*, highlights the nested setting in which students engage with content around wellbeing and includes multiple facets of the problem model, including societal factors, health system factors, and educational factors, all of which fall under the *mesosystem* and *exosystem* of the Bioecological Theory of Human Development.

The final aspect, *Time*, provides a framework for understanding micro-timing of students' interaction with concepts around wellbeing in their curriculum. Specifically, *when* students interact with the content during their two-year education, and *how often* they interact with the content during each semester. Meso-time encompasses the cumulative potential, or lack thereof, of students' regular interaction with content around wellbeing, and the influence of macro-time, or how students are experiencing concepts of wellbeing at this moment in history in Western culture. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (2005) provides a robust framework from which to understand the conceptualization of the problem for this doctoral project.

Explanatory Model of the Problem

Development of the Explanatory Model

This course grew out of an advisory committee of local practitioners who met with Appalachian State University's MSOT Program Director and voiced the impact of wellbeing, or lack thereof, on the therapeutic process for both the clinician and the client. From there, the course was handed off to the author for full development. Through course development research, the author realized that wellbeing is a developing concept that lacks specificity in how it is defined and evaluated for clients within OT and that wellbeing continues to be approached from a disability model instead of from a health promotion perspective. Additionally, students bring their own strengths and areas for growth, which impact a student's wellbeing and continue to influence their wellbeing after graduation. Drawing on this research, an explanatory model of the problem was developed. Visual representation of the explanatory model is presented in Figure 2.1.

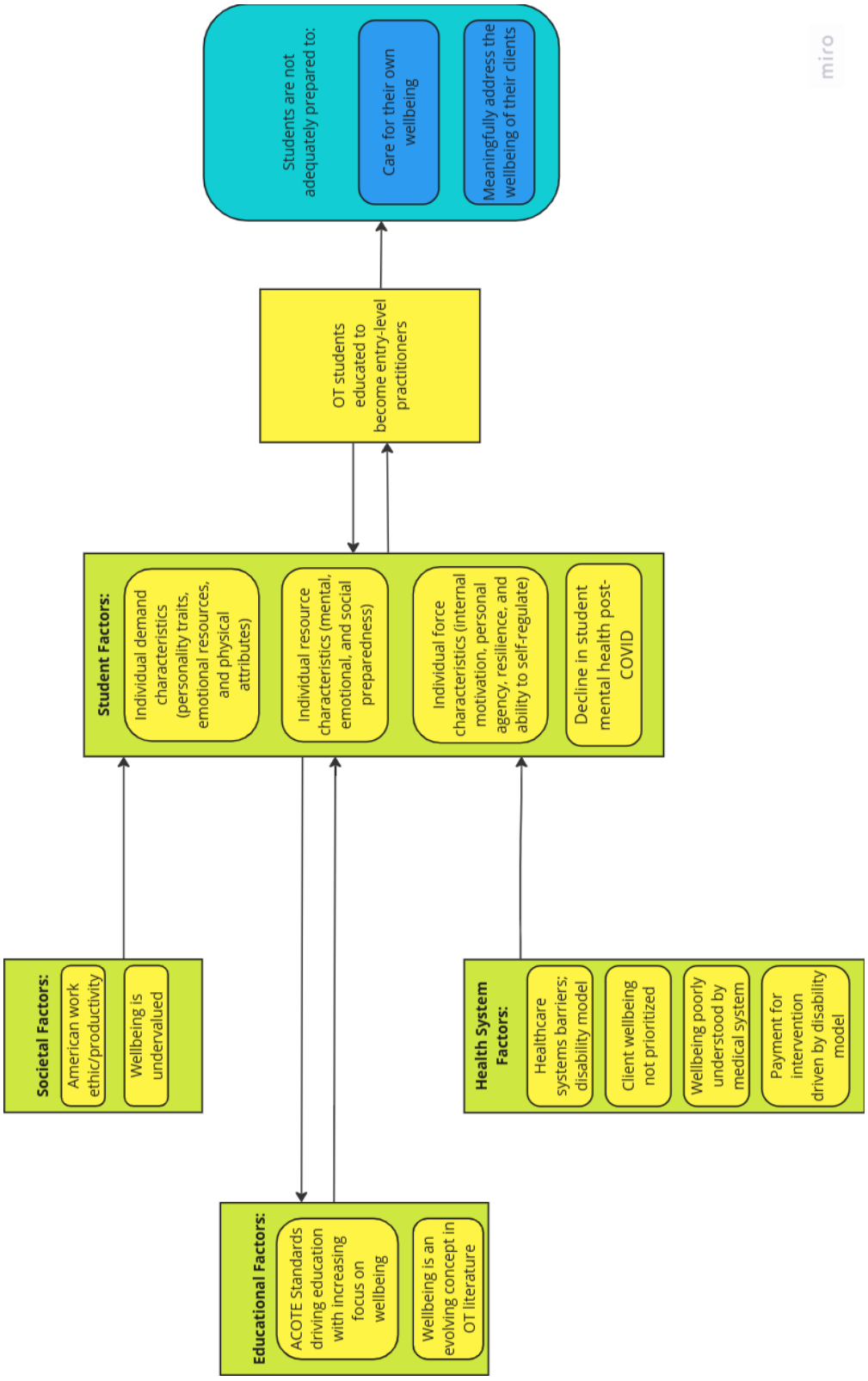


Figure 2.1
Explanatory Model of the Problem

Components of the Explanatory Model

As presented in the model, four areas that influence the problem were identified:

1. **Societal Factors.** These include Western culture's emphasis on work and productivity, undervaluation of wellbeing, and public misunderstandings about what constitutes wellbeing.
2. **Health System Factors**. These include barriers within the healthcare system that hinder the inclusion of wellbeing, including the disability model as a reimbursement driver, limited understanding and valuation of wellbeing within the medical system.
3. **Educational Factors.** These include ACOTE (2023) standards that drive education with limited emphasis on wellbeing, the overall decline in student mental health, and the limited definition of wellbeing in OT literature.
4. **Individual Student Factors.** These include a student's individual demand, resource, and force characteristics. Demand characteristics comprise personality traits, emotional resources, and physical attributes of the student. Individual resource characteristics include the mental, emotional, and social preparedness of the student. Finally, the individual force characteristics are comprised of a student's internal motivation, personal agency, resilience, and ability to self-regulate.

While students are trained to become entry-level OTPs, these factors shape their classroom and fieldwork experiences, influencing their understanding and use of wellbeing as a discrete therapeutic modality and outcome in most clinical practices.

Literature Review of Factors Contributing to the Issue

To explore whether OT students were adequately prepared to care for their own wellbeing or effectively address their clients' wellbeing, a literature search was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. How is wellbeing defined in the OT literature?
2. Do OT students feel prepared to care for their own wellbeing?
3. How do intrinsic characteristics — demand (traits, behaviors, physical attributes), resources (mental, emotional, social, material), and personal drive (motivation, agency, resilience, self-regulation) — affect OT students' wellbeing?

A search of the literature was conducted using four databases: APA PsycINFO, PubMed, CINAHL, and Web of Science. Hand searching was also completed in the Journal of Occupational Therapy Education (JOTE) for articles related to wellbeing.

Research Question 1. Table 2.1 shows search terms used for the first research question, "How is wellbeing defined in the OT literature?".

Table 2.1

Search Terms Used for Research Question 1

Wellbeing		**Occupational Therapy**
wellbeing OR wellness OR "well-being" OR "well-ness"	AND	"occupational therapy" OR OT OR "occupational science" OR "occupational therapist"

The search in the databases yielded 65 studies that were relevant to the question. A further five articles were found through hand searching. Abstracts and full text of the retrieved articles were reviewed against the following criteria: published within the last

10 years, articles in the English language, and published in academic journals. Conference abstracts were excluded from this review. Following this, 10 studies were selected for inclusion in this review.

Research Question 2. Table 2.2 shows search terms used for the second research question, "Do OT students feel prepared to care for their own wellbeing?".

Table 2.2

Search Terms Used for Research Question 2

Occupational Therapy		**Students**		**Wellbeing**
"occupational therapy"	AND	student*	AND	wellbeing OR wellness OR "well-being" OR "well-ness"

The search yielded 139 studies that were relevant to the question. Abstracts and full-text of the retrieved articles were reviewed against the following criteria: published within the last 10 years, articles in the English language, and published in academic journals. Conference abstracts were excluded from this review. Following this, 15 studies were selected for inclusion in this review.

Research Question 3. Table 2.3 shows search terms used for the third research question, "How do intrinsic characteristics — demand (traits, behaviors, physical attributes), resources (mental, emotional, social, material), and personal drive (motivation, agency, resilience, self-regulation) — affect OT students' wellbeing?". As there was limited literature specific to OT, additional health professions with similar curricular experiences and demands were included in the search.

Table 2.3

Search Terms Used for Research Question 3

Intrinsic characteristics		**Health professionals**		**student**		**wellbeing**
personality OR "emotional resources" OR "coping mechanism" OR "coping mechanisms" OR "physical attributes" OR age OR gender OR resilience OR cogniti* OR psychological OR motivation OR "personal agency" OR "self-regulate" OR "self-regulation" OR "self regulate" OR "self regulation"	AND	"occupational therapy" OR physiotherapy OR "physical therapy" OR "speech language pathology" OR "speech pathology" OR "speech therapy" OR "language therapy" OR nutrition OR dietetic OR "athletic training" OR "athletic therapy" OR "social work" OR medic* OR nursing OR pharmacy OR dental OR dentistry	AND	student*	AND	wellbeing OR wellness OR "well-being" OR "well-ness"

The search yielded 105 studies that were relevant to the question. Abstracts and full-text of the retrieved articles were reviewed against the following criteria: published within the last 10 years, articles in the English language, and academic journals. Conference abstracts were excluded from this review. Following this, 14 studies were selected for inclusion in this review.

A synthesis of the literature for each of the three questions is presented below.

Wellbeing Defined in OT Literature

Defining what comprises and contributes to wellbeing is a critical first step, not only for students but also for the OT profession. As a profession that positions engagement in meaningful occupation as its core, engagement is also a central component of wellbeing, as is participation in occupations over skilled or effective occupational performance (Hammell, 2023; Pizzi, 2017).

WHO defines wellbeing as "a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions" (WHO, 2021, p. 10). In their discussion paper describing OTPs' role and contribution in the areas of health promotion and prevention, Reitz et al. (2020) described wellbeing as an evolving concept involving emotional health, life satisfaction, and positive functioning, aligning with the CDC (2018) definition, which highlights "the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning" (para. 1). While broad in scope, further investigation of scholarly articles reveals a more nuanced yet evolving definition of wellbeing.

Three key content areas emerged relative to wellbeing: physical contributors, emotional contributors, and social contributors (Espiritu et al., 2024; Popova et al., 2022; Hammell, 2023). Physical contributors include the fulfillment of basic needs, as highlighted by Taff et al. (2023) in their pilot study of MSOT and OTD students at Washington University in St. Louis, which explored the impact of unmet basic needs on

the health, wellbeing, and academic engagement of OT students. Taff et al. (2023) found that fulfilling basic needs, such as health, safety, and belonging, is critical to student success, and that marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by unmet needs of this nature.

Several articles cited emotional contributors to wellbeing. Kannenberg et al. (2016) emphasized the role of mental health, stating that wellbeing involved "successful performance of mental function resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with challenges" (p.1). Resilience, which was identified in one article as a contributor to wellbeing (Popova et al., 202), also supports mental health as a foundational component of wellbeing.

Social contributors include concepts such as self-determination, belonging, and social inclusion, all of which significantly contribute to wellbeing. Kannenberg et al. (2016) elaborate on social factors by referring to the OTPF-Third Edition (AOTA, 2014), which includes contentment with one's belonging, self-determination, roles, and helping others. Hammell (2023) emphasizes self-determination as the "ability to enact choices and counteract powerlessness" (p. 9). Hammell further describes wellbeing as a harmonious state encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual balance, as well as personal and economic security, self-worth, belonging, self-determination, meaningful occupations, and hope. Overall wellbeing appears deeply connected to belonging, equality, self-determination, satisfaction, and hope.

Defining wellbeing is vital for advancing both OT practice and education. This review highlights its multifaceted nature, encompassing physical, emotional, and social

health (Espiritu et al., 2024; Popova et al., 2022; Hammell, 2023), alongside engagement in meaningful occupations as a core component (Hammell, 2023), with prioritization of participation over performance to optimize wellbeing (Hammell, 2023; Pizzi, 2017). Social contributors, such as belonging, self-determination, and inclusion, are equally important in fostering a sense of connection and equality (AOTA, 2014; Hammell, 2023). Together, these elements weave a holistic yet evolving definition of wellbeing, illuminating the transformative potential of occupation and the OT profession in health promotion and prevention.

Student Preparedness to Care for Their Wellbeing

While the ACOTE (2018; 2023) accreditation standards identify wellbeing as a content area required in entry-level OT programs, there is little guidance on how to incorporate wellbeing education into curriculum and little clarity on the multi-faceted, evolving nature of the components of wellbeing, despite its centrality to the OTPF and its value to OT students (Lawrence et al., 2021). Lewis-Kipkulei et al. (2021) emphasized that educating students to manage their own wellbeing is an ethical responsibility that is vital for the long-term sustainability of the profession.

Mental health challenges faced by OT students are consistently highlighted in the literature. In their cross-sectional survey of OTPs and MSOT/OTD students at a university in the United States, Popova et al. (2022) sought to explore the relationship between stress, resilience, self-care, and wellbeing. They found that both OT students and OTPs reported experiencing good wellbeing less than half the time and expressed only moderate satisfaction with their ability to sustain it. Correlated to experiencing reduced

feelings of wellbeing, OT and physical therapy students experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to undergraduates and the general population. This is largely driven by academic demands and the conflict between school and personal life (Webber et al., 2021). Additionally, Espiritu et al. (2024) conducted a cross-sectional survey of OT students from programs in the United States, focusing on post-professional OTD and PhD programs. Their study aimed to evaluate whether action-planning and group accountability might impact health, wellness, and student wellbeing. They observed that students experience decreased wellbeing during their educational experience. In a cross-sectional study of allied health students across the United States exploring the utility of emotional intelligence as a tool for burnout mitigation, Taylor et al. (2024) found that 86% of students reported exhaustion, further contributing to reduced wellbeing.

Stress can, at times, be adaptive and action-inducing (e.g., eustress); however, it can become maladaptive and harmful, especially when chronic in nature. Chronic, maladaptive stress can negatively impact mental health and serve as a barrier to student wellbeing. Popova (2022) highlighted the high levels of stress and low levels of wellbeing experienced by OT students. Ongoing chronic stress can impact academic performance and overall success in the program, reinforcing the critical need for targeted wellbeing education in OT curriculum.

Given the persistent challenges related to OT student wellbeing, academic programs are beginning to recognize the need for inclusion of wellbeing in their curriculum. Whether in the form of a comprehensive program or as discreet components,

faculty are increasingly attentive to the call for action to address student wellbeing (Vogtmann, 2021; Smallfield et al., 2022; Espiritu, 2022). This shift signals a growing acknowledgment of the importance of supporting student wellbeing as an integral component of academic success and long-term professional sustainability.

