

Exploring the Lived Experiences of First-Generation Masters-Level Occupational Therapy Students: An Action Research Approach

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Abstract

Graduate occupational therapy (OT) programs are characterized by intensive academic and clinical learning experiences to prepare students for entry-level practice. This pragmatic, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) aimed to investigate how first-generation students enrolled in a master's level OT program make sense of their lived experiences. Five participants who were enrolled full-time in the OT program were purposively recruited. Data were collected through open-ended, qualitative surveys with questions designed to capture the intricacies of the first-generation OT students' experiences. An inductive analysis revealed three primary themes: Navigating a new academic landscape, resilience and resourcefulness, and managing the weight of responsibility. Rooted in action research, this project includes an action plan that outlines a process for initiating departmental change.

Keywords: occupational therapy, graduate student retention, allied health education, first-generation students, supportive practices, action research

Background

The Higher Education Act reauthorization of 1980 offered an initial definition of a first-generation college student in law, "an individual...whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree." (COE, 2024). Over the past two decades, additional descriptors of the first-generation student have been posed in higher education as the focus on this group increases, most notably at the undergraduate level. The designation of a first-generation college student is commonly based on the educational attainment and postsecondary experience of the student's immediate family, most often referring to individuals whose

parents have not completed a college degree (Choy, 2001; Inkelas et al., 2007; Lockeman, 2014; Pelco et al., 2014). The wide range of variability in classification for this group is notable, as a recent literature examination identified 18 different definitions for the first-generation student (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). A lack of consistency in definition presents challenges for both research and supportive practices aimed at supporting first-generation college students.

Defining the first-generation graduate student adds several levels of complexity. The University of Washington recently described this group as students who are the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree, enter graduate school in the United States, or are those who have never had access to the knowledge of navigating graduate school (2024). For this study, a first-generation graduate student does not have a parent who has attended college or postsecondary education or is the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree.

As a collective, first-generation college students are often subjected to challenges not commonly experienced by their continuing-generation peers. Citing first-generation student literature over the past 20 years, this group faces unique challenges, including a lack of support networks (Evans et al., 2020; Holden et al., 2021; House et al., 2019), a reliance on academic advising for support and retention (Swecker et al., 2013; Wofford et al., 2021), and difficulty acclimating to higher education culture (Evans et al., 2020). These difficulties often stem from a lack of cultural capital and academic skills that are often inherently learned through access to family members who have experienced higher education and attained degrees (Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023; United States Department of Education, 2018). Without access to familial models, first-generation students may enter college less prepared to manage academic expectations and institutional systems.

Furthermore, issues of classism are more likely to persist on college campuses for first-generation students, reinforcing feelings of marginalization and exclusion (Allen et al., 2016; Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Rice et al., 2017). In addition to the cultural and social barriers first-generation students experience, this group is more likely to come from families with lower socioeconomic status, with 47.6% of master's level students' income falling in the lowest or lower middle quarter (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The U.S.

Department of Education reports that 39% of these students are identified as ethnic minorities, primarily black, Hispanic, or Asian (2018), and often have limited financial resources, resulting in a reliance on work for financial stability while in school (Evans et al., 2020; House et al., 2019; Pratt et al., 2019). Considered together, these intersecting factors emphasize the complex and compounded challenges that first-generation students face throughout their academic journey.

First-generation graduate students, especially those pursuing health-related degrees, have received limited attention resulting in a lack of identified resources and evidence-based support practices tailored to their needs. Shifting attention to the first-generation graduate student is critical. Around 56% of graduate students come from families where their parents or guardians did not attain a bachelor's degree or higher, and evidence suggests that students with parents who hold a bachelor's degree are more likely to enroll in graduate studies than first-generation students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, Cataldi et al., 2018). Investigating the experiences of this group is critical to revising departmental and procedural practices in allied healthcare education, as the United States is the highest producer of advanced degrees in the fields of science and engineering (National Science Board & National Science Foundation, 2020).

A recent scoping review by Tyminski et al. revealed that underrepresented minority (URM) graduate students' sense of belonging remains a significant factor in retention and future success within health profession programs (2023). This review calls for research specific to OT education and urges individual programs to engage URM students in the process of curriculum, policy, and procedural changes, by using lived experiences to inform the decision-making process and monitor the influence of these changes over time (Tyminksi et al, 2023). Recent work within the field of OT begins to bridge the existing gap in first-generation literature by exploring the experience of the impostor phenomenon and factors that contribute to a sense of belonging and community at a four-year university (McCarthy et al., 2023). Most recently, Ham describes specific factors impacting self-efficacy for first-generation OT students and offers practical solutions to address academic performance, in a private, nonprofit four-year institution (2025). Although recent scholarly work may offer educators more insight into first-generation undergraduate student

experiences, it does not address the gap in the literature for this same population enrolled in graduate-level OT programming. This project expands current literature by sharing insights gleaned from the challenges and perspectives of first-generation graduate-level occupational therapy students, and that input informed the realistic strategies employed to support student retention and academic progression.

