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Abstract

There are limited studies within occupational therapy literature assessing the outcomes of advanced degrees. Specifically, there is a scarcity of literature about the benefits of completing a post-professional occupational therapy doctorate (POTD) program. The purpose of this study was to retrospectively examine graduates' professional and personal outcomes at a midwestern university with an established POTD program. A total of 64 graduate exit surveys completed by POTD graduates between the years of 2008 and 2017 were analyzed using a mixed methods research design. Emergent categories from the data included a greater sense of self-empowerment and confidence, expanded career opportunities, and increased professional knowledge and skills. Quantitative data indicated new employment opportunities and increased pay. Overall, graduates reported increased personal and professional growth, however continued research regarding the benefits of completing a POTD is needed to help guide occupational therapists considering an advanced degree.

Keywords

Outcomes for education, occupational therapy doctorate, post-professional education, program outcomes

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Retrospective Analysis of Graduates' Outcomes in a Post-Professional Occupational Therapy Doctorate Program

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ABSTRACT

There are limited studies within occupational therapy literature assessing the outcomes of advanced degrees. Specifically, there is a scarcity of literature about the benefits of completing a post-professional occupational therapy doctorate (POTD) program. The purpose of this study was to retrospectively examine graduates' professional and personal outcomes at a midwestern university with an established POTD program. A total of 64 graduate exit surveys completed by POTD graduates between the years of 2008 and 2017 were analyzed using a mixed methods research design. Emergent categories from the data included a greater sense of self-empowerment and confidence, expanded career opportunities, and increased professional knowledge and skills. Quantitative data indicated new employment opportunities and increased pay. Overall, graduates reported increased personal and professional growth, however continued research regarding the benefits of completing a POTD is needed to help guide occupational therapists considering an advanced degree.

Introduction

Many health professions require a clinical doctorate degree for entry-level practice including audiology, chiropractor studies, dentistry, optometry, pharmacy, physical therapy, and veterinary medicine (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Following suit of other health professions, some occupational therapy programs have advanced their curriculum to an entry-level doctoral degree. The professional standards for entry-level practice transitioned from bachelor's to master's in 2006 (AOTA, n.d.a), and currently, occupational therapists are able to practice with entry-level bachelor's, master's, and doctoral level degrees. Due to the constantly evolving healthcare environment, post-professional doctoral-level programs are needed to keep up with advancements in research, technology, and the complexities of healthcare (Morley & Petty, 2010). Additionally, obtaining a post-professional occupational therapy doctorate (POTD) degree allows occupational therapy practitioners with a bachelor's and master's degree the opportunity to meet the expanding need for experienced doctoral level faculty required by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) to fill directorships and teaching positions in educational programs (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], n.d.b).

Literature Review

As of July 2020, AOTA had over 60 POTD programs listed on their website (AOTA, n.d.c). A scarcity of literature exists that examines the benefits of a POTD degree. Provident et al. (2015) and Salls et al. (2012) both had limited or small sample sizes from single source populations but noted that graduates of POTD programs reported personal and professional growth. Salls et al. (2012) found that POTD graduates were more likely to utilize evidence-based practice (EBP) and reported increased familiarity with the use of scholarly writing, which helped them to overcome time constraint barriers. Provident and colleagues (2015) analyzed personal and professional transformations resulting from completing an online POTD program. Respondents identified the use of EBP and increased engagement in leadership roles as areas of professional growth. In the areas of personal growth, graduates identified self-awareness and self-confidence. Results of this study also indicated POTD graduates felt empowered and described broadening their perspectives of what an occupational therapist can accomplish, transforming and improving themselves in all areas of their lives, and becoming re-energized for the occupational therapy profession (Provident et al., 2015).

Although limited evidence exists about the benefits of completing a POTD, literature from other health professions reflects positive outcomes related to post-professional education. Several health professions including audiology, dietetics, nursing, occupational therapy, and physical therapy have determined the need for and benefit of post-professional education (Brody et al., 2009). Post-professional clinical doctorate education expands professional knowledge, increases EBP, and advances advocacy skills (Moriarty & Brown, 2010). Additionally, post-professional doctorate education

expands scopes of practice, increases job promotions, and increases salary (Brody et al., 2009; Seegmiller et al., 2015). Employers have reported employees with post-professional degrees demonstrated superior skills, had increased leadership skills, and had increased competency related to advanced practice (Murray et al., 2001).