The research suggests that many students are not adequately prepared to care for their own wellbeing before entering graduate school, and they may face significant mental health challenges, including high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, which can negatively affect their academic performance and overall wellbeing. However, there is growing recognition within academic programs of the need to address student wellbeing with a few programs incorporating discrete components and even fewer considering a more comprehensive approach. Generally, OT educators are in the early stages of making a positive shift towards better preparing students to care for their own and their future clients' wellbeing.

Influence of Students' Intrinsic Characteristics on Wellbeing

The search terms used for Research Question 3 were based on Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model to help clarify how individual traits may influence a student's wellbeing, either positively or negatively. The results from the review are organized below according to this same framework.

Demand (Traits, Behaviors, Physical Attributes). When considering the traits, behaviors, and physical attributes that may contribute to or detract from student wellbeing, one may need to focus on discreet components of each. In their descriptive study, Wagner et al. (2017) investigated how perfectionism impacted occupational and

perceived health in OT students. Adaptive perfectionists, those who find satisfaction in meeting reasonable standards, fare better than maladaptive perfectionists, whose self-worth depends entirely on performance, leading to diminished wellbeing. Self-compassion can also contribute to or detract from student wellbeing (Popova et al., 2022). Martinez-Lorca et al. (2023) conducted a descriptive, epidemiological, cross-sectional study of first through fourth year OT students at a Spanish university. They found that the OT students often struggled with emotional regulation skills, negatively impacting their wellbeing, and those managing chronic illnesses experienced an even greater impact on their wellbeing. Together, these findings emphasize the mental and emotional toll of traits and behaviors that hinder students' ability to maintain balance in high-demand environments, such as graduate school.

Resources (Mental, Emotional, Social, Material). Material resources, emotional resources, and social support play a critical role in OT students' wellbeing. At the most basic level, students need to have their basic needs met, such as food and housing (Taff et al., 2023). Kotera et al. (2019) highlighted the detrimental role of internal shame and self-criticism, both of which are demanding mental traits and significantly predict mental health challenges in OT and counseling students, ultimately impacting wellbeing. Taylor et al. (2024) found that students with higher emotional intelligence reported better overall mental health, which positively impacted their wellbeing. Similarly, Carpenter et al. (2023) identified a significant correlation between higher levels of emotional intelligence and lower perceived stress, suggesting that developing this resource could enhance wellbeing by reducing stress. Social support was also highlighted as a key factor, with

Birinci (2023) demonstrating that low perceived social support, combined with feelings of hopelessness, was closely associated with burnout. These findings suggest that ensuring basic needs are met, minimizing internal shame and self-criticism, improving emotional intelligence, and fostering social support may reduce the likelihood of negative emotional outcomes and improve overall mental health, a contributor to overall wellbeing.

Personal Drive (Motivation, Agency, Resilience, Self-Regulation). Intrinsic factors such as resilience, self-compassion, and goal setting are closely tied to OT students' wellbeing. Kotera et al. (2019) identified resilience and self-compassion as significant predictors of wellbeing, with self-compassion emerging as the strongest predictor, outperforming psychological constructs such as intrinsic motivation, engagement, and resilience. Popova (2022) further connected low levels of self-compassion to increased stress, which negatively impacts wellbeing. Finally, Espiritu (2022) found that action-planning, or structured personal goal setting, promoted the development of strategies to achieve personally relevant outcomes and contribute to feelings of autonomy, a critical component of wellbeing.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT model to explore how individual traits, resources, and personal drive impact the wellbeing of OT students reveals key areas that can either enhance or hinder their wellbeing. Demand characteristics, such as perfectionism and emotional regulation, highlight the mental and emotional challenges students face. Resources such as emotional intelligence, social support, and the fulfillment of basic needs are essential for fostering wellbeing. Meanwhile, personal drive

factors like resilience and self-compassion can play critical roles in helping students manage stress and enhance their wellbeing. Together, these findings underscore the complexity of internal traits and external supports shaping OT students' overall wellbeing.

Conclusion

Wellbeing is an evolving, multifaceted concept that encompasses aspects of physical, emotional, and social health, as well as engagement in meaningful occupations, with a prioritization of participation over performance. The research suggests that students are not adequately prepared to care for their own wellbeing prior to entering graduate school and face extraordinarily high levels of stress and anxiety while in graduate OT programs, which can negatively impact their academic performance and overall wellbeing. Individual student characteristics such as perfectionism, emotional regulation, emotional intelligence, fulfillment of basic needs, social support, and self-compassion can enhance or hinder student wellbeing. Together, these findings underscore the complexity of defining wellbeing in our profession, the challenges our students face to develop or maintain their wellbeing while in school, and highlight a few of the personal characteristics students bring that may enhance or hinder the development of their personal wellbeing.

CHAPTER THREE – Overview of Current Approaches and Methods

Literature Review of Current Approaches and Methods

To explore the current approaches and methods of integrating education on wellbeing in OT curricula, a literature review was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do entry-level OT programs teach wellbeing concepts in their curricula?
2. What educational approaches do OT educators use to teach wellbeing?
3. What strategies do OTPs utilize to sustain their wellbeing in practice?

For Research Question 1, a search of online curriculum listings from 10 entry-level OT programs in the US was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how programs teach wellbeing. For Research Questions 2 and 3, a literature search was conducted using five databases: APA PsycINFO, CINAHL, Web of Science, PubMed; and hand searching in the JOTE.

Research Question 1. To address the first research question, the top 10 OT programs in the United States were identified and examined, using the *U.S. News & World Report* (2024) *Best Occupational Therapy Programs* as well as, Appalachian State University, the author's current workplace. Curriculum and course descriptions available on each university's website were reviewed for search terms presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Search Terms

Search Terms
Wellbeing / Well-being / Wellness
Resilience / Resilient
Self-care / Self care (as it relates to the practitioner)
Stress management

Research Question 2. Table 3.2 shows search terms for Research Question 2, "What educational approaches do educators in OT programs use to teach wellbeing?".

Table 3.2

Search Terms Used for Research Question 2

Educational Approaches		**Student**		**Occupational Therapy**		**Wellbeing**
"teaching strategies" OR pedagogy OR "education method*" OR "learning model*" OR "instructional approach*" OR "teaching framework*" OR teach OR "teacher strategies" OR "educational method" OR "instructional design" OR "teaching methodologies" OR "experiential learning" OR "problem-based learning" OR "group work" OR "reflective learning" OR "reflexive learning" OR simulation OR project OR didactic OR lecture OR "flipped classroom" OR "collaborative learning" OR "team based learning"	AND	student*	AND	"occupational therapy" OR "occupational therapist" OR OT	AND	wellbeing OR wellness OR "well-being" OR "well-ness"

The search of databases yielded 177 peer-reviewed articles relevant to the question. Abstracts and full-text of the retrieved articles were reviewed against the following criteria: published within the last 12 years, articles in the English language, and articles published in academic journals. Conference abstracts were excluded from this review. Following this, 10 studies were selected for inclusion in this review.

Research Question 3. Table 3.3 presents search terms used for the third research question, "What strategies do OTPs utilize to sustain their wellbeing in professional practice?".

Table 3.3

Search Terms Used for Research Question 3

Strategies (Abstract)		**OT (Abstract)**		**Practitioner (Title)**		**Wellbeing (Abstract)**
strateg* OR "coping mechanisms" OR "self care" OR "Stress management" or "work-life balance" OR "burnout prevention" OR resilien*	AND	"occupational therapy" or "occupational therapist"	AND	practitioner* OR clinician* OR therapist* or "health professional" or provider*	AND	wellbeing OR wellness OR "well-being" OR "well-ness"

The search yielded 138 studies that were relevant to the question. Abstracts and full-text of the retrieved articles were reviewed against the following criteria: published within the last 12 years, articles in the English language, and published in academic

journals. Conference abstracts were excluded from this review. Following this, 12 studies were selected for inclusion in this review.

A synthesis of the literature for each of the three questions is presented below.

Wellbeing in Entry-Level OT Curricula

Based upon the data extracted, there appears to be variability in the level of conceptual focus and spectrum of integration ranging from courses explicitly named and focused on wellbeing to the inclusion of wellbeing as a component within broader course topics such as therapeutic use of self, occupational performance, and policy. Table 3.4 lists the universities reviewed, the degree type offered, course credit hours, and whether wellbeing was a main focus or a component of the course.

Table 3.4

Wellbeing in the Curriculum of Included OT Programs

University	**Degree Type**	**Course Credit Hours**	**Wellbeing as Main Focus or Component of Course**
Boston University	OTD	2	Component
University of Pittsburgh	OTD	2	Component
University of Chicago	OTD	2	Main Focus
University of Southern California	OTD	3	Main Focus
Colorado State University	OTD	2	Component
Columbia University	MSOT	3	Component
Medical University of South Carolina	OTD	3	Main Focus
Texas Women's University	OTD	3	Main Focus
University of Wisconsin at Madison	OTD	10	Main Focus
Appalachian State University	MSOT	1	Main Focus

Six universities have wellbeing included in the curriculum either as a dedicated course, a significant course component, or as a curriculum thread. The University of

Illinois at Chicago's OTD program offers a course titled, *OT 360: Promoting Wellbeing*, which focuses on promoting wellbeing for students as a means of understanding how to apply wellbeing concepts to themselves and others across various academic, work, and professional roles. Appalachian State University offers a similarly focused course, *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing*, which provides students with an understanding of wellbeing in the context of their roles as students and future practitioners and teaches them how to apply these same constructs to the clients they will serve as future practitioners. The University of Southern California offers an interactive exploration of the Lifestyle Redesign framework, emphasizing the prevention and management of chronic health conditions to promote health and wellness in the course *OT 619: Applying Occupational Science: Lifestyle Redesign.* Medical University of South Carolina offers a course titled *OT 823: Wellness in Action* that focuses on the integration of interpersonal wellness activities into daily routines at the individual and population level as well as offering *OTD 800: Introduction to Occupational Therapy*, which includes a course component offering resources to support students' wellness along their academic journey. Texas Women's University offers *OT 6723: Reflective Practice: Occupational Adaptation and Wellness,* which considers the role of occupation in the promotion of health and wellness and considers lifestyle modifications to support living life to its fullest. The University of Wisconsin–Madison's OTD program offers a comprehensive wellness curriculum thread, present to some degree in all courses, and composed primarily of four courses in their Living Well Series, titled *OT 731: Living Well: Wellness Promotion for Graduate Students, OT 732: Living Well: Designing Occupation-*

Based Wellness Promotion, OT 733: Promoting Health and Wellness for Populations, OT 812: Trends Influencing OT Practice, and *KINES 785: Occupation & Health*.

The University of Pittsburgh's OTD offers three courses. *OT 2200: Foundations of Occupation* examines the role of occupation in health and wellness. *OT 2238: Adaptation / Technology Theory & Practice* considers assistive technology and devices utilized to enhance participation and foster wellbeing. *OT 3211: Advanced Concepts in Health Policy and Advocacy* considers policy issues affecting OT that support health, wellbeing, and societal participation at the micro and macro levels. Colorado State University incorporates wellbeing into its leadership skills and teamwork course titled *OT 760: Leadership Skills of Change Agents*. Columbia University addresses wellbeing in their assistive technology course, *OCCTM 6507: Modification and Assistive Technology,* and in the *OCCTM 6554: Application of the OT Process to Older Adults,* an occupational performance course focused on health promotion and wellness strategies for older adults.

While not overt in their naming, clearly, wellbeing is threaded across curriculum that touch upon wellbeing through the lens of occupation's influence on health, the role of assistive technology in participation and wellbeing, and the impact of policy and advocacy on individual and societal wellbeing.

Several programs address wellbeing in relation to the student/practitioner and clients/others, underscoring the understanding that an OTP's own wellbeing is crucial for effectively supporting the wellbeing of their clients. The Boston University course, *SAR OT 506: Therapeutic Use of Self,* covers coping skills, therapeutic use of self, client support, and the wellbeing of the practitioner. The University of Illinois at Chicago's

course, *OT 360: Promoting Wellbeing* offers students opportunities to gain skills to promote their own self-management and wellbeing, equipping them with the knowledge to apply the same concepts to future clients. Finally, the OTD program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison incorporates a semester-long course on student wellness during graduate school.

The data also reveals a wide range of approaches to wellbeing across programs. Some emphasize self- care and coping (e.g., Appalachian State, Boston University, University of Wisconsin-Madison), while others focus on therapeutic use of self, occupational wellbeing, policy and advocacy, assistive technology, lifestyle modification, or teamwork. Each program frames wellbeing education and its application to future clients differently.

This preliminary review of a limited sample of entry-level OT programs indicates a growing, yet varied, integration of wellbeing concepts into the curriculum. Used to help understand the current landscape of wellbeing education in OT programs, it highlights the different ways in which programs are integrating components of wellbeing into their curriculum, with some programs foregrounding wellbeing as one of their curriculum threads. This information is valuable for understanding how to enhance the current curriculum and provides insight into future directions. However, it is worth noting that this analysis is based on a small and potentially non-representative sample of programs. Further, the analysis relies on course titles and descriptions, which may not fully reflect the depth and breadth of wellbeing content embedded in each course at each university. Finally, while credit hours are provided for some courses, this does not directly translate

to the amount of content explicitly focused on wellbeing within a multi-topic course. Further investigation, including a larger sample size and review of course materials would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how entry-level OT programs are addressing the wellbeing of students, clients, and future practitioners. The development of this line of inquiry could contribute to the establishment of best practices and ensure that graduates are well-equipped to promote wellbeing in their professional lives and the lives of their clients.

Educational Approaches to Teach Wellbeing in OT Programs

Investigating the strategies and approaches educators in OT programs utilize revealed a global representation of research. Articles meeting inclusion criteria span several countries, including Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, Switzerland, Ireland, Canada, and the United States. The articles highlight the stressors inherent in OT education, the impact on student mental health, and potential pedagogical approaches and interventions to promote student wellbeing.

Research highlights how the inherent rigor of OT education amplifies common student stressors, often leading to diminished student wellbeing. A scoping review by Lewis-Kipkulei et al. (2021) examined the interaction between academic demands, coping strategies, and student wellbeing, emphasizing the challenge between maintaining high educational standards and mitigating student stress. Stress manifests differently throughout the educational journey, with the didactic phase often linked to increased cognitive demands, lower physical activity, and poorer moods (Boolani et al., 2018). A cross-sectional study of OT and physical therapy students in Japan found that OT

students experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to the general population (Taniguchi et al., 2024). Similarly, a US-based study of OT, physical therapy, and physician assistant students highlights how academic demands often come at the expense of student wellbeing, with prolonged sitting, frequent examinations, and limited physical activity exacerbating negative moods (Boolani et al., 2018). Additionally, sensory processing differences can influence students' ability to engage socially and maintain overall wellbeing, adding another layer to the challenges they face (Matson et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance of embedding wellbeing education within OT curricula to support student engagement in meaningful occupations that foster resilience and long-term success.

Recognizing these challenges, research points to self-compassion, opportunities for engagement in meaningful occupation, and occupational balance as predictors of student wellbeing (Espiritu et al., 2024). Self-compassion involves treating oneself with understanding and care, even in moments of self-doubt or perceived inadequacy, and it is cultivated through self-kindness, recognizing shared human experiences, and practicing mindfulness (Espiritu et al., 2024). Engagement in meaningful occupations fulfills key occupational needs, including autonomy, competence, and identity, while also providing opportunities for pleasure, renewal, and restoration, all of which contribute to overall wellbeing (AOTA, 2020, as cited in Espiritu et al., 2024). Occupational balance, or maintaining an appropriate variation of activities, further protects against stress and supports students' capacity to meet personal, academic, and professional demands. These predictors provide a foundation for designing educational interventions that not only

mitigate stress but also actively promote student wellbeing.