This study was implemented at a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy (MSOT) program at a rural higher education institution in the northern Appalachia Region. Colleges and universities in rural settings are presented with unique challenges for student success and retention, and these institutions are more likely to serve first-generation rural students (Castillo et al., 2021; Crain & Newlin, 2021). Relatedly, students enrolled in rural universities may experience higher rates of social isolation and feelings of disconnection from institutional support (Castillo et al., 2021). Considering social, economic, and cultural factors related to first-generation status and the rural geographical region, the authors aimed to explore the personal experiences of this group of students, with results intended to inform departmental practices. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of five MSOT students at a private, Catholic university to gain first-hand perspectives of factors that affect their matriculation, retention, and success as first-generation graduate students.

Positioning the Study

Principles of pragmatism and critical pedagogy informed the theoretical basis for this study. Critical pedagogy served as a guiding framework for this project's emphasis on inclusion and support by considering the perceptions of first-generation students, a marginalized and underrepresented population in higher education. Drawing on Freire's (1970) seminal work, authors acknowledged that first-generation students often need to navigate systemic barriers within higher education. Within this view, modifications to departmental policy are developed not by administration alone, but based on input from first-generation stakeholders, providing them with an agency in decision-making (Freire, 1970). Pragmatism, which views knowledge as dynamic and situated in practice, also informed this multifaceted project (Dewey, 1938). From this perspective, the research process serves as a tool for solving real-world problems through reflection and iterative

change. A pragmatic orientation supported the study's goal of translating participants' experiences into immediate and actionable departmental improvements. Considered together, critical pedagogy and pragmatism provided a robust theoretical basis that allowed the researcher to identify and highlight participants' perceptions to enact positive change.

Method

Study Design

This study employed a pragmatic action research design combined with a qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodological approach, which was selected for its unique capacity to examine how individuals perceive and interpret lived experiences through detailed, first-hand accounts (Ungvarsky, 2024). IPA allows for the exploration of subjective components of the human experience by examining individual perspectives. By engaging in a detailed investigation of the participants' subjective realities (Ungvarsky, 2024), the researcher gained insight into specific aspects of programming through the lens of a first-generation student (Callary et al., 2015). This understanding derives implications for policy change (Munhall, 2012) by increasing departmental care for students who are first-generation college learners.

Reflective survey prompts were developed following IPA principles and were structured to capture participants' subjective meaning of their lived experiences across social, financial, and personal domains. In alignment with IPA's emphasis on exploring how individuals interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences, open-ended, written accounts provided the participants with flexibility to construct narratives in their own words and at their own pace. Participants were empowered to freely express their perspectives through detailed thoughts, words, and phrases that a traditional one-on-one interview might have otherwise inhibited. The written method of data collection significantly reduced researcher influence by allowing participants to describe their interpretations with fewer external pressures than those inherently present during face-to-face interviews, while addressing potentially personal and sensitive topics.

Open-ended, written accounts for qualitative research have been cited as being time-efficient and effective methods of gathering descriptively rich data (Handy & Ross, 2005). Contemporary approaches to qualitative data collection support the use of online

open-ended questions (Seixas et al., 2018), with free-text responses being recognized as useful data sources (Kim et al., 2017). This strategy is being more commonly adopted within health-professions research for phenomenological-based inquiry (Ghulmi et al., 2024; Shorey & Ng, 2022; Sweetman et al., 2023; Vignato et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2015). Recent discussions initiated by Rajasinghe et al. encourage IPA researchers to diverge from traditional approaches used in IPA methodology, such as the use of the widely accepted semi-structured interview for data collection (2024). Authors argue that the use of innovative approaches may ultimately result in deeper interpretations and expanded opportunities for research (Rajasinghe et al., 2024).