Due to the lack of research about POTD educational outcomes, more evidence is needed to justify the benefits of occupational therapists attaining the degree. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to retrospectively examine graduates' perceptions of personal and professional growth at a midwestern university with an established POTD program. Specifically, the research questions were: 1) *Does completing a POTD program impact graduates' personal and professional growth outcomes?* 2) *What are the personal and professional growth outcomes achieved by graduates of a POTD program?*

Methodology

Research Design

This retrospective study utilized a mixed methods research design to explore personal and professional growth outcomes of POTD students at a midwestern university. A mixed methods research design was chosen due to the retrospective nature of the study and the survey included both open and close-ended questions (Depoy & Gitlin, 2016). For the qualitative portion of the research, an inductive content qualitative analysis was utilized to allow the researchers to establish clear links between the research questions and the raw data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Categories then emerged from analysis of questions pertaining to personal and professional growth. For the quantitative portion of the research, a descriptive statistical analysis, specifically frequencies, summarized specific areas of potential personal and professional growth related to employment status, salary, and scholarly activities (Depoy & Gitlin, 2016).

Appropriate institutional review board approval was granted prior to obtainment of POTD graduate exit surveys. Completed POTD graduate exit surveys from the years 2008-2017 were provided to the primary researchers for data analysis on a password protected cloud. All identifying information was removed from the surveys prior to researcher access.

Respondents

This study utilized a non-probability convenience sample of 64 graduate exit surveys from an established POTD program (more than 10 years of graduates). Surveys were completed online anonymously. As noted by Vassar and Holzmman (2013), convenience sampling provides the most practical strategy for study population selection when sample sizes are small. To ensure the most accurate outcomes, this study included analysis of all surveys between 2008 and 2017. Exclusion criteria included missing, incomplete, or illegible answers regarding personal and professional

growth outcomes. All exit surveys met the inclusion criteria and were included in the analysis.

Instruments

Select close-ended and open-ended questions from POTD graduate exit surveys provided data for this study. The exit surveys provided information about POTD graduates' outcomes regarding program goals, advising and technology support, professional development and contributions to practice, processes and effectiveness of the program, and program mission fulfillment. The program's POTD graduate exit surveys consisted of Likert-scale and closed and open-ended questions. Formatting changes to survey questionnaires occurred across the different years; however, question content remained unchanged and respondent anonymity was maintained for all surveys and years.

This study specifically focused on data regarding perceptions of personal and professional growth outcomes as the result of completing the POTD program. The researchers analyzed all open-ended questions that addressed personal and professional growth in relationship to the academic program. Additionally, quantitative data regarding participation in professional activities since beginning the POTD program and information on employment changes directly after POTD program completion were analyzed. Survey questions that addressed these constructs are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Open-Ended Survey Questions

Survey Questions
1. Please comment on the overall influence the POTD program has had on your personal and professional growth.
2. How has the POTD program at this university advanced your career?
3. What has been the most significant impact on you professionally as a result of your experiences in this program?

Procedures and Data Analysis

The researchers utilized an inductive content analysis for the qualitative portion of the study which allowed for analysis of large amounts of textual data as described by Elo and Kyngas (2008). From surveys spanning 10 years with 64 different samples analyzed, answers to the three open-ended questions ranged from a few words to short paragraphs. The two primary authors consulted with the third author, a skilled qualitative researcher, throughout the entire process. Following the framework for inductive content analysis discussed by Elo and Kyngas (2008), the first and second researchers individually read all the data and completed open coding for the open-ended survey

questions. For example, a statement about new opportunities to teach at a university was coded as academia by the first primary researcher and coded as new job placement by the second primary researcher. The two primary researchers then collaborated, discussed individually formed headings, and consulted with the third author regarding category generation. After peer debriefing with the third author, the two primary researchers selected common categories. The two primary authors came to a consensus with three broad categories. Following the example, opportunities to teach at a university was placed into the category of expanded career opportunities. After the two primary authors finalized the categories, the third author was consulted to validate the results (Curtin & Fossey, 2007).