There are numerous opportunities to integrate health and wellbeing education into OT curricula, equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary for both personal and professional resilience and overall wellbeing. One key area of focus is supportive pedagogy, as adjusting teaching methods to align with student needs can significantly impact student learning and wellbeing. Supportive pedagogy refers to instructional approaches that consider student wellbeing as a central part of the learning process, ensuring that teaching methods do not inadvertently contribute to unnecessary stress (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). Within OT education, three signature pedagogies were identified in the research that enhance student engagement and learning outcomes:

1. **Relational Learning** – which emphasizes strong educator-student connections to foster trust and motivation;
2. **Affective Learning** – which acknowledges the role of emotions in knowledge retention and skill development;
3. **Active Learning** – which encourages student participation through hands-on, experiential activities (Krishnagiri et al., 2019 as cited in Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021).

While these approaches offer meaningful benefits, it is essential to balance their implementation with careful consideration of student workload, as excessive time demands may contribute to stress and limit occupational balance (Brown et al., 2018; Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021). Additionally, therapeutic use of self by the OT educator further enhances the learning environment by emphasizing authenticity, empathy, power

equity, and critical reflexivity. Educational spaces that cultivate collaborative and equitable relationships between students and faculty positively influence both student and educator wellbeing (Lee Bunting et al., 2024).

Interventions that promote engagement in meaningful occupations and self-compassion have demonstrated measurable benefits for OT students. Research suggests that incorporating self-compassion training and reinforcing the value of participation in meaningful activities can significantly improve student wellbeing (Espiritu et al., 2024). Similarly, mindfulness and stress management interventions have been shown to reduce stress among health profession students (Golz et al., 2022). In addition, individualized metacognitive approaches that strengthen cognitive self-confidence, such as resilience training, which equips students with adaptive coping strategies to manage stress, and cognitive restructuring, which helps reframe negative thought patterns into constructive perspectives, can help students manage emotional instability and enhance overall wellbeing (Taniguchi et al., 2024).

Beyond these psychological and occupational interventions, the development of emotional intelligence (EI) is a crucial component of wellbeing education. A trainable skill, EI-focused education integrated into OT curricula may help students develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills that are essential for managing stress and promoting wellbeing (Taylor et al., 2024). Additionally, interventions that teach students about brain development and time management skills have been linked to improvements in wellbeing, self-compassion, and a growth mindset, reinforcing the role of thoughtful educational approaches in supporting student wellbeing (Hunt & Coombes,

2021).

Finally, educating students on sensory modulation approaches provides practical strategies for enhancing self-regulation and coping. By utilizing sensory inputs to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, these interventions support physiological regulation and emotional stability, contributing to overall student wellbeing (Matson et al., 2024). Together, these educational strategies and interventions provide a comprehensive framework for enhancing student occupational wellbeing.

To effectively support student wellbeing in academically rigorous OT programs, educators should integrate targeted interventions that foster self-compassion, engagement in meaningful occupations that facilitate occupational balance, and increase awareness of the benefits of emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and sensory modulation. Training faculty in supportive pedagogy, including therapeutic use of self, awareness of student workload, and promoting time management skills, can enhance learning environments that prioritize student wellbeing. By embedding these principles into OT curricula, educators can cultivate a learning experience that prioritizes both professional competence and personal wellbeing.

Practitioner Strategies to Support Wellbeing

Investigating strategies OTPs utilize to sustain wellbeing in professional practice revealed a recent trend in interest and research globally. Articles meeting inclusion criteria span various countries, including Australia, Canada, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and a variety of contexts, including mental health, eating disorders, general hospital settings, and academia. Additionally, articles focus on work and personal

factors influencing the wellbeing, resilience, and ultimately the retention of OTPs, with key themes including the impact of workplace culture, the role of professional identity as a support or barrier to practitioner wellbeing, work-life balance, and self-care strategies.

Workplace culture and support yielded three subthemes: the impact of neoliberal principles on the workplace, supportive environments, and supervision or mentorship. Neoliberal principles emphasize a free-market economy, promoting competition and consumerism as key drivers of economic growth. This economic model has led to heightened pressures in paid work, characterized by increased workloads, stricter performance expectations, and heightened resource limitations (McChesney, 1999; Clousten, 2019). Clousten (2019) argues that the pressures of performance-led cultures and consumerism, driven by neoliberal economies, lead to occupational imbalance, as paid work requires the greatest use of time and energy, leaving little time for "being" pursuits. Oostlander et al. (2024) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, OTPs described low morale as a result of a lack of support at the hospital, community, and provincial levels. This perceived lack of support further contributed to feelings of stress, anxiety, reduced wellbeing, and potential burnout. Several studies underscore the importance of supportive workplaces in fostering wellbeing and retention. OTPs who receive strong physical, mental, and interpersonal support tend to experience lower burnout and greater resilience, particularly when leadership styles emphasize high leader-member exchange, fostering employee involvement and support (Popova et al., 2022; Scanlon et al., 2013). Additionally, supervision and mentorship play a crucial role in professional socialization and reflective practice, supporting the development of

professional identity and team cohesion (Ashby et al., 2024).

The role of professional identity, a second key theme emerging from the research, revealed a direct impact on OTP wellbeing. In one study of 10 occupational therapists working in eating disorder settings, representing 50% of the workforce in this specialist area in Australia, it was found that practitioners face challenges to their professional identity, contributing to poor work-related wellbeing, particularly when supervision is limited and the evidence base for OT interventions is scarce (Devery et al., 2018). Maintaining an occupational focus and effectively communicating the OT role to colleagues and managers are essential for professional satisfaction and wellbeing (Devery et al., 2018). When OTPs feel unable to enact their professional identity, they may feel that OT is no longer the right career choice, as was found through stories gathered from six Australian OTs who left the field (Turner et al., 2024). Conversely, a strong professional identity serves as a protective factor, buffering against job stress and burnout while promoting resilience and job satisfaction, as was found in a systematic literature search published since 2008 (Yan et al., 2024).

Burnout and stress emerged in the research as significant contributing factors to diminished OTP wellbeing. Burnout is a complex psychological syndrome characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and a diminished sense of effectiveness or accomplishment (Popova et al., 2022). A cross-sectional survey of 235 American OTPs revealed that they often experience high levels of stress, with only moderate resilience and a sense of wellbeing less than half the time (Popova et al., 2022). These challenges were further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among 12 Canadian inpatient

OTPs who faced heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout (Oostlander et al., 2024). Additionally, psychosocial factors contribute to burnout risk, with approximately 15% of a sample of 127 Spanish OTPs from a variety of settings and geographical areas of Spain experiencing burnout symptoms (Juy et al., 2022).

Work-life balance, a third contributor to practitioner wellbeing, is often shaped by perception rather than objective measures. A cross-sectional study of 103 Australian OTPs working in mental health settings in Queensland found that practitioners with flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies enhanced individuals' sense of balance (Scanlan et al., 2013). A study of 12 OTPs working at a tertiary care hospital in Canada who began providing virtual or hybrid services during the pandemic reported improved work-life balance, highlighting the benefits of remote work (Oostlander et al., 2024). Additionally, in a single case study that was part of a wider interpretive phenomenological analysis exploring levels of stress and work-life imbalance experienced by OTPs working in health and social-care settings in Wales, United Kingdom, found that perceived and believed alignment between personal, family, and work-related values plays a crucial role in mitigating work-life imbalance and reducing stress (Clouston, 2019).

A global, cross-sectional survey of 31 WFOT members defined professional resilience as the ability to balance occupational stressors and life challenges while maintaining professional values and career sustainability (Ashby et al., 2024). Strategies that support resilience among experienced OTPs include setting boundaries, negotiating workload, and taking breaks and leave when available (Ashby et al., 2024). Social

support also plays a crucial role, with strong social connections and supportive environments being linked to enhanced wellbeing, as was found in the 2022 study of 235 American OTPs by Popova et al. Additionally, in the single case study "gem" by Clousten (2019), maintaining personal integrity and focusing on meaning in everyday life, rather than solely on performance, can help sustain resilience and overall wellbeing.

Resilience is closely tied to practitioner retention, with job satisfaction, professional identity, and burnout forming a "Retention Ecosystem" that influences long-term career sustainability (Yan et al., 2024). Strengthening leadership development within the profession, along with innovative approaches to meeting funding requirements and upholding OT values, is crucial for retaining practitioners and promoting professional growth (Turner et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Sustaining wellbeing in OT practice requires a multifaceted approach that addresses workplace culture, professional identity, burnout, work-life balance, and resilience. Supportive environments, strong leadership, and access to mentorship help mitigate stress and promote professional fulfillment. A well-defined professional identity strengthens resilience and job satisfaction, while its absence can contribute to attrition. Burnout remains a critical challenge, particularly in high-pressure environments, but strategies such as flexible work arrangements, boundary setting, and social support can enhance wellbeing. Ultimately, fostering a culture that prioritizes practitioner wellbeing, professional growth, and sustainable workloads is essential for retaining a resilient and engaged OT workforce.

CHAPTER FOUR – Description of the Proposed Program

Program Description

The author's proposed program, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing*, is a required one-credit course for all MSOT students at Appalachian State University. Offered in person during the fall semester of the students' first year, the 15-week course is designed to help students explore diverse perspectives on wellbeing, understand the role of occupation in health promotion, and apply strategies to support their own occupational wellbeing throughout graduate school. This course is grounded in the OTPF-4 (AOTA, 2020), which identifies "achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation" as a central tenet of OT practice (p. 5).

The course also emphasizes the importance of therapeutic relationships, integrates trauma-informed care principles, and addresses social justice issues related to health and occupational engagement — all within the context of the OTP's role in promoting occupational wellbeing.

Enrollment in Appalachian State University's MSOT program is capped at 24 students, limited by space within the program's primary classroom. The author serves as the instructor of record for this course.

OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing is organized into three five-week units: student wellbeing, client wellbeing, and practitioner wellbeing. The course is designed to deepen students' understanding of wellbeing components while equipping them with practical tools to support both their own occupational wellbeing and that of their future clients.

Ultimately, it is anticipated that through engagement with the course content, students will enhance their capacity to sustain their wellbeing throughout graduate school and enter clinical practice prepared to foster occupational wellbeing for themselves and the clients they serve.

This chapter provides a detailed description of the course and outlines the evidence base that informed its development.

Basis of the Proposed Program

During the early stages of program development for the MSOT program at Appalachian State University, the Program Director led a Local OTP Curriculum Steering Committee to guide curriculum planning and ensure community relevance. Through this process, OTPs voiced a strong desire for coursework that would proactively support student wellbeing and prepare future practitioners to address wellbeing in client care. In response to this feedback, the course *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing* was included in the curriculum plan. This author fully developed the course, which is now the foundation of the author's doctoral work.

Interventions and Activities that Support Occupational Engagement

This course promotes MSOT student engagement in personally relevant and meaningful occupations that support wellbeing through the development of personal SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goals that address their comprehensive wellbeing needs. Developed in their first semester of graduate school and continued throughout their matriculation in the program, the student-developed SMART goals are utilized during each of their academic advising sessions,

providing accountability and touchpoints that occur at least once per semester for the duration of the program. The course also addresses occupational justice as students are encouraged to consider their own barriers to engagement in occupations contributing to wellbeing, translating to future identification of barriers to wellbeing for the clients they will serve as OTPs.

Wellbeing Theoretical Frameworks to Inform Curriculum Development

Two theories contributed to the foundational development of this course: the PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) Model (Seligman, 2018) and the OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018).

PERMA Model

The field of Positive Psychology has undergone a remarkable level of revision in the short time since it was introduced at the Presidential Address at the American Psychological Association in 1998 (Seligman, 1998). It remains a broad field of investigation into the human experience. Seligman (2018) introduced the PERMA Model of Wellbeing as a framework for understanding the many facets of wellbeing, including **P**ositive emotion, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, and **A**ccomplishment. Positive emotion, a primary indicator of flourishing, includes emotions such as hope, joy, love, compassion, and gratitude, and can be cultivated to improve wellbeing (Fredrickson, 2001). Engagement is similar to the concept of flow and refers to complete absorption in the task at hand. Relationships encompass all the interactions a person has, from family to community, and the feelings of love, support, and value that others offer. Meaning is derived from feeling that one is serving something greater than oneself and provides a

focus on what is important in the face of challenges. Finally, accomplishment results from working towards goals and developing a sense of mastery.

The OT Wellbeing Framework

The OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018) provides a more nuanced, occupation-based perspective on components of wellbeing including autonomy (having control and choice), belonging (feeling connected and valued), competence (feeling capable and effective), contentment and pleasure (experiencing satisfaction and enjoyment), identity (maintaining a coherent sense of self), and hope (maintaining optimism for the future), offering a structured foundation for promoting student wellbeing.

Together, these two theories provide the theoretical foundation students use to develop a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing for themselves and for the future clients they will serve, in alignment with the OTPF-4 (AOTA, 2020).

Educational Theories to Inform Teaching and Learning Approaches

Two theoretical frameworks, described below, informed the development of this program.

Positive Psychology

When considering how to educate students to understand their own and their clients' wellbeing, the author turned to Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) to frame an understanding of the nature of change combined with a strengths-based approach. This framework allowed the author to maintain occupation as the True North throughout the course development, a core concept and

language found in the foundational documents of App State's MSOT program.

Nature of Change. The nature of change in the theory of positive psychology is primarily qualitative in that there are changes in the "nature" of the experience. Specifically, the theory of positive psychology, at its most basic level, seeks to identify and nurture an individual's strongest qualities by recognizing their areas of excellence and helping them find their niche, enabling them to fully develop their strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Whether examining an individual, the community, or how society influences changes in the 'nature' of the experience, changes in one aspect impact the overall function of the organism.

Interestingly, within the theory of positive psychology, quantitative change can also impact the system. Specifically, certain aspects of the theory involve increasing the amount of focus and attention given to character strengths, increasing the amount of time spent focusing on positive. The reverse could also be true, increasing the amount of time spent focusing on the negative. Thus, change could occur when an individual or community attends to the very best qualities or leans into their worst traits, either having a quantitative change on the system.

View of the Person. Within the theory of positive psychology, the nature of the person is understood to be both organismic and contextualistic. At the foundation of the theory and from its inception, the theory focused on the organismic nature of the person in that it understood the human to be an active system, capable of change, and that by focusing on personal strengths one can build resilience, optimism, and flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As the theory has evolved over the last 20-plus

years, it has incorporated contextualist perspectives, acknowledging that external factors, such as social, cultural, and environmental contexts exert influence over human behavior and that these important factors cannot be separated from the human experience (Lopez, 2014; Rashid, 2015). Both the organismic and contextualist perspectives combine to help create a comprehensive view of the nature of human flourishing.

By introducing key concepts related to occupational wellbeing, trauma-informed care, therapeutic use of self, and the social contexts of health early on, the course aims to shape students' understanding of OT as inherently connected to holistic, person-centered, and justice-informed practice.

