

# Cultivating Safe Spaces and Belonging to Empower Future Occupational Therapy Professionals

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WFOT Congress  
Bangkok, Thailand  
February 9-12, 2026

## Introduction

As the occupational therapy profession becomes more globally connected, student populations are becoming increasingly diverse. To foster optimal learning environments where students feel safe and have the opportunity to thrive, occupational therapy (OT) academic programs must adapt to meet students' evolving learning and belonging needs.

## Objectives

The goal of this study was to understand globally diverse students' perspectives regarding their sense of belonging, safety, representation, and empowerment within occupational therapy educational programs in the United States (U.S). This presentation highlights preliminary results.

## Methods

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 occupational therapy students enrolled in either a bachelor's, entry-level doctorate, or post-professional master's program. Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts provide deeper insights into student perspectives. Each transcript was reviewed and coded by 3 distinct reviewers. Several group discussions led to consensus of themes that emerged.

*No financial disclosures*

# Results

Data analysis revealed a key theme of **Safe Spaces**. Participants described safe space as an environment where they felt emotionally and physically secure, supported, and able to express ideas without hesitation. Belonging was fostered through meaningful connections beyond academic settings, including informal gatherings and participation in student organizations.

Three subthemes include the following:

## 1) Developing connections outside the classroom:

Picnics and potlucks “...are really powerful, because it gives us a space to just come together and connect.” Being involved in student organizations or committees “facilitates belonging”. “Having a sense that you are part of something bigger than yourself.”

## 2) Sharing one’s identity with others:

“It helped me feel at home away from home. My need at the moment was feeling like I belong, and feeling like I want to share my culture with my peers, as I experience their culture, and I think they should also see a part of mine.”

## 3) “The little things”:

“Come, get coffee and chat with faculty members.” “Most faculty are very approachable. I can just drop by their office after class and talk.” “Little things such as time spent after class and waiting for the shuttle just hanging out. It’s just the little things like that. They’re small things, but really do mean a lot.”



## Discussion

This study builds upon the work of Benitez, Park & Bream (2022) that examined the needs of international students as they transition to graduate level OT education and daily life in the U.S., to further explore the unique needs of international students. Preliminary results of the current study indicate that supporting students' learning needs goes beyond the classroom. It is evident among the study participants that activities and relationship building outside of the classroom are highly impactful in creating a sense of safety and belonging. These preliminary findings align with existing literature regarding students' sense of belonging (Duran et al, 2020; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Tavares, 2021).

## Conclusion

Results indicate that access to safe spaces—or the lack thereof—impacts students' learning experiences and sense of belongingness. These findings have implications for occupational therapy programs as they evolve in supporting the needs of students.

## Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of James Lee, OTD, OTR/L; Jacqueline Villa; Xiaorong Wang; Natalia Leon; Alyssa Dharmawan; Mashly Martinez; and Carolin Chung in supporting this study.

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