American Occupational Therapy Association

Supporting Student Success: Strategies, Systems, and Lessons from OT Programs

AOTA ALC Room 3
October 23, 2026

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Objectives

- Identify examples of initiatives for supporting OT/OTA students throughout their educational journeys
- Identify opportunities for tracking outcomes of student support initiatives
- Discuss strategies and actions that OT/OTA educators can implement into their own programs to support students

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Today's Panelists



Molly Bathje, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

Associate Professor & Program Director

DePaul University



Jessica Harney, DPT, OT

Department Chair & Program Director, EL-OTD

Tufts University



Carole Ivey, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

Department Chair & Program Director, Associate Professor

Viginia Commonwealth University

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DePaul University

- Private, Catholic, Vincentian University located in Chicago
- Masters of Occupational Therapy
  - Began in 2022 (Graduated 3 cohorts)
  - 6 Full time faculty, including Chair, PD & FW Coordinator
  - Admit 1 cohort per year, 30-35 students
  - In person/ On campus program
  - 8 Quarters (2 years including summers)

Student Profile

First Generation College Student	Economically Disadvantaged	Under-represented racial/ethinic grp	Out of State
25%	16%	43%	34%

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Tufts University

- Private, Research University just outside of Boston
- Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
- 3 OT degree programs
  - Entry-Level OTD
  - Post-Professional OTD
  - Post-Professional Masters
- Entry-Level OTD
  - Transitioned from the ELMS in 2019
  - Full-time, in-person program over 9 semesters including summers
  - Average 38 students/cohort (1 admissions cycle/year)
  - 7 full-time faculty; 5 part-time adjunct faculty

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Viginia Commonwealth University

- State University, located in Richmond, Virginia
  - Urban – two campuses (academic and medical campus with affiliated health system)
  - Minority Serving Institution
- Occupational Therapy Doctorate program
  - OT program since 1942; EL-OTD started in 2016 (graduated 7 cohorts)
  - 48 students/cohort (1 admission cycle/year)
  - 11 full-time faculty (including chair/program director, AFWC, DCC)
  - 2 full-time staff devoted to OT
  - Traditional on-campus, in-person
  - 3 years, 9 semesters

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Supporting Students through Recruitment & Admissions

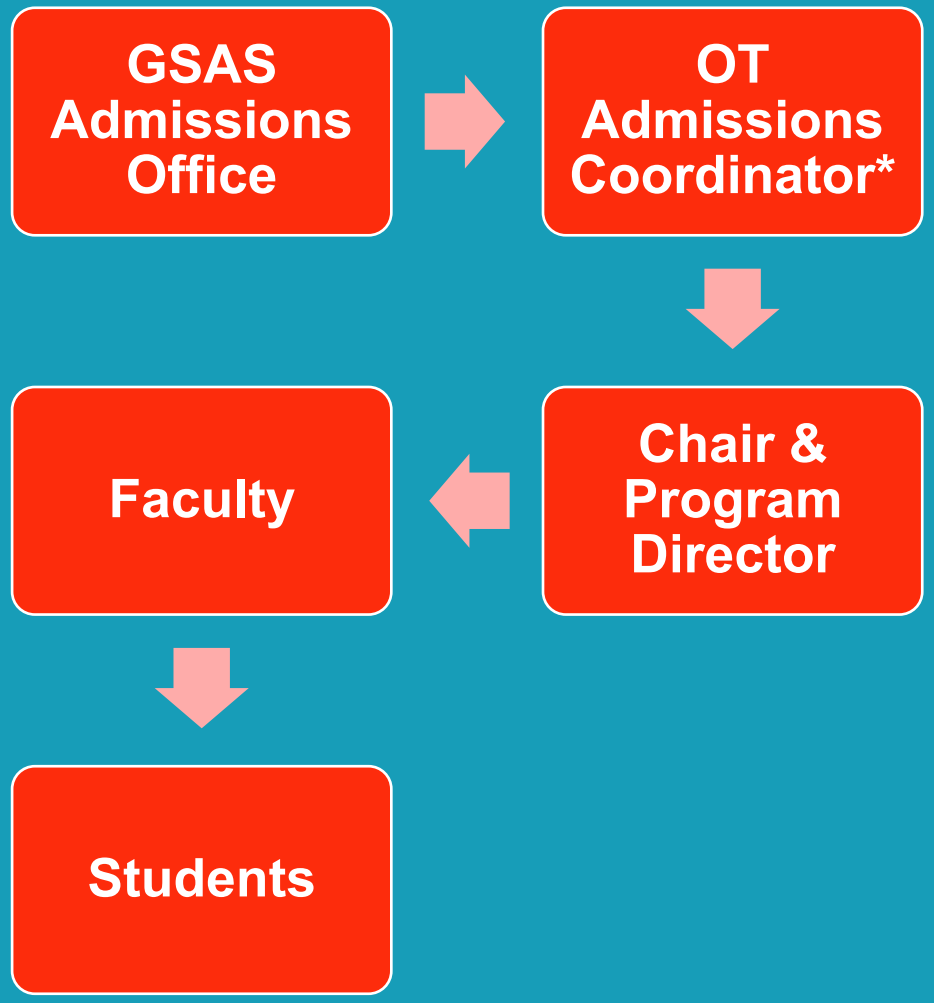
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Tufts University
Department of Occupational Therapy