Constructivism

Constructivism (Bruner, 1966) emerged as a "right fit" for understanding the best educational approach for this course. Rooted in active, student-centered learning, students build on existing knowledge to construct new understandings of their world through experience and reflection (Kritt & Budwig, 2022; Olusegun, 2015), a natural fit for the structure of this course. The student wellbeing SMART goal assignment spans multiple semesters, as it is used during academic advising. This assignment fits well within the Constructivist Theory, as its primary constructs include active construction of knowledge through experience and reflection, active participation of the learner in knowledge-making, understanding pre-existing knowledge as an influencer of the construction of new knowledge, and teacher as facilitator or guide (Bruner, 1966; Kritt & Budwig, 2022; Olusegun, 2015). Thus, through active engagement with the content in the course, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing*, students actively construct their knowledge of

how to maintain and sustain their own wellbeing during graduate school, while also applying these same concepts and skills to the clients they serve while on Level I and Level II Fieldwork, equipping them to continue to cultivate their own and their clients' wellbeing after graduation.

Course Aims and Objectives

The author intends to address the challenges faced by MSOT students in managing their own occupational wellbeing — while preparing to support the occupational wellbeing of others — by providing foundational education and structured opportunities for reflection and skill-building. Through *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing*, students will deepen their understanding of wellbeing concepts and apply evidence-informed strategies to sustain their occupational engagement. Ultimately, the course aims to cultivate habits of occupational wellbeing that reduce the risk of burnout and foster resilience — during graduate training, as students transition into fieldwork, and as students transition into clinical roles.

Course Participants

All MSOT students at Appalachian State University are enrolled in the course *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing*, during their first semester as part of the program's required curriculum. The program operates on a cohort model in which all students take courses together and progress through the program as a group. As such, no recruitment or screening procedures are required: enrollment in the course is automatic for all incoming students. Figure 4.1 provides a case vignette of a student in the MSOT program at Appalachian State University, and how she may benefit from the course, *OT*

5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing.

Figure 4.1

Vignette.

Olivia is an OT student in her first semester of the MSOT program. She reports never struggling with academic success or wellbeing prior to graduate school. In the second week of the fall semester, Olivia, began experiencing mounting stress from adjusting to the academic demands of graduate school. Though she is passionate about the field, she found herself struggling with time management and self-doubt. She was consistently late with all of her assignments, the frequency of which worsened as the semester wore on, and she reported that it had a significant impact on her mental health and overall wellbeing. She was unsure how to address this challenge or how to get "back on track". For Olivia, who is struggling to manage the demands of graduate school, engaging with wellbeing-focused content may offer her valuable language and tools to support her wellbeing both during her studies and in her future endeavors. During the course, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing*, Olivia participated in a class discussion on occupational balance and the impact of stress on performance. She was encouraged to reflect on her own habits and create a SMART goal related to her wellbeing. Over the next few weeks, Olivia set and tracked goals to spend time each day working on assignments followed by a 30-minute hiking routine — a meaningful occupation that supports a sense of identity and calm and promotes occupational balance — as a daily reward for her work. Her advisor checks in with her progress during scheduled advising sessions, reinforcing the importance of intentional strategies for sustaining wellbeing.

Teaching Faculty

The course was developed and facilitated by the author, who serves as the sole instructor of record. Although the opportunity to design this course was initially unanticipated, it aligned seamlessly with the author's longstanding personal and professional interest in wellbeing. For over 15 years, the author has explored wellbeing through multiple lenses — including philosophy, holistic health, integrative medicine, yoga, meditation, mindfulness, natural horsemanship, horseback riding, and building a community of friends and mentors. This diverse foundation has informed the

development of the course and shaped the author's scholarly trajectory, making the *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing* course a natural focus for this doctoral work. The opportunity to pursue this topic with autonomy and depth was a key factor in selecting the Boston University post-professional OTD program.

Setting and Resources

OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing is held weekly each fall semester in a flexible, well-appointed classroom space on the Appalachian State University campus, in the Beaver College of Health Sciences, a new building constructed within the last 10 years. The primary classroom lab includes tables, chairs, internet access, audiovisual equipment, and movable furniture to support reflective floor-based activities and collaborative group discussions. The course is supported by the existing university infrastructure and funded by the standard curriculum and faculty salary model. With a growing number of applicants and a fixed cohort size (currently capped at 24 students due to space limitations within the program's main teaching space), the program presently maintains a competitive 28% acceptance rate, ensuring sustainability of the course offering for future cohorts. All course content and requirements are shared via a Universal Design for Learning (UDL)-aligned syllabus, developed during the author's tenure in Boston University's post-professional OTD program while enrolled in the *SAROT 0911: Practicum in Social Policy and Disability* course. The UDL syllabus, now adopted across all courses in the MSOT program, further supports accessibility and overall student wellbeing.

Interventions and Activities

OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing meets once weekly for 15 weeks in the fall semester, with each session lasting one hour. The course is delivered through a dynamic combination of short lectures, group discussions, peer teaching, reflective writing, assigned readings, case-based learning, and experiential activities such as mindfulness, meditation, and movement. This multimodal approach supports a wide range of learning styles and encourages active student engagement.

The course encourages students to explore evidence-based components of wellbeing through multiple theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Participants engage in self-reflection and structured activities, such as SMART goal development, to identify the wellbeing strategies that work best for their individual needs. This work continues throughout the program through twice-per-semester academic advising sessions in which students revisit and refine their goals. Broader beneficiaries of the program include future clients, fieldwork educators, and employers, as students carry forward their understanding of wellbeing into clinical practice, with a focus on occupational balance, trauma-informed care, and occupational justice.

The course is organized into three thematic units, each spanning five weeks:

- **Weeks 1–5** focus on *student wellbeing*, introducing foundational concepts from OT, positive psychology, and trauma-informed care, with an emphasis on self-reflection and the development of SMART goals.
- **Weeks 6–10** shift to *client wellbeing*, where students examine occupational justice, social determinants of health, and the therapeutic use of self.

- **Weeks 11–15** explore *practitioner wellbeing*, encouraging students to integrate their knowledge and consider sustainable strategies for maintaining their own wellbeing in clinical practice. The intentional sequencing guides students from personal insight to client application, and ultimately to professional identity formation.

While the course content continues to evolve based on emerging literature and student needs, Table 4.1 provides a general overview of the thematic organization and focus areas by unit.

Table 4.1

Overview of Course Content

Unit	Weeks	Theme	General Focus
Student Wellbeing	1–5	Foundations of wellbeing: SMART goals, self-reflection	Positive Psychology, trauma-informed care, occupational balance and engagement
Client Wellbeing	6–10	Social determinants, therapeutic use of self	Occupational justice, client interview, Intentional Relationship Model (Taylor, 2020)
Practitioner Wellbeing	11–15	Professional sustainability	Burnout prevention, work-life integration, systems of support

Throughout the semester, students engage in several structured learning activities that are graded to reinforce and apply course content. Early in the semester, a collaborative jigsaw activity introduces the OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018). Each student group investigates a single component of the framework and presents their findings to the class, collectively building a shared foundation for future coursework. Later, students complete an applied assignment in which they interview a

"client" and explore how core course concepts — such as trauma-informed care, occupational justice, and the intentional relationship model — might be applied to support that client's wellbeing. Students synthesize this experience through a written reflection that bridges theory and imagined practice. The final assignment utilizes the jigsaw content from assignment one, centered on the OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018), to develop personally meaningful SMART goals that support wellbeing during graduate school. Combined, these deliverables demonstrate learning objectives from all three units, culminating in the SMART goal assignment used for academic advising for the remainder of the semester.

A range of supportive materials is used throughout the course to enhance student learning. These include a UDL-aligned syllabus, weekly slide presentations, and printed or digital handouts related to key concepts such as SMART goal setting, the Intentional Relationship Model (IRM) (Taylor, 2020), and the OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018). Assigned readings and case studies allow students to apply theoretical concepts in practical scenarios. Visual models and diagrams help students conceptualize the multidimensional nature of occupational wellbeing. Reflective writing is supported through structured prompts that guide students in connecting course content to their lived experiences. Materials are made accessible via the university's learning management system and shared document platforms.

The course is facilitated by the author, who also serves as the sole developer and instructor of record. Instructional activities are grounded in theoretical frameworks including the PERMA Model (Seligman, 2018), the OT Wellbeing Framework

(Saraswati et al., 2018), and Constructivism (Bruner, 1966), all of which support the course's emphasis on self-awareness, goal-setting, and sustained engagement in meaningful occupations. Prior to launching the course in Fall 2024, the author participated in a formal Course (Re)Design process with the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for Student Success (CETLSS) at Appalachian State University. This collaborative experience was deeply impactful, resulting in a more robust, accessible, and meaningful course design for students. Through this structure, the course aims to cultivate both knowledge and practical skills that students can apply in future clinical practice and throughout their lifelong professional development.

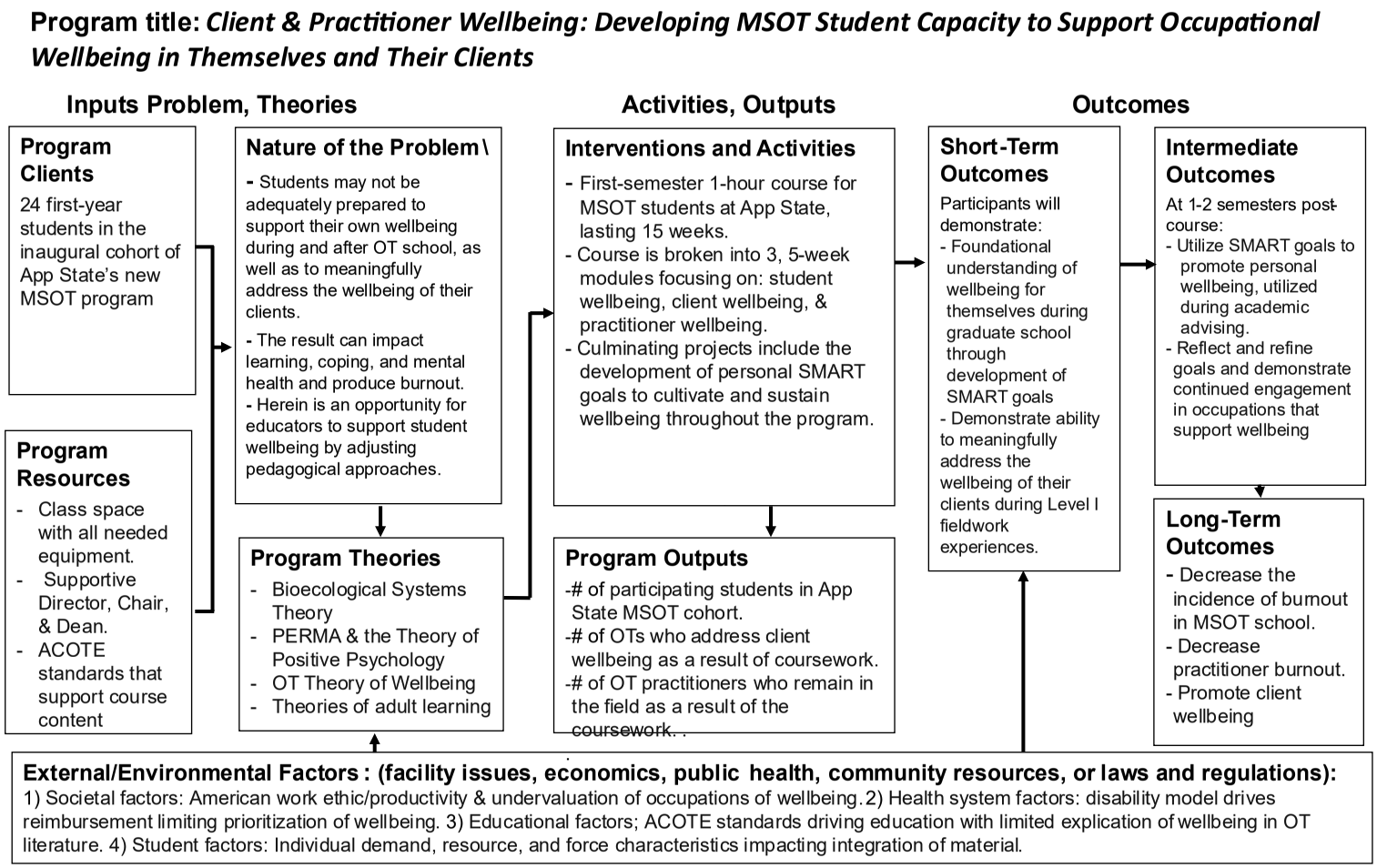
Logic Model

The Logic Model presented in Figure 4.2 is a visual representation that illustrates how the author's proposed program — *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing* — is designed to function. It serves as a conceptual map and model of change, outlining the relationship between identified problems, program inputs, key activities, and anticipated short- and long-term outcomes. While theoretical underpinnings such as the PERMA model (Seligman, 2018), the OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018), and Constructivism (Bruner, 1966) are discussed more fully in the accompanying narrative, the model itself highlights key elements, such as reflective goal setting and occupation-based engagement, that are grounded in those frameworks. By visually depicting how the program components work together to promote student, client, and practitioner wellbeing, the model provides a blueprint to guide program implementation, evaluation efforts, and ongoing reflection on course effectiveness and alignment with professional

values.

Figure 4.2

Logic Model



Program Outputs and Outcomes

The *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing* course yields several tangible outputs as direct products of its interventions and activities. Up to 24 MSOT students participate in the course each fall as part of a cohort model. The course consists of 15 one-hour weekly sessions, supported by a range of educational materials, including weekly slide decks, online access to all readings, and a student-curated playlist designed to support wellbeing and develop community. All materials are distributed through the university's learning management system. Anticipated program outputs include students who are prepared to care for their own wellbeing in the short and long-term as well as future OTPs who are equipped to address their clients' occupational wellbeing while ensuring they attend to their own occupational wellbeing.

The desired outcomes of the course are organized into short-term, intermediate and long-term categories. Short-term outcomes, defined as those expected by the end of the course, include students developing a foundational understanding of student wellbeing during graduate school. Students are also likely to consider how to understand and meaningfully address the wellbeing of their clients during their fieldwork experiences.

The intermediate outcomes, defined as those expected one to two semesters post-course, include the continued use of personal SMART goals to sustain occupational wellbeing, which are embedded in their academic advising meetings as a touchpoint to encourage continued reflection and refinement of goals, and to demonstrate continued engagement with the occupational wellbeing concepts introduced in the course.

Long-term outcomes, anticipated three or more semesters post-course, include a measurable decrease in student stress while on Level II fieldwork compared to national averages. Extended horizon potential outcomes include reduced burnout and field exiting within five years post-graduation compared to national averages.

Program Outreach Plan

As part of the program's outreach strategy, the author intends to share the course structure, student outcomes, and ongoing research through multiple academic channels. Plans include presenting at the AOTA Education Summit in Fall 2025 and disseminating aspects of the dissertation through scholarly writing and peer-reviewed publications. The author also envisions developing a cohesive and sustainable line of research grounded in occupational wellbeing, with branches that explore the wellbeing of students, clients, and practitioners. In addition to contributing to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), this work will serve to fill critical gaps in the OT literature while offering practical, evidence-informed strategies to support wellbeing across educational and clinical settings.

