Barriers that Affect Equity in the Occupational Therapy Admissions Process: Student and Faculty Perspectives

Quinn P. Tyminski  
*Washington University School of Medicine - USA, tyminskiq@wustl.edu*

Lenin Grajo  
*Washington University School of Medicine - USA, grajo@wustl.edu*

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Student and Faculty Perspectives

Abstract
The use of holistic admissions in higher education has been demonstrated to increase the diversity of incoming student classes; yet, in occupational therapy (OT) research, admissions processes remain under-explored. This phenomenological study aimed to explore the process of OT admissions from the perspective of students, faculty, and staff at a single OT program with the goal to create a more inclusive, equitable, and holistic process. Focus groups were conducted with first-year students, and an online survey was sent to faculty to explore perspectives on the admissions process, necessary qualities for an OT graduate student, and suggestions for increasing inclusion and equity in the admissions process. Several key themes emerged: the cost of applying, lack of uniformity across different institutions’ admissions requirements, and preconceived notions of institutions; flexibility in admissions requirements, connections with the institution, and the need to recruit more diverse participants. Findings of this study are consistent with the literature regarding the use of holistic processes in graduate education, recommending less focus on student academic achievements and increased view of the student as a multifaceted individual with numerous talents. As a result, recommendations can be made to change admissions processes at this institution and in OT.

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
occupational therapy, education, admissions, equity

Credentials Display
Quinn P. Tyminski, OTD, OTR/L, BCMH
Lenin C. Grajo, PhD, EdM, OTR/L

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Holistic admissions processes have been upheld in the higher education literature as the gold standard for increasing equity in admissions processes by allowing admissions committees to view applicants as the sum of their experiences and skills rather than solely their academic performance (Robinett et al., 2021). However, holistic admissions processes may not completely remove the barriers to application and matriculation to graduate health professions education. Thus, this study aimed to explore the facilitators of and barriers to the admissions process and matriculation in a single health professions education program that uses holistic admissions. This study also seeks to ascertain how the identified barriers to admission and matriculation can affect equity in the admissions process.

The literature regarding admissions processes in graduate health professions education has historically focused on the need to examine an applicant’s cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Bowyer et al., 2018). Cognitive factors demonstrate academic and thinking abilities, including undergraduate grade point average (GPA), pre-requisite GPA, or standardized test scores (e.g., Graduate Records Examination; GRE). Non-cognitive admissions factors include personal essays, interviews, and skills assessments, such as leadership, problem-solving, organization, and adaptability, among others. Traditional admissions processes have been well described in the health care professions literature (e.g., Wilcox et al., 2018; Zamanzadeh et al., 2020). In recent years, the health care professions have begun to encourage holistic admissions processes to improve diversity and inclusivity. Holistic admissions or a whole-file review is a process whereby the entire applicant is considered one whole person while minimizing the emphasis placed on disparate cognitive factors, such as the GPA and GRE scores (Wilson et al., 2019).

The push for holistic admissions has come as the need for more equitable admissions practices and greater class diversity has been identified as a priority by many health care professions, including occupational therapy (OT) (e.g., Barrett et al., 2022; Nakae et al., 2021). Holistic admission has been demonstrated to increase the diversity of incoming student classes, with an increased number of underrepresented minoritized students being admitted (Robinett et al., 2021). Holistic admissions can remove some systematic bias perpetrated by standardized exams with students of color and those from low socioeconomic statuses facing barriers to taking the test (i.e., cost of the exam, transportation, etc.) and demonstrating lower scores than their white and higher-income counterparts (Moneta-Koehler et al., 2017). A wealth of evidence exists supporting the inequities associated with the GRE as it fails to predict student performance in graduate education and serves as an appropriate measure of aptitude (e.g., Sealy et al., 2019; Woo et al., 2023).

A significant amount of literature exists on how undergraduate, graduate, and medical school admissions processes may perpetuate systematic inequities in higher education (e.g., Herbaut & Geven, 2020). In OT education, the literature on admissions focuses mainly on student traits that increase success in coursework and fieldwork settings (e.g., Bathje et al., 2014; Craik & Wyatt-Rollason, 2002). Studies exploring aspects of inclusivity, equity, and justice in the admissions processes remain under-explored.

