

**Preparation for a Career in the Field of Occupational Therapy: The role of high-impact
undergraduate experiences**

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Abstract

This thesis examines how high-impact educational practices can prepare undergraduate students for success in the field of occupational therapy (OT). The paper will utilize Campus Connections (CC), a youth mentorship program at Colorado State University, as the focus of this research.

Undergraduate mentors gain core skills relevant to OT from participation in CC, such as cultural humility, leadership, self-reflection, professionalism, theory-based practice, and therapeutic use of self. Through qualitative analysis of CC alumni mentor interviews and relevant literature, this research highlights the similarities between CC outcomes and OT professional competencies.

This research indicates that CC can provide a strong foundation for future OT practice.

Preparation for a Career in the Field of Occupational Therapy: The role of high-impact undergraduate experiences

The Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) program at Colorado State University educates and inspires more students to pursue careers in helping professions with each graduating class. The HDFS program can successfully cultivate well-rounded alumni because of the emphasis placed on high-impact practices throughout the undergraduate curriculum. These practices allow students to gain an in-depth understanding of the populations they aim to work with, motivating them to passionately enter new fields. Notably, many HDFS graduates transition into fields like occupational therapy (OT), where they can apply their understanding of human development to real-world interventions. This connection is particularly relevant when considering the high-impact programs HDFS provides like Campus Connections (CC), a mentorship initiative that fosters connections between undergraduate students and youth exposed to adversity.

CC aligns with many of the central aspects of high-impact practices. These include collaborative and service learning, as well as community engagement. Through CC, students gain hands-on experience in building mentoring relationships, problem-solving, and applying class learning to the real world. These experiences benefit the mentee but also foster critical skills in mentors. Outcomes of high-impact practices, such as leadership, empathy, and critical thinking, closely mirror competencies and cornerstones required for success in OT. These competencies are outlined in the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF-4).

Given the natural overlap between the principles of CC and the core competencies required in OT, this thesis explores the intersections between the two. Specifically, it investigates how the skills fostered through high-impact practices, like CC, align with those necessary for

success in OT practice. This will be examined through existing research on both CC mentor outcomes and OT professional competencies and will be supplemented with interviews with Campus Connections alumni who have transitioned into OT (see Appendix A for IRB information). This research offers insight into how undergraduate experiences can contribute to the development of professional skills that are key to OT success.

High-Impact Practices

As higher education evolves, research is beginning to question whether undergraduate students are gaining the skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex and unpredictable world (Kilgo et al., 2015). There are building concerns about the effectiveness of current educational systems which force questions of the preparedness of students as they begin entering career fields. Kilgo and colleagues (2015) state that in response to these concerns, The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) identified ten "high-impact" practices that were designed to enhance student learning and development. It is suggested that these practices such as service-learning and community-based learning, collaborative assignments and projects, and diversity/global learning have a positive influence on students' academics and future career readiness. These approaches help to ensure that students are getting maximum benefits from their undergraduate education (Kilgo et al., 2015).

According to Kuh (2008), these practices improve the undergraduate educational experience, because they require a greater time commitment and effort from students, often involving daily engagement to deepen student interest. Additionally, these high-impact practices create opportunities for students to work closely with faculty and peers over a longer period of time. Many of the practices identified by the AAC&U let students experience diverse perspectives, allowing students to broaden their worldview and challenge students to question

their thinking and collaborate with others meaningfully. Ultimately, these experiences can have life-changing impacts, enriching students' educational journeys (Kuh, 2008).

Types of High-Impact Practices/Outcomes

Having established the general importance of high-impact practices in deepening undergraduate education, it is important to explore each practice individually to better understand the specific outcomes they provide for students. The following sections will look at three of the ten high-impact practices identified by the AAC&U, highlighting the long-term benefits and outcomes they offer to students, in both the academic and the greater professional world. This section will only discuss the high-impact practices that are most relevant to the current study (see Appendix B for information about additional high-impact practices).

Undergraduate Learning Communities

Undergraduate learning communities are widely used in many universities to create a more comprehensive educational experience. These communities allow students to participate in learning that moves beyond the classroom. Learning communities can be seen in living arrangements in residence halls or small, focused classes that pair academic topics with activities outside of the classroom. Research shows that students in learning communities often experience better grades, greater satisfaction with their education, higher retention rates, and increased openness to diversity (Inkelas et al., 2006; Kuh, 2008; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2010). These positive outcomes may result from frequent interactions with diverse peers and faculty, which can foster a sense of closeness and contribute to perceptions of a supportive campus environment (Pike et al., 2010). By putting students in communities based on shared interests or backgrounds, universities create more focused academic engagement (Pike et al., 2010).

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning has been recognized as an important educational approach since the 1980s (Cabrera et al., 2002). This high-impact practice places emphasis on moving away from traditional lecture-based education. In doing this, students are able to work in groups to solve problems. This helps students develop active listening and critical thinking skills among a diverse group of peers (Cabrera et al., 2002; Kuh, 2008). Collaborative learning environments can be observed in universities in a variety of ways. These can include study groups, group projects, research collaborations, and team-based assignments (Kuh, 2008). Research by Cabrera and colleagues (2002) shows that students who participate in collaborative learning experiences throughout their undergraduate education develop stronger interpersonal relationships and greater openness to diversity. These skills enhance students' preparedness for workplaces that prioritize collaboration and adaptability. In turn, this prepares students to thrive in a diverse and constantly evolving world (Cabrera et al., 2002).

Service and Community-Based Learning Courses

Service and community-based learning courses provide students with opportunities for hands-on experience with the content and challenges they study in the classroom. Service-learning courses usually have both real-world involvement and in-class components. In-class components allow students to reflect on their experience and connect their work in the community back to course concepts (Kuh, 2008). Through service experiences, students can gain an understanding of the importance of contributing to their communities. When working with community partners, students become better prepared for the workforce (Kuh, 2008). According to Kilgo and colleagues (2015), service-learning courses lead to many beneficial outcomes for

undergraduate students. These include increased civic responsibility, political awareness, community engagement, intercultural effectiveness, openness to diversity, multicultural competence, and a commitment to socially responsible work. Service and community-based learning also improve students' global perspectives (Kilgo et al., 2015). Additionally, research by Simons and Beverly (2006) shows that participation in service-learning boosts students' self-efficacy and deepens their academic experience. This is because students are given opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings. These courses further prepare students for their future careers by exposing them to the complexities of the world they will navigate post-graduation (Simons & Beverly, 2006).

