

Prevalence of Holistic Admissions Criteria Among Occupational Therapy Entry-Level Master's and Doctorate Programs

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DOI: 10.5014/ajot.2022.76S1-PO38

Date presented: March 31, 2022

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PURPOSE: The demographics of occupational therapy (OT) students are saturated with white women and under-representative of other racial, ethnic, or gender identities (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2018). Representation of a variety of backgrounds is important because it can impact services to the underserved, low income, and underrepresented communities (Collins & Carr, 2018). Holistic admissions criteria are one strategy to be more inclusive of students with a variety of experiences, cultures, and beliefs. Barriers that hinder programs from holistic admissions include the focus on academic metrics like grade point average and Graduate Record Examination scores (Gay et al., 2018). Knowledge of admissions criteria currently used by occupational therapy programs could highlight whether applicants are being considered based on a holistic approach. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the relationship between holistic admissions criteria and occupational therapy program ranking.

DESIGN: We utilized a retrospective cross-sectional cohort descriptive study design of OT programs in the United States to understand whether top performing occupational therapy programs employ holistic admissions criteria or academic metrics. Secondary descriptive analysis of an organized data set created from information provided in the 2020 U.S. News and World Report (Morse et al., 2020) was carried out. We considered programs that included a personal statement or writing sample, at least one letter of recommendation, and at least one interview as utilizing holistic admissions criteria. Occupational therapy programs listed in the report that were Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) accredited and that offered entry level masters or doctorate degrees were included in the study.

METHOD: We obtained the ACOTE-accredited top 50 ranked OT programs and the bottom 50 ranked OT programs from the 2020 U.S. World and News Report. We then used a nominal scale to classify the top ranked and bottom ranked into two groups. We also used a nominal scale to classify schools containing all three holistic measures and schools containing less than three holistic measures into two groups. The three measures included an interview, a personal statement or writing sample, or at least one letter of recommendation. We used IBM Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (Version 27) to implement a chi-square test of independence.

RESULTS: Overall, 54.95% (n = 61) of the programs used holistic admissions criteria. Of these, 36 were among the top 50 ranked programs, and 25 were among the bottom 50 ranked schools. Occupational therapy programs using holistic admissions criteria were not statistically different from the programs that did not use holistic admissions criteria on their overall ranking in the top 50 or bottom 50 programs ($\chi^2 = 0.55$, $p = 0.46$).

CONCLUSION: Among the top 100 ranked programs, those using holistic admissions criteria were not statistically different from programs not using holistic criteria on their ranking as a top or bottom ranked program.

IMPACT STATEMENT: Minimal research has been conducted in the field of occupational therapy regarding use of holistic admissions processes. Additional research should be conducted to discover the relationship between implementation of holistic admissions and diversity of the student body.

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