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OT professor inspires Dominican students

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OT professor inspires Dominican students

As an associate professor of Occupational Therapy at Dominican, Julia Wilbarger has become a worldwide ambassador for the University.

Because of her reputation as an acknowledged expert in the field, Julia is frequently invited to present workshops nationally and internationally on treatment strategies to help children with sensory processing disorders including supporting neuroscience research. Last year she presented in Australia, South Africa and Hong Kong. Last month, she presented in Toronto.

The traveling has brought Dominican visibility within the profession and allowed Julia to explore possible international fieldwork sites.

“I find it rewarding that there are so many excellent occupational therapists around the world. I am so proud of my profession,” Julia says. “There are so many smart people who are working really hard. I like the fact that I can teach at a high level so it stretches my clinical brain.”

Julia passes her experiences and knowledge onto Dominican occupational therapy students and has involved them in research and several projects. For example this year Julia, who is on the steering committee for Marin Autism Collaborative, has Dominican OT students working on a project with Autistry Studios, a 10,000 square foot warehouse in San Rafael where students, all on the autism spectrum, are engaged in projects of their own design. The project is focused on an adolescent/young adult transition program that helps with work skills through project-based therapy.

Dominican OT students in the [School of Health and Natural Sciences](#) currently are collecting data, doing a qualitative study by interviewing various stakeholders. The goal is to determine how effective Autistry Studios is through qualitative outcomes.

“I have contributed to students’ research experience and exposed them to some good projects that have helped them to be thoughtful and expand their thinking,” Julia says. “I’ve seen – and our whole faculty is part of this – such exponential intellectual growth. They start as students and then they become scholars. Our students leave the occupational therapy program with the capacity to contribute to the scholarly base of our field.”

Julia’s impact at Dominican has been far reaching.

“I think the students have benefited from working closely with a nationally and internationally recognized scholar on their Capstone projects, and learning how to do rigorous research,” says Dr. Ruth Ramsey, chair of the [Occupational Therapy program at Dominican](#). “Julia sets high academic and scholarly standards, and also provides the close mentoring students need to experience success.”

After earning her Masters in Occupational Therapy from Boston University and doctoral degree in Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience from the University of Denver, Julia in 2003 became assistant professor of occupational therapy at the University of Wisconsin. Following eight years of work in Wisconsin, Julia longed to return to her home state of California and the timing was perfect for Dominican, which had a faculty position available in its OT department.

Julia, who received her BA in Psychology in 1984 from UC Berkeley, had actually lived across the freeway from the Dominican campus while working for Marin County Schools after graduating from Boston University. She was familiar with Dominican and the reputation of its occupational therapy program.

“What struck me right away was the list of Capstone research projects that the students were doing. I love doing research. My PhD was a research-based degree. I was trained as an experimentalist,” Julia says. “I saw the Capstones and thought `this is a nice, small program, where I could keep doing research. I love working with the students on their Capstone research projects. It’s one of my favorite things.”

As is traveling to help educate OTs. Julia is committed to teaching students and teaching clinicians.

“Occupational therapists around the world have more commonalities than differences,” says Julia, who will fly to a conference in Ireland in May to teach therapy techniques for improving sensory processing. “It’s amazing to see that attitude of caring and can-do spirit. For OTs, solving problems is international.”