Building on a Tradition of Excellence: UW–Madison’s Occupational Therapy Program Celebrates 75 years

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The field of occupational therapy emerged as a profession in the United States just more than 100 years ago, with practitioners using occupational pursuits to promote health and well-being among World War I veterans and people with mental health conditions.

Yet even when UW–Madison’s occupational therapy program was founded in 1943, the field of OT was still establishing itself as a vital healthcare profession.

“There were very few practitioners and the field was growing very slowly,” Caroline Thompson, who became director of the university’s OT program in 1945 and served in that capacity until 1976, said in a 1996 interview. “Very few people knew of (OT). There were only five or six training programs in the United States.”

Academic courses initially focused on preparing students to work in the areas of mental health, tuberculosis care, general medicine, pediatrics and orthopedics, with UW–Madison’s OT program being jointly administered by the School of Education and the Medical School.

In an effort to demonstrate its value, the program was dedicated to rigorous academic standards, and teaching evidence-based practices and interventions — a foundation from which faculty, staff, students and alumni continue to build a tradition of excellence.

“I think the doctors were the ones who saw that patients needed more than drugs and exercise,” Thompson, who died at the age of 95 in 2004, said in 1996. “They saw we were producing results. And as doctors worked with occupational therapists to reduce patient recovery times, insurance companies took notice. Once the funding was there, the field really started to grow.”

Today, UW–Madison’s occupational therapy program is housed within the School of Education’s Department of Kinesiology and is regarded as one of the very best in the United States. To recognize and honor the past while looking to enhance this legacy into the future, the program hosted a 75th anniversary celebration Sept. 13-15.

There was a welcome party at the Memorial Union’s Tripp Commons on Thursday night, Sept. 13, followed by a practice and research symposium, the 39th annual Caroline Thompson Lecture and an alumni banquet on Friday, Sept. 14. The festivities wrapped up with a brunch and trip to Camp Randall Stadium on Saturday, Sept. 15, to watch the Badger football team play BYU.

“We are not simply celebrating a program’s longevity,” said School of Education Dean Diana Hess. “The exceptional research, scholarship and instruction that have kept our university’s OT program at the forefront of its field for decades are both impressive and worthy of this wonderful occasion.”

In its early years — and even as it grew to become the second-largest program in the country by the mid-1950s, with an enrollment of 150 students — UW–Madison’s occupational therapy program was thriving despite some rather humble roots. After World War II, the university’s enrollment nearly doubled due to the wave of veterans returning and the campus built numerous new and temporary facilities. Both the OT and physical therapy programs’ offices and classrooms were housed within a temporary building, T-14, during this period.

“As students of that era will remember, (the temporary facilities) were uncomfortably hot in the summer, icy in the winter and were infested with mice,” Alice Punwar, who earned her undergraduate degree in OT from UW–Madison in 1954, writes in a short essay about student life in the 1950s. “Miss Thompson was in the habit of draping a raincoat over her filing cabinet before she left her office each day so that the student files wouldn’t get wet if it rained.”

Punwar, who returned to campus in 1969 as a faculty member, also recalls how, during the 1950s, “instructors for the occupational therapy curriculum were drawn from all over the campus and were often important names in their field.” The medical school, notes Punwar, provided eminent
doctors who offered lectures in psychiatry, neurology, rehabilitation, general medicine and surgery. The Anatomy Department utilized cadavers that had been dissected by medical students to teach both occupational and physical therapy students gross anatomy. During this period, Punwar adds that OT was using a variety of arts and crafts as therapeutic tools — and nationally known artists from the Art Department contributed instruction.

While OT continues to draw on various realms and sciences to inform its practices, the field of occupational science today is a highly regarded pursuit of its own. Curriculum improvements within UW–Madison's OT program included the addition of the first research methods course in 1964 and a class in OT theory for those in the junior year of the program.

UW–Madison alumna Ruth Zemke, who received her bachelor's degree in occupational therapy at UW–Madison in 1965 and enjoyed an award-winning career as a faculty member at the University of Southern California, says that once occupational science started to be taken seriously by federal funding agencies in the mid-1990s, OT's proven impact on health and well-being was finally able to take off.

