Partnering with Occupational Therapy to reach children in primary school

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Summary
The Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (OT) at Southern Cross University (SCU) incorporates teaching approaches that motivate and inspire students to learn in connection with their communities. Students are facilitated to be co-authors of their learning experience by their active involvement in the process of determining community need, establishing connections with partners, and building a platform for future growth in collaborative partnerships between allied health students and community organisations in regional and rural Australia.

Background
In 2014, a partnership between SCU’s OT students and ReachWise was established. ReachWise is an early intervention service to support families at risk within primary school communities. Research has shown that families with primary school age children are more likely to engage with resources such as counselling, therapies, allied and social services than those with adolescent age children. Adolescent vandalism and crime impact on entire communities. With support from SCU OT students who are embedded across four local schools, ReachWise is working to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage by developing whole of community coordinated responses to social, educational, learning support and emotional issues. OT students are guided by the learning support coordinator and ReachWise staff in the schools and supported by academic staff at the university to address the individual needs of primary school students.

Impact
Through their community engaged learning experience, students have developed a deepened appreciation for the role, expertise, hard work and passion of other team members, including families, teachers, aides, and health professionals. They have an increased insight into the various systems and networks of service provision, funding, and inter-professional collaboration in their community. Students’ professional identities have also been broadened. Evaluation from community collaborators has revealed that understanding of the dynamic role of occupational therapy has increased.

Outcomes
The partnership between ReachWise and SCU has facilitated a sustainable, mutually beneficial link supporting the missions of both organisations. OT students work 1:1 or in small groups with children who have been identified as “at risk” for learning difficulties or participation in educational activities. They collaborate with teachers and staff to promote meaningful engagement of primary school students. Many of the lessons learned by students through the community engaged learning experience has helped to develop the essential skills
they will need to implement creative, collaborative services in underserved regions of the country.