- Admissions Quick Facts (EL-OTD focus):
  - One admissions cycle per year
  - OTCAS and Kira Interview Platform
    - No GRE scores
    - Kira Interview Questions are designed by faculty/admissions team
  - Applications open in summer
  - October 15th Deadline
  - Looking to fill 35 seats, current enrollment averages 38/cohort
  - Summer start for curriculum

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Who is Involved?



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Tufts University OT Admissions Leadership

- Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Admissions Office
  - Dedicated Recruitment and Admissions Coordinator in the OT Department
    - Early face of the Department; Champion of all things Tufts OT
    - Attends graduate student recruitment events at outside institutions
    - Works with Department Chair to integrate into the pre-health programs at Tufts
    - Leads marketing initiatives, website attraction and social media posts
    - Hosts monthly virtual information sessions
    - Meets in-person with prospective students
    - Hires 3 admissions assistants per year who are OT students
    - Hosts Virtual and In-Person Accepted Student Events

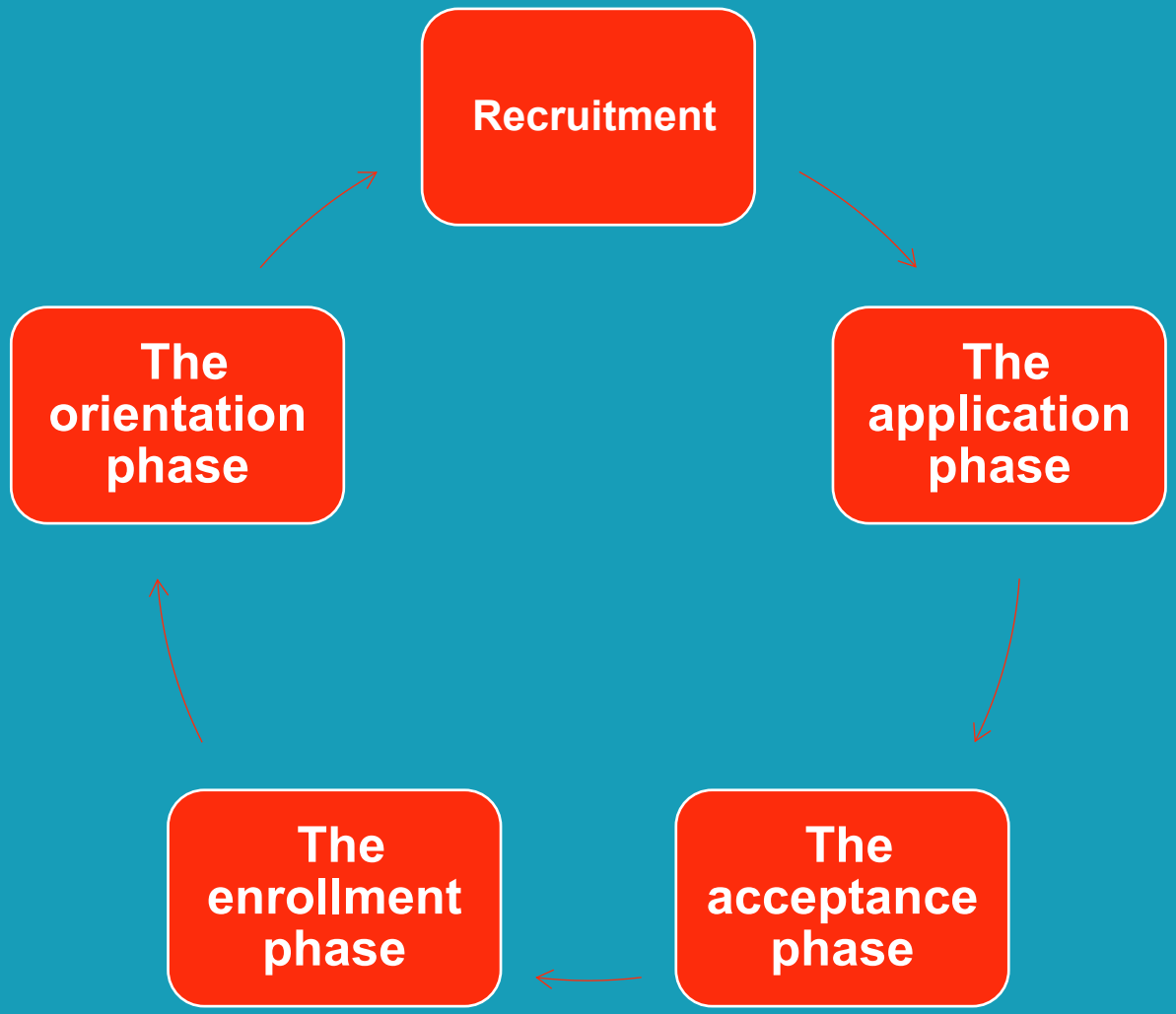
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Supporting Students in the Recruitment & Admissions Process