In an effort to maintain its high quality and better meet the needs of students, the UW–Madison OT program in the early 1970s required students to meet minimum standards for admission. The program continued to evolve and add options, and in 1985 launched a post-professional master's degree in therapeutic science (MS-TS) to serve the advanced learning needs of occupational or physical therapists seeking career advancement. It was 1996 when the Ph.D. in kinesiology, therapeutic science track (now occupational science track), was established.

After a 65-year history, the occupational therapy program phased out its bachelor of science degree to meet the standards of the Accreditation Council of Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). Starting in 2007, all entry-level occupational therapists were required to graduate with post-baccalaureate degrees. So in 2005, UW–Madison launched its professional master's degree in occupational therapy (MS-OT), with an emphasis on research and critical thinking skills.

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— Caroline Thompson

Director of the UW-Madison’s Occupational Therapy program from 1945 to 1976

Most recently, in 2016, UW–Madison started its doctor of occupational therapy program (OTD) to enable practitioners to advance their careers through a part-time, predominantly online curriculum.

UW–Madison's OT program was ranked 14th in the nation, out of 164 programs, according to U.S. News and World Reports' 2016 Best Graduate Schools ratings.

Today, UW–Madison faculty and staff lead a highly regarded research enterprise that has secured more than $8 million in federal research grants over the past five years alone. At the 75th celebration, renowned professors emeriti and highly regarded scientists Betty Hasselkus and Mary Schneider, along with Tracy Bjorling, showcased scientific and practice-based presentations of alumni and current faculty during the symposium.

“This program enjoyed a great deal of success in its first 75 years — and we are excited to build from that strong foundation to bolster the university’s tradition of excellence and educate occupational therapists who will promote the health and well-being of our state, our nation and the global community for years to come,” says UW–Madison’s Ruth Benedict, a professor and director of the OT program.
75th a wonderful opportunity to ‘Celebrate, Celebrate, Dance to the Music’

The loyalty of UW–Madison’s OT Badgers is remarkable.

Nearly 300 alumni, students, faculty and friends gathered on campus Sept. 13-15 to celebrate our occupational therapy program’s 75th anniversary.

Festivities began with a welcome party at the Memorial Union, site of many OT graduation banquets. A visit from Bucky and spirit songs of the UW Marching Band set the tone for a magical event!

Alumni from as early as 1957 and as far-flung as California and Florida filled the event spaces with chatter, laughter, hugs and tears. Ten alumni from the Class of 1965, all of whom were 75 years young, were the largest cohort of attendees from a single class. Stories were shared, relationships built, knowledge gained … and, yes, there was even dancing.

The Friday symposium, “Occupational Therapy Alumni Journey Forward: Education, Research, Practice, and Technology,” brought words of praise for the career contributions of the presenters, and the diversity and relevance of the topics. The 39th Annual Caroline Goss Thompson Memorial Lecture capped the symposium with alumnna Tracy Jirikowic (1991) sharing her work on “Risk and Resiliency in Children Affected by Prenatal Alcohol Exposure and Early Adversity.” Alumnna Mary Locast (1986) was honored with the Preceptor of the Year Award for her many years of service in mentoring fieldwork students at the Waisman Center. Our heritage of excellence in scholarship and service, originated by Thompson, the first and longest-serving program director, was evident throughout the day.

Varsity Hall in Union South was the site of a celebratory banquet on Friday evening that featured a walk through our past, a report on the present and a peek into the OT program’s future. Faculty, classmates, family and friends connected over dinner and raised their glasses to toast 75 years of success. An inspiring slideshow and memory book, created by Associate Professor Beth Larson, featured images, quotes and memories across the decades. Mary Hager (’84) recorded audio stories of attending alumni to be preserved for our next celebration. And our current students hosted a silent auction to raise funds to attend the AOTA Annual Conference in New Orleans in April.