Stakeholder Overview

Key stakeholders who might benefit from and contribute to the development and continued refinement of the course *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing* exists at the micro, meso, and macro levels. At the micro level, individual MSOT students are both the primary participants and beneficiaries of the course, gaining knowledge and tools to support their personal and professional wellbeing. Several students have also expressed interest in deeper engagement with the content and are willing to participate in

research-related activities such as focus groups.

At the meso level, program faculty and fieldwork educators benefit as students develop self-awareness and professional habits that may reduce academic strain and enhance readiness for clinical education. Additionally, the MSOT Program Director — who brings content expertise in program evaluation — and the Director of the university's CETLSS, whose work focuses on faculty development and student success, are key stakeholders who have contributed to course development and refinement.

At the macro level, MSOT students will one day become practitioners who foreground occupational wellbeing when participating in the therapeutic process with the clients they serve, thereby supporting society as a whole. Additionally, the author hopes to engage in collaboration with international OT scholars whose research aligns with the author's and the program's goals, allowing for the long-range development of wellbeing research.

Together, these stakeholders inform and strengthen the course through ongoing evaluation, evidence-based refinement, and alignment with the evolving needs of OT education.

Anticipated Barriers and Challenges

One primary challenge associated with the course, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing,* is the limitation on instructional time within the broader graduate curriculum. Although students have repeatedly expressed that the course is not long enough to explore and apply the content fully, the program is already at the maximum allowable number of credit hours for an OT graduate degree, a constraint influenced by a

combination of policies ranging from the Department of Education to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), our regional accrediting body, to institutional policies and guidelines. As a result, expanding the course requires careful consideration of the existing schedule and credit distribution across the curriculum. The program is currently exploring ways to reconfigure existing coursework to allocate additional contact hours to the wellbeing content. However, any proposed changes would need to proceed through the university's Graduate Academic Policies and Procedures (GAP&P) approval process, which requires additional time and administrative coordination. Thus, changes in the length, frequency, or credit load of the course take, at minimum, 12 months to complete, limiting the immediate change that would benefit incoming cohorts of MSOT students.

Program Resources

The course is a required course in Appalachian State University's MSOT program, thus, the course and the faculty's salary have secure funding. With no ability to increase class size due to space constraints and a growing number of applicants year over year, supporting a 28% acceptance rate, the program is well-positioned to support this course for some time. Appalachian State University has well-appointed classroom space with seating, tables, internet access, and movable furniture to modify the space for time on the floor for active investigation of occupations that support wellbeing, or configured to support round-table discussions.

Examples

Appendix A and *Appendix B* present two examples from the course *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing*. The first example provides a detailed description of one class session, including a slide deck and activities. The second example provides an overview of one of the course assignments requiring students to develop SMART goals to maintain and sustain their occupational wellbeing during graduate school. The goals are then shared with their Academic Advisor and are used throughout the program as modifiable touchpoints to promote student wellbeing throughout the program.

Summary and Conclusions

OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing is a required course, situated in the first semester of Appalachian State University's MSOT program and lasting 15 weeks. Through reading, class discussions, reflection, experiential learning, and the use of a flipped-classroom model, students are guided through a three-unit course that equips them with knowledge on how to maintain and sustain their occupational wellbeing as students, for their clients, and for themselves as future OTPs. Three major graded assignments are spread across the semester. The anchor assignment for the course, the development of personal SMART goals to maintain wellbeing throughout the students' time in the program, is utilized during academic advising as a touchpoint, providing accountability for students and equipping them with tangible skills to address their own and their future clients' wellbeing.

In planning for this course and considering how students might change as a result of their interaction with the content of the course *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner*

Wellbeing, the theory of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and more specifically, the PERMA Model (Seligman, 2018) coupled with the OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018) emerged as appropriate models for understanding the many facets of wellbeing within the course. The PERMA model's wellbeing components, coupled with a strengths-based perspective that emphasizes individual traits, unique to the individual to promote adaptation, optimal human functioning, and thriving, was a natural fit for this course (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 1998; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The OT Wellbeing Framework provides a more nuanced, occupation-based approach to understanding and framing wellbeing into six components: autonomy, belonging, competence, contentment and pleasure, identity, and hope. This framework offers a structured foundation for promoting student occupation-based wellbeing.

To complement the PERMA Model and the OT Wellbeing Framework, Constructivism (Bruner, 1966) was selected to guide the author in supporting student-centered learning, providing an educational theory as an overarching framework to enhance the author's understanding and thinking about course design and development. Constructivism was selected because of its focus on student-centered knowledge construction through experience and reflection, with the teacher serving as a guide or facilitator.

Through the intentional integration of the OT Wellbeing Framework, Positive Psychology, and Constructivist learning principles, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing* offers students not only the opportunity to gain knowledge but to actively

engage in the process of becoming reflective, resilient OTPs. By rooting the course in strengths-based frameworks, emphasizing the interaction between person and environment, and grounding wellbeing in occupation, this course addresses the need for students to develop sustainable strategies to support their wellbeing, equipping them with both the mindset and the tools to cultivate wellbeing throughout their professional journey for themselves and for those they serve.

CHAPTER FIVE – Program Evaluation Research Plan

Program Overview and Stakeholders

OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing is a semester-long one-credit hour course that meets weekly in person. Focused on building the capacity for MSOT Students to support themselves and their clients, it is unique to the Appalachian State University's MSOT program. Participants are students enrolled in MSOT program at Appalachian State University, which is currently underway and is therefore in the pilot study phase. This course is a required course in the fall of the first semester of the program. The author is the developer and instructor of record for this course.

The course aims to enable students to understand diverse perspectives on wellbeing, explore the role of occupation in health promotion, and apply strategies that promote personal wellbeing during graduate school while equipping them with the mindset and the tools to cultivate wellbeing throughout their professional journey and gives them the knowledge to address wellbeing with future clients.

This chapter outlines the plan for evaluating the course using research methods. Key stakeholders who would be interested in research findings include all students in the MSOT program, students who have expressed interest in a deeper understanding of the content and participating in research methodology, researchers focused on the role of occupation and wellbeing, the MSOT Program Director, and the CETLSS Director.

Vision for the Program Evaluation Research

Short-term Vision Regarding Projected Findings of Program Evaluation Research

Anticipated short-term outcomes from programmatic evaluation of the course include three primary areas. First, evaluation may help determine if the content impacted students' foundational understanding of the importance of cultivating personal wellbeing during graduate school. Second, program evaluation of the course may help determine if students feel equipped to meaningfully address the wellbeing of their clients, regardless of practice setting in Level I and II fieldwork experiences. Finally, the course evaluation will assess whether students have gained a foundational understanding of wellbeing concepts that are personally meaningful and conducive to sustaining their own wellbeing as they transition into their Level I and Level II fieldwork experiences. This feedback will help refine future iterations of course content and learning outcomes.

Long-term Vision Regarding Projected Findings of Program Evaluation Research

Long-term outcomes may contribute to the knowledge base and inform prevention efforts in three key areas. First, student exposure to this content may decrease the incidence of stress and anxiety among students during the MSOT program. Second, exposure to this content may help students, who will become future OTPs, promote the wellbeing of the clients they serve. Third, exposure to this content may reduce field exit at the five-year mark for App State MSOT program graduates compared to national averages. This may contribute to future research lines that could further expand the knowledge base around student, client, and practitioner wellbeing, and may help develop a formal, occupation-based screening and evaluation of wellbeing.

Engagement of Stakeholders in the Program and Evaluation Research

There are several key stakeholders in this program evaluation research:

1. **MSOT students**. Student participation in the course evaluation is critical to its success.
2. **MSOT student focus group.** Several students have expressed interest in content research outside of class and are willing to serve as focus group participants.
3. **MSOT Program Director.** As this course is a core aspect of the MSOT program at Appalachian State University, the program director is interested in the success of the course. Additionally, the program director has content expertise in program evaluation and has expressed willingness to participate as a key stakeholder.
4. **Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for Student Success (CETLSS).** An education specialist from CETLSS has been invited to participate as a key stakeholder given her expertise in student education and faculty development. Specifically, the education specialist will be able to inform the author about teaching strategies that foster student success and constructing a classroom environment that invites student engagement and a supportive learning-community. This will be integral to the objective of supporting students' wellbeing in the occupation of being graduate students.
5. **OT researchers.** The author anticipates connecting with OT researchers from Canada, Australia, and Europe who are doing research in the realm of wellbeing, who will help with long-range planning and development of research lines around wellbeing. Additionally, the author intends to connect with U.S.-based

universities who foreground wellbeing in their curriculum, to continue to refine the course and create connections that may lead to collaborative research and dissemination; and collaborate with OT scholars whose research aligns with the author's and the program's goals who can then collaborate on long-range development of wellbeing research.

Stakeholder Engagement Strategies

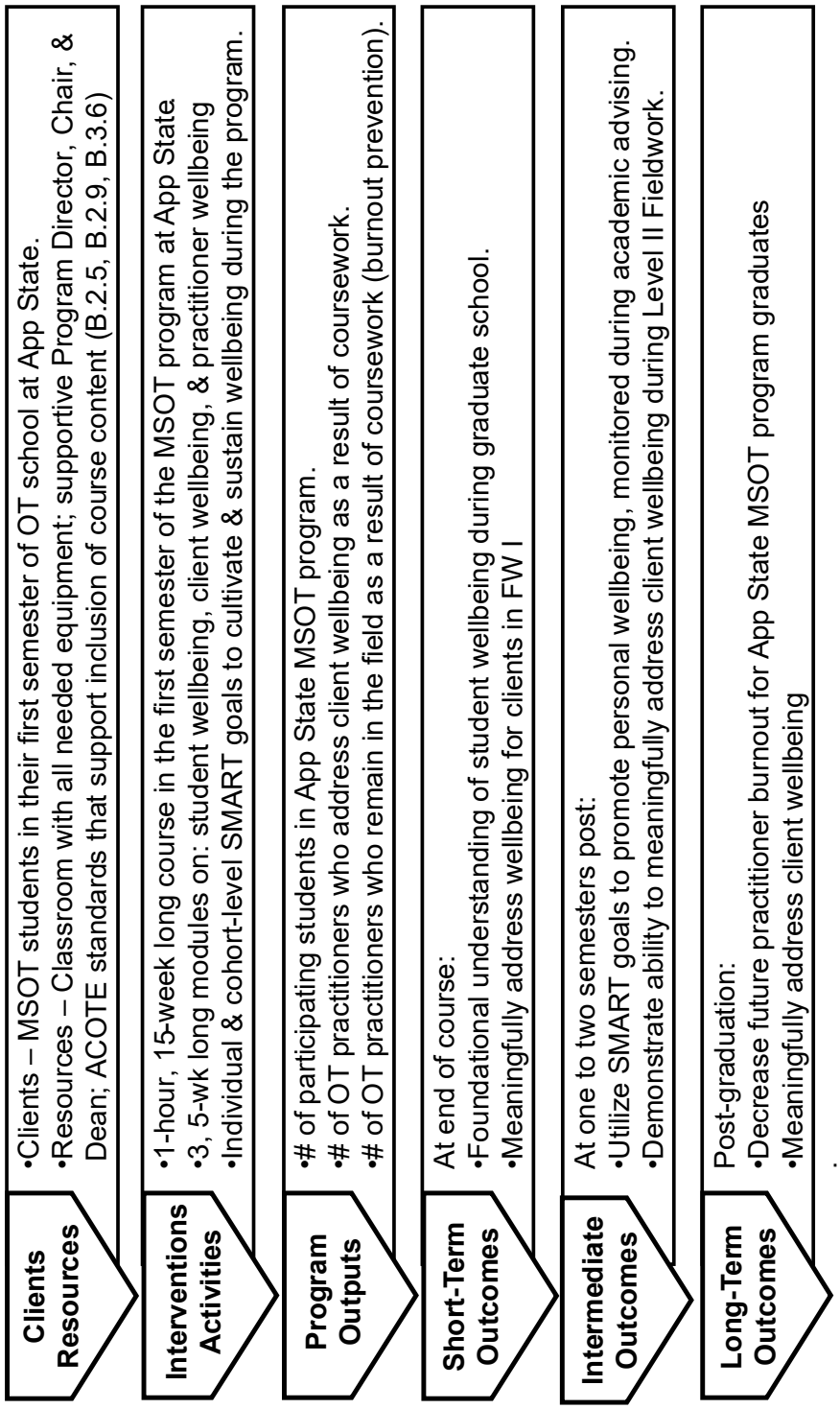
Student engagement can be accomplished through the integration of evaluation of course content into class time. Student focus groups can be fostered through intentional scheduling during class breaks during the day, while students are already on campus. Engagement with the MSOT Program Director and the Director of CETLSS can be accomplished through intentional scheduling and coordination of calendars during the workday, coupled with an openness to meet via Zoom to enable maximal participation while minimizing impact on valuable time. Both are knowledgeable about the course content and have already played integral roles in content refinement prior to the initiation of the inaugural course in Fall 2024. Connections with thought leaders at other institutions in the U.S., Australia, Canada, and Europe will require more focused efforts, tightly coordinated meeting agendas, and planning to account for differing time zones.

Simplified Logic Model for Use with Stakeholders

Figure 5.1 presents an overview of the proposed program designed to develop MSOT students' ability to support their own wellbeing and how to address the wellbeing of their future clients. By identifying student needs, educators can adjust pedagogical approaches to promote learning and student mental health through a preventative lens.

Figure 5.1

Simplified Logic Model of the Proposed Program and Evaluation



Program Evaluation Research Questions

Research Questions

The research questions presented in Chapter 2 used to investigate the problem were also used to frame the evaluation:

1. How is wellbeing defined in the OT literature?
2. Do OT students feel prepared to care for their own wellbeing?
3. How do intrinsic characteristics — such as demand, resource, and personal drive — of an OT student affect their overall wellbeing?

These three questions guided the development of the course as well the development of the formative and summative questions used to assess the impact of the course on students' understanding and application of wellbeing concepts.

More detailed questions related to student evaluation of the course, listed as either formative or summative, are presented in Table 5.1. These questions will help answer the above overarching research questions. Using a backward curriculum design approach, the summative questions, coupled with the outcome objectives, helped drive the development of the formative questions.

Table 5.1

Formative and Summative Questions

Formative **Focus Group**	**Summative** **Beginning/ending self-rating questions using a 1–10 Numerical Rating Scale**
Is the course content sufficient for MSOT students to understand wellbeing in the context of occupational therapy?	Did participants achieve increased knowledge to understand wellbeing?
Do students feel adequately prepared to understand and address their own wellbeing?	Did participants achieve increased knowledge to understand the role of wellbeing in OT?
Do students feel adequately prepared to understand and address their client's wellbeing while on Level I and Level II Fieldwork?	Did participants learn how to address their own wellbeing?
Is the course delivery methodology engaging?	Did participants learn how to address their client's wellbeing while on Level I Fieldwork?
Would students benefit from additional course content around wellbeing?	Did participants learn how to address their client's wellbeing while on Level II Fieldwork?
If students are interested in additional course content, would students prefer adding courses in subsequent semesters, or "push-in" style instruction with wellbeing content embedded in other relevant coursework?	
Would students prefer this content to be delivered on a different day/time? If so, why and which days/times are preferred?	
How have students incorporated wellbeing content into their day-to-day lives?	