OT admissions practices currently vary depending on the academic institution. Most programs use the GRE and pre-requisite course GPA to analyze cognitive factors, observation hours, and personal essays for non-cognitive factors. The use of interviews was more varied, with 50% of masters and 62.5% of doctoral programs reporting an interview, though interview types varied (Bowyer, 2018). Often missing from OT program admissions is the impact of the requirements on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice on the applicant pool. Razek et al. (2022) found that engagement in admissions processes required
economic, social, and cultural capital. Economic capital can be considered the fiscal resources needed to participate in the admissions process, such as engaging in shadowing hours that do not bring in income. Social capital included the students’ network of relationships that could be leveraged to assist with admissions, including ways for students to learn about the profession of OT and having individuals write reference letters. Finally, cultural capital was cited as how students could show their authentic selves in the application. The study noted that admissions processes favored students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and those with majority identities (e.g., white, cisgender, etc.). If the OT profession desires to increase diversity and commitment to inclusive and equitable practices in our educational institutions, it is necessary to ensure that the admissions process and requirements represent these principles (AOTA, 2017).

To assist in determining gaps in the admissions processes and provide guidance for necessary changes to increase equity in the admissions process, this study examined a single OT program that uses a holistic admissions process with the goal of creating a more inclusive and equitable process. The importance of understanding the lived experience of participants was central to the aim of the study, as the researcher sought to explore how the same admissions process may differ based on a person’s experiences and identities (Pilarska, 2021).

The guiding research questions were:

- What do faculty and students view as barriers to and facilitators of completing the OT admissions process and attending an OT program once an admissions decision is completed?
- How do the identified barriers affect equity in the OT admissions process?

**Method**

**Study Design**

This study used a constructivist phenomenological approach with the primary objective of exploring the process of OT admissions from the perspective of students and faculty at a single OT program that uses a holistic admissions process. All aspects of this study adhered to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) and included all applicable aspects of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ; O’Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and occurred during the Fall 2021 semester of an OT program in a research-intensive private university in a Midwestern city. Participation in the study did not benefit students or faculty beyond being able to contribute to change in the future of the profession.

**Participants and Data Collection**

The primary investigator (PI) used purposive sampling to select participants who could answer the proposed research questions. The researchers determined that focus groups were the most appropriate form of data collection for students to provide a comfortable environment for speaking with a faculty member and allow students to build on each other’s ideas. The PI conducted two focus groups and one individual interview during the Fall 2021 semester. Each focus group lasted for 60 min via Zoom. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An individual interview was conducted with one student who was unavailable during the focus groups. The interview lasted for 30 min via Zoom and was recorded and transcribed verbatim.
To recruit participants, the PI shared an announcement during their first-year class. First-year students included master’s and entry-level doctoral students in the same academic cohort. The researcher sent a follow-up email that provided basic information regarding the project specifics and time required and asked interested students to contact the PI for further information. The PI conducted focus groups with current first-year students to gain their perspectives on the admissions process, necessary qualities for an OT graduate student, and suggestions for increasing inclusion and equity in the admissions process. Participants were assigned to a focus group based on their availability and sent a virtual meeting invite.

The PI collected data from faculty at the same OT program through an online anonymous survey emailed to all current faculty and lecturers as a form of supporting data from the student focus groups. A survey process was chosen to allow faculty a quick and efficient way to provide input while mitigating power differentials. The PI used convenience sampling to recruit from all faculty using the program faculty email group. All faculty (n = 26) on the email group were eligible to complete the survey. Eligible participants were reminded of the survey via an email sent 1 month after the initial email. Consent was obtained before any survey questions via an electronic checkbox at the beginning of the survey.

**Survey Instrument**

Survey questions explored perspectives on the admissions process, necessary qualities for an OT student, and suggestions for increasing inclusion and equity in the admissions process (see Table 1). Survey questions were piloted for face and content validity before their use through an informal feedback process on survey questions with two experts in conducting mixed methods research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Questions on the Faculty Admissions Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Headings from Faculty Survey</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Barriers facing prospective students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Facilitators assisting prospective students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Changes to the admissions process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Promoting equity in the admissions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

The PI coded the data using an inductive method with an emphasis on basic descriptive codes. Some codes were created using in vivo coding, and some were created using the student’s and faculty’s own words. After the initial pass through all forms, thematic analysis occurred with the researcher combining descriptive codes to create thematic codes based on recurring patterns in the data.

In keeping with a constructivist research philosophy and to ensure trustworthiness and rigor, the PI used research memos throughout the process and maintained an audit trail of all data, including raw data, researcher field notes from focus groups and the individual interview, initial inductive codes and coded transcripts, communications with participants, and PI research memos from each step of the process. In addition, the PI conducted member checking with the participants. Focus group participants were sent themes extracted from the data via their university email address within 1 year of their participation in the focus group. The participants were asked if the themes presented matched their experiences and for any additions or changes to the themes. All of the participants who returned the document agreed with the identified themes and made no significant changes.