Saturday was all about Badgers, with a tailgate brunch hosted by faculty and students. Our spaces in the Medical Sciences Center were lively as attendees engaged in current education and research activities, including feeding interventions for children, tango for balance disorders and a menu task screening tool for elders to identify early cognitive decline. A museum of artifacts, including Thompson’s carpetbag, were also on display. Fans then headed to Union South for the Badger Bash and on to the football game against BYU, where we cheered the scoreboard message: “UW OT program – 75 Years.”

Your gifts, through mentoring students, funding scholarships and supporting faculty research, have and continue to play an important role in the UW–Madison OT program’s 75 years of success. It is not too late to join the celebration. Visit our Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/uwmadisonot/) to view slideshows of all the events. Email in your stories or class pictures to strengthen our collection (otoffice@education.wisc.edu). Make a contribution to the Anniversary Campaign through the end of the year (see back cover for details) to ensure that the program’s legacy of excellence endures another 75 years.

With gratitude for your loyalty, we celebrate and dance.

— Ruth Benedict
Director,
UW–Madison OT program
Pickett receives ICTR KL2 Career Development Award

Kristen Pickett received a career development award for a proposed study titled, “Examining the effects of social engagement on exercise outcomes: In-home cycling for individuals with Parkinson disease.”

Pickett, who is an assistant professor with the Department of Kinesiology’s occupational therapy program, earned the award from UW-Madison’s Institute for Clinical and Translational Research (ICTR). The overall aim of the ICTR KL2 Career Development Award is to cultivate a diverse and multidisciplinary clinical and translational research workforce.

The KL2 Scholars Program is designed to support junior faculty members at UW-Madison who are pursuing and actively engaged in translational research and who are committed to developing an independent research program. This program is funded by the NIH through ICTR’s Clinical and Translational Science Award.

Pickett’s research focuses on individuals with neurologic pathology and progressive movement disorders, including Parkinson’s disease. She leads the Sensory Motor Integration Lab, which examines the effective implementation of activity-based interventions to improve the everyday lives of older adults who are currently undeserved by clinical and academic approaches.

Support from Austins bolsters Travers’ autism work

UW-Madison’s Brittany Travers was appointed earlier this year as the Carla and Michael Austin Occupational Therapy Faculty Fellow. The fellowship is made possible through a generous gift from UW-Madison alumni Carla (‘78 OT) and Mike Austin (‘77 and ‘87 Business), and will provide five years of support for Travers’ research and teaching efforts.

Travers, who is an assistant professor with the occupational therapy program, studies children with autism. She noticed that people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) move differently. “I was drawn to this atypical motion,” she says.

Travers heads the Motor and Brain Development Lab within the university’s Waisman Center, where she is involved with more than a half-dozen research initiatives exploring various aspects of motor and brain development in children with autism. Many of these projects include collaborators from across the UW–Madison campus, and often utilize the latest brain imaging technologies.

Travers says receiving support from the Austins is a highlight of her career, so far. “To have this fellowship means I can expand my work and answer pressing research questions more quickly,” she says. “It’s such an honor for me to be chosen for this.”

Adds Travers: “I am so inspired by what Carla has done in her career to help children who have very special needs. To honor this, part of what we are using this funding for is to make our research procedures (including brain imaging) more accessible to individuals across the autism spectrum.”

Larson serves as guest coach for Badgers game at Camp Randall

Elizabeth Larson was invited to serve as a guest coach during the Badger football team’s game against Brigham Young University at Camp Randall Stadium on Sept. 15.

Larson is an associate professor with the Department of Kinesiology’s occupational therapy program. She was given this opportunity due to her efforts to support student-athletes on campus.

Larson was invited to be a guest coach by Mark Shook, the assistant athletic director for academic services, Aaron Stang, an academic advisor, and Danielle Straw, an academic learning specialist. Larson leads a summer course, “Living Well: Lifestyle Redesign and Wellness Promotion for College Students,” which serves many of the incoming student-athletes from a range of sports.

Larson toured the Fetzer Center for student-athletes, watched the football team practice the day before the game and met with UW football coach Paul Chryst after practice. On game day, she was invited to a brunch with recruits, got to watch warmups on the field, followed the team back out onto the field prior to kickoff and watched the first quarter on the sidelines before heading into the stands.