Viewing action research as a tool to drive real-world change, study participants are not viewed merely as subjects, but as experts whose first-hand accounts are used to identify and address presenting issues (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021). Within this view, researchers act as facilitators, collaborating with stakeholders throughout the research process (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021). The core principles of action research: Continuous improvement, critical reflection, and actionable planning (Mertler, 2020), align closely with the project's objectives. With its focus on improving educational practices and critically reflecting on them (Mertler, 2020), this method offers practical insights into students' meaning-making as OT graduate students and effectively contributes to knowledge translation practices. By focusing on the improvement of educational practices and fostering critical reflection (Mertler, 2020), action research provides a practical framework for addressing a lack of supportive practices at the department and school levels.

Researcher's Positionality

I acknowledge that my education and training as an occupational therapist and educator shape the lens through which I interpret data related to first-generation student experiences. My academic, professional, social, and cultural background impacts my priorities and assumptions regarding student support and institutional procedures. Therefore, the particular lens of my lived experience may affect how I interpret concepts related to equity and access. I recognize that my positionality may influence how themes are identified and presented throughout the IPA process. To mitigate potential bias, I purposefully engaged in ongoing reflexive questioning and sought perspectives beyond my

own to ensure that the interpretations presented here reflect the diverse social, cultural, and educational backgrounds of the collected data.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected from a convenience sample of MSOT students at a small, rural, Catholic university in the northern Appalachian region of the United States. Inclusion criteria stipulated that students must be enrolled full-time in the OT program and self-identify as a first-generation college student. Five out of 27 first and second-year MSOT students (30%) identified as first-generation and elected to participate in the study. This purposive sample, characterized by the researcher's selection of participants based on specific attributes or qualities (Hissong & Lape, 2014), was suitable to derive rich details regarding this group's meaning-making during their graduate experience.

Data Collection

This qualitative study explored participants' interpretations of their experiences as first-generation MSOT students. Following IRB approval, an anonymous, online, written-response survey with open-ended questions was selected for data collection. This innovative data collection approach allowed participants to share in-depth details, insights, thoughts, and feelings related to the interpretation of their lived experiences while maintaining core IPA methodological intent (Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Considering the dynamic relationship between the participants and the researcher as a faculty member, a written survey mitigated hesitancy and improved participant comfort with disclosing truthful information. The survey consisted of eleven open-ended questions and five demographic questions, with the data collection process lasting for two weeks. Students were given the option to omit responses to questions that caused unease or did not apply to their circumstances. All narrative responses were collected prior to the initiation of the data cleaning and interpretation phase.

All participants were invited to engage in a period of member-checking to ensure the accuracy of the data recorded. This practice is a commonly accepted measure of validity in qualitative research, intended to solicit participant feedback and validate the interpretation of the collected data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this period, surveys remained "open" for an additional seven days, where participants were encouraged to

review, modify, or adjust their recorded responses to the survey questions. This practice ensured that all participants' voices were accurately represented in the qualitative data results.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic, inductive, and interpretative process consistent with IPA guidance. Inductive-analytic procedures guided data interpretation, which is rooted in and driven by the qualitative data gathered (Green & Thorogood, 2018). Narrative input was first cleaned and prepared for review by exporting raw data, removing any unusable or incomplete responses, and formatting the qualitative data into a workable table. During this initial phase, data were assessed for any direct participant identifiers to maintain confidentiality. The researcher then initiated a period of familiarization, which involves an immersive process of reading full responses while concurrently taking notes and creating memos (Ramanadhan et al., 2021), documenting initial impressions. Consistent with IPA guidance, each participant's account was examined individually before identifying patterns across cases.

Next, open coding was conducted ideographically, allowing the researcher to focus on how each participant made sense of their lived experience. In vivo codes (e.g., using exact language from participants) and short descriptive labels were used to capture key phrases of meaning in the participants' own words. These codes were then developed into emergent themes that captured how participants made sense of their experiences. Finally, themes were examined for conceptual connections across individual cases by identifying areas of convergence and divergence. Through this interpretative process, codes and initial themes were reorganized into overarching themes and subthemes which captured the complexity of the first-generation graduate student experience.

Considering the researcher's dual role as a faculty member, concerns related to power dynamics were addressed throughout the data collection and analysis processes to avoid influence on participant input and interpretation. To mitigate the potential for bias and personal positionalities, the researcher maintained reflexivity via reflective journals and memos, while documenting code categories and tracking emergent theme development (Kenny & Fourie, 2015).