Research Design

Formative Design

A focus group will be created that includes first-year, first-semester MSOT students who have expressed interest in participating in research related to wellbeing, and are willing to provide valuable insights that will inform the formative evaluation. Identified participants include students in their first semester of Appalachian State University's MSOT program who have expressed interest in participating in a Wellbeing Course Design Focus Group. The focus group will have a minimum of five participants and no more than eight participants to optimize participation to generate rich, diverse discussion, allowing all participants to share their perspectives. The focus group will meet in person three times over the course of the semester (weeks 3, 9, and 14 of a 15-week semester), during open meeting times while students are on campus. Focus groups will be guided through group discussions of the conceptual underpinnings of the wellbeing course using the summative questions listed in Table 5.1 as a framework. The focus group will participate in semi-structured interviews that will be videotaped, and transcribed using Sonix, an AI-powered transcription service that provides text output from video that can be edited. Transcriptions will be thematically evaluated using NVivo**.**

Summative Design

Because this program is in Phase 2 of program implementation, preliminary testing of the finalized project will be conducted on the cohort to develop an understanding of the course content's impact on the target population: first-year MSOT students. Data will be gathered using a non-experimental, single-group pre-post-

intervention design in a single cohort: the first cohort of the MSOT program. Identified participants include all students in their first semester of Appalachian State University's MSOT program, with a cohort cap of 24 students. Data will be gathered at weeks 1 and 15 during class time using online questions in a 1–10 Numerical Rating Scale (NRS) via Google Forms. Additionally, the survey will feature open-ended responses to elicit suggestions for improving the course content and delivery for future iterations, as well as to identify any perceived benefits of the course. Responses will be gathered, ensuring student anonymity by disabling the "collect email address" feature on the Google Forms platform. Students will be clearly informed that their responses are anonymous, both verbally and in the instructions at the start of the NRS questionnaire. Dependent variables include the students' conceptual understanding of wellbeing, their understanding of wellbeing in the context of OT, their ability to apply occupation-based wellbeing concepts to themselves, and their ability to apply occupation-based wellbeing concepts to their clients during fieldwork.

As we matriculate additional students through the program, it may become feasible to conduct comparison-group designs for summative research purposes. Additionally, implementing a mixed methods design after multiple cohorts have completed the program would be valuable, as it could help identify potential shortcomings in the course design.

Methods

IRB Approval, Consent, Confidentiality, and Data Protection

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is not required for this evaluation, as students are already participating in the course, and evaluative processes will be included as a part of the course evaluation process. Appalachian State University's IRB will be contacted to ensure that this study is exempt according to their institutional rules. Consent will be requested via Google Forms and will be kept confidential in our Exxat Platform. Confidentiality will be maintained by designating participant numbers, if necessary, instead of collecting participant names on response forms. Appalachian State University firewalls will provide data protection, and all data will be maintained on university-secured drives.

Formative Methods

This project will employ focus group sessions with student stakeholders who have expressed interest in the content. The student stakeholder focus groups will be conducted in person to enable video and audio recording of the sessions for future transcription using Sonix, an AI-powered transcription service that provides text output from video. Transcriptions will be thematically evaluated using NVivo**.** To enhance accuracy, triangulation, cross-checking, and member checking with administrative stakeholders will be implemented, allowing responses to be funneled anonymously for analysis.

Formative Data Management and Analysis. Transcripts will be completed via Sonix and NVivo will be used for coding transcripts to identify recurring themes. All data

will be stored on university-secured computer systems to protect data integrity and participant anonymity.

Qualitative data analysis can be completed by analyzing themes in the answers. Data analysis can be completed via Qualtrics, with the assistance of Appalachian State University's Office of Research and Innovation, which provides consultation on study design, data management, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. Themes from focus group transcripts, generated from Google transcripts, will be identified using NVivo. This is a free service, available to all faculty at Appalachian State University.

Summative Methods

Fidelity of the independent variable (program delivery) will be ensured by delivering the course during the first semester of each cohort. As the instructor of record, adherence to the curriculum plan is certain. Dosage, frequency, and duration are standardized unless our program evaluation results show a need for modification. Continuous quality improvement will be sustained through ongoing engagement with the Course (Re)Design Institute and its associated Teaching Quality Framework methodologies.

Measurement Approaches for Dependent Variables. This project will employ surveys of the entire cohort and focus group sessions with the student stakeholders who have expressed interest in the content. The surveys will be completed anonymously online. The online survey will be a combination of a Likert scale-style survey and open-ended questions and will be analyzed using Qualtrics. The student stakeholder focus groups will be conducted via Zoom to enable video and audio recording of the sessions

for future coding using NVivo.

Summative Data Management and Analysis. Although this study employs a descriptive design, the author anticipates collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to capture participants' experiences and to measure impact. Students will complete anonymous questionnaires to gather qualitative insights and use numeric rating scales to assess their understanding and perceived ability to apply key course concepts. Data collection will occur via secure computer-based methods to ensure anonymity and the integrity of responses. All student data will be deidentified and stored securely on university-maintained drives, accessible only to the author. Thematic analysis will be conducted using NVivo software for coding and theme identification. To enhance accuracy, triangulation, cross-checking, and member checking with administrative stakeholders will be implemented, allowing responses to be funneled anonymously for analysis.

Descriptive statistics will be used to quantify the basic features of the study, including participants and measured variables, as well as to calculate the magnitude of change in dependent variables from pre- to post-course completion. Further, descriptive statistics could be used to determine the correlation between measured dependent variables while participants are enrolled in the course.

Because the measurements are from the same group of students at various time points and the data are therefore paired, a paired, or dependent, t-test would be the most appropriate statistical test to determine if there is a significant change in student wellbeing before and after the course. Appalachian State University provides free faculty

access to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), which will be utilized to analyze quantitative pre- and post-test data. Additionally, the author has access to enrollment in a three-hour semester-long course in "Quantitative Data Analysis for Education Leaders". The course is available, free of charge, to Appalachian State University faculty and provides education in and practice with fundamental descriptive and inferential analysis of quantitative data using linear regression analyses, t-tests, and analysis of variance (ANOVA). Engagement with course content would provide improved insight into best practices relative to quantitative data analysis.

Inferential statistical analyses will be conducted to assess the likelihood that the findings observed in the study sample are representative of the larger population. Specifically, t-test methodology will be employed to evaluate whether significant differences exist across the semester, thereby supporting the conclusion that the observed results are unlikely to have occurred by random chance. Significant findings could substantiate wider application to MSOT students in other programs.

Disseminating Findings of the Program Evaluation

A scholarly paper that communicates the results of the program evaluation would be an ideal way to disseminate information. Submitting the paper to OT-specific peer-reviewed journals, such as AJOT or JOTE, will ensure the findings reach an academic audience and contribute to the broader knowledge base. Additionally, the primary researcher plans to present the results at both state and national conferences, such as the North Carolina Occupational Therapy Association (NCOTA) annual conference, the AOTA Inspire Conference, and the AOTA Education Summit, allowing for engagement

with practitioners, educators, and policymakers. These platforms will provide opportunities for discussion, feedback, and potential implementation of the findings to improve practice and educational approaches.

For educators, a clear and straightforward approach, often referred to as the "mom test" — to present the findings in a way that is accessible and immediately understandable, ensuring that key concepts related to student and client wellbeing are communicated without unnecessary complexity. This method will highlight practical applications for teaching and integrating wellbeing into the curriculum.

For administrators, a more concise approach is necessary. An impactful presentation of findings, using a "critical paragraph" to emphasize the program's success in fostering student wellbeing and its potential long-term benefits for the institution would be best. This approach will underscore the value of continued support for programs that prioritize wellbeing in both education and clinical practice.

Key Benefactors of Programmatic Evaluation Findings

Primary beneficiaries are future cohorts of MSOT students, as evaluation findings will be used for continuous refinement of content and delivery to promote maximal learner impact and utilization. Future clients will benefit, as students become equipped to meaningfully address the occupational wellbeing of their clients. Future employers may benefit, as the course has the potential to create long-term change in how students, who become future practitioners and employees, are better equipped to maintain and sustain their own wellbeing, potentially minimizing field exit as a result of burnout reduction.

Anticipated Limitations and Strengths

Limitations of this study include a small sample size from one MSOT program located in the southeastern United States, a predominantly Western perspective on the concept of wellbeing, and limited gender diversity, as all participants in the first cohort were female.

Strengths of this proposed program evaluation include the thoughtful selection of focus group participants, the well-structured course design, in-person classes, and the use of a single instructor, ensuring consistency in content delivery.

Summary

The focus of evaluation of *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing* is to determine the impact of the course on student, program, and profession-related outcomes. Short-term outcomes of the evaluation plan include measuring the content's impact on students' functional understanding of foundational concepts of wellbeing, which will inform future iterations of the course. Long-term outcomes include contributions to the foundational knowledge of wellbeing and application of concepts within OT education and clinical practice. Stakeholders who may benefit from this research include future MSOT students in Appalachian State University's MSOT Program, the Program Director for Appalachian State University's MSOT Program, Appalachian State University's CETLSS Program, and OT researchers investigating wellbeing. Formative methods, including a student focus group, will inform the development of the program. Summative methods, including student surveys, will be employed to assess the course's impact on student outcomes. The dissemination of findings will occur through various methods,

including conference presentations at the state and national levels, as well as scholarly writings in multiple venues, including the AJOT and JOTE.

CHAPTER SIX – Dissemination Plan

Overview

OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing is a first-semester course for MSOT students at Appalachian State University. The course meets once weekly for an hour over 15 weeks and is organized into three five-week units. In the first unit, students explore foundational theory from multiple disciplines to understand occupation as a core contributor to wellbeing. The second unit shifts the focus toward promoting wellbeing in clients through meaningful, evidence-informed strategies. In the final unit, students examine the realities of OT practice, including its challenges, and consider ways to sustain their own wellbeing as emerging professionals.

Dissemination Goals

In the short term, the goal of disseminating this doctoral work is to foster conversations within OT education about the role of wellbeing, both for clients and practitioners. By sharing the course model and outcomes, it is hoped that other programs will consider integrating wellbeing as a core curricular component, grounded in occupation and clearly aligned with the values of OT. This includes contributing to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by exploring how we educate our students on sustaining their wellbeing throughout graduate education. As a part of this effort, an expansion of the current course into a three-semester sequence is proposed. This already has programmatic support and will move forward through internal and university curriculum change processes during the next three years.

Over the long term, the author hopes this work will contribute to a profession-

wide initiative, led by organizations such as the AOTA, to establish a unified, occupation-based definition of wellbeing specific to OT. While OT considers meaningful occupational engagement to be at the heart of wellbeing, and wellbeing the heart of the OTPF-4 (AOTA, 2020), there is a lack of formal evaluation strategies or unified language to describe wellbeing, which poses a particular challenge in education, where students benefit from clear frameworks, tools, and language to guide both self-reflection and client-centered assessment. Thus, this project will also be a launching point for future research, including a call to action for development of age-specific measures of wellbeing that are meaningful within OT practice, placing the profession at the forefront of national dialogue around how to support and enhance wellbeing to promote health not just as a response to illness and injury. Finally, national platforms, such as AOTA conferences, will be utilized to draw attention to policy gaps that limit the OT role in health promotion and to foster further dialogue around the role of OT in promoting health and wellbeing. By sharing this work and inviting dialogue, the author hopes to encourage a shift toward more proactive, wellbeing-centered models of care and education in OT.

Target Audiences and Key Messages

Graduate-level OT students face high levels of stress, burnout, and occupational imbalance. Recent findings indicate that more than 30% of OT students report feeling overwhelmed on a daily basis, and over 50% frequently experience high levels of stress (Grab et al., 2021; Popova et al., 2022). Without early access to tools to address wellbeing, students may enter the profession without the self-regulation or adaptive strategies required for sustainable practice. Thus, the primary target audience is OT

educators in entry-level OT programs. Student wellbeing is a part of the newly updated ACOTE (2023) accreditation standards, which all entry-level OT programs are required to adopt by their next accreditation cycle. That means that it could be eight years or more before all programs consider how to incorporate student wellbeing into their curricula. Programs are beginning to address this broad topic, and some have already implemented comprehensive programs, as described in Chapter 3. Still, many are in the early stages of developing formal education to support student wellbeing during their journey to becoming OTPs, leading to practitioners with limited capacity to manage their wellbeing during the stressful early years. This reality prompts critical reflection for OT educators to collectively ask the questions: How do we teach wellbeing content to our students? How can we effectively center wellbeing in OT education? Finally, how do we help students build the skills, habits, and mindsets they'll need to sustain both their wellbeing and that of future clients?

The secondary audience for this work includes OTPs and occupational scientists who are well-positioned to deepen and expand this dialogue. There is still significant work to be done in defining and operationalizing wellbeing within our profession. To fully claim wellbeing within our scope, our profession must coalesce around a unified, occupation-centered definition of wellbeing that informs both practice and research. This doctoral project is an invitation to advance this conversation, which requires more than agreement; it demands active inquiry, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and a willingness to highlight and address the gaps in our profession’s current understanding. By generating research from multiple perspectives and foregrounding occupation and

wellbeing in both education and practice, we can strengthen OT's visibility in health promotion and more fully realize the transformative potential of our profession and our work.

Key Messages for Target Audience

Table 6.3 presents the key messages for each audience, primary and secondary, outlining the significance of the project's results.

Table 6.1

Key Audience Messages

Primary Audience – OT educators in entry-level OT programs
1. Wellbeing is not an extra; it's essential. Teaching wellbeing in OT programs is no longer optional; it's an ethical and professional responsibility. 2. Students need structured wellbeing education. An occupation-centered wellbeing curriculum equips students with lifelong strategies for sustaining themselves and their clients. 3. Meeting ACOTE standards through innovation. This work offers a proactive response to ACOTE's call to address student wellbeing in the 2023 standards.
Secondary Audience – Occupational scientists, OT researchers, OTPs invested in wellbeing
1. Development of a shared definition. The profession would benefit from an articulate, unified, occupation-based definition of wellbeing guiding education and practice. 2. A call for collaborative inquiry. This project calls for research that operationalizes wellbeing within OT in age-specific, context-driven ways. 3. Occupation at the heart of wellbeing. Ensure that wellbeing has a meaningful part in our scholarship and clinical frameworks. 4. Centering wellbeing. Centering wellbeing strengthens our professional identity and amplifies our role in broader health systems and health promotion.

Key Sources for Dissemination

The mode of dissemination for both the primary and secondary audiences is multi-modal in its approach. A detailed description of the dissemination of program

evaluation data was presented in Chapter 5 of this doctoral project. In summary, key findings will be shared through journals such as the JOTE, AJOT, Australian Occupational Therapy Journal (AOTJ), Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy (CJOT), and Human Occupation and Wellbeing Journal (HOWJ). Additionally, components of this dissertation and subsequent research lines will be presented at professional gatherings, including the AOTA Education Summit, AOTA Inspire National Conferences, and the NCOTA Annual Conference. These platforms offer opportunities to invite dialogue, spark inquiry, and foster collaboration with others who recognize this gap in our profession and are committed to advancing the full potential of our profession.