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Brittany Travers (center) celebrates being appointed the Austin Occupational Therapy Faculty Fellow with Carla (right) and Michael Austin.
UW-Madison’s occupational therapy program wants to extend its thanks to the more than 150 alumni who traveled from around the country and world to celebrate 75 years of this outstanding program Sept. 13-15, 2018.

The welcome party at the Memorial Union’s Tripp Commons on Sept. 13 was a wonderful way to kick off the series of events, while the practice and research symposium, the 39th annual Caroline Thompson Lecture and the alumni banquet on Sept. 14 made for a full but exciting day of memories. The fun times continued with a brunch and trip to Camp Randall Stadium on Sept. 15 to watch the Badger football team play BYU.

It was wonderful to not only commemorate the many decades of amazing accomplishments for the program but to also recognize the exceptional careers and talents of our alumni, students, faculty and staff.

Together, we have created and continue to build one of the most successful OT programs in the United States.

We can’t wait to see what happens next!
Anniversary Celebration a Huge Success!

75th PLANNING COMMITTEES
Successful celebrations depend on the time and talents of a team of planners. Kudos to both the National and Local Planning Committees for a job well done:

Betty Hasslekus ('60), Rita Hohlstein ('65), Suzanne Lineau ('65), Ruth Zemke ('65), Karen Barney ('66), Toni Walt (’66), Mary Schneider ('73), Mary Hager ('74), Kerry Baker Gloss ('75), Marcia Gevelinger Bastian ('76), Barbara Kornblau ('77), Wayne Winistorfer ('77), Janet Manders ('79), Karen Sames ('80), Lisa Mahaffey ('80), Sandra Rogers ('91/97), Amber Ward ('93), Sarah Zurowski ('02), Anne Jones ('07), Alexi Rebni ('07), Tracy Bjorling ('09), Rebecca Reitz ('11), Sabrina Hilton ('15)

OT Program Director Ruth Benedict, Thompson Memorial Lecture keynote speaker Tracy Jirikovic (1991 UW-Madison alum) and School of Education Dean Diana Hess pose for a photo Sept. 14 at the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery.

Members of the UW Marching Band take part in the Welcome Event Sept. 13 at the Memorial Union.

Professor Dorothy Farrar-Edwards (right) visits with former student Marine Sutrisno during a pregame brunch Sept. 15 at the Medical Sciences Center.

Alumni from the OT class of 1976 pose for a photo with Bucky Badger at the Memorial Union.
Zemke gift to support ‘sifting and winnowing’ via occupational science research

UW–Madison alumna Ruth Zemke didn’t grow up in Oconto Falls, Wisconsin, with dreams of becoming an occupational therapist.

In fact, she had never heard of the profession before seeing a brochure explaining the field at her local library as a teenager.

“When I was young, everyone thought I was going to be a kindergarten teacher and that I’d go to the local teachers’ college,” says Zemke. “But I had my heart set on going to Madison and that brochure changed my life.”

After earning her bachelor’s degree in occupational therapy at UW–Madison in 1965 and working as an OT for several years, Zemke went on to earn her master’s and a doctor of philosophy at Iowa State en route to becoming one of the top scholars and leaders in the field. In 2017, during the centennial celebration of occupational therapy as a profession, Zemke was named one of OT’s “100 Influential People” by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA).

Among her many accomplishments, Zemke is regarded as a pioneer in the development of occupational science, which is the study of human participation in the world. This discipline examines how engagement in occupation can address global health concerns by promoting health, well-being and quality of life across the lifespan. The founding of this new field has not only led to significant breakthroughs but has helped open major funding streams for occupation-related research. Similarly, Zemke is recognized as a leading figure in establishing occupational science for occupational therapy in Japan.

For these efforts and more, she received the prestigious 2018 AOTA Award of Merit.