Results

Participants were primarily females (80%) between the ages of 16 and 24 (60%), with a White ethnic background (80%). Four out of five first-generation MSOT students were working at least part-time (See Table 1). The survey included eleven open-ended interview questions to prompt student reflection and guide the data collection process. Each question was purposefully designed to elicit the students' introspective examination, with question content related to supports and barriers impacting social, financial, and personal factors, and students' perception of self. Three themes and four subthemes emerged from the interview process (see Table 2) and are discussed in the following section.

Table 1

Demographics of sample

Baseline characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	4	80
Male	1	20
Age		
16-24	3	60
23-34	2	40
35-44	0	0
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	4	80
African American	1	20
Employment Status		
Part-time	2	40

Contract/temporary	2	40
Student	1	20
Disability Status		
Disabled	1	20
Non-disabled	4	80

Theme #1: Navigating a New Academic Landscape

Participants perceived challenges acclimating to the roles and expectations associated with graduate school as compared to their undergraduate college experiences. Participants reflected on difficulties matriculating to a professional degree program, including understanding the admissions process, applying for financial aid, and managing academic and professional expectations. Two participants specifically identified barriers related to the graduate school admissions process. “I was not familiar with the application process and had a lack of support in guiding me through the process and expectations.” Similarly, another student stated, “I didn’t have any family members that I could ask about the steps of applying for aid/scholarships or interviewing for admission. The process was hard but not impossible to navigate.”

Related to the admissions process, one student offered a suggestion as to how to better prepare first-generation students who are preparing to enter the program, “...explaining expectations such as coursework and additional fees presented in the program. Overall, explaining the expectations of graduate school versus undergrad.”

Collectively, participants expressed uncertainty and anxiety related to the nuances and expectations of graduate school. Participants also identified a lack of familial knowledge that could be utilized during their transition to graduate coursework. Students were faced with managing self-doubt as they navigated graduate school processes and advanced coursework. “I know I am capable; however, I am unsure of the expectations that graduate school has.” This theme emphasized that while these first-generation graduate students conveyed a sense of pride in the venture of graduate studies, they felt hesitant to adapt to the rigorous demands of graduate education.

Theme #2: Resilience and Resourcefulness

The second theme, *resilience and resourcefulness*, represents the students' self-perception of perseverance and determination by actively seeking support from peers, faculty, and institutional resources to overcome barriers. A common thread of pride and determination to succeed emerged from participant responses, with several students pointing to institutional practices and resources as systems of support. In conjunction with realizing the value of institutional resources, participants reflected on their access to (or lack thereof) family and social supports. One participant highlighted a sense of personal resilience, "Overcoming challenges that come with the diagnosis of a learning disability. Also being the first in my family to go to grad school despite the challenges that I've had."

According to them, first-generation MSOT students are often faced with managing complex emotions while mitigating uncertainty and self-doubt. The prospect of graduation and eventual professional licensing as an end goal served as an incentive for perseverance. "I am excited for fieldwork and getting a job. I am nervous for the NBCOT exam. I know in the end all the hard work will pay off."

I think that sometimes I have a lot of self-doubt about my abilities. Being a first-generation student I feel like getting this far may be a fluke and that I am due for failure eventually. However, I am proud of the person that I have become and the things I have achieved and I think that eventually I will feel like I belong in this setting.

Institutional resources

This subtheme developed as participants reflected on the availability of institutional resources. Students felt positively supported by faculty support and advising, consistent with existing research regarding the impact of the institution, especially the academic advisor (Frazier, 2021; Swecker et al., 2014). Students experienced a lack of streamlined communication regarding program expectations and clarity about financial obligations associated with the program (e.g., additional fees). Several students cited the university's free internal application as a financial facilitator, in contrast to the costly fees associated with the common application.

Overall, I feel supported by the OT program. They are there for me, understand my struggle with my learning disability, and work with me to understand the assignments.

I think that the financial burden is the first thing that pops into mind. Application fees are not cheap and can rack up a large bill very quickly depending on how many schools you wish to apply to. [redacted] was a very welcome outlier because of the fee application and I feel like that part of the application process was a very welcome change.

Family/Social support

For first-generation graduate students, social resources played a significant role in their sense of progression in their academic career. Significant others, friends, and family members were cited as facilitators or barriers to emotional support and engagement in the program. Relatedly, family dynamics, their location in proximity to campus, and home responsibilities significantly impacted student participation, either positively (convenience, supportive roommates) or negatively (distractions, family stress). “My wife was a great support during the application process. Coming from a low SES family and being a first-generation college student I had to kind of figure everything out on my own.”

Despite facing personal obstacles, one participant identified family support and perseverance as facilitators to entering and succeeding in a graduate program.