- Prospective students have a lot of options
  - Degree (MS/OTD/OTA)
  - Programs (local or relocation)
  - Full-time/Part-time
  - In-person/Hybrid
- Prospective students have questions
  - What does Fieldwork look like?
  - Do I have classes in the summer?
  - Do I need a car?
- Prospective students have worries
  - Tuition
  - Cost of Living
  - Can I work while I am school
- Prospective students might look for validation in their decision
  - It needs to be the student decision but we can provide them with the resources, communication and guidance to help them reach their goal

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Intentional Six Phase Student Centered Approach



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The Recruitment Phase

- Outreach & Marketing
- Monthly virtual open houses
- Social media
- Current student accessibility
- Faculty accessibility
- Tours and Class Visits

The Application Phase

- Communication availability
- Guidance on transcripts and pre-req course
- Dean availability

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The Acceptance Phase

- Early communication
- Tuition Scholarships
- Calls/emails from Dean
- Accepted Student Events
  - Virtual & In-Person
  - Current student Q & A
  - Student Financial Aid

The Enrollment Phase

- Email Communication
  - Chair
  - GSAS student services
  - Dept Administrator
- Acknowledgement of Student Resources Available
  - Accommodations process
  - Academic Resources
  - Mental Health and Wellness
- Initiation of EXXAT profiles
  - Student Advising Manual
  - Vaccinations etc...

The Orientation Phase

- Intentional Design
  - 2 longer ½ days
  - Faculty & current students
  - Scavenger hunt
  - Building Belonging
- Department Focus
  - Upfront with schedules
  - Upfront with important dates
  - Upfront with policies and procedures
- Student Resource Focus
  - StAAR Center
  - Community Mental Health
  - Graduate Student Financial Aid
- Community Engagement

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How are you providing support during recruitment and admissions within your programs?

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Supporting Student Belonging & Social- Emotional Wellbeing