“One of the things that always stuck with me from my time at UW–Madison is this concept of what knowledge is all about,” says Zemke, who spent the bulk of her career as an internationally recognized professor at the University of Southern California, where she headed the OT graduate program. “There’s the plaque on Bascom Hall that talks about ‘fearless sifting and winnowing.’ It’s this idea that once you learn something you don’t have the answer and know it all — but that we must continuously be searching for the truth.”

To help celebrate the 75th anniversary of UW–Madison’s OT program and to help bolster its research efforts, Ruth and Wayne Zemke have made a generous donation to the OT program to establish the Zemke Fund in Occupational Science Research.

“Sifting and winnowing is at the core of what I did as a researcher and my hope is we can give a boost to people trying to get their research projects up and running,” says Ruth Zemke.

Ruth and Wayne were college sweethearts and married while Ruth was pursuing her undergraduate degree in OT at UW–Madison. Wayne holds both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in engineering from UW–Madison.

The Zemke Fund in Occupational Science Research is made possible, the couple explains, in part due to an inheritance left by Ruth’s father, Victor Bast. Bast spent his career as an educator and principal, and also is an alumnus of UW–Madison, having earned his master’s degree from the School of Education.

“We’re all Badgers and wanted to give back to this great university,” says Wayne Zemke, a native of West Allis who went on to become a highly regarded engineer and a mechanical engineering faculty member at Cal Poly Pomona. “We both grew up in Wisconsin and this place is special to us.”

“It’s this idea that once you learn something you don’t have the answer and know it all — but that we must continuously be searching for the truth.”

— RUTH ZEMKE

UW–Madison alum, and Winner of the 2018 AOTA Award of Merit
As we celebrate the 75th anniversary, we’re putting the spotlight on people who have played important roles in making UW-Madison’s occupational therapy program one of the most successful and highly regarded in the United States. These alumni are but three examples of dedicated OT professionals who have made a significant difference as leaders in the field.

GAIL GROTH

Groth is unique in having earned both her bachelor’s degree (1985) and Ph.D. (2010) from UW-Madison in occupational therapy and occupational science.

She passed away in April 2018 after a long battle with cancer. At the time of her death, Groth managed the Hand and Upper Extremity Rehabilitation Clinic at UW Hospital in Madison.

Hand therapy was Groth’s professional focus from her earliest days and she published seminal articles about hand therapy during her time at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, and at UW Hospital. She also took great pleasure in hiring occupational therapists for their first job and then helping them launch their careers as they support people in living their fullest life.

JEAN KIERNAT

Kiernat, who received her undergraduate degree in occupational therapy from UW-Madison in 1957 and a master’s in 1970, loved teaching aspiring occupational therapists at UW-Madison. Her special interest was getting therapists out into the community to work with people where they live.

“I was serving on the board of a neighborhood center, and community-based mental health was just getting going, but I didn’t see OT in the community,” she recalls.

Kiernat wrote a grant for occupational therapy in that neighborhood center and was able to hire an occupational therapist.

“There were a lot of older people in the neighborhood and they needed support to be able to stay in their homes,” she says. “We were able to help with that.”

The students enjoyed the opportunity to be creative in helping people, something that draws many people to the OT profession. Kiernat continues her support of students in the occupational therapy program through the Jean Chapman Kiernat Scholarship.

“If you see a person in their home, you offer more specific changes,” she says. “I loved getting students out to try new things and to look at new ways of working with people, and once they got out there, they loved it, too.”

In addition to her work in neighborhood centers, Kiernat also focused her efforts on the council of the blind and other organizations in the community, rather than a clinical practice.

BARBARA KORNBLAU

Kornblau earned her bachelor’s degree in occupational therapy from UW-Madison in 1977.

She has had a long interest in public policy, beginning in her first year at UW-Madison when she volunteered in a state legislator’s office and worked on issues around reimbursement and disability. That interest led her not only to law school at the University of Miami, where she earned a J.D., but to a combined practice supporting occupational therapists and advocating for a systems approach to improving care.

Kornblau lives in the Washington, D.C., area and is a consultant on disability and health policy, and patient participation. It was a faculty member at UW-Madison who encouraged her to stay in occupational therapy because of the important role public policy plays in the field. Kornblau’s connection to UW-Madison continues through her devotion to Badger football and service to the School of Education’s Board of Visitors.