Some of my family supported my desires to pursue my study goals. I've perceived social barriers as a younger individual at school, having roadblocks, but as I grew older, I learned that one "no" doesn't define my purpose or goal. I always find another route to achieve.

Some students perceived home issues, such as family stress or carrying the emotional load, as factors that interfered with their academic focus. To mitigate home-based challenges and stressors, they used strategies such as therapy to maintain mental clarity and balance.

I went through the application process on my own. My family supported me in going to grad school and moving on. However no one helped with the application. I had no

guidance, really. I was kinda just hoping I was doing everything correctly, and called some people.

Overall, participants' experiences highlighted the complex and somewhat contradictory role that social supports play in the lived experiences of first-generation graduate students. While many students credited encouragement from family, partners, and friends, these supports were often coupled with barriers including emotional strain, limited understanding of the academic process, and additional responsibilities at home. Students remained determined and proved resilient by using adaptive strategies such as seeking therapy and reframing setbacks.

I have few supporting my journey in school but I still strive to accomplish my best.

At times at home issues tend to get me stressed because of feeling the need to carry family's load..but I maintain a mental focus by going to therapy.

Theme #3: Managing the Weight of Responsibility

A prominent experience that emerged from participants' reflections was *carrying the weight of responsibility*, as students balanced high academic demands with personal and familial roles. For first-generation graduate students, this weight often included managing an unfamiliar academic terrain while simultaneously acting as role models, caretakers, and financial providers for their families. Without the benefit of family members who had gone through similar experiences in higher education, participants described the emotional and logistical complexity of being the "first" in graduate school while juggling multiple identities. Within this theme, students recounted the pressure of managing academic, work, and personal obligations.

Academic Expectations

Participants described a continual pressure to meet academic expectations while learning to manage graduate-level coursework and programmatic demands. Even with strong organizational skills and motivation, many students reported feelings of uncertainty and being overwhelmed.

Being a grad student is tough sometimes and it is flying by. I often times feel I am forgetting to do assignments or not sure of how to complete assignments. I feel that even though I am more organized than ever I still feel lost at times.

A sense of disorientation was a common thread, even among students who described high levels of perseverance and time management. Several participants spoke to the difficulty of managing academic responsibilities and highlighted the importance of a consistent and reliable academic calendar to manage their extracurricular commitments.

My schedule is very strenuous inside and outside of the program. This makes it harder to schedule and navigate all tasks that need to be done and causes a lot of stress and anxiety even though steps are taken to remain organized and flexible through the navigation of the transition into graduate studies.

These reflections illustrate the internal tension of striving to succeed academically while learning how to manage the unspoken norms and expectations of graduate education.

Personal obligations

In addition to academic demands, students echoed the significance of personal responsibilities, as many were obligated to fulfill caregiving roles, manage employment, and maintain relationships with individuals who did not fully understand the rigors of graduate school. Students referenced the program's condensed course schedule as a facilitator of their success in the program, allowing flexibility with work and family commitments while enabling them to pursue their graduate degree. One student stated, "I think that the schedule is very conducive to a good school/life balance."

Even with institutional and peer support, the balancing act of managing academic performance alongside personal obligations remained a consistent challenge. One participant reflected on the out-of-class time commitment required for course content, writing, "There is a lot of out of the classroom work and readings which makes it difficult to manage studying and support work, maintenance of home, time for self."

Table 2*Themes and Subthemes*

No.	Theme	Subtheme
1.	Navigating a new academic landscape	X
2.	Resilience and resourcefulness	Family/social supports Institutional resources
3	Carrying the weight of responsibility	Academic expectations Personal obligations

Discussion

This study explored how five first-generation graduate OT students made sense of and articulated their educational journeys. Inductive thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes that captured the participants' meaning-making within a graduate-level health professions program. Through a critical pedagogy lens, student interpretations reflected in these themes and subthemes influenced the evaluation of unintended inequities within the program's structure and curriculum (Freire, 1970). The first theme, *navigating a new landscape*, stood alone and reflected a universal learning curve associated with the participants' experiences. In contrast, the second theme, *resilience and resourcefulness*, and the third theme, *carrying the weight of responsibility*, each included distinct subthemes.