To establish trustworthiness, initial analysis was completed utilizing researcher triangulation (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). Each primary researcher individually analyzed the data and then collaborated with the third author for consensus on categories as recommended by Curtin and Fossey (2007). Peer debriefing occurred with the third author, an experienced qualitative researcher, to increase credibility of the results (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). The researchers employed reflexivity throughout the research process by electronic journaling and in-depth discussions to set aside biases. Finally, methodological triangulation allowed for a deeper discovery of the findings by employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

For the quantitative portion of this study, the researchers selected close-ended questions to analyze based on relation to personal and professional development. After reviewing all close-ended questions on the surveys, eight close-ended questions were selected. Selected questions focused on employment status, salary, and professional development. Answers were tallied. Descriptive statistics were performed to determine relative frequencies and obtain cross tabulations.

Results

Demographics

Sixty-four surveys completed by POTD graduates between 2008 and 2017 met eligibility criteria. Of the 64 surveys, 52 respondents completed the demographic questions. The respondent demographics are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographics of POTD Graduates

Characteristic	n (%)
Age	
30-34	8 (15.4)
35-44	12 (23.1)
45-49	9 (17.3)
50-54	8 (15.4)
55-59	2 (3.8)
60-65	3 (5.8)
Unknown	10 (19.2)
Gender	
Male	7 (13.5)
Female	42 (80.8)
Unknown	3 (5.8)
Geographic location after degree completion	
Western United States	14 (26.9)
Midwestern United States	12 (23.1)
Southern United States	6 (11.5)
Northeastern United States	11 (21.1)
Japan	1 (1.9)
Italy	1 (1.9)
Practice setting after degree completion	
Acute care	1 (1.9)
Outpatient setting	3 (5.8)
Private practice	2 (3.8)
School setting	12 (23.1)
Academia	18 (34.6)
Early intervention	6 (11.5)
Home health	5 (9.6)
Community	6 (11.5)
Long term care	3 (5.7)
Other	5 (9.6)

Note. N=52. Some respondents did not report information or reported multiple answers. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Survey Data

Of the 64 completed surveys, 56 respondents completed the open-ended questions. Analysis of the open-ended questions revealed common categories related to personal and professional growth outcomes. The commonalities created the following categories: greater sense of self-empowerment and confidence, expanded career opportunities, and increased professional knowledge and skills.

Greater Sense of Self-empowerment and Confidence

Graduates felt empowered and transformed in both their personal and professional lives. Respondents reported feeling rejuvenated, driven, passionate, and excited about the occupational therapy profession with comments such as “I have an increased level of commitment and thirst for excellence in my practice” and “I have strengthened my passion for the profession” indicating self-confidence and empowerment. One respondent reported exuberating confidence in all areas of life and because of the program reported “I am changed forever. I am a better woman, wife, mother, friend, sibling, community member, and occupational therapist.” Another respondent described the entire program as simply “transformational” to her overall personal and professional life.

Many respondents reported increased confidence within the comments. A respondent stated, “I can say that I am smarter, more confident, and even more excited about being an occupational therapist.” Another respondent remarked “I have become a more confident and professional therapist who aspires to become a teacher and leader of the community.” Another graduate emphasized growth in the area of confidence and reported, “Overall, the program has facilitated a level of confidence within myself that I am no longer scared to seek or try new opportunities.” Overall, the increased confidence allowed the graduates to have a renewed sense of excitement for their careers.

Expanded Career Opportunities

Graduates reported more career options, increased salary, and an expanded professional network. Data related to employment related questions is presented in Table 3. Several graduates reported that completing the POTD program fostered opportunities to transition into other practice areas and the possibility of promotions into leadership positions. For example, some of the respondents reported the ability to transition into academia. Others reported they would remain in their same position and practice area but would now be taking on more responsibilities. A POTD graduate explained “[I am] more competitive with other health care professional[s] for management, and advanced positions.” Another reported “having more options to grow in the field and influence others” and one stated, “I have been made acting supervisor.” A few survey respondents reported needing the doctorate degree in order to attain their current academia position. One graduate stated, “My preparation at the university has allowed me to achieve my professional goal of teaching and practicing.” Another

respondent reported she needed a doctoral degree in order to stay in her academic position. “I moved into this position 3 years ago with the agreement that I would complete my OTD...”

Table 3

Participants' Employment Changes

Activities	2008-2010 N=12 n(%)	2011-2013 N=32 n(%)	2014-2016 N=20 n(%)	Total N=64 n(%)
Employment status				
Current position-same responsibilities	3(25.0)	4(12.5)	5(25.0)	12(18.8)
Current position- new responsibilities	5(41.7)	9(28.1)	5(25)	19(29.7)
Develop a private practice	2(16.7)	3(9.4)	2(10)	7(10.9)
New position- same employer	0(0.0)	1(3.1)	4(20.0)	5(7.8)
New position- new employer	2(16.7)	4(12.5)	4(20.0)	10(15.6)
Changed employment after graduation	5(41.7)	14(56.0)	10(58.8)	29(45.3)

Additionally, 24 respondents indicated an increase in salary following completion of the POTD program. Reasons reported by respondents for increased salary included career changes, transition into leadership positions, and pay scale climbs primarily in areas of private practice, academia, and school-based employment. See Table 4.

Table 4

Participants' Salary at Graduation

	2008-2010 n(%)	2011-2013 n(%)	2014-2016 n(%)	Total n(%)
Salary range	N=7	N=24	N=14	N=45
\$40,000-\$49,999 (12-month)	0	0	2(14.3)	2(4.4)
\$45,000-\$49,999 (9-month)	0	1(4.2)	0	1(2.2)
\$50,000-\$54,999 (12-month)	0	2(8.3)	1(7.1)	3(6.7)
\$55,000-\$59,999 (12-month)	1(14.3)	1(4.2)	1(7.1)	3(6.7)
\$60,000-\$64,999 (9-month)	0	2(8.3)	0	2(4.4)

Table 4 Continued

\$65,000-\$69,999 (9-month)	0	1(4.2)	0	1(2.2)
\$65,000-\$69,999 (12-month)	0	1(4.2)	2(14.3)	3(6.7)
\$70,000 and above (9-month)	0	4(16.7)	0	4(8.9)
\$70,000 and above (10-month)	3(42.9)	1(4.2)	1(7.1)	5(11.1)
\$70,000 and above (12-month)	3(42.9)	11(45.8)	7(50.0)	21(46.7)

Increased Professional Knowledge and Skills

POTD graduates reported new and advanced professional and scholarly skills. The majority of POTD graduates also noted advanced leadership skills. One graduate noted "I feel strong as a leader..." while another described "growing as a leader" within their work environment. Some described gaining higher level critical thinking skills. For example, one respondent reported "I gained the respect from my colleagues by demonstrating a higher level of critical thinking...". Respondents also expressed improved advocacy skills. One graduate explained "I am better prepared to advocate for our profession". Additionally, many POTD graduates stated that they had an increase in skills related to academia. A POTD graduate reported, "It has increased my ability as an instructor by expanding my knowledge of instructional strategies and learning styles." POTD graduates also noted the program increased their ability to use and participate in research. A few respondents indicated they had published manuscripts due to the knowledge gained in the POTD program. A POTD graduate explained her scholarly involvement and stated, "I have published in a peer-reviewed journal; I have presented at state conferences. I have had presentations accepted at a national conference." Table 5 displays the number of professional development activities POTD graduates reported being involved in since starting the POTD program.

POTD graduates also described a new professional network of passionate occupational therapy professionals who they can seek out for support, mentorship, and scholarly advice. One POTD graduate explained, "I feel I am now a member of a family of exceptional therapists who I feel I can contact and interact with even after my time has ended at the university."

