MS OT Program: The “Just Right” Fit

With recent debate over entry-level education needs, it is easy to forget about the advanced practice needs of occupational therapists who currently have a bachelor’s degree in occupational therapy. The Master of Science Program at the University of Pittsburgh (MS) answers that need and is intended for occupational therapists, educated in the United States or internationally, who are seeking advanced knowledge and skills. Dr. Roxanna Bendixen serves as the Program Director. The MS Program offers the unique feature of a curriculum customized for each student’s goals. Working collaboratively with an advisor, students design an in-depth course of study in their chosen area of advanced practice, drawing on resources within the department, school, university and community. MS students have the opportunity to closely interact with entry-level MOT students and participate in many student projects and activities. These interactions between the MOT and MS students have been beneficial in maximizing learning and increasing cultural awareness. An additional benefit of the program is the ability to participate in clinical preceptorships, which provide experiential learning in a specialized area of occupational therapy clinical practice for the purpose of advancing skills and knowledge in that specialized practice area. Through these preceptorships, students upgrade their clinical skills and participate in program development activities. International students develop familiarity with the U.S. health care system. Many of our MS graduates successfully sit for the NBCOT examination and remain in the US as clinicians, or continue their education through seeking doctoral level training.

Positioned for Success in Aging Research

When it comes to making an impact, Dr. Juleen Rodakowski leads the way! Pitt welcomes Dr. Rodakowski as its newest Assistant Professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy. Dr. Rodakowski completed her MS in occupational therapy and OTD at the University of Illinois at Chicago. After working in acute and long-term care, she came to us to build a career in research. Since coming to Pitt, she completed a MS in Clinical Research, post-doctoral training in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, and more post-doctoral training in Geriatric Psychiatry. Dr. Rodakowski’s NIH-supported research program examines occupational therapy-based interventions as a way to prevent or slow decline to disability for older adults. She primarily works with older adults who are at-risk for dementia and caregivers of individuals with cognitive impairments. In addition to examining how engagement in occupations may change as a result of participation in occupational therapy-based interventions, Dr. Rodakowski is exploring biological factors that may be improved by participation in the interventions. She collaborates with researchers across the University. Her collaborators are in Geriatric Psychiatry, Neurology, Behavioral Neuroscience, Neuropsychology, Biostatistics, Methodology, and Occupational Therapy. She maintains these strategic partnerships to grow her research program and demonstrate the effectiveness of occupational therapy services.
In October, two of our faculty participated in the American Occupational Therapy Association Vision 2025 Summit in Washington, DC. Master practitioners, healthcare administrators, educators, scientists, and policy makers from around the nation gathered to discuss the opportunities and challenges that the profession faces in the next 10 years – changing population health needs, changing models of delivery, and a changing workforce, among several others. One thing was clear: the need for new and enhanced strategic partnerships within and outside the profession will be essential to our success. Whether strengthening collaborations among occupational practitioners across practice settings (e.g., acute and post-acute care); enhancing interactions among practitioners, scientists, and educators; or advocating for occupational therapy’s critical role in innovative service delivery models – I am confident that strategic partnerships will take the profession to a new level of significance in the next 10 years. PITT OT is engaged in several strategic partnerships in the region and the nation. This issue shares our strategic partnerships in fieldwork education and occupational therapy practice in a variety of clinical settings. In addition, you will read about our students’ active roles in state and national leadership and advocacy. Finally, you will learn about the generation of new science that supports practice, education, and policy for older adults. These are just a few examples of how PITT OT seeks to develop and enhance strategic partnerships to ensure that occupational therapy remains a strong profession.

Stay tuned for more examples in upcoming issues.
Student Spotlight: POTA Leader—Jen Bennis

For many occupational therapists, early leadership opportunities often provide the foundation for future strategic partnerships and career advancement. MOT student Jen Bennis is realizing similar success through her past and present leadership roles in the Pennsylvania Occupational Therapy Association (POTA).

Bennis, a native of Lancaster, PA, “discovered” occupational therapy after completing an undergraduate degree in Psychology. After serving as the elected POTA student representative of her MOT class, Jen was appointed to be the Student Representative to the POTA Board. Her role on the Board is to represent the voice of OT and OTA POTA members. Bennis notes that the experience has allowed her to work collaboratively with experienced clinicians on the Board and with the Emerging Leaders to help improve POTA. A primary focus this year was to make POTA more accessible on social media, and Jen was able to contribute ideas to achieve this goal. Bennis acknowledges that this experience has not only helped her get to know the PA leaders in OT and network with other practitioners, but also to learn how to confidently use her voice to make a change. Jen has gained confidence in taking on leadership roles in OT and sees herself looking forward to many more years with POTA after graduation!