**Positionality**

The PI is an alumnus and serves as a faculty member and chair of the admissions committee at the institution. As such, the sum of the PI experiences at the university becomes central to the study of the
admissions process at this university and across all OT institutions. Combined with the PI’s identity as a white, cisgender female in a profession where white, middle-class females are the majority, and as an instructor of these students in courses, it is acknowledged that a specific set of biases may be present when engaging in this qualitative research inquiry (AOTA, 2020). Attempts to mitigate these biases were made through the inclusion of a diverse team of authors, the use of member checking, and ensuring that participation in the study had no impact on student class standing. It is impossible to eliminate bias fully, yet open identification of the author’s positionality can serve to provide others with a better lens to view the resultant evidence.

Results

Sixteen students from the first-year cohort responded to the invitation, and 15 students participated. Fifteen students identified as female, while one student identified as gender fluid. The participants ranged from 20 to 28 years of age at the time the study was conducted. Of the 16 student participants, four identified as Black or African American, three identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and nine identified as White. Student data demonstrated six themes regarding facilitators of and barriers to the admissions process (see Table 2).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Quotes from Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barriers to the Admissions Process</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of Applying</td>
<td>“Thinking back to applying, I think the biggest thing that sticks out to me was how expensive it was. I think, [this institution] was the cheapest, actually, that I applied to, but I probably took the GRE twice, the application fees, there are some schools that after the application fee on [the centralized application system] had separate application fees of their school. I spent over $2,000 of [sic] applying. I had that money, that was all my savings, but not everyone has that money to apply.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Uniformity</td>
<td>“[T]he requirements were all over the place, and I was lucky that, like, I had a degree that covered most things that could have been asked. But whenever I was kind of looking at schools, some of them I didn’t even apply to, because when thinking about the top few schools and OT, they all require pretty much the same things. And then there were some schools that would require, like, ridiculous things like physics &amp; religion.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preconceived Notions of Institution</td>
<td>“When I put my application in and schools would reply to me, I’d have this window in which I had to choose yes or no, and whether I was going to go to school. And I almost put down a $500 deposit on another school, because I wasn’t sure if I was going to hear back [from my top choice]. So it was like, pitting the schools against each other, and making me feel like I didn’t know if I could actually get to my best option without spending even more money.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample Quotes from Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitators of the Admissions Process</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in Admissions Requirements</td>
<td>“So for me, I really appreciate how this program accepted my prerequisites from the community college. When I was applying to grad schools . . . I didn’t apply to a school because they said, ‘If you do your pre-reqs at the community college, like, we strongly recommend not doing that’, and I was like ‘Okay, I won’t apply here.’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with the Institution</td>
<td>“I made my decision based on an email I got from her because I asked her several questions about the program, and it was like a Bible length response, which was very very comforting because I didn’t usually get responses like that even from current students at other universities.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preconceived Notions of an Institution</td>
<td>“[She] sent me an email right after I got in, and said, with the heading, “We want you! I posted that on my snapchat story or something . . . . I was, like, sobbing over this email . . . . So, her sending those emails directly after you get accepted was probably the key to getting those people to come here.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preconceived Notions of an Institution</td>
<td>“It’s like one of the best of the best so it’s [a] very hard opportunity [to pass up applying to].”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Themes from Student Focus Groups

Cost of Applying

The students noted that the number one difficulty navigating the admissions process at all OT institutions was the cost of applying to OT programs. The students discussed the cost associated with applying to multiple schools, such as paying an application fee at each school, losing paid wages to engage in observation hours, the cost of taking multiple prerequisites, and taking standardized examinations.

Lack of Uniformity

The students reported frustration with a lack of uniformity regarding admissions requirements between academic institutions despite the presence of a centralized application system. The students noted that requirements for prerequisites, essays, interviews, and timelines for admissions decisions differed across institutions. They reported that the need to take extra prerequisites increased costs in an already costly process and resulted in them not applying to schools with unique prerequisites. The students reported applying on average between 5 and 10 institutions and engaging in both group-based and individual interviews. In the discussion of lack of uniformity, codes for negative experiences with large group interviews, positive experiences with individual interviews directly with faculty members, and both positive and negative experiences with asynchronous video interviews were noted. The students noted that group-based interviews felt rushed, not allowing them to consider their answers to questions or feeling that they were being evaluated for their individual abilities. Conversely, the students reported positive experiences with individual synchronous interviews, both virtual and in-person, with faculty at various universities, as these experiences provided a chance to create rapport with faculty and gain a connection to the university. Finally, regarding virtual asynchronous interviews, the students reported both positive and negative experiences. The students reported that the asynchronous nature of this type of interview benefited students with mental health concerns, such as anxiety, allowing them to have multiple chances to answer a question and providing increased time to consider their answer. Conversely, some of the students reported that they felt their answers to the asynchronous interviews were “rehearsed and not genuine.” In addition, the students reported that there is no consistent application deadline or admissions decision date for all OT schools. The students felt the differing timelines made making informed acceptance decisions difficult.