Table 5

Professional Development Activities and Involvement since Graduation

Activities	2008-2010 N=12 n(%)	2011-2013 N=32 n(%)	2014-2016 N=20 n(%)	Total N=64 n(%)
Professional development activities				
Read professional books	10(83.3)	16(50.0)	12(60.0)	58(59.4)
Read professional journals	12(100.0)	22(68.8)	14(75.0)	48(75.0)
Attend professional meetings/conferences	11(91.7)	16(50.0)	12(60.0)	39(60.9)
Attend CE courses annually	11(91.7)	15(46.9)	12(60.0)	38(59.4)
Other	4(33.3)	7(21.9)	1(5.0)	12(18.8)
Give presentations				
Local	8(66.7)	18(56.3)	9(45.0)	35(54.7)
State	1(8.3)	18(56.3)	9(45.0)	28(43.8)
National	3(25.0)	4(12.5)	3(15.0)	10(15.6)
International	0(0.0)	3(9.4)	2(10.0)	5(7.8)
Publications				
Peer reviewed journal	1(8.3)	4(12.5)	1(5.0)	6(9.4)
Non-peer reviewed journal	2(16.7)	4(12.5)	1(5.0)	7(10.9)
Newspaper	2(16.7)	4(12.5)	3(15.0)	9(14.1)
Book chapter	0(0.0)	3(9.4)	0(0.0)	3(4.7)
Book or chapter review	0(0.0)	2(6.3)	0(0.0)	2(3.1)
Other	4(33.3)	4(12.5)	2(10.0)	10(15.6)
Grants	9(75.0)	10(31.2)	2(10.0)	21(32.8)
Policy and procedure positions				
Department	7(58.3)	15(46.9)	10(50.0)	32(50.0)
Hospital/corporation	2(16.7)	5(15.6)	4(20.0)	11(17.2)
Community/local	5(41.7)	5(15.6)	4(20.0)	14(21.9)
State	2(16.7)	3(9.4)	1(5.0)	6(9.4)
National	0(0.0)	2(6.3)	0(0.0)	2(3.1)
International	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	1(5.0)	1(1.6)
Other	4(33.3)	3(9.4)	0(0.0)	7(10.9)
Leadership				
Appointed to committee	5(41.7)	5(15.6)	3(15.0)	13(20.3)
Committee Chair	1(8.3)	3(9.4)	2(10.0)	6(9.4)
Elected officer position	0(0.0)	2(6.3)	1(5.0)	3(4.7)
Advisory group board member	2(16.7)	5(15.6)	5(25.0)	12(18.8)
Accepted administrative responsibility	3(25.0)	9(28.1)	7(35.0)	19(29.7)
Developed a new program	5(41.7)	10(31.3)	6(30.0)	21(32.8)

Discussion

Results indicated self-empowerment and confidence as the main areas of personal growth. The personal empowerment and confidence gained from the program fueled the respondents' passion for their profession and extended into increased understanding of how to improve themselves. Professional growth was evidenced by new employment opportunities, increased pay, and an advancement in professional knowledge and skills. The majority of respondents in this study reported a change of employment or position after graduating. This finding is consistent with the findings of Lampe et al. (2020) who reported doctoral experiential components developed by POTD students created opportunities for the students to advance in their current position or to make a career change. Not only did respondents in this study obtain new employment opportunities, the majority reported earning a 12-month salary in excess of \$70,000. It is well documented by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), that individuals with doctoral degrees are the highest wage earners, and they also are more likely to be employed. These statistics may be important considerations for individuals contemplating pursuing an advanced degree.

It was not surprising that evidence from this study supports a positive impact on occupational therapists' personal and professional growth as a result of completing a POTD program. Although previous research revealed that the majority of practicing occupational therapists were not interested in completing post-professional education (78%), the primary goal of practitioners who were interested was to improve their personal development (83%; Dickerson & Wittman, 2009; Dickerson & Trujillo, 2009; Smith, 2007). By analyzing data from occupational therapists who completed a doctoral program, the researchers garnered information from the point of view of occupational therapists with first-hand experience of a doctoral program.

Several graduates reported an increase in their ability to advocate for the occupational therapy profession due to knowledge gained from the POTD program. Advocacy is an essential skill used in clinical practice to ensure clients have access to services, and advocacy skills are also crucial to defend the role of occupational therapy in an increasingly complex society. Learning about the advocacy process has the potential to make an occupational therapist feel empowered and inspired to make a change. Dhillon et al. (2010) surveyed practicing occupational therapists and found most of those surveyed viewed advocating very important in day to day practice, but they did not feel it was taught thoroughly in entry-level education. Given the real-world and life experiences of POTD students, post-professional education may be the ideal situation to learn about advocating for the occupational therapy profession.

Vital to the continued advancement of the occupational therapy profession, leadership development was mentioned multiple times as an area of growth for POTD graduates. AOTA has identified developing effective leaders as part of the 2025 Centennial Vision (AOTA, 2017). Given the importance of leadership in the profession, AOTA has

dedicated numerous resources to leadership development including such efforts as professional development programs for managers and students, toolkits, and webinars. In alignment with the university's POTD program goals (Creighton, n.d.), respondents demonstrated an impressive amount of leadership aptitude and characteristics by assuming leadership roles on committees and boards, by accepting administrative responsibility, and developing programs. Participation in program development efforts was the most frequent leadership role identified by respondents in our study. Braveman (2019) identified planning as one of four traditional functions of management. There are many different types of planning but planning for program development, which may include designing services and programs to meet clinical goals and client outcomes, is a foundational skill in occupational therapy leadership and management (Braveman, 2019).