Evaluation of Dissemination

To evaluate the effectiveness of this project's dissemination, the author will assess both the reach and impact of various dissemination activities. For published journal articles, quarterly tracking of views and downloads will offer tangible metrics of engagement and reception. Similarly, attendance figures and audience feedback from speaking engagements will help determine the extent to which the content resonated with participants and the timeliness of dissemination. Follow-up emails, questions, and social media engagement provide additional qualitative feedback on how the content is being received and may help illuminate future directions.

Conclusion

The dissemination of aspects of this project, including the development of course content for *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing*, will employ a multi-pronged approach targeting both primary and secondary audiences. The primary audience is OT

educators in entry-level programs, as they consider how to incorporate wellbeing into their curriculum to meet the ACOTE (2023) accreditation standards. The secondary audience is occupational science researchers, OT researchers, and OTPs invested in wellbeing for themselves and their clients. The goal of targeting this audience is to generate more conversation around how the profession talks about, evaluates, and addresses wellbeing within the context of occupation and OT. Utilizing a variety of methods, including scholarly journal articles and conference speaking engagements, the author aims to reach members of both audience groups and generate maximal interest in the project. This dissemination plan reflects both an invitation and a commitment to move wellbeing concepts from the margins of OT education and practice to its very center. By sharing this work widely and engaging others in conversation, the author hopes to contribute to a collective shift that empowers students, strengthens the profession, and affirms our role in promoting health and wellbeing throughout the lifespan.

CHAPTER SEVEN – Funding Plan

Overview

The educational program is a course designed for students in their first semester of the MSOT program at Appalachian State University. The course, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing,* meets weekly for one hour for 15 weeks. The course contains three units, lasting for five weeks each. First, students are grounded in theory from a variety of disciplines to frame occupation as the primary contributor to wellbeing and are guided through evidence-informed techniques to understand themselves as occupational beings, addressing their own wellbeing. Then, students move on to understanding how to meaningfully address their clients' wellbeing. Finally, students spend time understanding the inherent challenges and constraints of OT practice and how to support their wellbeing as future practitioners.

This course is a required component of the MSOT program at Appalachian State University. Because the course is embedded in the current curriculum, all costs associated with delivering the content are covered by the university, including faculty time for content development and delivery, dedicated space for course delivery, and all teaching resources associated with the in-person course delivery format.

Following research and curriculum development, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completing the post-professional OTD program at Boston University, the author recognized that the breadth and complexity of the content make it challenging to consolidate into a one-credit-hour course. Additionally, verbal and written feedback from the first student cohort overwhelmingly reported a desire for more content on the

subject, which included several requests to include a wellbeing course in subsequent semesters. This chapter highlights the costs associated with further enhancements to the course and the dissemination of program evaluation data.

Three aspects of this project have expenses requiring funding:

1. Expansion of the course content.
2. Faculty development site visit.
3. Dissemination of program evaluation data.

Expansion of Course Content and Related Expenses

In August 2024, Appalachian State University welcomed its inaugural cohort of 24 MSOT students. Those students participated in *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing*, a required course, with the author as the instructor of record. At the end of the course, students completed anonymous end-of-course evaluations. Many of the end-of-course evaluations contained evidence of the students' interest in the content and expressed a desire to spend more time on the subject matter. End-of-course feedback is listed in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1.

End-of-Semester Student Feedback on Course Content

OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing End-of-Course Feedback from Students ***How could your instructor improve his/her/their teaching?***
I liked the teaching style!
Honestly, make it a longer class! Loved it!!
Professor Jasper could maybe teach this course in a longer time frame! I felt like I learned a lot and more class time might be helpful to let it digest.
Overall, I think I knew most of the class material before this semester (I knew contentment led to well being). Or at least I could have reasoned things out. I would have loved to go into deeper detail on specifics, or maybe spent longer on practical tips. I did learn a lot about flow, and was able to articulate that process, and create personal techniques where I could get into flow.
I think utilizing methods such as group discussions, peer teaching, case studies, and problem-based learning helped me stay actively engaged in class and would be a great thing to further implement in future classes.

Every student in the cohort has also verbally expressed an interest in more content on wellbeing, and all have expressed that they missed having the class this spring semester. Based on the student evaluations and the findings presented in Chapter 3 relating to how other MSOT and OTD programs are educating their students, the author concluded that an expansion of course time in the current curriculum would benefit students immensely. Therefore, the funding plan outlines costs associated with increasing the content hours for the *Client and Practitioner Wellbeing* course.

Curriculum changes require review by Appalachian State University's Graduate School Academic Policies and Procedures Committee (GAP&P), in addition to approval by the MSOT Program Director, Chair of the Rehabilitation Sciences Department, and Dean of the Beaver College of Health Sciences.

In addition to increasing the number of curricular hours, the expansion of the program will also include an immersive learning experience for students at a local retreat center. In the Boone, North Carolina area, several retreat centers offer programming related to wellbeing. Program sessions include yoga, breathwork, mindfulness, and tools to help thrive during life. At one local retreat center, a three-day package is priced at $625, which includes meals, shared rooms, and program sessions. The total cost for 24 students to attend the three-day retreat is $15,000.

To inform the expansion of the curriculum, the author will conduct a site visit to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, as their program offers the most comprehensive student wellbeing program among the institutions researched in Chapter 3. Table 7.2 presents the costs associated with this site visit.

Table 7.2.

Costs Associated with Program Development

Line-Item Description	**Cost**
Flight from Charlotte, NC to Madison, WI	$600
Hotel in Madison, WI (six nights)	$150 per night for six nights $900
Food for six days	$50 per day for six days $300
Transportation in Madison, WI	$50 per ride, or $100
Travel Total	$1,900

Dissemination of Program Evaluation Data

The costs associated with dissemination are relatively small and are highlighted in Table 7.3. The expenses presented in Table 7.3 serve as a functional plan for disseminating research on wellbeing in OT education. The author has already submitted a proposal to present at the AOTA Education Summit, scheduled to take place in Salt Lake

City, Utah, in November 2025. Appalachian State University covers a portion of the travel costs; however, faculty typically incur the remaining costs. Research on grants is included in this chapter to explore possible options for covering the difference in expenses and to explore funding options for course expansion.

Table 7.3

Costs Associated with Travel to the AOTA Education Summit

Line-Item Description	**Expense**
Registration for AOTA Education Summit 2025 (pricing not available at the time of writing, and is based on the cost of attendance for previous years)	$380.00
Flights (Charlotte, NC to Salt Lake City, UT)	$343.00
Transportation to/from airport via Uber	$75.00
Hotel for 3 nights (November 13–16, 2025) (Meeting venue not yet released, and estimate based on typical price in downtown Salt Lake City, UT during that timeframe)	$340.00 per night x 3 nights = $1020.00
Food for 3 days	$50.00 per day x 3 days = $150.00
Total Expenses:	$1,968

Costs associated with dissemination beyond the AOTA Education Summit include development of peer-reviewed articles in journals such as JOTE, AJOT, CJOT, AOTJ, and the HOWJ. To support data analysis and the development of manuscripts, a graduate student will be employed. The costs associated with submitting to these journals and hiring the graduate students are listed in Table 7.4.

Table 7.4

Costs Associated with Dissemination to Scholarly Journals

Journal	**Submission Cost**
Journal of Occupational Therapy Education	Free
American Journal of Occupational Therapy	Free
Australian Occupational Therapy Journal	Free
Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy	Free
Human Occupation and Wellbeing Journal (	Free
Graduate Assistant for 5 hours per week to assist with research and data analysis for dissemination for 15 weeks. Covered by Appalachian State University, Beaver College of Health Sciences	$25 per hour for 75 hours per semester. $1,875
Total cost:	$1,875

Funding Sources

As the costs of curriculum expansion and the faculty development site visit are unlikely to be covered by Appalachian State University, funding will be sought from external sources. Potential grant sources are presented in Table 7.5.

Table 7.5.

Potential Funding Sources

Funding Source	**Description**
Appalachian State University University Research Council (URC) Grant. (Appalachian State University, 2023)	Supports all full-time EHRA faculty and non-faculty employees in research activities, including travel for research dissemination. Funding amounts available up to $5,000
American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF). (AOTF, 2019)	AOTF offers various grants to early-career researchers to support OT research and professional development, and may cover dissemination activities.
AOTA Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Program. (AOTA, 2023)	Supports faculty in disseminating research on teaching and learning in OT education and is open to OT faculty members engaged in SoTL projects. Supported learning environment for dissemination of SoTL research. Free to participate and not grant-funded.

Behavioral Health Workforce Development Technical Assistance Program. (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2024)	$2,499,000
Health and Public Safety Workforce Resilience Technical Assistance Center Grant. (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2021a)	$6,000,000
Health and Public Safety Workforce Resiliency Training Program. (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2023)	Up to $1,079,333 in year 1 Up to $709,000 in year 2 Up to $492,333 in year 3
Promoting Resilience and Mental Health among the Health Professional Workforce (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2021b)	$29,560,000
SOTA Fundraising for a cohort retreat (Appalachian State University SOTA, 2025)	$1,000

Conclusion

OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing is a required course in the MSOT curriculum at Appalachian State University. The institution covers all costs associated with delivering the course in its current format. Funding costs related to dissemination are discussed in this chapter, including travel expenses to the AOTA Education Summit and costs incurred for submitting manuscripts to scholarly journals. Expenses related to expanding the course to a three-semester, three-course format, totaling three credit hours (one credit hour per semester), are discussed in the plan. Included in that budget are costs associated with the author traveling to another U.S. university to learn more about their curriculum, as wellbeing is a core curricular thread in their program, with 10 credit hours

dedicated to wellbeing in their curriculum. A 3-day immersive wellbeing experience for students is also included in the proposed budget. Lastly, costs associated with disseminating program evaluation data at professional conferences and in peer-reviewed journals are outlined. With institutional support and external funding, this initiative aims to strengthen the integration of wellbeing into occupational therapy education and practice at Appalachian State University's MSOT Program and beyond.

CHAPTER EIGHT – Conclusion

Wellbeing is an evolving, multifaceted concept that encompasses aspects of physical, emotional, and social health, coupled with engagement in meaningful occupations that prioritize participation over performance. Its expansive scope encompasses numerous domains, profoundly impacting various aspects of life. Borrowing from a variety of disciplines to define the term within OT, AOTA primarily ascribes to the CDC (2018) definition and is inclusive of having "positive emotions (e.g., contentment, happiness), not having negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), and having satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning" (para 1). In simple terms, wellbeing is feeling good and judging life in a positive way.

ACOTE, the accrediting body for OT education programs in the US, acknowledges the evolving conceptual nature of wellbeing with a four-fold increase in the number of standards pertaining to wellbeing in the 2023 standards compared to 2018 (ACOTE, 2018; ACOTE, 2023). This growing recognition within the OT profession of the importance of wellbeing necessitates enhancements to OT education to incorporate concepts related to wellbeing into OT curricula.

To address the evolving concept and increased focus on wellbeing within our profession, the focus of this doctoral project is the development of the *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing,* a unique course in the Appalachian State University MSOT Program. A one-credit hour course, offered in the first semester of the program, aims to enable students to understand the role of occupation in promoting personal wellbeing and equip them with the framework and tools necessary to address the wellbeing of their

future clients and their own wellbeing as future practitioners.

As discussed in Chapter 2, research suggests that students are not adequately prepared to care for their own wellbeing before entering graduate school and face extraordinarily high levels of stress and anxiety while in graduate OT programs, which can negatively impact their academic performance and overall wellbeing. Individual student characteristics, such as perfectionism, emotional regulation, emotional intelligence, fulfillment of basic needs, social support, and self-compassion, can either enhance or hinder student wellbeing. Together, these findings underscore the complexity of defining wellbeing in our profession, the challenges our students face developing and maintaining their wellbeing while in school, and highlight a few of the personal characteristics that students bring, which may enhance or hinder their occupational wellbeing.

As noted in Chapter 3, sustaining wellbeing in OT practice after graduation requires a multifaceted approach that addresses workplace culture, professional identity, burnout, work-life balance, and resilience. Supportive environments, strong leadership, and access to mentorship can help mitigate stress and promote professional fulfillment. A well-defined professional identity strengthens resilience and job satisfaction, while its absence can contribute to attrition. Burnout remains a significant challenge, particularly in high-pressure environments. However, strategies such as flexible work arrangements, boundary setting, and social support can help enhance overall wellbeing. Ultimately, fostering a culture that prioritizes practitioner wellbeing, professional growth, and sustainable workloads is essential for retaining a resilient and engaged OT workforce.

In planning for this course and considering how students might change because of their interaction with the content of the course *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing*, the theory of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and more specifically, the PERMA Model (Seligman, 2018) coupled with the OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018) emerged as appropriate models for understanding the many facets of wellbeing within the course. The PERMA model's wellbeing components, coupled with a strengths-based perspective that emphasizes individual traits, unique to the individual to promote adaptation, optimal human functioning, and thriving, were a natural fit for this course (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 1998: Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). OT Wellbeing Framework provided a more nuanced, occupation-based approach to understanding and framing wellbeing into six components: autonomy, belonging, competence, contentment and pleasure, identity, and hope, offering a structured foundation for promoting student occupation-based wellbeing.

To complement the PERMA Model and the OT Wellbeing Framework, Constructivism (Bruner, 1966) was selected to guide the author in supporting student-centered learning, providing an educational theory as an overarching framework to enhance the author's understanding and thinking about course design and development. Constructivism was selected because of its focus on student-centered knowledge construction through experience and reflection, with the teacher serving as a guide or facilitator.

Through the intentional integration of the OT Wellbeing Framework, Positive Psychology, and Constructivist learning principles, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner*

Wellbeing offers students not only the opportunity to gain knowledge but to actively engage in the process of becoming reflective, resilient OTPs. By rooting the course in strengths-based frameworks, emphasizing the interaction between person and environment, and grounding wellbeing in occupation, this course addresses the need for students to develop sustainable strategies to support their own wellbeing, equipping them with both the mindset and the tools to cultivate wellbeing throughout their professional journey for themselves and for those they serve.

The core message for OT educators and administrators is to address our professional obligation to educate students on wellbeing concepts and to model their application within the academic setting. By fostering student wellbeing, we equip future practitioners with the skills necessary to promote both their own wellbeing and that of their clients. This focus is critical to the development of well-rounded, effective OTPs. Ultimately, this doctoral project serves as both an invitation and a commitment to move wellbeing concepts from the margins of OT education and practice to its very center. By sharing this work widely and engaging others in the conversation, the author hopes to contribute to a collective shift that empowers students, strengthens the profession, and affirms our role in promoting health and wellbeing across the lifespan. Because wellbeing is the essence of what makes life worth living, and participation in meaningful, health-promoting occupations makes it possible.

APPENDIX A – Wellbeing & Flow Through Craft, Class Session 7

"Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."
~Thomas Merton

Week 10: Wellbeing & Flow Through Craft

Spotify – shared music playlist

Pre-Test

Google Forms Link

Agenda

- Pre-test – 5 mins
- Collaborative Concept Mapping – 15 mins
- Craft – 20 mins
- Post-test – 5 mins
- Group discussion – 15 mins

What is Flow and Why do we care?

