

Educational Preparation of OT Practitioners for Designation as Qualified Mental Health Professionals

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PURPOSE: Millions of people in the US struggle with mental health problems. Because of the shortage in mental health professionals, many of these people don't have access to treatment. Subsequently, they are at great risk of hospitalization, loss of income, and compromised overall health (NAMI, 2019). Even though occupational therapists could ease this shortage of access to mental health services, they are often not recognized as Qualified Mental Health Professionals (QMHPs). The purpose of this study was to investigate whether occupational therapy practitioners are academically prepared for designation as QMHPs in the perspective of occupational therapy educators.

DESIGN: We used mixed-methods with a cross-sectional survey and grounded theory designs. Cross-sectional survey data provided quantitative evidence regarding educator opinions about academic preparation of occupational therapy practitioners for designation as QMHPs. The grounded theory approach provided rich data detailing the process by which academic programs prepared students for future practice in mental health as described by occupational therapy educators.

METHOD: One hundred thirteen educators participated in the survey by responding to a questionnaire that was disseminated through an email list obtained from the AOTA website. We developed the survey questionnaire based on a comprehensive literature review and also based on the 2019 standards of the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE). The survey questionnaire consisted of 16 items inquiring about study participants' views on whether or not occupational therapy practitioners were academically prepared for designation as QMHPs. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate whether they were interested in volunteering for a follow-up interview to discuss further their views about preparation of occupational therapy practitioners for practice in mental health. Eight of the survey participants volunteered for the interviews. Each of the eight individuals was interviewed via Zoom platform. The interviews were facilitated using an interview guide that we developed based on a detailed description of the phenomenon of interest, which was to understand how academic programs prepared students for future practice in mental health. The survey data were analyzed using non-parametric statistics such as Chi-square goodness of fit tests. Qualitative data were analyzed using grounded theory methods.

RESULTS: Study participants were of the opinion that both occupational therapists, $\chi^2(2, N = 102) = 48.77, p = .000$ and occupational therapy assistants, $\chi^2(2, N = 95) = 9.18, p = .01$, were adequately prepared for designation as QMHPs. According to grounded theory results, the processes that academic programs used to prepare students for future practice in mental health included making them acquainted with the profession's historical roots in mental health, fieldwork placements in mental health, and a variety of lab activities.

CONCLUSION: Examination of the criteria for designation as QMHP in many States indicated that the minimum level of academic preparation for practitioners was a Bachelor's degree. Therefore, even though our study participants thought that both occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants (OTAs) were well prepared, we may find it difficult to advocate for recognition of OTAs as QMHPs in many states. However, our findings support advocacy for such designation of occupational therapists. Designation of occupational therapists as QMHPs would allow them to receive direct referral of individuals with mental health problems, which would help ease lack of access to mental health services.

References

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