Preconceived Notions of Institutions

The students’ preconceived biases supported by school rankings appeared to serve as both a barrier and a facilitator to the admissions process. The students noted that a program’s high ranking, designated by the US News and World Report Best Occupational Therapy Schools, resulted in limited beliefs that they would be admitted. Some of the students referred to certain programs as their “reach” school, a designation meaning that they did not expect to be admitted. Yet, other students reported that they selected this program because of the ranking, stating, “it’s one of the best” as their main reason for applying.

Flexibility in the Admissions Process

Recent changes to increase flexibility in admissions requirements prompted the students to note, “[this institution] was probably the easiest of the schools I applied to.” The students commented on the program’s flexibility in accepting a variety of prerequisites from all types of institutions and the lack of GRE requirements.

Connection with the Institution

The students noted that the largest facilitator in the admissions process was a connection with the institution. The presence of a designated recruiter conducting outreach experiences for the students,
including tours, a summer introduction to an OT course, and individual meetings, was a large factor in many of the students’ decision to attend. In addition, the students reported that the opportunity to engage with current students in the program with similar identities gave them a chance to have frank and open conversations about what the experience at the institution was like. One student described her experience as, “I ended up talking to three students, and kind of asking pretty deep questions about like what was the diversity within our cohort like. And, I mean, they didn’t lie about that, there was no lie.”

**Faculty Survey Results**

For the faculty survey, 21 out of 33 faculty responded. Most of the faculty participants had greater than 20 years (n = 6) and between 10 and 20 years (n = 5) of experience in academia. Further, 13 of the 21 respondents reported an experience being on an admissions committee either at this or another academic institution.

The faculty survey data mirrored several of the same themes from the student focus groups, including the cost of applying, the need to create more flexibility in the admissions process, and a desire to create relationships with incoming students (see Table 3). One additional theme included the need to recruit more diverse students, but faculty did note that a recent pathway program and partnership with a local Historically Black College and University (HBCU) designed to mentor and recruit students of color was a large facilitator in this endeavor. Many of the faculty requested changes to the admissions process that had already occurred, indicating faculty may lack familiarity with the process despite a high percentage reporting previous involvement in admissions.

**Table 3**

*Faculty Admissions Survey Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Facilitator Sample Quotes from Respondents</th>
<th>Barrier Sample Quotes from Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of Applying</td>
<td>“the reasonable requirements. I have not heard from anyone that our requirements were overly cumbersome.”</td>
<td>“Several prospective applicants decided NOT to apply because we required GRE, so they applied only to schools that did not require GRE.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility in the Admissions Process</td>
<td>“helpful staff to answer questions.”</td>
<td>“[I would like to see more effort be placed on] helping students feel engaged and welcomed here.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with the Institution</td>
<td>“pathway program with local [HBCU].”</td>
<td>“fear of rejection, concern about whether they’d fit in.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to Recruit from more Diverse Environments</td>
<td>“cost, for URM (underrepresented minoritized), students structural barriers like expectations of volunteering and standardized tests.”</td>
<td>“lack of diverse representation.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature regarding holistic processes in graduate education, recommending less focus on academic achievements and an increased view of the student as a multifaceted individual with numerous talents (Michel et al., 2019). Beyond simply the use of holistic admissions, the results of this study mirror the results of the single study mentioned above regarding equity in the OT admissions process yet provided greater depth. The cost of applying can be correlated with economic capital (see citation for history on racial wealth disparities, Derenoncourt et al., 2022), while the creation of relationships with and the reputation of an institution can be equated with social capital and the need for flexibility to cultural capital (see Keefer & Knack, 2008; Razek et al., 2020 for a deeper discussion on social capital in higher education and OT).
Reducing the Cost of Applying

Beyond the cost to apply, the students noted the extra cost of taking multiple standardized exams, pre-requisite courses, and choosing observation experiences over paid work. In recent years, medical schools have recognized the inherent privilege and resources required simply to submit applications, with one study noting that over one third of applicants spend greater than $2,000 applying, limiting the opportunities for students from identities with resource scarcity (Millo et al., 2019). To aid, some medical institutions have begun to host visiting students, eliminating travel and lodging costs to visit. Also, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) recently started a program that reduces MCAT costs, waves application fees, and provides free MCAT study materials. The need for financial resources in the application process sends a message to potential applicants that economic capital is required to belong, which may deter some students from applying (Millo et al., 2019). At present, the OT Centralized Application System (OTCAS) does provide small grants to cover the cost of application fees, but these remain underused.

Creating Connections with Applicants

Creating connections with prospective students can be an important factor in attracting and retaining diverse students. The students reported that engaging with other underrepresented minoritized students and a welcoming connection to a faculty member were important factors in their decision to attend a school. In the higher education literature, social capital is cited as a pivotal factor in a first-generation and Latinx student’s decision to attend college (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Jorgensen, 2018). Forms of social capital that can improve equity in the admissions process include the use of peer groups that allow current students to engage with prospective students in informal ways to allow for honest conversation and programs designed to engage adolescents in the OT profession to make an introduction and connection to the field (Tierney & Venegas, 2006).

Providing Flexibility in the Admissions Requirements

In alignment with holistic admissions, added flexibility in the admissions process, particularly around standardized examinations, has gained traction in the literature. In the Razek et al. (2022) study, applicants reported not feeling represented in the admissions process, as not all aspects of their abilities, skills, and personality were considered for admission. Yet, several studies have demonstrated little increase in diverse student representation through test-optional admissions policies, necessitating a great discussion around flexibility in all portions of the admissions requirements and process (Rubin & Gonzalez Canache, 2019). Creating opportunities for flexibility in the admissions requirements can create equity through broadening the pool of potential applicants and highlighting their unique strengths.

All students would benefit from greater discussion among OT programs regarding requirements and deadlines for the process. Students wanted to view all of their admission options at once to select the option that best fits their needs (financial, spatial, temporal, etc.), but the varying deadlines made this impossible. While it may not be fully possible to align all admissions deadlines because of academic requirements and start dates, institutions should review their competitors’ deadlines and align as closely as possible.

Attracting Future Students

As the rates of applicants for OT education programs continue to decline, all schools would benefit from the creation of social networks to recruit and retain potential students (Harvison, 2022). Academic institutions should consider how they advertise the profession to younger students who may not traditionally get exposed to OT. Engagement with the local community may provide a symbiotic
relationship through the creation of pipeline programs to increase enrollment from a variety of diverse populations. Similar programs have shown promise in medical centers for improving the attainment and retention of students from underrepresented backgrounds (Gerull et al., 2021).

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study, including the possible presence of a power differential between the interviewer and the student participants. The use of focus group data collection may have limited the student participants’ ability to comment freely. The student participants were already attending the institution studied, providing a specific view of the beneficial process at that institution and admissions processes they disliked at other institutions. However, the student participants all applied to numerous other institutions and could discuss these experiences during the study. Another limitation was the small sample size of students included and the use of only one data analyst. The use of a survey to glean faculty and staff did not allow for a conversation and building of ideas that occurs in focus groups. Finally, the faculty and staff participants are already employed at an institution working to make changes to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in OT education and, thus, may have differing opinions than faculty and staff at institutions not making these changes.

Future research should focus on the continued ways to create flexible and inclusive admissions processes in the profession. An exploration of the use of interviewing in the admissions process would be beneficial to gather data regarding student experiences and faculty’s perceived benefit of interview types in making an admissions decision. Future admissions studies should include a wider variety of students (both admitted and rejected) and institutions.

Conclusion

This study was conducted before the June 2023 Supreme Court of the United States decision (Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard, 2023) to overturn affirmative action in the United States. In this new era where a student’s race cannot be considered a factor for admission, the use of holistic admissions and increased flexibility in admissions requirements and processes may serve as an academic institution’s main means to aim for diversity and inclusion in admissions decisions and become an even greater asset in the recruitment and retention of minoritized identities.

The findings of this study revealed student and faculty perspectives on barriers to and the impact on equity in the admissions process and indicate that some beneficial changes to the admissions process in OT education have occurred in the recent past. Yet, further changes are needed to ensure that equity continues to be a primary motivating factor in the admissions process. In addition, there are large-scale changes that can occur at a national level across OT schools that can serve to benefit the profession.

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