

# Leading the OT Profession Toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Let's Talk Academia

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DOI: 10.5014/ajot.2022.76S1-PO71

Date presented: April 1, 2022

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The OT profession is predominantly white (82.5%) and does not reflect the national demographics in terms of diversity. This is also reflected in the occupational therapy academic programs within the student population. As the current projection suggests that the nation will become 'minority white' in 2045 (U. S. Census statistics, 2017), there will be significant challenges in the future recruitment of students if academic programs continue using traditional methods for admissions. Thus, threatening the viability of the OT profession by limiting access to the increasing population of Black and Hispanic applicants. As the U. S. population continues to diversify, the OT profession must be prepared to meet the demands of cultural congruency as consumers are increasingly sensitive to how they choose and access health professionals. The absence of diverse OT practitioners limits the range of backgrounds and perspectives that enhance practitioner-client relationships and lead to better outcomes for consumers. Increasing racial and ethnic diversity among practitioners supports the capacity of the profession to address disparities in education and healthcare. If efforts are not made to maximize diversity, equity, and inclusion within the profession, there will continue to be significant inequalities in access to occupational opportunities for marginalized populations (Brown et al., 2021). OT academic programs must first identify barriers to recruiting and retaining diverse students to address the lack of Black and Hispanic Occupational Therapy (OT) practitioners in order to build equitable and inclusive admissions practices. To address the lack of Black and Hispanic Occupational Therapy (OT) practitioners, the following questions were posed: What are the barriers to recruiting Black and Hispanic applicants in the occupational therapy profession for Occupational Therapy Programs? What resources support the persistence of Black and Hispanic students in the occupational therapy Master's Degree programs? What influences contribute to why Black and Hispanic students choose the occupational therapy profession? In what ways are the current Black and Hispanic occupational therapy practitioners feel they are being supported for leadership roles within AOTA? A mixed-methods, phenomenological approach was used to gain information that will assist the profession to become a viable option for those who have been historically marginalized. Through analysis of the data, this study uncovered key findings that explain the continued underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic people in the Occupational Therapy Profession. The following themes emerged: 1. Barriers to recruitment of Black and Hispanic applicants in the OT profession include general lack of awareness about the OT profession, application screening methods, lack of financial resources (students and programs), and deficient student support/resources. 2. OT programs did not provide adequate support/resources for Black and Hispanic students in their programs to sustain their persistence. 3. Exposure to occupational therapy through a healthcare practitioner or family or friends were the catalyst for choosing OT as a profession. 4. Black and Hispanic OT practitioners do not feel supported for leadership roles within AOTA. Furthermore, these results support other researchers that have found that Black and Hispanic people have been systematically neglected and left out of opportunities for occupational participation (Angell, 2014; Lavalley & Johnson, 2020). Collectively, this body of research can inspire and generate active solutions to increase diversity and advance the profession towards equity, and inclusion, supporting AOTA's Vision 2025.

## References

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