Campus Connections Youth Mentoring Program

The current study aims to evaluate mentoring as a combination of multiple high-impact practices, demonstrating its significant outcomes for undergraduate students. Specifically, this study focuses on *Campus Connections*, a youth mentorship program facilitated by Colorado State University (CSU), which has been in operation for 15 years (Campus Connections, 2019).

Campus Connections (CC) is a youth mentoring program that pairs undergraduate student mentors with youth mentees, many of whom have been exposed to adversity (Haddock et al., 2017). Youth mentees aged 10-18, are referred to the program by a variety of community partners and local school districts, for a 12-week intervention. Each week, mentors and mentees spend four hours on campus, participating in a variety of structured activities. These activities include a 30-minute "Walk and Talk" around campus, one hour of school support, a provided shared meal, and two hours of prosocial activities, such as crafts, sports, or trivia which are run by the mentors (Haddock et al. 2017; Boat et al., 2019).

This program focuses on fostering meaningful relationships between mentors and mentees. This is achieved by promoting a sense of belonging for participants as well as providing a structured, supportive environment. Each mentee chooses their mentor based on shared interest to ensure a strong mentee-mentor match (Boat et al., 2019). Prior to the beginning of the program, mentors receive 18 hours of training that discusses mentoring skills, social justice issues, and adolescent development. This training is facilitated by program faculty and is supplemented with student leadership (Boat et al., 2019).

Each session of CC involves approximately 24 mentoring pairs who are then further grouped into smaller “Mentor Families”, which each has a designated student Mentor Coach who provides further support (Haddock et al., 2020). The structure of the program allows for multiple layers of connection and reinforces the sense of community and belonging for both the youth and the mentors (Maples et al., 2020).

Campus Connections as a High-Impact Practice

Through its focus on mentorship, academic support, and community engagement, CC functions as a comprehensive service-learning experience for undergraduate students, integrating several high-impact practices that influence outcomes for both mentors and mentees. Many components of CC align with principles found in collaborative learning, undergraduate learning communities, and service learning. By examining these high-impact practices alongside existing research on CC, we can better understand the specific outcomes mentors experience within the program.

Collaborative Learning

CC embodies principles of collaborative learning by creating an environment where undergraduate students can engage in shared problem-solving, reflection, and relationship-building among themselves and with their mentees. This collaborative learning emphasizes peer-to-peer interaction, critical thinking, and the development of interpersonal skills (Cabrera et al., 2002; Kuh, 2008). During CC, undergraduate mentors can participate in activities with their mentees that foster active collaboration. These activities require mentors to utilize active listening, cooperative problem-solving, and dialogue, all of which are central to collaborative learning. Mentors also can work with fellow peers or student leadership in pre and post-lab conversations and reflections. During this time mentors can collaborate to talk about situations that have occurred during the mentoring period and can work together to find a solution.

In the CC curriculum mentors are not only guiding youth but learning alongside them. In helping mentees with homework or participating in discussions about social justice (Maples et al., 2020) mentors can improve their own understanding of the material while also improving skills such as teamwork, empathy, and leadership. This mentor-mentee dynamic mirrors the collaborative model seen in many group-based learning environments, where participants learn by working through difficulties together (Cabrera et al., 2002). In addition to the mentor and mentee collaboration the structural approach of “mentor families” reinforces the collaborative learning environment by creating small learning communities. With one Mentor Coach overseeing each family, this structure encourages frequent interaction, peer feedback, and

support, which are all aspects observed in more traditional collaborative learning environments (Kuh, 2008).

As previously mentioned, research on collaborative learning shows that it allows undergraduate students to strengthen skills such as interpersonal skills, critical thinking, communication, and openness to diversity (Cabrera et al., 2002), all of which are cultivated within CC. Research conducted by Haddock and colleagues (2013) assessed mentor outcomes which mirrored many of the outcomes discussed within existing literature on collaborative learning environments. It was discovered that CC allows students to develop interpersonal skills, most frequently patience and listening skills, with results indicating that mentors felt more competent in social situations (Haddock et al., 2013). Additionally, mentors reported being more open-minded and civically aware with participation in the program bringing them awareness of local needs as well as the pervasiveness of stereotypes within our society (Haddock et al., 2013). Based on its structural components and undergraduate outcomes it is clear that CC aligns with many of the principles of collaborative learning.

Undergraduate Learning Communities

Undergraduate learning communities are designed to connect students who share common interests in an environment where they can engage deeply with one another and their learning (Inkelas et al., 2006). Similarly, CC creates a community of undergraduate mentors who have a shared interest and passion for mentoring youth exposed to adversity. The program brings students together in a structured way outside of the classroom each week with ample opportunity for bonding during the night as well as before and after. During the training period, CC mentors participate in multiple team bonding activities from student leadership each week. This is done to

ensure that the CC community extends beyond just the mentor-mentee pairs and that undergraduate participants feel supported and welcomed. Part of this community aspect is facilitated by mentor families; this small supportive community further solidifies CC as an immersive educational community (Maples et al., 2020).

Reminiscent of more traditional learning communities, CC provides undergraduate students with meaningful peer interactions and a supportive environment, which research shows leads to improved academic performance, higher student retention rates, and greater openness to diversity (Inkelas et al., 2006; Pike et al., 2010). Research conducted by CC (Maples et al., 2020) indicated that students who participated in CC have greater degree completion and degree progress in comparison to non-CC participants of similar academic caliber (Maples et al., 2020). This greater retention may be attributed to the greater sense of belonging students in CC report, with research (2013) stating that students say they feel close to other mentors and mentor supervisors throughout the program (Haddock et al., 2013). As previously established CC allows students to be more civically aware (Haddock et al., 2013); it also allows students the space to recognize their own privilege and opportunity which serves as motivation to deepen their relationship with their mentee, opening their minds to more diverse experiences of youth (Haddock et al., 2013). The sense of belonging fostered by CC greatly strengthens undergraduate students' personal and academic development, emphasizing the program's alignment with the principles of undergraduate learning communities.