The first theme, *navigating a new academic landscape*, echoes the significance of the transitional period students experience while moving from undergraduate to graduate studies and the uncertainty associated with this transition. Respondents expressed uncertainty about meeting expectations, experienced a fear of failure, and felt undeserving of the opportunity to attend graduate school. These results echo those of previous studies reporting increased vulnerability, self-doubt, and uncertainty for first-generation students (Holden et al., 2021) and experience heightened stress, which may be aided by structured, tailored seminars (Glaessgen et al., 2018). Consistent with literature findings, first-generation students often experience heightened feelings of self-doubt, associated

with “imposter syndrome”, and perceived pressure to succeed (Holden et al., 2021). These feelings of inadequacy, coupled with the need to adapt to rising expectations of academic coursework, are often stress-inducing and impact the transition to higher education programming.

Participants also shared feelings of disorientation to graduate school culture, starting with the admissions and orientation processes. Evidence-based strategies must be employed to prevent these issues from impacting the success and retention of first-generation graduate students. Frequent touchpoints with advisors during the onboarding process and structured advisement throughout the program are essential components to managing stress and mental wellness (Swecker et al., 2014). Additionally, offering peer support through a structured mentorship program provides another layer of wraparound support for first-generation students (Ahmed et al., 2021; Hagler et al., 2021). To combat feelings of isolation and facilitate the transition period, departments may consider setting clear expectations up front, utilizing peer and faculty mentoring, and incorporating purposefully structured check-ins with academic advisors.

The second theme, *resilience and resourcefulness*, revealed that first-generation graduate students are intrinsically motivated to succeed academically, encouraged by a passion to enter the field of OT and improve the lives of others. The subtheme related to family and/or social supports underscores the significance that social factors play in first-generation students’ lives. First-generation students are often supported by their social networks with enthusiasm for their professional goals. However, the lack of ecological social support to expose students to higher education, particularly professional graduate school norms, leaves first-generation students expending more energy than their counterparts to fill this gap in cultural capital (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021). The rigor of health professions graduate programming, in addition to these social factors, places first-generation students at a disadvantage in accessing resources necessary to succeed.

Research suggests that providing social support early in the academic career is essential for addressing the knowledge gaps in social capital that are reported by first-generation students (Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021). Explicit guidance on university resources to support success should be provided to students upon matriculation.

Institutions often focus on support for first-year students, with heavy emphasis on undergraduate students' access to support. First-generation graduate students can benefit from this type of explicit guidance, particularly in using research tools and advancing professional writing skills, as they may be less likely to access these resources on their own (Stallworth & Maurici-Pollock, 2023). Embedded opportunities to navigate and use institutional resources have been a key method for supporting all OT graduate students, which was shaped by the perspectives of the participants in this study.

The third theme, *carrying the weight of responsibility*, confirms the additional challenges posed by external pressures placed on graduate students. Consistent with literature across disciplines related to first-generation students, many of the students surveyed engaged in work while enrolled in the program (Gardner, 2013; Posselt & Grodsky, 2017; Williams & Ferrari, 2015), with 80% of this study's participants working full or part-time. It has been established that first-generation students experience increased financial strain and are less likely to rely on income from parents or family for funding (Rehr et al., 2022). Their reflections confirmed stressors related to family responsibilities, work commitments, and schedule management (Sergeev, 2024). Although many participants recognized the significance of added pressures, several students recounted the benefits of living close to campus, collaborating with peers within the cohort model, and the availability of faculty as valuable supports.

Corresponding with previous research, this study revealed that graduate-level students perceive social and cultural barriers, experience additional financial and social stresses, and face uncertainty and anxiety related to graduate-level academic expectations. Drawing on pragmatism as a conceptual framework for informed decision-making, the graduate-level OT program becomes an evolving system, adapting to the needs of learners. By identifying and exploring the lived experience of first-generation graduate students, faculty and leadership can develop logical and practical solutions to real-life problems (Dewey, 1938). Implications related to departmental policy, student onboarding procedures, and academic advising are presented in the action plan outlined in the following sections.

Limitations

The results of this qualitative study are subject to biases stemming from the nature of self-reporting and researcher bias as an instructor for the targeted student population. Although efforts were made to modify the data collection methods (written, anonymous responses) to account for potential power imbalances, the possibility for power dynamics to impact results was still a significant consideration (Subedi, 2016). Using written narrative accounts for data collection must also be recognized as a potential limitation, as this method prohibits the researchers' ability to ask follow-up questions, interpret non-verbal cues, and seek additional clarification on responses provided. The researcher carefully considered this trade-off to mitigate researcher bias and potential influence on the participants' genuine interpretation and expression of their perceptions.