Students Making News

MOT students Jaclyn Mazza and Devra Alper each published an article on adaptive equipment for aging-in-place in the Pittsburgh Senior News.

MOT students co-authored and presented the following posters at the 2015 Pennsylvania Occupational Therapy Association Annual Conference:

- Elizabeth Bondarenko: Occupation-focused wellness groups for marginalized populations.
- Kelly Dickson: The prevalence and outcomes of frailty in skilled nursing facilities.
- Melissa Swafford: Self-awareness and recovery in stroke rehabilitation.

MOT students Samantha Chamberlin, Anne Chen, Stephanie Rouch, and Casie Strausbaugh were selected for the 2015-2016 Jewish Healthcare Foundation Jonas Salk Fellowship.

UPSOTA Class of 2017 elected leaders include: Jordan Shoup (Pres), Leah McCarthy (VP), Megan Shaffer (Treas), Amy Katz (Sec), Catherine Leece and Cameron Williams (AOTA reps), Elise Pure (POTA rep), Hannah Simko (Class liaison).

The following MOT students provided the “Occupational Therapy Checkout” at the recent Cranberry Township CarFit event: Jennifer Arrington, Kelly Dickson, Lindsay Feth, Megan Lucas, Carolyn Mayer.

Alumni Spotlight: Benjamin Gross

Even as an MOT student, it was evident that Benjamin Gross (MOT ’10) was destined for leadership. Gross took advantage of established leadership programs such as the Jonas Salk Fellowship and an international OT learning opportunity in Turkey, and led creative fundraising initiatives for AOTPAC. These experiences paved the way for Benjamin to be selected as an AOTA Emerging Leader and to participate in the Arizona OT Association (ArizOTA).

Fast-forward to the present and you will find Gross serving in a leader in many different roles. In addition to being the President of ArizOTA, he recently started his own private practice, “Transformative Therapy Services”. Services include vocational rehabilitation for clients with neuro and/or mental health diagnoses. These individuals are usually in need of cognitive skills training, with services provided in the home, community or workplace—wherever the client is experiencing difficulties.

When asked what advice he would give to current Pitt MOT students, he offered the following:

1. Be involved.
2. Give back with donations (when you can).
3. Give back with your time.
4. Recognize that anyone, with the will and desire, can be a leader.

Benjamin credits the University of Pittsburgh OT program and its faculty as aiding greatly in his success. Thank YOU, Benjamin Gross, for making us Pitt Proud!
The OT in Mental Health Act (HR 1761) would include OT when defining qualified mental health professionals and would expand the number of occupational therapists practicing in mental health by encouraging new therapists to practice in shortage areas through loan forgiveness.

The Enhancing the Stature of Visibility Medical Rehabilitation Research at the NIH Act (S 800 and HR 1631) supports investing in rehab research to promote independence, reduce hospital readmissions, and prevent more costly health problems by enhancing rehab science research at NIH without increasing spending.

The profession thanks Jennifer Arrington, Marissa Beaston, Jennifer Bennis, Jamie Cylinder, Elizabeth Duggan, Sarah Furar, Jordyne Goodman, Nicole Habovick, Emily Johnson, Melissa Leonard, Lindsay Lippert, Megan Lucas, Tracy Maschoff, Jaclyn Mazza, Abigail Moul, Alexis Palladino, Emily Peterson, Alexa Seybold, Melissa Swafford, Abigail Tuttle, and Susan Whitworth . . . For supporting and advocating for occupational therapy and the clients we serve! You make us Pitt Proud!

For the third year in a row, Pitt OT students advocated for occupational therapy at AOTA Capitol Hill Day. On September 28, 2015, 21 second year MOT students made the 4+ hour trek to Washington, DC to share the message that occupational therapy can be a part of the solution to today’s health care problems. Pitt MOT students spoke with their Representatives and Senators (13 offices), and shared their message of how occupational therapy can improve outcomes while cutting costs. Pitt Associate Professor and AOTA Board of Director, Denise Chisholm, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA also attended the event and provided mentorship and guidance to students throughout the day. The students highlighted two bills that demonstrate the distinct value of OT in mental health and wellness services, and rehabilitation research: