The Relationship Between Holistic Admissions Criteria and Program Ranking Among Occupational Therapy Entry-Level Programs

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Abstract
Holistic admissions criteria are one strategy to be more inclusive of students with a variety of experiences, cultures, and beliefs. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the relationship between holistic admissions criteria and occupational therapy program ranking. We used a retrospective cross-sectional cohort descriptive study design of occupational therapy programs in the United States to understand whether top performing programs employ holistic admissions criteria. Secondary descriptive analysis from the top and bottom 50 ranked occupational therapy programs in 2020 U.S. News & World Report (Morse et al., 2020) was completed. We used a nominal scale to classify programs into two groups based on use of holistic measures. 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 ($\chi^2 = 0.55, p = 0.46$). The bottom- and top-ranked programs were not statistically different regarding use of holistic admissions criteria, which suggests that implementation of holistic admission criteria is not associated with program ranking. Therefore, this research should encourage universities to implement holistic admissions criteria, as it is not associated with lowered program ranking, but has been associated with increasing both diversity and academic performance in other health professional programs (Glazer et al., 2014; Witzburg & Sondheimer, 2013; Price & Mills, 2010).

Comments
The authors declare that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interest that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

Keywords
holistic admissions, occupational therapy, diversity, education

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The profession of occupational therapy celebrated its centennial anniversary in 2017. The profession has been rapidly expanding since its inception and is projected to grow 16% annually between 2019 and 2029 (United States Census Bureau, n.d., “Quick Facts”). Although the profession is growing, the demographic composition of occupational therapy students has remained stagnant. In the 2011–2012 academic school year, 82% of master’s students self-identified as White, 5% self-identified as Black or African American, 6% self-identified as Asian, and 0% self-identified Alaska Native or Pacific Islander (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2012). In addition, 88% of master’s students self-identified as female (AOTA, 2012).

Results from the 2017–2018 academic year yielded the same percentage of African American enrollment, as well as a 1% increase in students who self-identified as Asian and a < 1% increase in students who identified as Alaska Native or Pacific Islander (AOTA, 2018). The majority of students still self-identified as White, totaling 80% (AOTA, 2018). According to the United States Census, the U.S. population in 2019 was made up of 76.3% White alone, 13.4% Black or African American, 5.9% Asian, 1.3% American Indian and Alaska Native, 0.2% Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, and 18.5% Hispanic or Latino (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Self-identified female enrollment increased to 89% (AOTA, 2018, p. 11). In contrast, the female population in the US in 2019 was 50.8% (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). These stark differences in demographics between occupational therapy students and the population of the United States clearly demonstrate that the profession is severely overrepresented by White women and underrepresented by racial minority groups and men.

Decades of similarly homogenous entry-level professional occupational therapy program student demographics prompted the AOTA Centennial Vision to address this lack of diversity (AOTA, 2020). Diversity is critical for the growth and sustainability of the occupational therapy profession (Taff & Blash, 2017). Occupational therapists serve the community in a variety of roles and settings, including hospitals, schools, skilled nursing facilities, and freestanding outpatient clinics (Castaneda et al., 2013; Davies, 2018; World Federation of Occupational Therapists, n.d.). This extensive involvement with the community highlights how often therapists interact with clients from a variety of backgrounds (Agner, 2020; Hazelwood et al., 2019). It is important that professionals in these fields come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences because it has been found that a lack of representation negatively affects access to services in these underserved, low-income, and underrepresented communities (Collins & Carr, 2018).

Occupational therapy programs educate students on how to provide culturally competent care, but it is arguable that this care cannot be fully achieved until the occupational therapy workforce is more reflective of the individuals treated. It is imperative to view students applying to occupational therapy programs from a more holistic point of view by understanding their experience, culture, and beliefs and then examining whether those aspects could benefit various patient populations. Professionals who mirror their patient population more easily cultivate trust and rapport with their patients (Glazer et al., 2014). Sharing key dimensions of one’s identity between occupational therapists and patients can improve communication, trust, and the patient-provider relationship (Ferguson & Candib, 2002; Glazer et al., 2014). The lack of diversity that currently exists in the health care profession may contribute to the large gap in health care services provided to underrepresented groups (Glazer et al., 2014). Adopting a holistic admissions perspective for occupational therapy programs may facilitate greater diversity, creativity, ideas, opinions, and perspectives (Price & Mills, 2010; Witzburg & Sondheimer, 2013).
A critical first look at barriers to viewing potential students holistically is warranted in order to address the current issue of homogeneity. One important barrier to note is the tendency for universities to focus on academic metrics, which heavily weigh numerical scores such as one’s grade point average (GPA) or Graduate Record Examination (GRE) score (Gay et al., 2018). Much data exists to reinforce the use of GRE scores, undergraduate GPA, and other pre-admission test scores as valid predictors of academic performance in graduate school (Andreeff, 2014; Hudson et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2016; Olivares-Urueta & Williamson, 2013; Stegers-Jager et al., 2015). However, these academic metrics might also reflect unequal access to resources and other academic opportunities such as tutors, standardized test preparation materials, and research opportunities (Haber et al., 2015; Hughes, 2019; Keith & Hollar, 2012; Moneta-Koehler et al., 2017). When universities assess applicants primarily through academic metrics, such as standardized test scores and grade point averages, the incoming cohort is at an increased risk of being homogenous (Harrison, 2019). Viewing applicants primarily through an academic lens may influence the entire admissions process, including the initial interview.

Knowledge of and focus on students’ academic metrics before the interview process could affect how students are scored during an interview (Gay et al., 2018). An excess amount of influence may be put on the academic metrics, which would inhibit the ability to view an applicant holistically (Gay et al., 2018). By giving increased attention to an individual’s non-academic metrics or soft skills, there is a possibility of growing inclusivity and diversity of applicants (Gay et al., 2018). Academic criteria such as GPA or test scores provide different information about the applicant than non-academic metrics, which consist of soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, character, ethical responsibility, resiliency, and cultural competence (Chaffey et al., 2012).

Barriers that limit diversity could potentially be overcome through holistic admissions measures, which weigh experiences, attributes, and academics equally, thereby potentially giving more students a chance to enter the field of occupational therapy (Addams et al., 2010). Holistic admissions is the process of taking into consideration an “applicant’s experiences, attributes, and academic metrics as well as the value an applicant would contribute to learning, practice, and teaching,” thereby allowing “admissions committees to consider the ‘whole’ applicant, rather than disproportionally focusing on any one factor” (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2020, para. 1). Using holistic admissions to look at other attributes in addition to academic metrics allows for soft skills to be taken into consideration during the admissions process. Health care professionals with increased soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, are reported to have higher patient satisfaction scores (Oyur-Celik, 2017; Wang et al., 2018), higher job satisfaction ratings (Tagoe & Quarshie, 2016), and lower levels of burnout (Görgens-Ekermans & Brand, 2012).

Several academic institutions have implemented holistic admissions processes and revealed a host of benefits, including an increase in diversity. In a study by Harrison (2019), 5.2% of students from underrepresented populations were accepted when using an academic-focused process; this percentage jumped to 30.4% when a holistic review process was implemented. Studies have also shown that holistic review processes did not negatively impact students’ success (Harrison, 2019; Witzburg & Sondheimer, 2013). In fact, holistic admission efforts have been shown to increase the number of underrepresented students in various programs, as well as the GPA of an entire class (Witzburg & Sondheimer, 2013). When Boston University School of Medicine engaged in the holistic admissions process, the percentage of underrepresented students attending the program increased by 9%, and the average GPA of the entering class increased from 3.57 to 3.66 (Witzburg & Sondheimer, 2013). Evidence shows that a holistic
approach to the admissions process can increase diversity and enhance each student’s learning experience (Glazer et al., 2014; Witzburg & Sondheimer, 2013).

Although evidence exists to support the use of a holistic review process in the health science field, there is limited research on holistic review processes in occupational therapy programs. It is important to understand whether holistic admissions processes are currently used in the top-ranked occupational therapy programs. Therefore, the aim of this study was to compare the holistic admissions criteria used by the top 50 ranked entry-level occupational therapy master’s and doctoral programs to the 50 lowest-ranked programs. This research is necessary to provide a groundwork for answering future questions about effective ways to view applicants holistically while still producing highly competent occupational therapists.