Service and Community-Based Learning Course

Service and community-based learning courses are designed to combine academic knowledge and learning with impactful community service. These courses encourage students to

reflect on their experiences and apply their classroom knowledge to real-life situations (Kuh, 2008). CC aligns with this high-impact practice by allowing undergraduate students to engage directly with local youth exposed to adversity, many of which face many difficulties such as involvement with the juvenile justice system (Haddock et al., 2017). Mentors not only serve as positive role models for youth participants but also actively participate in supporting their mentees academically and emotionally, contributing to the community in a direct and impactful way. An imperative aspect of many service-learning courses is in-class reflective activities, CC embodies this as the program begins and ends with an hour that only the college students attend. This time is utilized for lectures where the students learn about best practices of mentoring as well as time for group reflection and recapping of the students' experience (Haddock et al., 2013).

In line with service-learning outcomes, undergraduate students who participate in CC develop civic responsibility, cultural awareness, and a deeper understanding of social justice issues (Haddock et al., 2013). Research conducted by Haddock and colleagues (2013) found that mentors reported a higher awareness of societal inequalities and an increased dedication to socially responsible work (Haddock et al., 2013). Additional research by Boat and colleagues (2019) found that undergraduate participants maintained a high level of self-efficacy (Boat et al., 2019). These findings mirror the benefits that are usually seen in service-learning, where undergraduate students deepen their openness to diversity, critical thinking, and personal efficacy (Kilgo et al., 2015). The way the Campus Connections program can combine mentorship, community involvement, and structured reflection underscores its relationship with the key principles of service learning.

Occupational Therapy

High-impact practices were developed to improve the outcomes of undergraduate learning by cultivating competencies that are critical in various professional fields. This study in particular looks at how these practices can help foster success in the field of occupational therapy. The following section delves into occupational therapy, setting groundwork for analysis which will assess how the core skills developed in CC can play a fundamental role in successful practice within the field of occupational therapy.

Occupational Therapy (OT) is a client-centered health profession that focuses on helping individuals of all ages participate in meaningful daily activities or “occupations”. Occupations are aspects of an individual’s life that help promote independence and well-being. OT practitioners, which describe therapists, assistants, and aides, utilize a holistic approach. This means that practitioners address physical, cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors that may impact their clients’ daily lives. (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], n.d.). Additionally, OT is crucial in prevention and health promotion, helping individuals limit the risk of injury, improve habits, and manage chronic conditions (AOTA, n.d.).

The Fourth Edition of the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF-4) defines “occupations” as personalized activities that people do individually, with others, or in communities to occupy time in ways that bring both meaning and joy to life. Occupations are categorized into multiple categories. The first of these categories is activities of daily living (ADLs). These activities focus on taking care of one’s own self. Another category is instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs), which support daily life within the home or community. OT practitioners also support health management occupations relating to creating, maintaining, and

managing health and wellness activities. Other occupation categories include rest and sleep, education, work, play, leisure, and social participation (OTPF-4, 2020).

OT practitioners can support occupations in a variety of ways. The profession emphasizes collaboration between practitioners and clients to make personalized intervention plans that consider both immediate goals and long-term outcomes (AOTA). All interventions in OT are deeply rooted in evidence-based practice, to ensure that clients receive care that is proven to be effective and aligned with rehabilitation research (AOTA). Whether practitioners are working in hospitals, schools, clinics, or community-based environments, they aim to empower individuals to live as independently as possible. OT plays a critical role in improving the quality of life, health, and functional outcomes for a wide variety of populations, including children with developmental disabilities, adults recovering from injury or illness, and older adults managing the impacts of aging (AOTA).

Success in the Field of Occupational Therapy

The current study seeks to assess the attributes that lead to success for OT practitioners. The OTPF-4 is a vital resource utilized to define and operationalize what “success” in this field would look like. The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, Fourth Edition (OPTF-4), released in 2020, is the latest effort of the profession to clearly outline the domain and process of OT. This framework builds upon the core values of the profession, which have been established since the profession was founded in 1917 (OTPF-4, 2020). These values encapsulate the vision of OT being occupation-based, client-centered, contextual, and evidence-based (OTPF-4, 2020). By providing a central understanding of these foundations, the OPTF-4 serves as a framework to guide practice and enhance professional organization. In this study, the focus will be on the

cornerstones of OT Practice, as outlined in the OTPF-4, and the contributors that enhance a practitioner's effectiveness in the field (OTPF-4, 2020).

The OTPF-4 describes cornerstones as the distinct knowledge, skills, and qualities that OT practitioners possess. These cornerstones are essential contributors to the success of the occupational therapy process and are the pillars that aid in distinguishing OT from other professions (OTPF-4, 2020). There are four cornerstones which include: (1) core values and beliefs rooted in occupation, (2) knowledge of expertise in the therapeutic use of occupation, (3) professional behaviors and dispositions, and (4) therapeutic use of self. Each of these cornerstones influences one another and serves as a fundamental foundation for practitioners (OTPF-4, 2020). To gain a comprehensive understanding it is essential that each of these cornerstones be observed individually.

Core Values and Beliefs Rooted in Occupation

One of the most defining aspects of OT is its emphasis on occupation. However, this language also contributes significantly to the public's uncertainty about the profession. Cohn (2019) highlights the importance of practitioners confidently asserting their competence and affirming the value of occupation. Cohn quotes AOTA president Lamb, who stated that the profession holds on to the self-limiting belief that individuals do not understand what occupational therapy is (Cohn, 2019,). Cohn expands on this by explaining that the challenge lies in interpreting the concept of occupation. Most people think of "occupation" as a job or having to do with employment (Cohn, 2019), which greatly differs from the meaning OT practitioners use. Rather than running away from this confusion, Cohn (2019) argues that it is vital the field embraces the strength found in its dedication to occupation. She emphasizes that

OT's focus on occupation is essential to the lives of the population practitioners work with (Cohn, 2019). For practitioners, being deeply connected to the concept of occupation, which is reflected in the verbiage of this cornerstone within the OTPF-4, is critical to the work they do.

Knowledge of and Expertise in the Therapeutic use of Occupation

The importance of understanding and applying occupation-based interventions is essential in OT practice, as evidenced by an additional cornerstone focused on occupation. Gillen (2013) outlines the negative implications that arise when therapeutic intervention strays away from its roots in occupation. He describes how some areas of OT that move away from occupation-based intervention face challenges such as professional blurring, dual encroachment, and professional envy (Gillen, 2013). Additionally, Gillen (2013) highlights that as intervention becomes less focused on occupation, the extensive research that has served to scientifically back the philosophy of OT is being undermined. This shift is particularly evident in the realm of neurorehabilitation, where traditional treatments that can be described as "doing," "active participation," or "skill-building" have been replaced by therapist-led interventions, such as tendon manipulation, which frame the therapist's actions as the central element of recovery (Gillen, 2013). This dramatic shift away from more traditional occupation-based interventions has brought about a call to action for practitioners to return to evidence-based, occupation-centered intervention (Gillen, 2013). Gillen's (2013) article reinforces the importance of practitioners having a deep understanding of the therapeutic use of occupation, a key factor in the development of this cornerstone in the OTPF-4.

Professional Behaviors and Dispositions

In developing this cornerstone in the OTPF-4 authors referenced the *Standards of Practice for Occupational Therapy* (2015), created by Kennenberg and colleagues, to define the minimum standards of the field. Standard 1 outlines the professional standing and responsibility of practitioners, detailing the behaviors and dispositions expected of practitioners to ensure success in the practice, as mentioned in the OTPF-4. The document lists 13 expectations within this standard, with the following being most pertinent to this thesis. OT practitioners must have current knowledge of legislative, political, social, cultural, and societal issues that may impact clients and the practice of OT (Kennenberg et al., 2015). Practitioners are also expected to be effective advocates for their client's needs, intervention planning, and necessary accommodations. Furthermore, OT professionals must respect the client's sociocultural background to best provide client-centered and family-centered services (Kennenberg et al., 2015). These professional behaviors and dispositions, as outlined in the standards, make up a crucial part of the OTPF-4 cornerstones, reflecting the essential qualities that determine successful OT practice.

Therapeutic Use of Self

Therapeutic use of self is a vitally important aspect of the OT process, where practitioners form and maintain their therapeutic relationship with clients. These relationships are facilitated through the practitioner's professional reasoning, empathy, and client-centered, collaborative approach to treatment (OTPF-4, 2020). Professional reasoning helps clients understand the information they receive during an intervention, cultivating a sense of hope and meaning in the intervention (OTPF-4, 2020). In this context, empathy is defined as the emotional

connection shared between practitioner and client which allows for more open communication (OTPF-4, 2020).

By creating a collaborative relationship, practitioners are able to thoroughly understand their experience and goals for intervention. Utilizing this collaborative approach throughout treatment respects both the clients' and practitioners' contribution to the process. Practitioners must employ interpersonal communication skills to alter the power dynamic in the relationship, creating space for the clients to take control of their decisions and problem-solving. This approach is essential to the effectiveness of treatment and has been identified by clients as critically important to the outcomes of intervention (OTPF-4, 2020). Clients are the ones who identify and communicate what is important for them in treatment. Practitioners must cultivate an environment that allows clients to feel safe to authentically express themselves. To create an inclusive space practitioners must have knowledge of gender-affirming care, an understanding of the systemic issues impacting underrepresented groups, and deploy cultural humility throughout the OT process (OTPF-4, 2020). The therapeutic use of self underscores the importance of building strong relationships, that are fundamental to the cornerstones of OT and critical for facilitating success for practitioners in the practice.

Additional Contributors

In addition to the cornerstones of OT practice the OTPF-4 (2020) outlines contributors that are complimentary to the cornerstones. These contributors are skills and qualities that interact with the cornerstones and provide a foundation for practitioners which contributes to their success in the practice (OTPF-4, 2020). These attributes not only hold the potential to

enhance the therapeutic process but also ensure that practitioners are adept and able to meet the diverse needs of clients.

The first of these contributors is *client-centered practice*. This term is utilized to describe many of the cornerstones. Though client-centered practice itself can be defined as the approach to treatment that places importance on client partnership and collaboration throughout the therapy process. This approach emphasizes the clients' experience, knowledge, strengths, ability of choice, and overall autonomy (OTPF-4, 2020). *Clinical and professional reasoning* is an additional contributor that describes the process practitioners use to plan, lead, employ, and reflect on client care (OTPF-4). As described above professional reasoning is vital for the effective incorporation of therapeutic use of self and ensuring that clients are fully informed about the information they are receiving (OTPF-4, 2020).

Competences for practice is a broad term that looks generally at practitioners' knowledge, interpersonal skills, performance abilities, and both clinical and ethical reasoning skills concerning their effectiveness in aiding clients in engaging in occupation and supporting health and wellness (Johnson Coffelt & Gabriel, 2017). Ensuring the maintenance of these competencies proves that practitioners are adept at providing care. *Cultural humility* describes the flexibility, acknowledgment of bias, and lifelong learning approach to diversity that practitioners must embrace. Cultural humility also encapsulates an understanding of how power influences healthcare interactions (Agner, 2020). Due to the diverse population OT practitioners interact with understanding and practicing cultural humility is incredibly important.

Like most defined professions, OT places a strong expectation on practitioners to maintain high *ethics*. The AOTA has published the *Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics* (2015)

which outlines the enforceable professional behavior standards and principles of the field. These include beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, justice, veracity, and fidelity. These standards reflect the historical foundations of OT, and it is expected that these standards are frequently referenced as a guide to ethical decision-making (Hachtel et al., 2015). Similarly, to maintain a high value of practice in the field practitioners must utilize *evidence-informed practice*. To do this practitioners must integrate the evidence that supports the profession into clinical practice (Benefeild & Johnston, 2020).