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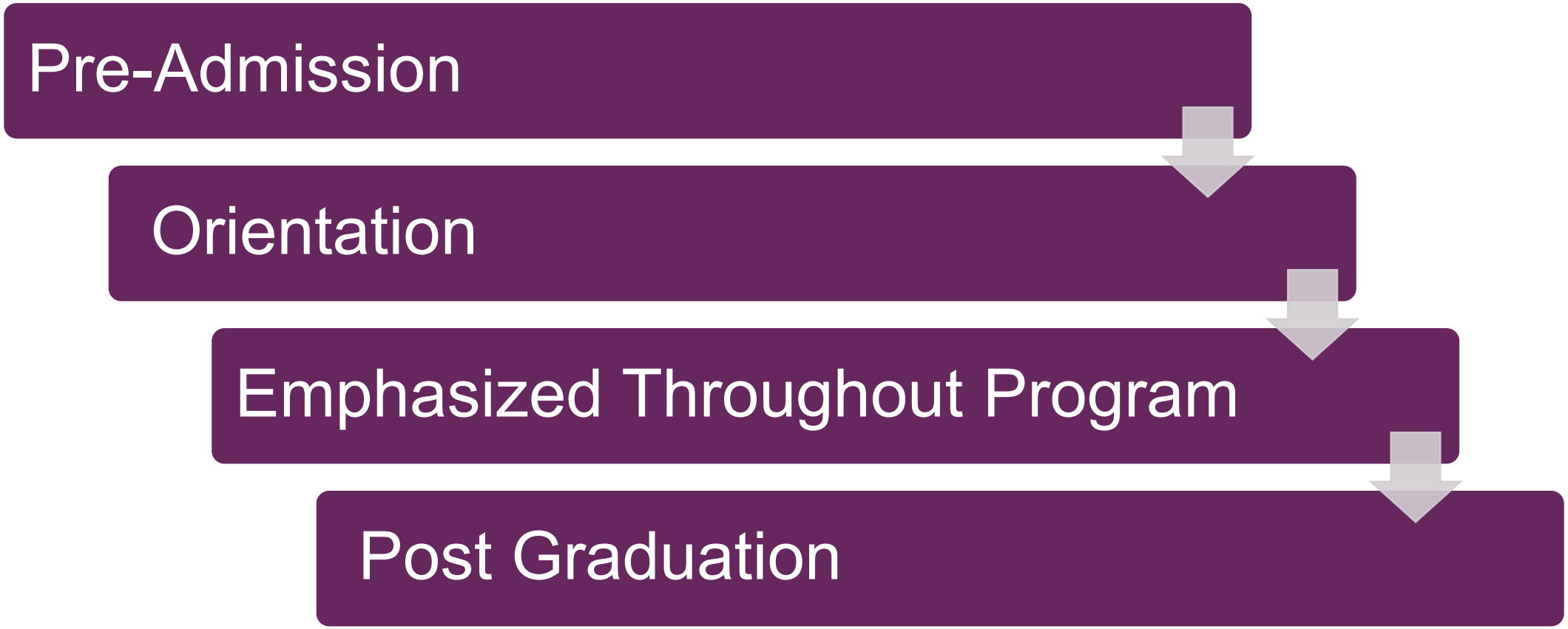
Belonging



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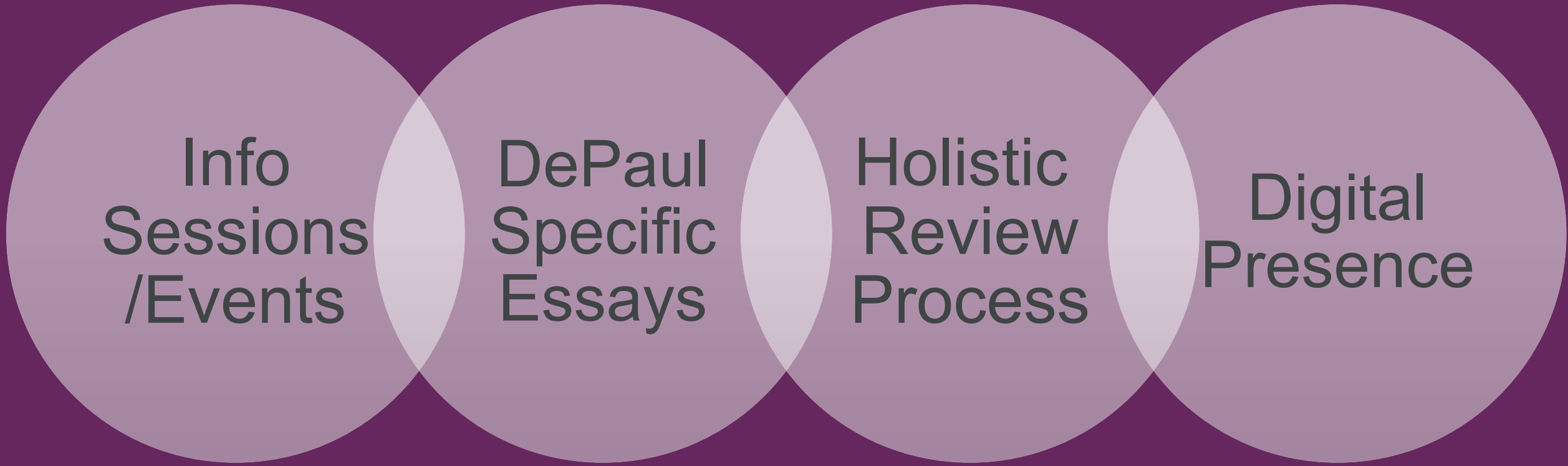
Fostering Belonging

