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## Understanding Occupational Therapy Admissions Decisions Related to Diversity

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# Understanding Occupational Therapy Admissions Decisions Related to Diversity

## Abstract

The vast majority of occupational therapy (OT) practitioners are white, leaving gaps between the representation of our profession and those we serve. Admission practices determine the future of the profession. This cross-sectional study aimed to understand how admission requirements, particularly the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and interview, influenced OT graduate students' application decisions, specifically those who identified as a first-generation college student (FGCS), underrepresented minority, English as a second language, or receiving public assistance. Methods included an online survey distributed to current OT graduate students. The survey consisted of background information, closed-ended questions on influence of application requirements, open-ended questions on priority factors in application decision-making, and barriers and supports to the application process. Of the 263 participants, 37.4% agreed that the GRE requirement influenced their application, most frequently citing test-taking ability and cost as reasons; 16.2% agreed that an in-person interview requirement influenced their application, most frequently citing cost and interviewing ability as reasons. Participants identifying as FGCS (p

## Keywords

Admission, allied health education, diversity

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## Authors

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### ABSTRACT

The vast majority of occupational therapy (OT) practitioners are White, leaving gaps between the representation of our profession and those we serve. Admission practices determine the future of the profession. This cross-sectional study aimed to understand how admission requirements, particularly the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and interview, influenced OT graduate students' application decisions, specifically those who identified as a first-generation college student (FGCS), underrepresented minority, English as a second language, or receiving public assistance. Methods included an online survey distributed to current OT graduate students. The survey consisted of background information, closed-ended questions on influence of application requirements, open-ended questions on priority factors in application decision-making, and barriers and supports to the application process. Of the 263 participants, 37.4% agreed that the GRE requirement influenced their application, most frequently citing test-taking ability and cost as reasons; 16.2% agreed that an in-person interview requirement influenced their application, most frequently citing cost and interviewing ability as reasons. Participants identifying as FGCS ( $p < .01$ ) and English as a second language ( $p < .05$ ) were significantly correlated with the GRE requirement influencing their application. All demographic variables of interest were predictive of the GRE requirement influencing their application. Financial elements and application requirements were the most frequently reported barriers, and mentorship was the most frequent support desired during the application process. Admission committees carefully weigh the costs of admission requirements by predicting student outcomes and the need to diversify the profession. The profession is called to develop mentoring and other support for applicants from various backgrounds.

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## **Introduction**

The vast majority of occupational therapy (OT) practitioners in the United States (US) are White (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). As the US population becomes more racially diverse, there is a growing need to diversify OT practitioners (Snyder et al., 2023; Wilbur et al., 2020). Many allied health professions have begun addressing this issue in their graduate programs by employing recruitment and admission strategies that target underrepresented minorities (URM) with promising results (Hsueh et al., 2021; Kilburn & Hill, 2019; McWhirter et al., 2003; Wise et al., 2017). Evidence supports changing admission requirements (Cahn, 2015; Wise et al., 2017) and using targeted marketing (Kilburn & Hill, 2019) to increase the number of URM students in allied health programs; however, little is known from the applicant's perspective.

Graduate, entry-level occupational therapy programs are faced with making decisions on admission requirements that may impact the diversity of the students that will matriculate into the program; however, available research to inform these decisions is limited. Research on the impact of the admission requirements on the diversity of applicants and matriculated students are often retrospective outcomes from one specific program (Bathje et al., 2014; Roman & Buman, 2019), descriptive research from the perspective of the program directors (Cahn, 2015), and/or from outside the field (Grova et al., 2020; Kilburn & Hill, 2019; Wise et al., 2017). Two frequently used requirements in graduate, entry-level OT programs include the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and an interview (McNeil et al., 2021). Gaining insight from current graduate, entry-level OT students can help determine the impact of standardized testing and interview requirements on their choice of programs and better understand the supports and barriers students face in the application process.

## **Graduate Record Examination**

The GRE has widespread use as a quantitative metric of a student's academic capacity for graduate school and measures verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing skills. A recent study found that of the 111 top-ranked OT programs, 55.86% required the GRE to apply to their programs (McNeil et al., 2021). Concerns of bias, fairness, and test validity of the GRE have been raised in recent years because of score disparities across historically underrepresented groups compared to White males (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2023) as well as the racist historical background and underpinnings of the test despite efforts to mitigate bias by Educational Testing Service (ETS; Boykin, 2023). GRE score discrepancies have also been substantiated within the allied health professions, with lower scores documented from URM applicants in speech and language pathology programs (Kovacs, 2021). These discrepancies have called to question the use of the exam in admission criteria, as it appears at odds with the desire of many programs to increase the representation of URM groups. Allied health programs have begun to critically assess the impact of the GRE requirement on the diversity of matriculated students. The physician assistant (PA) field has documented decreased URM representation associated with the GRE requirement (Luck, 2022; Yuen & Honda, 2019). Costs associated with preparing for and taking the examination and the lack of resources to prepare were determining factors in lower matriculation rates within PA programs (Yuen & Honda, 2019). Literature in the physical

therapy field also indicates the GRE can be a potential barrier for applicants from historically disadvantaged communities (Cahn, 2015; Wise et al., 2017). While eliminating the GRE may increase diversity, programs must still engage in URM-specific recruitment and retention strategies to maximize URM recruitment and support student success (Cahn, 2015; Ford et al., 2021).