Professionals in the field must also be adept in *inter- and interprofessional collaborations*; due to the nature of the work, typically practitioners will be part of a medical team. Ensuring that practitioners have strong interpersonal skills and effective communication techniques is imperative to facilitate success among these multidisciplinary teams (OTPF-4, 2020). *Leadership* is highlighted as another vital contributor for OT practitioners. When assessing what contributes to success in the field, Fleming-Castaldy and Patro (2012) found that being able to inspire a shared vision as well as challenging the process were the two most prominent skills. Leaders in this field need to embrace the idea of challenging the status quo (Fleming-Castaldy & Patro, 2012).

Lifelong learning occurs in four stages for healthcare practitioners. It begins with fundamental formal education, such as a high school diploma. Next individuals must prepare for entry into the profession, this can be observed by sitting for national boards and receiving necessary licensures. The third stage includes contact with clients and the adaptation that occurs as individuals develop within their profession. Lastly, practitioners must participate in continuing education, to maintain competence in the ever-changing world (Jones & Kirkland, 1984). This

ongoing journey of education is relevant to the next contributor of *theory-based practice*.

Lifelong learning ultimately supports the further development of the profession by implementing the most relevant theories into practice. This type of practice utilizes research, personal judgment, and knowledge of the client to form competent clinical decisions (Dubouloz, Egan, Vallerand, Zweck, 1999).

Practitioners are not only concerned with occupation but also must be aware of the multitude of factors that can disrupt or promote these occupations and the client's ability to participate in them. To understand these aspects, practitioners must have *micro and macro system knowledge*. Being competent in how different influences impact clients is vital to the success of the implementation of treatment for individuals (OTPF-4, 2020). Briefly mentioned in the third cornerstone of OT practices *professional advocacy* is a significant contributor for OT practitioners. Profession advocacy can be observed in the practitioner's ability to empower clients and community members, engage in organizations that support advocacy, engagement in policy making, stay current on societal and political issues that may impact clients, and inform others of the professional value and outcomes of OT (McKinnon, 2024). This specific type of advocacy allows for a more solidified understanding of the field, to combat institutional problems, influence legislative change, and emphasize population-based decisions (McKinnon, 2024).

The final two contributors are *self-advocacy* and *self-reflection*. The OTPF-4 (2020) describes self-advocacy as making individual decisions, understanding how to get information about personal interests, developing a network of support, understanding individual rights and responsibilities, and reaching out to others when needed. Self-advocacy can be observed as a

client goal, so it is important practitioners have a strong sense of personal self-advocacy to effectively teach this to clients (OTPF4, 2020). Self-reflection is seen in a practitioner's ability to reflect on their practice. Healthcare researchers have stated that reflective thinking is vital for self-reflection and analysis which ultimately leads to the process of improving practice (Krueger et al., 2020).

Campus Connections as a Facilitator of Success in Occupational Therapy

This section highlights the key findings from the in-depth research presented above, outlining similarities between the skills cultivated in CC and those essential for success in OT. As outlined in Figure 1 below, this analysis focuses on the following skills, as identified in the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF-4) and how they are cultivated by CC demonstrated in previously mentioned research and supplemented with interviews with CC alumni.

Figure 1.*Bridging CC Outcomes and Occupational Therapy Competencies*

Cornerstones and Contributors for success in the field of OT (OTPF-4, 2020)	Campus Connections Mentor Outcomes	Supplemental Support from Participants with relevant OT experience.
Cultural Humility	Understanding one’s own privilege, gaining perspective, and decreasing the use of stereotypes (Weilier et al. 2014; Haddock et al., 2013)	<p>“Anytime you're in a community-based setting, I feel like there's a lot more opportunity to tap into your cultural awareness and Campus Connections fits that model beautifully”.</p> <p>“CC did show that, like, everyone comes from a different situation, like no mentee had the same situation, even if they were like, from the same family, like their siblings. And I think that helped me, like broad, my perspective in OT”</p>
Leadership	Increased Confidence in Leadership Skills and Leadership Skills across multiple areas (Haddock et al., 2013).	<p>“There's kind of a hierarchy, and ability to both observe leadership, rely on leadership, and then also the ability to become leaders.”</p> <p>“It definitely made me more of a leader, more comfortable with being a leader”</p>
Self-Reflection	Personal Growth, Learning about oneself, Increased self-awareness, and Increased reflective skills (Weiler et al., 2014; Haddock et al., 2013)	<p>“I feel like campus connections, first of all, have that. At the end of the day, we meet in post-lab. So we immediately set up opportunities to reflect back on what happens.”</p> <p>“CC had a heavy emphasis on reflecting with journals. I think that as an OT, it's also important to reflect on yourself and your practice.”</p>
Professionalism	Professional Development, Increased Professionalism (Weiler et al., 2014)	<p>“It was just my first brush with professionalism. It was my first brush with presenting my opinion and my intervention in my knowledge and capacity that is supposed to help somebody else. So I definitely developed the skills of how to do that in campus connections.”</p>
Theory-Based Practice	Understand how to	<p>“I think that was my first introduction to how there is a theory to what we're doing and then</p>

	operate within a family system approach, the Systemic perspective aids mentors in their work (Haddock et al., 2013)	how you can design something or act in a way that implements that theory... in OT you're gonna have a theory that you're trying to center your intervention around.”
Therapeutic Use of Self	Increased Communication Skills, Betterment of Relationships, Problem-Solving Skills, Self Understanding within Relationships (Weiler et al., 2014; Haddock et al., 2013)	<p>“Being a part of CC has allowed me to gain hands-on experience with youth and has allowed me to understand how to truly bond with them”</p> <p>“Time participating with CC has taught me alot about how to get different adolescents interested in the activities of the night and that buy-in is vital for participation in therapy”</p>
Competencies for Practice	Increased Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills (Weiler et al., 2013)	“Because it's such a structured program, it allows for the development of professional reasoning, professional skills, and communication skills. I think that it lends itself well to developing competencies”

Connecting CC Practice with OT Competencies

Cultural Humility

Cultural humility is a crucial cornerstone in OT, that emphasizes the importance of understanding and respecting the varying cultural backgrounds, identities and lived experiences of clients. Practitioners in the field of OT are expected to take a self-reflective approach to cultural humility. This means that they will be committed to an ongoing process of learning from each client interaction as well as bringing awareness to their own biases (OTPF, 2020). This focus on cultural humility is strongly supported by the mentor experience at CC. These mentors work with youth exposed to adversity that comes from many diverse backgrounds. One CC alumni shared, “I don’t think in my personal life I have encountered at-risk youth to the level that I did in Campus Connections,” explaining that they encountered “all different kinds of situations” and learned that “everyone comes from a different walk of life”. Another alumni echoed this statement explaining how CC provided them with “an open space for processing” without judgment. This encouraged them to interact with mentees with cultural awareness and respect for each youth’s unique circumstances. These personal sentiments are also supported by research about CC mentor outcomes which find that CC enabled mentors to gain perspective about their own privilege and was crucial in decreasing their use of stereotypes (Weiler et al. 2014; Haddock et al., 2013).