- Belonging within the OT Profession, DePaul, and the DePaul OT Program



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Pre-Admission



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Orientation/ Onboarding

Emphasis on Mutual Choice

Focus on "seeing" each student

Connections to Other Students

Peer/Mentor Involvement

Peer Led Assistance with Onboarding

Make Implicit Norms Explicit

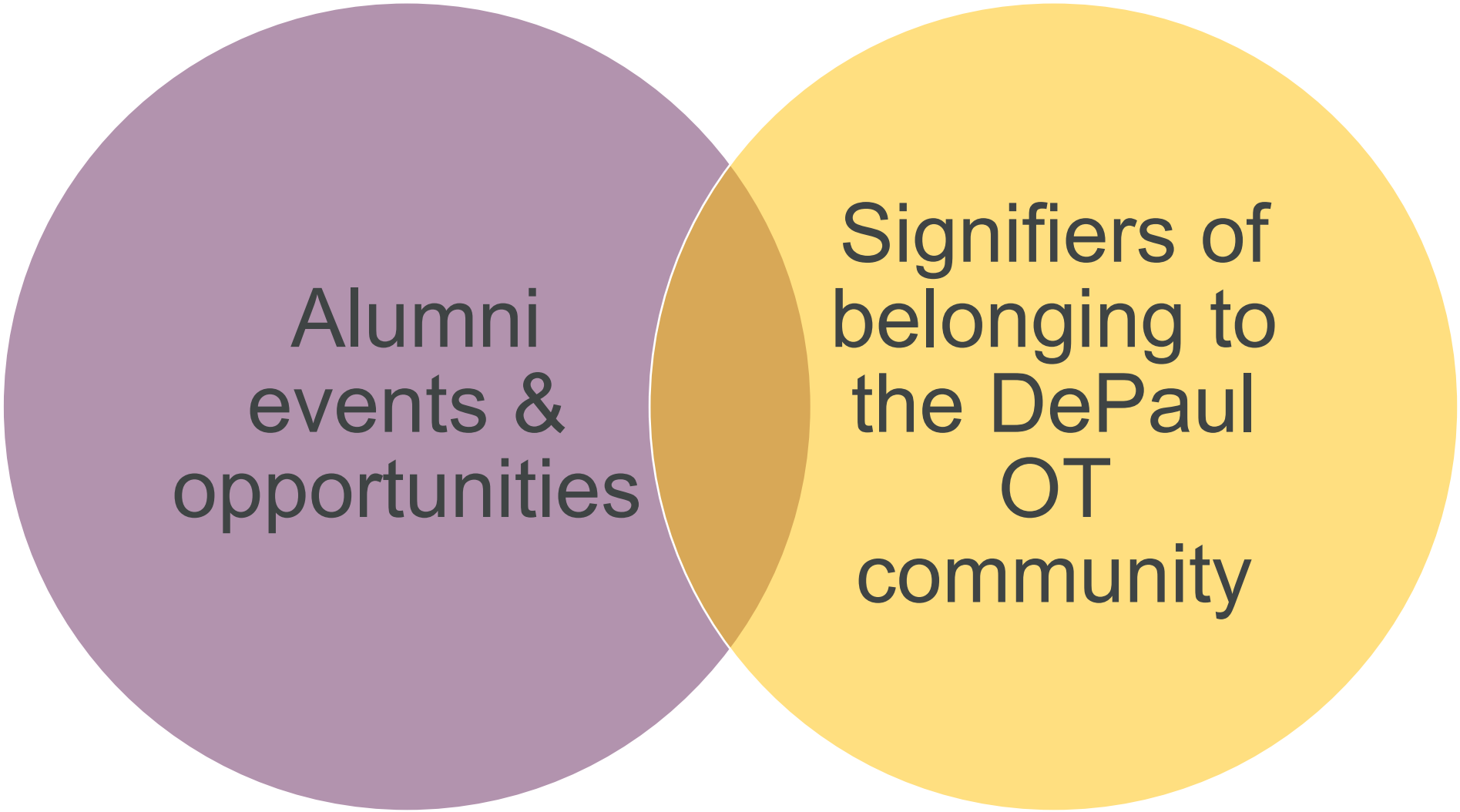
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Belonging Within Program

SOTA/COTAD Experiences	Professional Development Opportunities	Signifiers of Belonging
University/ College/ Program Supports & Activities	Cultivate Supportive Environment & Relationships	Input and Feedback Opportunities

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Post Graduation Belonging



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DePaul Student Surveys Related to Belonging

First Year Survey:

- What are ways in which you can be your best self in the program and contribute to the DePaul OT learning community?
- How can the DePaul OT program show you respect?
- What is your greatest strength as a learner?