Kornblau is a past president of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and a former Robert Wood Johnson Health Foundation Policy Fellow, serving in the offices of Senators Harkin and Rockefeller as an adviser on health and disability issues.

She also was a professor of occupational therapy and public health at Nova Southeastern University for 15 years and did a stint as dean of the School of Health Professions at the University of Michigan-Flint. Kornblau is currently an adjunct professor of occupational therapy at Florida A&M University, where she teaches via Skype.
Student News

Student organizations making a difference

Students who are part of UW–Madison’s master of science in occupational therapy (MSOT) program have the opportunity to enhance their experience by joining one of three student-led groups.

While each one has its own unique mission and OT focus, these groups provide outstanding ways in which students can connect with the community, while also contributing additional professional opportunities and experiences.

Diverse-OT

This student organization aims to advance the cultural climate of the field of occupational therapy by creating pathways for marginalized students into OT programs and providing opportunities for discussion of diversity-related issues in the healthcare field.

Over the past year, Diverse-OT reached more than 100 underrepresented high school students in Madison by providing workshops about higher education and the field of OT. Earlier this year, Diverse-OT received funding for a Baldwin Seed Project Grant, which will allow members of the organization to expand its outreach efforts to urban and rural areas across Wisconsin.

Diverse-OT also partnered with Advancing Diversity and Excellence in Physical Therapy (ADEPT) to host an interprofessional event surrounding the impact of language barriers on quality healthcare. Diverse-OT ended the 2017-18 academic year by receiving a 2018 Bucky Award from UW–Madison as the Best New Student Organization.

Student Occupational Therapy Association

The Student Occupation Therapy Association (SOTA) is a long-standing student professional development organization connected with the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). This group hosts panels on fieldwork, professional development seminars, the annual graduation banquet, and other student-led initiatives.

In the past academic year, MSOT students have also started participating in the interdisciplinary Pro-Bono Clinic on Fridays. This year, SOTA is focusing on getting students to the AOTA Conference in New Orleans and has already raised more than $2,000 to help this cause thanks to a successful silent auction fundraiser at the 75th anniversary events.

SOTA is always interested in connecting alumni to current students. If you would be interested in serving on a panel or sharing about your practice, please email Sammie Gannon: sjgannon@wisc.edu.

Community Connections

This group centers its efforts on raising student awareness about community-based initiatives within the OT practice domain, the populations occupational therapists serve and the challenges they face.

When possible, Community Connections focuses on local programs in the Madison area. The group aims to increase dialogue about the role of OT in community-based settings.

During the past academic year, this student organization welcomed various speakers, including: a panel of parents of children with disabilities; a UW–Madison landscape architecture professor who researches environmental design and its relationship with well-being; and an occupational therapist who served in the army. If you are part of an organization in the community that students should know more about, please email Jenna Sherman: jpsherman@wisc.edu.

Students with the MSOT program pose for a photo with Bucky Badger during the 75th anniversary celebration.
**OT Faculty Publications**

**KARLA AUSDERAU**


**ELIZABETH LARSON**


**KRISTEN PICKETT**


Let’s Build for the Next 75 Years

The alumni response during the OT program’s 75th anniversary has been remarkable. Nearly 300 alumni, students, faculty and friends gathered on the UW–Madison campus Sept. 13–15 for our special celebration event.

Many of those alumni have also taken part with their financial support. Your gifts play an instrumental role in mentoring students, funding scholarships and supporting faculty research. They are an irreplaceable part of the program’s success.

If you haven’t already, please consider making a contribution to the 75th Anniversary Campaign before the end of the year. Your support will help ensure the program’s legacy and bolster its excellence into the future.

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It is not too late to join the celebration!

DONATE TODAY BY GOING TO: supportuw.org/OT75

PLEASE CONTACT:
Joshua Woolfolk, School of Education Director of Development
Email: Joshua.Woolfolk@supportuw.org
Call: 608-416-0192

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