This experiential learning also aligns with OT’s emphasis on client-centered care as it pertains to cultural humility. This can be seen as another past participant noted: “Everyone’s occupations are influenced by their culture and identity,” working in CC gave them the experience to understand that “the occupations you participate in cannot be done without identity

or diversity”. In cultivating this awareness, CC mentors are able to develop a foundational understanding of cultural humility. This can prepare them to navigate the complex cultural dynamics that come along with OT practice. Having this heightened capacity for cultural sensitivity is critical to building trust and engagement with clients in practice. This is also essential in enabling the practitioner to be confident that their interventions are meaningful and relevant to each client’s unique context.

Leadership

Leadership is seen as a critical contributor to OT practice. As leaders’ practitioners must navigate varied roles, inspire collaboration, and balance team dynamics to support client-centered care (Flemming-Castaldy & Patro, 2012). Within each night at CC mentors are placed in positions where they will lead mentees through prosocial activities of their choice (Haddock et al. 2017; Boat et al., 2019). This gives mentors the opportunity to make real-time decisions and respond to more challenging situations. One alumni highlighted this practical leadership experience stating “Campus Connections [activities] is one of those things where you are implementing intervention. On top of activities, you are communicating with kiddos and parents, caregivers, and professionals. Those are all the things that you’ll be doing in your professional life, and this is your first shot at it with supervision”. This practical experience helped the mentor become “more comfortable with being a leader,” directly translating to their OT practice. On a wide scale this statement was further supported, Haddock and colleagues (2013) found that participation in CC increased individuals’ confidence in leadership skills across multiple areas (Haddock et al., 2013).

Another participant emphasized the value of CC's hierarchical structure, mentioning that it "naturally creates a hierarchy" where, mentees, mentors, mentor coaches, and lead mentor coaches each play specific roles. This structure allowed mentors to observe leadership as well as rely on leaders for guidance, while also developing their own leadership capabilities within the mentor-mentee dyad. The participant notes that this non-authoritative approach allowed for "humility and leadership" because leaders were encouraged to support pairs rather than command. This idea emulates the collaborative and respectful dynamic valued in OT (OTPF, 2020).

The experience in CC provides mentors with a form of leadership that values and is grounded in trust, humility, and collaboration. Each of these is reflected in the core principles of OT. In allowing for these comprehensive learning experiences in undergraduate learning, CC prepares mentors for the leadership demands of OT. Demands where a practitioner is often balancing authority with empathy to create effective, supportive bonds while still maintaining a client-centered focus.

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is a fundamental skill for OT practitioners. It allows them to evaluate their own practices, acknowledge areas for improvement, and enhance their therapeutic effectiveness (Krueger et al., 2020). As a service-learning course, CC encourages self-reflection throughout many avenues of the program. Mentors are prompted to consider their interactions with mentees, recognize their biases, and assess the impact of their mentorship. One alumni shared a pivotal moment in the program stating, "On the last night of the program, my first mentee surprised me by sharing how much the program and our relationship had impacted him. It was the first time I

really understood how significant our relationships are for the kiddos themselves.” This reflection highlighted the mentor’s shift from more personal worries about themselves in the program to a more client-centered perspective. This transition is crucial for OT professionals and by getting this experience at CC this transition was easier.

Another interviewee emphasized that self-reflection is what differentiates “a good practitioner from a great one”. They also noted that self-reflection drives continuous improvement through a “mindset of curiosity and willingness to learn”. This mindset allows OT practitioners to be reflective on their practice, drawing from resources such as peer feedback, leadership input, and continuous professional development to continue to enhance their intervention. CC facilitates this practice through structured debrief sessions and reflective journals. This allows mentors space to think about their interaction and to assess the emotional and practical aspects of the work they do each night with their mentees. The structure also enables mentors to have increased self-awareness and increased reflective skills (Weiler et al., 2014; Haddock et al., 2013). The reflective practices in CC mirror the intentional reflection expected of OT practitioners to ensure that they can remain adaptable and responsive to the evolving needs of the population who they work with.

Professional Behaviors and Dispositions and Competencies for Practice

Professionalism is a key cornerstone in OT that encompasses the knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions practitioners are expected to have in order to navigate the complex and ever-changing needs of clients. The OTPF-4 draws on the *Standards of Practice for Occupational Therapy* (2015) to define the professional responsibilities and competencies that are expected within the field. Some of these include staying informed about legislative, political,

and societal factors that could impact clients, advocating for clients' needs, and respecting the unique sociocultural background of each client (Kennenberg et al., 2015). Research by Weiler et al. (2014) about CC mentor outcomes found that the program enhances mentors' professional development, specifically in areas like communication, accountability, and collaborative problem-solving. These areas of development mirror those the OTPF-4 (2020) outlines as essential competencies of OT practice. Aspects like interpersonal skills, performance abilities, and ethical and clinical reasoning seem to overlap with both professionalism and CC outcomes.

CC mentors echoed these findings, describing the program as their "first brush with professionalism." In CC they learned how to "present [their] opinion and intervention in a way that is supposed to help someone else", creating a lasting sense of confidence and professional identity. This was furthered as the mentor noted that "a lot of it is those interpersonal skills," including both expressive and receptive communication, which is essential for understanding clients holistically. In alignment with client advocacy one participant mentioned how CC allowed them to feel more confident advocating for their mentee, "CC plants seeds that inspire change and advocacy for the youth we interact with". This early exposure to professionalism within CC prepares mentors to navigate the complex dynamics and ethical demands of OT. Undergraduate experiences like CC equips prospective practitioners with essential skills for client advocacy and overall competency in practice.