Intriguing to the authors, survey data expressed growth in confidence and renewed passion for occupational therapy. Health professionals, such as occupational therapists, work in high stress jobs that can lead to burnout (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011). Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2011) further discussed the need to maintain professional vitality and the importance of a sense of making a difference to preventing practitioner burnout. Among many factors contributing to burnout among physicians was a loss of meaning from work (West et al., 2018). To combat burnout West et al. (2018) suggested several organizational-level solutions including offering professional development opportunities and several individual-level solutions including reflection and self-awareness of fulfilling work roles. Shanafelt and Noseworthy (2017) proposed shared responsibility between physicians (individuals) and healthcare organizations to promote engagement and reduce burnout. At an individual level, self-awareness of the most meaningful components of work and the ability to shape one's career focused on personal interests were key drivers of burnout and engagement in physicians (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017). Receiving post-professional education, such as earning a POTD, may be one strategy that could help reduce burnout by providing therapists with new sense of empowerment in meeting the needs of their clients and being able to make a difference, reinvigorating professional passion, and expanding networking connections.

POTD graduates reported a range of professional knowledge and skills attained from the program including a development of an interesting variety of skills and knowledge based on individual personal experiences. Some of the professional knowledge and skills identified were clinical skills, advocacy, leadership, and scholarship, which aligns with Dickerson and Wittman's (2009) findings that 79% of practitioners who were considering advanced education wanted to improve their skills and knowledge. Furthermore, Doyle et al. (2016) found that POTD students increased their scholarly pursuits through publications, presentations, and took on additional professional leadership roles. The unique differences of this study such as increased clinical skills, advocacy, and leadership likely resulted from elective class selection and individual experiences in the doctoral experiential component of the university's coursework.

Limitations

There are several limitations related to this study's design and methods. The primary purpose of the POTD exit survey was to assess educational outcomes of one POTD program. Researchers had no control over the data collection process and could not ask follow-up questions. Hence, the generalizability of results to other universities may be limited (Portney & Watkins, 2015). Diversity in age, geographic location, and practice area assisted in counteracting some of the generalizability limitations. Additionally, due to the retrospective and post-test only design the researchers were unable to detect changes in professional development, leadership, program development, or employment.

Recall bias was another possible limitation of this study. Researchers analyzed open-ended survey questions and accurate reflection of respondents' perspectives rested with the researchers' interpretation of the data (DePoy & Gitlin, 2016). Additionally, respondents had just completed a survey reflective of a program in which they recently invested work, time, and money. Consequently, respondents may have had a personal bias regarding the benefits of program completion resulting in exaggeration of program benefits. Further possible bias by respondents could involve selective memory as the surveys were completed after graduation from the POTD program (Portney & Watkins, 2015).

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Many health professions have determined the need for and benefit of post-professional education. Despite multiple POTD programs offered in the United States, the benefits of the POTD have not yet been established in occupational therapy literature. This research demonstrates the potential of personal and professional growth that could be attained by completing a POTD program. A POTD degree may be an appropriate choice for students who aspire to grow professionally in areas such as scholarly work including presentations and publications, obtaining grants, and/or assuming leadership roles and positions. Students may also find that obtaining a POTD degree can lead to an increase in salary, employment status, and renewed passion for their work. Occupational therapy educators working with post-professional students should appreciate that the students who enter post-professional programs are often motivated individuals who have a wealth of professional experiences. Occupational therapy educators should create learning environments and experiences that challenge the students to grow personally and professionally, especially in the areas of leadership, advocacy, and scholarly endeavors.

Future Research

Future studies should include larger sample sizes from a variety of online and on-campus programs throughout the United States. Controls for variables such as age, years of experience, and work setting should be added to improve generalizability of results with comparisons between practitioners that do and do not pursue a POTD

degree. Additionally, expanding research methods to include a pre and posttest survey would add to the strength of study results. Future research questions should also include employer perceptions of POTD graduates and the long-term outcomes of completing a POTD program.

Conclusion

Due to the lack of research regarding POTD educational outcomes, evidence is needed to support occupational therapists attaining a POTD. The researchers retrospectively examined POTD graduate perceptions of personal and professional growth at a midwestern university with an established POTD program. Following completion of a POTD program, graduates reported experiencing a perception of personal and professional growth. Based on content analysis of survey data, three categories emerged which included developed greater sense of self-empowerment and confidence, expanded career opportunities, and developed increased professional knowledge and skills. POTD programs have the potential to continue the advancement of the occupational therapy profession by creating self-empowered confident leaders, advocates, scholarly practitioners, and academicians.

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