Method

Study Design

A retrospective cross-sectional study was conducted using publicly available websites to quantify admissions criteria from entry-level occupational therapy programs.

Sample Selection and Inclusion Criteria

Programs were included that met three criteria: (a) the program was fully accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE); (b) the program was ranked in 2020 by the U.S. News & World Report; and (c) the program offered an entry-level degree including a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy (MSOT) degree, Master of Occupational Therapy (MOT) degree, and/or clinical occupational therapy doctorates (OTD). Post professional degrees and “pipeline programs,” which are accelerated combined bachelor-master’s programs, were excluded. A total of 111 occupational therapy programs met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed. Schools that offered entry-level master’s and doctorate programs were counted as one program because they used the same or similar admission criteria.

Dependent Variable

Publicly available websites were reviewed for entry-level occupational therapy programs to identify the required components used by admissions. A dichotomous variable was created for “holistic admissions criteria” if programs publicly reported using three of the following admissions components: a personal statement or writing sample, at least one letter of recommendation, and at least one interview (Cameron et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2018; Felix et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2017; Pennebaker et al., 2014; Roman & Buman, 2019; Yaden et al., 2020). Programs were considered to use “non-holistic” admissions if they used two or fewer of the three holistic components.

Independent Variable

School ranking was determined using the U.S. News & World Report “Best Health Schools” rankings for 2020 (Morse et al., 2020). The report itself was created via a peer assessment survey sent to the faculty and staff of occupational therapy programs during the 2019–2020 academic year, and the method for developing the rankings is available from the publisher. Programs were ranked in descending order using this peer assessment score.

Data Analysis

Excel and Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS; IBM, n.d.) were used to conduct all analyses. To evaluate the hypothesis that higher-ranked schools would use holistic admissions criteria more frequently, a chi-square test for independence was conducted (Portney & Watkins, 2015). Alpha was set to $p < 0.05$. 

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Results

Out of the 111 programs, 61 (55%) programs used holistic admissions criteria, and 50 (45%) did not use holistic admissions criteria. Out of the 61 holistic programs, 25 programs (41%) ranked in the bottom half (in the range of 58–93), and 36 programs (59%) ranked higher (in the range 1–49). Out of the 50 programs that were not holistic, 24 (48%) ranked in the bottom half (in the range of 58–93), and 26 programs (52%) ranked in the top half (in the range of 1–49). The proportion of holistic and non-holistic programs did not differ by ranking as a top- or bottom-ranked occupational therapy program ($\chi^2 = 0.55$, $p = 0.46$).

Discussion

The bottom- and top-ranked programs were not statistically different regarding use of holistic admissions criteria, which suggests that implementation of holistic admission criteria is not associated with program ranking. Based on the analysis, 61 of the top 100 ranking programs used a holistic admissions process and 50 programs did not. Occupational therapy programs may be using a more holistic approach to follow suit with the trends in many other health-related fields. In a study conducted by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities ([NIMHD], n.d.), 67% of 228 health professions programs, including medical schools, dental schools, nursing schools, and pharmacy schools, began using a holistic admissions process in the last 10 years. Over 90% of dentistry and medical programs used a holistic admissions process (NIMHD, n.d.). Occupational therapy was not mentioned in the report, which suggests the importance of looking into holistic admissions for this profession. The data analysis of the top 100 ranking occupational therapy programs and the use of holistic admissions criteria provides some evidence that suggests occupational therapy programs are moving towards using a holistic admissions review like the majority of health professional programs.

Out of the 61 occupational therapy programs using a holistic review, the majority, 59%, had a better ranking. The data analysis indicated that 36 of the holistic occupational therapy programs were ranked between the range of 1 and 42 in the top 100. Other research highlights the benefits of using a holistic admissions process. Glazer et al. (2014) and Witzburg and Sondheimer (2013) found that using a holistic admissions process led to overall improvements in the academic program. The 67% of the programs studied by Glazer et al. (2014) used a holistic admission process, and there were either no changes or noticeable improvements in student academic performance as well as improvements in the overall academic experience (NIMHD, n.d.; Glazer et al., 2014).