Theory-Based Practice

Theory-based practice is essential in OT, where practitioners use a blend of research, professional judgment, and client knowledge to make informed clinical decisions (Dubouloz et al., 1999). In CC, mentors gain early exposure to this approach as much of the training and

program is grounded in theoretical frameworks. This allows mentors to understand how to integrate evidence and theory into their work with mentees. One alumni recalled, “When I was in CC, we would have pre-night meetings with articles we had read and journaled about, and then we’d all discuss them as a group,” stating that this experience was their “first introduction to how there is a theory to what we’re doing” and to implementing that theory in practice. This closely aligns with OT’s emphasis on evidence-informed care. Practitioners are expected to continually draw from research to design effective, client-centered interventions (OTPF-4, 2020; Dubouloz et al., 1999).

Research by Haddock et al. (2013) supports that CC’s theory-based approach allows mentors to develop a systemic, family-centered perspective which is critical when working with youth exposed to adversity. Another interviewee emphasized that CC allowed her to “see the outcomes when you are using a framework” and adapt strategies as needed. This is a practice that is directly applicable to OT, where practitioners often need to make real-time changes to intervention. CC’s structure which incorporates a theory-informed approach allows mentors to develop foundational skills in evidence-based decision-making. This will prepare them for the complexities of OT practice where interventions must be rooted in theory but also flexible and adaptive.

Therapeutic Use of Self

Therapeutic use of self is a central aspect of OT, which enables practitioners to actively build rapport, empathy, and trust in order to support their clients as they move towards their goals. This approach requires professional reasoning, empathy, and a collaborative, client-centered focus to build therapeutic relationships (OTPF-4, 2020). In CC, mentors are

introduced to this approach as they learn to adapt to the unique needs of their mentees. This builds rapport between the pair through the use of empathetic listening and responsive support. Research by Haddock et al. (2013) and Weiler et al. (2014) highlights how CC enhances mentors' communication skills, relationship-building, and self-understanding which are all essential elements of the therapeutic use of self.

Several mentors observed that CC emphasized meeting mentees where they are. This practice parallels OT's idea of client-centered care. One alumni explained, "I think CC does an incredible job of meeting all of their participants where they are at... the mentees are the focal point of [the mentors'] attention, and their decision-making relies on their needs." They noted that this allowed them to build "therapeutic rapport," which in OT practice is crucial for fostering client motivation and engagement by making clients feel valued and understood. Another interviewee described CC's focus on adapting to the mentee by explaining "If your mentee wasn't feeling it that day, then you would do whatever they wanted... truly letting the mentees guide the night". This emphasis on letting mentees that the lead is reminiscent of the role of an OT practitioner, where the intervention is client-guided without the imposition of authority (OTPF-4, 2020). These experiences provide mentors with foundational skills in the therapeutic use of self. This prepares them to be able to establish meaningful, client-centered relationships in OT practice.

Implications and Conclusions

This research highlights the significant impacts CC has as a high-impact practice on undergraduate students who hope to pursue a career in OT. Through mentorship experiences, CC mentors are able to cultivate competences that align with OT's core cornerstones and

contributors of success, including cultural humility, client-centered care, professionalism and therapeutic use of self (OTPF-4, 2020). The findings from this study supported by interviews with CC alumni and relevant literature demonstrate that the skills developed through CC can be applied beyond the mentoring experience and play a role in preparing students for the interpersonal and professional sphere of OT practice.

Given these results, there are clear implications for how programs like CC can support the recruitment and preparation of more pre-OT students. Sharing these results with pre-OT students would allow them to understand CC's relevance to their future careers resulting in a potentially greater amount of mentors for CC. Understanding the overlap between CC's mentorship outcomes and the competencies required in OT will allow mentors to see the long-term benefits of participating which can make it an attractive option for those considering OT.

Additionally, integrating these findings into CC's training materials or canvas shell could improve mentors program awareness. This could provide new mentors with a clearer understanding of the professional benefits they can gain from participation in CC. As there is a call to increase experiential learning as a way to prepare students for their careers, the results seen from this study can provide valuable insights for other programs who hope to better connect academic learning to real world professions. Ultimately, this study proves the transformative effect that high-impact practices like CC can have on undergraduate students. Specifically, it is evident that CC has the potential to develop foundational skills that will allow for success in the field of OT.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board and Interviewee Information

The interviewees who provided supplemental information for this project were selected through snowball sampling. Three individuals were interviewed two of which are CC alumnus who have worked as a part of the field of OT and the final interviewee is current OT working alongside CC to enhance the regulatory needs of participants.

To ensure my project did not need IRB Review I contacted the Social Behavioral and Education Research Panel Senior Coordinator, Cami Lind, via the email found on CSU's IRB website. I provided an overview and description of my intended thesis and asked if my planned project requires IRB Review. She stated that based on my described thesis, my project did not meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research (see definition below) and did not need IRB review.

Research is defined in the Code of Federal Regulations, 45 CFR 46.102(d), as a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

Human subject is defined in the Code of Federal Regulations, 45 CFR 46.102(f) (1 or 2), as a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research:

- Obtains information or biospecimens through intervention or interaction with the individual, and uses, studies, or analyzes the information or biospecimens; OR
- Obtains, uses, studies, analyzes, or generates identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens.

Appendix B

Additional High-Impact Practices

First-Year Seminars and Experiences

First-year seminars and experiences are a cornerstone of many undergraduate curricula. These seminars are designed to place first-year students in an intimate learning setting that create regular interaction with faculty (Kuh, 2008). Data shows that 94% of accredited four-year universities and colleges in the United States offer a first-year seminar or an experience comparable to at least some of their students (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). The widespread implementation of these courses is seen as beneficial, research suggests they can be seen as one of the most effective instructional practices for achieving developmental and educational objectives in undergraduate education. These benefits are seen across many different student demographics. They contribute to improved retention, persistence to graduation, and academic performance (Padgett et al., 2013). Kuh (2008) attributes these outcomes to the emphasis on critical thinking, collaborative learning, frequent writing, and research literacy. These all support the development of essential skills. By establishing these competencies early allows students to thrive as they progress through their undergraduate education (Kuh, 2008).