As an occupational therapist and instructor, the researcher was cognizant of practicing reflexivity to mitigate possible biases using reflective memos and journaling, to ensure the accuracy of data and participant voices. Through participant insights, departmental practices were modified to better meet the needs of this specific group of students. However, the nature of this study limits the ability to draw conclusions related to first-generation graduate students enrolled in other professional degree programs. Further, results may not speak to the perceptions of first-generation MSOT students at larger public institutions or those attending school in suburban or urban settings. Future research may consider examining the differences between a range of geographical settings and institution types for comparative analysis.

Action Plan

Following data collection, analysis, and reflection, a fundamental component of the action research process is the action plan, which describes realistic steps to initiate local change. The action items presented align with identified qualitative themes and were used to inform departmental policy and faculty practices to foster a supportive environment for first-generation students. First-generation students are impacted by systems of support, perceive barriers related to cultural and social expectations of graduate school, and are often tasked with managing multifaceted external commitments. This action plan adopts a cyclical nature of review and revision throughout each academic year, with objectives

corresponding to the department's systematic evaluation plan. The primary objectives and outcomes associated with this action plan (see Figure 2) are to:

1. Enhance student understanding of graduate school expectations
2. Examine departmental practices that help students successfully manage multiple commitments
3. Improve systems of support for first-generation students

This action plan enables ongoing reflection and improvement of program processes stemming from stakeholder perceptions. Continuous stakeholder engagement is a crucial element of the evaluation design, coupled with continuous and ongoing revision based on student, faculty, and staff feedback. Another key component of the action research process is communication and implementation of the action plan. Engaging identified stakeholders, students, faculty, and support staff is critical to implementing and refining these actions. These departmental strategies have been shared with and reviewed by internal stakeholders of the University, as well as departmental Advisory Board members for review and consideration.

Recent research on first-generation students within the field of OT calls for innovative clinical applications and support with formal and informal mentorship opportunities (Ham, 2025). Key components of the action plan related to the theme of *navigating a new academic landscape* include pre-matriculation support and tailored advising during the admissions process. Additional support related to graduate-level expectations has been implemented during new student orientation, where a "Grad School 101" presentation is provided to all new students. During this introductory presentation, students are provided with study tips, expectations for academic integrity and honesty, fieldwork expectations, scholarship and opportunities for financial aid, and general guidelines for success. In addition to these modifications, ongoing efforts have been implemented to help students adjust to and excel in graduate-level coursework, including course-embedded writing support and assignments tailored to career and professional development.

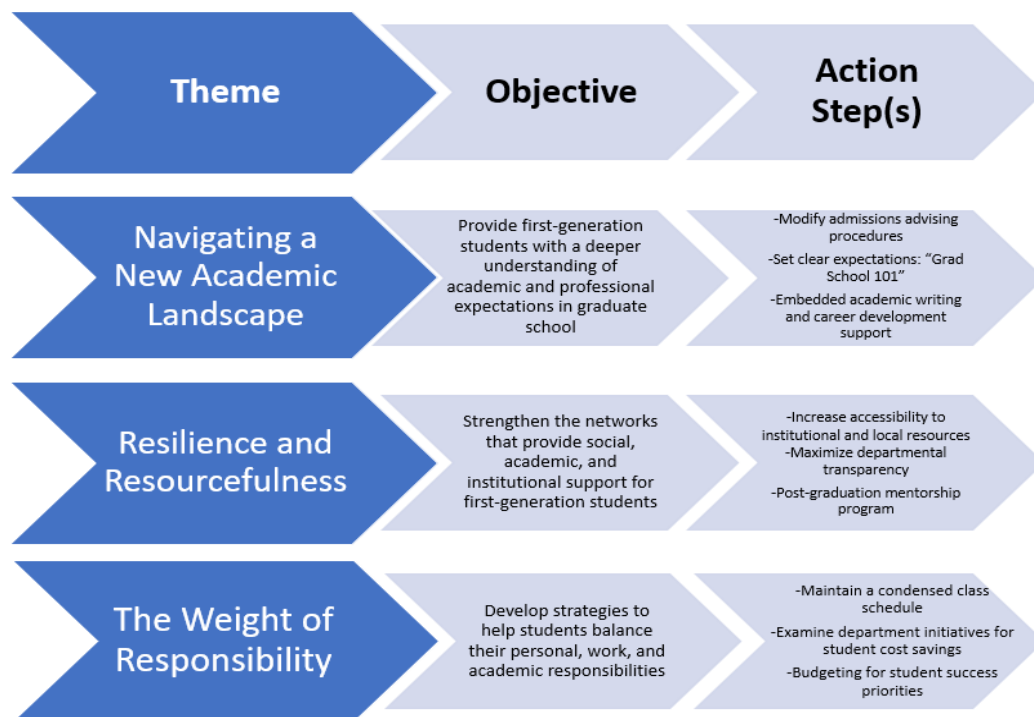
Stemming from the theme of *resilience and resourcefulness*, action steps highlight student accessibility to institutional and local resources. Collaborative faculty planning