A study by Witzburg and Sondheimer (2013) also noted that Boston University School of Medicine’s incoming applicant pool had a higher GPA when they used a holistic admissions process; the average GPA was a 3.57 for the class of 2008, and the average GPA was 3.66 for the class of 2012. Price and Mills (2010) similarly found that implementation of holistic review processes among pipeline dental college programs were correlated with increased leadership and volunteer roles, as well as class ranking in the top 10%.

There is not much current research about occupational programs and holistic admissions. Therefore, occupational therapy programs might have been hesitant to implement criteria that are considered holistic out of fear that they may impact ranking, prestige, or academics. However, this study suggests that the use of holistic criteria in occupational therapy school is not associated with a higher or lower ranking in the 2020 U.S. News & World Report, and therefore, programs should be encouraged to consider elements of holistic admissions: personal statements, letters of recommendations, and interviews.
The holistic criteria selected for this current study may lead to more academic success in occupational therapy programs and higher competency in the occupational therapy profession (Cameron et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2018; Felix et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2017; Pennebaker et al., 2014; Roman & Buman, 2019; Yaden et al., 2020).

Limitations

There are several limitations to consider. The data set gathered by previous students was reviewed and doubly confirmed by a second researcher. However, the entries were not verified by current researchers for accuracy. The data on school rankings is gathered from the 2020 *U.S. News & World Report*, which is subjective in nature. Because of time constraints, there was not enough time to analyze all occupational therapy programs. Therefore, there is a risk of selection bias as well as sampling bias. Another limitation of this study is the absence of a universally agreed on definition of holistic admissions components and a lack of knowledge as to how each program weighs criteria identified in this study as holistic with academic metrics, such as GPA and GRE data. It is important to note that this study does not illuminate how the criteria are weighed and just identifies if the criteria were collected. Standardization of this definition is optimal for future research.

Future Directions

Although evidence exists to support the use of holistic admissions in the health sciences, minimal research has been conducted in the profession of occupational therapy regarding the use of holistic admissions processes. A universally acknowledged definition of holistic admissions needs to be created to ensure the standardization of future research. Additional research should be conducted to discover the relationship between the implementation of holistic admissions and the diversity of the student body. Diversification of future occupational therapy students, and therefore, the profession, may increase culturally competent service delivery and maximize client-centered care. Further research would be advantageous in researching ways to improve diversity in the profession of occupational therapy and to identify the impact of holistic criteria implementation in the admissions process (Collins & Carr, 2018). The possibility of holistic admission processes providing beneficial aspects to occupational therapy programs cannot be decided by rankings in the 2020 *U.S. News & World Report* alone, and this analysis of the use of holistic admissions criteria by occupational therapy programs did not lead to insight on the impact of holistic admissions criteria on diversity.

Further research could illuminate whether holistic measures are associated with higher student success and satisfaction and an increase in diversity in occupational therapy programs and the profession as a whole. Studies have indicated that a lack of diversity in the health care field is associated with significant health disparities, lower quality of care, disproportionate health care services, and higher mortality rates for underrepresented populations (Scott & Zerwic, 2015). Therefore, while holistic measures during the admissions process of occupational therapy programs do not appear to have a significant effect on performance in the program based on this study, it is still important to observe if these measures will lead to a more diverse applicant pool. Conducting research on diversity is imperative to make the AOTA Centennial Vision of having an inclusive profession into a reality (AOTA, 2020). More research may help occupational therapists and academics become more aware of the impact of holistic admissions on diversity, and it may help them understand how to implement changes in the future (Glazer et al., 2016).
Conclusion

In conclusion, the bottom and top ranked programs were not statistically different regarding use of holistic admissions criteria, which suggests that implementation of holistic admission criteria is not associated with program ranking. Therefore, this research should encourage universities to implement holistic admissions criteria, as it is not associated with lowered program ranking, but has been associated with increasing both diversity and academic performance in other health professional programs (Glazer et al., 2014; Price & Mills, 2010; Witzburg & Sondheimer, 2013). Although evidence exists to support the use of holistic admissions processes in the health sciences, very little research has been conducted in the profession of occupational therapy. Additional research must be conducted to discover the relationship between implementation of holistic admissions and diversity of the student body.

References
HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS CRITERIA

https://urbanuniversitiesforhealth.org/media/documents/Holistic_Amissions_in_the_Heath_Professions_final.pdf