- Your reading & watching last night included:
  - Nakamura, J., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). The concept of flow. In M. Csikszentmihalyi (Ed.), *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology: The collected works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* (pp. 239–263). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8_16
  - Reid, D. (2011). Mindfulness and flow in occupational engagement: Presence in doing. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy, 78*(1), 50-56. https://doi.org/10.2182/cjot.2011.78.1.7
  - Kotler, S. (2022, May 1). *How to enter "flow state" on command | Steven Kotler for Big Think.* Www.youtube.com. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znwUCNrjpD4

Finding Flow Through Occupation:
A 15-Minute Group Work Activity

- Split up into 5 groups (4-5 per group) to explore 1 topic from the readings.
- **Discuss** and be ready to **report back** to the large group:
  - 2 key takeaways from your topic
  - 1 or more components from the OT Wellbeing Framework
  - How this connects to occupational engagement
- **Groups:**
  1. Conditions that support flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi)
  2. Flow, autonomy, & competence (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi)
  3. Mindfulness & presence in flow (Reid)
  4. Flow & meaningful occupational engagement (Reid)
  5. Flow & identity in occupation (both articles)

Collective Craft Activity (20 minutes)

Post-Test

Google Forms Link

Group Reflection – 15 minutes

- What did you notice about your internal state before and after the craft activity?
  - What changed, and what do you think contributed to that shift?
- Which components of the OT Wellbeing Framework were present for you during the craft?
  - Remember: competence, autonomy, identity, contentment & pleasure, belonging, & hope.
- How might you use flow-based or creative occupations to support your own or your client's wellbeing?
  - What would you consider when designing an experience?

APPENDIX B – Major Assignment, Development of Wellbeing SMART Goals

Course #: 5200

Course Name: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing

Assignment 3: Development of Personal SMART Goals to Maintain your Wellbeing Throughout the Program (30%)

Due:

Assignment Description:

In this assignment, you will develop a set of SMART goals to support your wellbeing throughout the MSOT program. As you create your goals, consider how the OT Wellbeing Framework can guide your approach. This framework includes six key dimensions: competence (feeling capable and effective), autonomy (having control and choice), contentment & pleasure (experiencing satisfaction and enjoyment), identity (maintaining a coherent sense of self), belonging (feeling connected and valued), and hope (maintaining optimism for the future). While you are not required to explicitly reference these dimensions, they can help shape meaningful and sustainable goals that support your personal and academic success.

Your SMART goals will serve as **touchpoints during academic advising meetings** throughout the MSOT program, allowing for ongoing reflection, accountability, and adjustment as needed.

Assignment Components:

Part 1: SMART Goals Development & Table completion

1. **Develop at least 4 SMART goals**
    - At least **1 academic goal** to support your success in the MSOT program.
    - At least **3 additional wellbeing goals** related to self-care, time management, stress reduction, social connection, or other personal wellbeing priorities.
2. **Use the provided table format to clearly outline each goal, including:**
    - **Goal Statement:** Clearly state your goals in SMART format (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)
    - **OT Wellbeing Framework Dimension(s) Addressed:** Identify any dimensions of the OT Wellbeing Framework that your goal supports (Competence, Autonomy, Contentment & Pleasure, Identity, Belonging, or Hope).
    - **Strategies for Accountability:** Describe how you will track progress and stay on course.
    - **Potential Adjustments:** Leave space for future modifications, to be revisited during academic advising meetings.

Part 2: Reflection

After developing your SMART goals, write a brief reflection (at least half a page, double-spaced, APA format) addressing the following:

- **What was the most challenging part of developing your SMART goals, and why?**
- **Which aspects of the goal-setting process felt most meaningful or relevant to you?**

Your reflection should provide insight into your personal experience with goal-setting and help you consider how these coals can support your wellbeing throughout the program.

Grading Rubric:

Criteria	Excellent (8-10 pts)	Proficient (6-7 pts)	Needs Improvement (0-6 pts)	Points (30)
SMART Goals Development (10 points)	Develops **at least one academic goal and more than three wellbeing goals** in SMART format. Goals are **clear, specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound**.	Develops **one academic goal and three wellbeing goals** that mostly follow the SMART format.	Fails to meet the **minimum number of goals,** or goals lack SMART structure.	
Accountability Strategies (8 points)	Includes **clear, feasible strategies** for tracking progress in academic mentoring meetings.	Strategies are included but **lack detail** or feasibility.	Strategies for accountability are **missing or unclear.**	
Reflection Content (7 points)	Reflection is **at least half a page** and thoughtful addresses **both required questions with depth and insight.**	Reflection meets length but **lacks depth or fully developed responses**.	Reflection is **too brief**, **missing key insights**, or incomplete.	
Reflection APA Formatting (5 points)	Reflection **follows APA formatting** (double-spaced, 12-pt APA-approved font, 1-inch margins, proper citations, if used).	APA formatting **has minor errors** (e.g., spacing, font, margins)	Reflection **does not follow APA formatting**, or multiple formatting issues are present.	

APPENDIX C – Executive Summary

Introduction

In American culture, the term ‘wellbeing’ carries various meanings and boasts a multitude of definitions across disciplines, reflecting its broad and multifaceted nature. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines wellbeing as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions” (WHO, 2021, p. 10). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) expands on this and acknowledges the multifaceted nature of wellbeing, emphasizing its comprehensive scope, which includes having “positive emotions (e.g., contentment, happiness), not having negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning” (CDC, 2018, para 1). In simple terms, wellbeing is feeling good and judging life in a positive way.

Occupational therapy (OT) is a “client-centered health profession concerned with promoting health and wellbeing through occupation” (World Federation of Occupational Therapy [WFOT], 2012, para.1). At the very foundation of the OT profession is the belief that humans are occupational by nature and that “achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation is the overarching statement that describes the domain and process of occupational therapy in its fullest sense” (AOTA, 2020, p. 5).

The Problem

Several years ago, during the early stages of programmatic development at Appalachian State University's MSOT program, an advisory committee of local clinicians met with the newly hired Program Director. During those advisory committee meetings, local occupational therapy practitioners (OTPs) voiced the impact of wellbeing, or lack thereof, on the therapeutic process for both the practitioner and the client. From there, the conceptual foundations of *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing* were born and included as a required course in the developing MSOT program. Through course development research, the author noted that while wellbeing is central to OT, the field of OT has not yet fully realized the full scope and potential of occupational wellbeing as a key aspect of health promotion, disease prevention, and a fundamental human right.

Conceptual Framework

Seligman (2018) introduced the PERMA Model of Wellbeing as a framework for understanding the many facets of wellbeing, including **P**ositive emotion, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, and **A**ccomplishment. Positive emotion, a primary indicator of flourishing, includes emotions such as hope, joy, love, compassion, and gratitude, and can be cultivated to improve wellbeing (Fredrickson, 2001).

The OT Wellbeing Framework (Saraswati et al., 2018) provides a more nuanced, occupation-based perspective on components of wellbeing including autonomy (having control and choice), belonging (feeling connected and valued), competence (feeling capable and effective), contentment and pleasure (experiencing satisfaction and

enjoyment), identity (maintaining a coherent sense of self), and hope (maintaining optimism for the future), offering a structured foundation for promoting student wellbeing.

Together, these two theories provide the theoretical foundation students use to develop a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing for themselves and for the future clients they will serve.

Additionally, constructivism (Bruner, 1966) emerged as a "right fit" for understanding the best educational approach for this course. Rooted in active, student-centered learning, students build on existing knowledge to construct new understandings of their world through experience and reflection (Kritt & Budwig, 2022; Olusegun, 2015), a natural fit for the course's structure.

Project Overview

This doctoral project will fully develop and refine a course for students in the MSOT program at Appalachian State University to help them understand their own occupational wellbeing needs and explore the occupational wellbeing needs of their clients, as well as their own needs as future practitioners. All MSOT students will be enrolled in a first-year, first-semester course, *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing*, where they will be exposed to discussions on wellbeing from various disciplines and engage in evidence-based wellbeing opportunities.

Through readings, class discussions, reflection, experiential learning, and the use of a flipped-classroom model, students are guided through a three-unit course that equips them with knowledge of how to maintain and sustain the occupational wellbeing of

students, clients, and future practitioners. Three major graded assignments are spread across the semester, with the anchor for the course, development of personal SMART goals to maintain wellbeing throughout the student's time in the program and utilized during academic advising as a touchpoint providing accountability for students to equip them with tangible skills to address their own and their future client's wellbeing.

Through the intentional integration of the OT Wellbeing Framework, Positive Psychology, and Constructivist learning principles, *OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing* offers students not only the opportunity to gain knowledge but to actively engage in the process of becoming reflective, resilient OTPs. By rooting the course in strengths-based frameworks, emphasizing the interaction between person and environment, and grounding wellbeing in occupation, this course addresses the need for students to develop sustainable strategies to support their own wellbeing, equipping them with both the mindset and the tools to cultivate wellbeing throughout their professional journey for themselves and for those they serve.

Key Findings

OT 5200: Client & Practitioner Wellbeing is a course unique to Appalachian State University's MSOT Program that aims to enable students to understand the role of occupation in the promotion of personal wellbeing and equip them with the framework and tools necessary to address the wellbeing of their future clients and their own wellbeing as future practitioners.

Short-term outcomes include measuring the content's impact on students' functional understanding of foundational concepts of wellbeing, to refine future iterations

of the course. Long-term outcomes include contributions to the foundational understanding of wellbeing and application of concepts within OT education and clinical practice.

To continue investigating the impact of this course, formative design methods include a focus group of Appalachian State University MSOT students interested in participating in research related to wellbeing, using structured questions to generate rich discussion, which is then thematically evaluated. Summative design methods include an investigation of the impact of course content on MSOT students, using an anonymous online Numerical Rating Scale to determine the course's impact on the target population.

Recommendations

Programs are beginning to address this broad topic, and some have a comprehensive program already in place, but many do not yet have formal education in place to support student wellbeing during their journey to becoming occupational therapists, leading to practitioners with limited capacity to manage their wellbeing during the stressful early years. This reality prompts critical reflection for OT educators to collectively ask the questions: How can we effectively center wellbeing in OT education? How do we teach wellbeing content to our students? Finally, how do we help students build the skills, habits, and mindsets they'll need to sustain both their own wellbeing and that of future clients?

General Conclusions

Wellbeing is an evolving, multifaceted concept that includes aspects of physical, emotional, and social health coupled with engagement in meaningful occupations with

prioritization of participation over performance. Its expansive scope encompasses numerous domains, profoundly impacting various aspects of life.

The core message for OT educators and administrators is a gentle but vital call: to honor our professional responsibility to teach wellbeing concepts and to model their application within the academic setting. By fostering student wellbeing, we equip future practitioners with the skills necessary to promote both their own wellbeing and that of their clients, which is critical to the development of well-rounded, effective OTPs. As OTPs, educators, and scholars, this is an invitation to foreground wellbeing in how we teach, practice, and partner with clients. Because wellbeing is the essence that makes life worth living, and occupation is the means through which we, as OTPs, make that possible.

APPENDIX D – Fact Sheet

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Elizabeth Jasper, MS, OTR/L
OTD Candidate

Sustaining the Heart of Practice: Illuminating Wellbeing in Occupational Therapy Education

Why It Matters:

At the foundation of occupational therapy (OT) is the belief that humans are occupational by nature, and that "achieving health, well-being, and participation in life through engagement in occupation is the overarching statement that describes the domain and process of occupational therapy in its fullest sense" (AOTA, 2020, p. 5).

While wellbeing is central to OT, the profession has not yet fully realized its potential as a core aspect of health promotion, disease prevention, fundamental human right, or educational component. While we prepare students to become occupational therapists, we often miss the opportunity to prioritize student wellbeing, teach them how to address it for their clients, or educate them on how to cultivate it in their evolving identities as future practitioners.

Image courtesy of Appalachian State University (2023)

The Gap in OT Education:

Despite its central place in the (OTPF-4) (AOTA, 2020), wellbeing is not consistently integrated across OT curricula. To prepare students for ethical, sustainable practice, educators must:

- Equip students with tools to understand and sustain their **own wellbeing**
- Position wellbeing as a **core concept**, not a side topic, in OT education
- Help students learn how to **recognize and promote wellbeing** in their clients
- Foster the habits and mindset needed to **flourish as future OT practitioners**

Key Questions for OT Educators:

Many OT programs still lack formal curriculum addressing student wellbeing. Without, new practitioners may enter the profession with limited capacity to protect their own wellbeing, let alone foster it in others. This raises critical questions educators:

- How can we **effectively center wellbeing** in OT education?
- How do we **teach wellbeing content** in meaningful, practical ways?
- How do we help students build the **skills, habits, and mindsets** they'll need to sustain both their own wellbeing and their future clients?

The Research:

Wellbeing in OT education is influenced by multiple factors, including psychological, environmental, pedagogical, and developmental. The literature points to several key findings:

Student Experience and Developmental Supports

- **Stress tends to peak** during the didactic phase of OT programs, when increased cognitive load often coincides with reduced physical activity, social connection, and opportunities for rest (Boolani et al., 2018)
- **Sensory processing differences** may further impact students' ability to engage, focus, and regulate emotional responses, impacting wellbeing (Matson et al., 2024)
- **Emotional intelligence (EI),** including self-awareness, self-compassion, opportunities for engagement in meaningful occupation, and occupational balance as predictors of student wellbeing (Espiritu et al., 2024).
- **Instruction on brain development, time management, and self-compassion** has been linked to improved wellbeing and growth mindset (Taylor et al., 2024; Hunt & Coombes, 2024).

The Role of Pedagogy:

- **Supportive pedagogy** can buffer against academic stress and improve wellbeing by aligning teaching methods with student needs (Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021).
- Three signature pedagogies support OT student wellbeing and engagement:
  - **Relational Learning** - fosters trust and motivation through a strong educator-student connection
  - **Affective Learning** - acknowledges emotion's role in knowledge retention and skill development
  - **Active Learning** - emphasizes hands-on, experiential activities (Krishnagiri et al., 2019 as cited in Lewis-Kipkulei et al., 2021)

Description of the Project:

This doctoral project focuses on the design, implementation, and early evaluation of a wellbeing-focused course for OT students.

- All MSOT students at Appalachian State University complete *OT 5200: Client and Practitioner Wellbeing*, during their first semester
- The 1-credit hour course draws from **OT theory, Positive Psychology,** and **Constructivist learning**
- Organized into three units over the course of the semester: **Student Wellbeing, Client Wellbeing,** and **Practitioner Wellbeing**
- Emphasizes **experiential, reflective, and evidence-informed learning**, inviting students to actively explore and apply wellbeing concepts
- Grounded in the **OT Wellbeing Framework**, the course fosters the development of reflective, resilient future OTPs.

Course Outcomes

- **Short-term:** Supports students' functional understanding of wellbeing as a personal and professional competency
- **Long-term:** Contributes to a broader understanding of how wellbeing can be embedded across OT education and future clinical practice.

Core Message

OT educators have a professional responsibility to integrate wellbeing into the heart of OT education. When we model, teach, and prioritize wellbeing in our programs, we:

- **Prepare students** to navigate the emotional and occupational demands of becoming a therapist
- **Equip future OTPs** with the insight and tools to support client wellbeing with authenticity
- **Reinforce the fundamental belief** that health and wellbeing are achieved through occupation.

Call to Action

This project is both an invitation and a commitment: to move wellbeing from the margins of OT education into its center. By sharing this work, the goal is to spark a collective shift, one that empowers students, strengthens our profession, and sustains the heart of practice.

Because wellbeing is the essence that makes life worth living, and occupation makes it possible.

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