Undergraduate Research

Undergraduate research engages students in various aspects of academic inquiry, allowing them to deepen their connection to the learning environment (Elgren & Hensel, 2006). This high-impact practice has been particularly well-developed in science disciplines, though recent efforts have expanded research opportunities across all fields. Through undergraduate research, students are exposed to current research questions, empirical observation, emerging

technologies, and a passion for discovery (Kuh, 2008). These experiences encourage students to reframe their thinking and develop critical problem-solving skills. Research also shows that students involved in research projects with faculty tend to have better retention rates and view their academic environment as more stimulating and engaging. These experiences provide valuable mentorship, as students observe how faculty navigate research challenges. Overall, students who participate in undergraduate research report both intellectual and personal growth and are more likely to pursue careers in research fields (Kuh, 2008).

Diversity/Global Learning

Diversity and global learning is emphasized in many universities through courses and programs that encourage students to understand different worldviews and cultures (Kuh, 2008). Universities encourage this type of learning systematically. Many times, it can be observed through structural diversity. Structural diversity makes sure that campuses are made up of individuals from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds. On a more intimate level, classroom diversity further increases this practice. It makes sure that both the student body and course content are inclusive and highlight different perspectives (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Many of these courses address racial, ethnic, and gender inequalities. It is found that these courses are most effective when paired with service learning or study abroad experiences. According to Gurin and colleagues (2002), participation in Diversity/Global Learning cultivates two sets of outcomes: learning outcomes and democratic outcomes. Learning outcomes include academic skills such as openness to differing opinions, active thinking, and intellectual engagement. Democratic outcomes involve perspective-taking, cultural awareness, and increased

civic engagement. Developing these competencies in an educational setting allows students to thrive in post-graduate environments (Gurin et al., 2002).

Writing-Intensive Courses

Writing intensive courses are common across many undergraduate curriculums, and across a variety of disciplines. According to Kuh (2008), these courses vary in instruction many students usually take multiple writing-intensive classes throughout their academic journey. These courses are usually smaller in size. This allows students to work closely with peers and faculty. Because these courses are more rigorous, students usually dedicate significant time to succeed in them. Research by Kuh (2008) finds that writing-intensive classes are most effective when they include frequent feedback from instructors and peers. This allows students to deepen their understanding of writing and improve their skills. Since these courses are offered across a wide range of disciplines, students develop competencies such as quantitative reasoning, research literacy, oral communication, and critical thinking (Kuh, 2008).

Common Intellectual Courses

Common intellectual courses, often referred to as "core" or general education classes, can be traced back to the Yale Report of 1828 (Bourke, Bray, & Horton, 2008). While the structure of these courses has changed since then, the central idea of having a set of required foundational courses remains the same. These courses are often integrated into more advanced studies. Many times they serve as requirements for learning communities. Common intellectual experiences typically span multiple disciplines and broad themes, allowing for a more diverse curricular options for students (Kuh, 2008). According to Bourke and colleagues (2008), these courses contribute to the overall development of students, not just the acquisition of knowledge. General

education courses have been linked to improvements in critical thinking through exposure to various teaching styles and learning methods. The broad content in these courses builds critical thinking across different areas. This contributes to well-rounded student development.

Additionally, these courses promote civic engagement, writing proficiency, and leadership skills (Bourke et al., 2008).

Internships

Internships have become one of the most popular forms of undergraduate experiential learning for students. In this high-impact practice students gain direct work experience in various career settings. (Kuh, 2008). Internships have been shown to significantly improve students post-graduate job prospects. According to Binder and colleagues (2015), no other experience compares to internships in terms of making applicants more attractive to job recruiters. However, when it comes to educational outcomes, limited research exists on the specific skills internships help produce in undergraduate students (Kilgo et al., 2015). Due to the fact that each internship depends on student's specific educational backgrounds and career interests. It is hard to generalize specific outcomes for internships. Regardless, internships provide valuable insight into potential career paths and offer real-world experience with the support and supervision of professionals in the field (Kuh, 2008).

Appendix C

Letter of Personal Reflection

The start of this project was a bit self-serving, at the time I was in the process of applying to OT graduate programs and currently slated to be a lead mentor coach at CC. I was aware that much of my final semester of undergrad would be primarily focused on OT and CC so this project seemed to be an easy fit. Having participated in four semesters of CC I have always felt that OT would be a very natural addition to this program because of the nature of this night. After the completion of this project I can acknowledge that even indirectly OT foundations have always been present at CC.

The client-centered nature of the night provides mentors with so many skills working with adolescents one-on-one. From my two semesters as a mentor, I knew I was so much more knowledgeable and confident in my interactions with youth. CC provided me with the ability to develop a deeper sense of empathy that I saw seep into many aspects of my life. I became a more empathetic leader as well as an empathetic communicator. In fact, just a few weeks ago in an interview for an OT program, I was asked what empathetic communication looked like to me and I was able to recall my experience at CC and the incredible lessons I had learned. The unique leadership structure at CC is my favorite part of the program and getting to step into these leadership roles has been beyond fulfilling. From fourth grade, I have been an active participant in the Student Council and for most of high school, I was also captain of my sports teams. The leadership experience at CC has been unlike all of these roles and has pushed me to dig deeper and work harder to be a better leader. I have always talked about CC and how much it has truly shaped me as a person but I was unaware of how it was helping shape me for my future career.

This project has also allowed me to gather a deeper understanding of OT. My initial draw to OT was the idea of holistic rehabilitation if you will. I liked that OT placed such emphasis on every domain of an individual's life. By digging more into the theoretical and practical frameworks of OT I have found a newfound understanding and appreciation of the profession. This basis of knowledge helped me feel more confident with the decision to move forward into graduate school to pursue becoming an OT. It also was very beneficial as I was applying and interviewing at school. Having a more complete understanding of OT has allowed me to be so much more passionate and excited to enter the field.