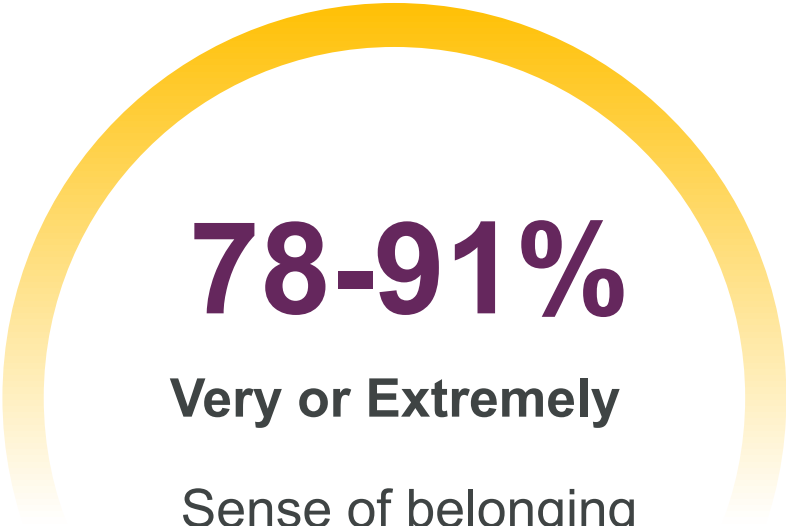
Individual Course Evaluations:

- I feel that I am a valued member of this learning community

Second Year Survey

- How did you present your best self during your first year?
- How did you contribute to the DePaul OT learning community?
- Did you feel respected by DePaul's OT Program? How?
- What is your greatest strength as a learner?

Post Graduation Survey:



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How are you fostering Belonging and Wellness within your Programs?

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Supporting Student Academic Success during Didactic, Fieldwork, & Capstone Courses

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VCU Example: Building a Student Support System

- Recognizing the Needs
- Advocating for Change
- Implementing a Coordinated Approach

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Recognizing Changing Student Needs

Increasing student needs

Academic, personal, financial, and mental health concerns

Growing faculty workload

More individual meetings and advising demands

Greater complexity

Accommodations, policies, and procedures

Changing resources

Reduced central funding for teaching assistants

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Developing a Coordinated Support System

Full-Time Student Services Manager

Professional advising - Consistent procedures - Support coordination

Universal	Targeted	Individualized
Newsletter, resources, communication	Open labs, tutoring, near-peer learning	Academic coaching, monitoring, outreach, referrals

Faculty advising and professional mentorship remain important

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Supporting Success Across the Curriculum

Didactic
Academic learning and progression

Fieldwork
Transition to clinical practice, professionalism

Capstone
Independence and professional growth

What is working in your program?

How do you identify needs, provide support, and monitor student progress?

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How are you supporting Student Academic Success within your Programs?

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Tracking Outcomes of Student Support Initiatives

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Student Support Outcomes
Why should we track them?

- Programs can demonstrate whether available students supports make a meaningful difference in students' academic success, well-being, professional development, and readiness for practice.
- Tracking outcomes helps determine whether academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, mental health resources, and fieldwork preparation are effectively meeting students' needs and supporting their success.
- Answers the question *"are we effective in what we offer students?"*
- Outcomes can tell a story that further support recruitment, building belonging and degree success.

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What Outcomes are We Measuring?

Required

- Student Retention
- Fieldwork Pass Rates
- Doctoral Capstone success rates
- Graduation rates
- NBCOT Exam Pass Rates
- Job attainment
- Educational Advancement
- Employer Feedback

Other Outcomes

- Student satisfaction/graduate exit surveys
- Open feedback groups
- Success of students who receive support services
  - Program Completion
  - Dismissal or Voluntary Withdrawal
- Alumni Involvement
- Community Advisory Board Feedback

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What should we do with outcomes?

- Share your results
  - The good and the challenging
  - Don't be afraid to share the challenging
- Celebrate the achievements
  - Recognize your team, students and community partners
- Make adjustments on the feedback
  - Talk with your team
  - Talk with your students
  - Talk with your school and community partners
- Set goals and track your updated outcomes

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How are you tracking outcomes within your programs?

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Thank you!

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