ensures that representation from on-campus resources (student wellness center, writing center, accommodations, etc.) is presented to each class, highlighting the services and resources available. The department has also made concerted efforts to provide OT students with knowledge of and access to a free local resource that offers assistive technology for educational purposes. Through this state-funded offering, students can rent technology (laptops, iPads, headphones, etc.) per semester at no cost to alleviate financial burdens associated with their academic participation.

To maximize departmental transparency, the OT webpage was modified to most accurately reflect anticipated costs and to include a list of nationally available scholarships and financial resources for health-professions students. The department also developed a post-graduation mentorship initiative to support students for one-year post-graduation. Through this mentorship model, students may access a faculty mentor with expertise in their area of practice to support their practice and professional growth as a new graduate. In addition to the above-listed action steps, several departmental policies have been developed or modified to strengthen academic and emotional support for first-generation students (academic advising, academic deceleration, and learning contract policies and procedures). These modifications allow for a more collaborative structure, with student-created goals and objectives to maximize buy-in and long-term success of these initiatives.

Recognizing the significant financial considerations that first-generation students expressed, the department responded to sentiments about the *weight of responsibility* by strategically examining departmental budgeting and spending. The priority was shifted to offset costs for students related to success efforts, including departmental sponsorship of clinical subscription services, national licensing exam preparation courses, and transportation to and from Level I fieldwork sites located outside the immediate geographic area. Consistent with student feedback, the department has also modified student technology requirements, allowing students use technology already owned, provided minimum word-processing and software expectations are met.

Figure 2.
Action Plan



This action plan seeks to create a more supportive and inclusive environment for first-generation students. By addressing challenges identified through qualitative research, the department can implement policies that directly respond to the needs of these students, improving their academic experience and retention. This plan outlines specific, actionable steps that respond to the perceptions of first-generation students while focusing on improving departmental policies and student success strategies. Study findings highlight the need for tailored mentorship programs, increased representation within academic and clinical settings, and institutional policies that address the specific challenges faced by this student population. These implications are vital for fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, which aligns with national, interdisciplinary efforts to establish a more culturally and ethnically representative healthcare workforce.

Implications for Practice, Education, and Research

Research regarding supportive practices for graduate-level health professions students is limited. The findings of this study reveal critical insights into the unique challenges, strengths, and needs of this underrepresented student population. To effectively recruit, retain, and support first-generation graduate students in healthcare professions, sustained outreach efforts, intentional support systems, and continued research are essential (Romero et al., 2020). Moreover, the narratives shared by participants in this study underscore the importance of representation, mentorship, and culturally responsive support. Institutions should consider implementing structured mentorship programs that pair first-generation students with faculty or practitioners who share similar backgrounds or experiences. Future research should examine the lived experiences of first-generation students attending various levels of occupational therapy programs (e.g. OTA, OTD), and students attending institutions in urban geographical areas.

In healthcare education, integrating action research into the classroom and clinical environments not only promotes a culture of evidence-based practice but also supports professional development. For example, faculty might use action research to explore strategies for fostering a greater sense of belonging among first-generation students, while fieldwork educators might examine ways to tailor mentorship to students with diverse educational backgrounds. Creating spaces for dialogue, peer connection, and reflective practice can further strengthen these students' academic success and professional identity formation. Based on the results of this study, educators should consider adopting supportive practices derived from the proposed action plan to support first-generation master's-level students.

Through intentionally designed supports that can be built into programmatic operations without adding additional student costs, institutions can help to unburden first-generation students' weight of responsibility and level the playing field for success. Programs may also consider providing extended support via post-graduation mentorship. Post-graduation mentorship guides students from academic support through licensing board exam preparation to a successful transition into their first professional role. Supporting graduates during their transition into entry-level practice through mentorship has received limited attention; however, a formalized program has been successfully

implemented in recent years for OT graduates (Stephenson et al., 2024). This study highlights the transformative potential of action research as a model for initiating change within academic and clinical settings. By leveraging action research as a practical framework for change, programs can turn student voices into concrete action and help shape a more diverse, responsive, and resilient healthcare workforce.

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