Despite the opportunity for increased diversity with the elimination of the GRE, many graduate, entry-level OT programs may have concerns regarding student outcomes (board exam pass rates, graduation rates, etc.). When considering a broad range of graduate school programs, a meta-analysis investigating the predictive properties of the GRE on grade point averages (GPAs) found that in the majority of studies included, the GRE scores were not significantly correlated with GPAs of first-year graduate students (Feldon et al., 2023). In medical programs, it has been found that faculty support is more predictive of academic success than GRE scores (Guhan et al., 2020). When looking at literature specific to allied health fields, GRE scores have limited efficacy of predicting other metrics beyond GPA (Bathje et al., 2014; Lolar et al., 2020; Petersen et al., 2018; Roman & Buman, 2019). Roman and Buman (2019) looked at predictors of pass rate on the physical therapy board exam and found graduation GPA to best predict board exam performance and an interview and undergraduate GPA to best predict graduate GPA. This study found the verbal subsection of the GRE was the only portion that appeared to influence board exam success. Others have assessed the GRE's ability to predict skills outcomes such as history taking and physical exams in PA programs and found no significant correlations between GRE scores and history and physical scores (Lolar et al., 2020). Specific to OT, Bathje and colleagues (2014) found the scores on the written subsection of the GRE predicted performance on Level II fieldwork for entry-level master's degree OT students.

As the benefits of a diverse workforce have become more widely recognized (Snyder et al., 2023; Wilbur et al., 2020), paired with the knowledge that healthcare professions require skills beyond linear thinking and memorization (Sancho-Cantus et al., 2023), the potential benefits of the GRE are further called into question. Graduate, entry-level OT programs are left to consider how the GRE predicts success in OT programs and whether its use supports admitting students with the vast array of academic and non-academic skills necessary to be OT practitioners. Occupational therapy calls for contextually relevant assessments that consider the individual's culture and unique needs (Al Busaidy & Borthwick, 2012; Gillen, 2013; Thorley & Lim, 2011). Presently, this approach has not been embraced in OT admission processes. Current data fails to provide a clear decision for graduate, entry-level OT admission requirements to include or exclude the GRE and must balance the questionable predictive success with the potential implications of decreased diversity. This study aims to contribute applicants' voices to the discussion and better understand how the GRE requirement influenced applicants from diverse backgrounds in deciding which graduate, entry-level OT program to attend.

## **Interview**

The majority of OT programs included in a recent sample of top-ranked entry level graduate programs (n=111, 61.25%) report requiring an interview for acceptance (McNeil et al., 2021). Interviews are used to assess non-cognitive skills. Selecting an interview type and format can be challenging due to limited evidence (Wilson et al., 2020; Woo et al., 2023). The literature is clear that standardization of the interview process and scoring is essential to minimize sociocognitive and rater biases, but it has potentially negative impact on diverse applicants (Wilson et al., 2020; Woo et al., 2023). Of interest in this study (Wilson et al., 2020) was the applicants' perspective on the in-person interview vs. virtual interview format as the profession considers the next steps following the mandatory online transition many programs made in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Literature in medical programs suggests that applicants prefer in-person over virtual interviews because of their enhanced ability to gather information about the culture of a program and make informed decisions (Grova et al., 2020; Seifi et al., 2020). An advantage of virtual interviewing was identified as the elimination of traveling and decreased costs (Seifi et al., 2020). Limited research in medical schools describes both interview formats as having advantages for applicants, but limited information is known within graduate, entry-level OT students. Furthermore, there is limited information on the impact of interview formats on applicants from historically disadvantaged communities' decisions to apply. Graduate, entry-level OT program admission committees are tasked with determining admission criteria to admit a diverse and capable student body. Research supports the removal of the GRE and the addition of virtual interview options to increase access and support the matriculation of a diverse student body; however, there is limited knowledge regarding how these interview requirements factor into the matriculation choice from the student perspective in the field of OT. Therefore, this study aims to understand if admission requirements influence students' applications when choosing where to apply and where to attend a graduate, entry-level OT program and the differences in preferences of students from historically disadvantaged communities.

## **Methods**

This study was conducted using a cross-sectional survey design. The study was approved by the administering institution's institutional review board.

## **Participants**

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling. Initial recruiting strategies utilized the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) student email list and Student Occupational Therapy Association president emails. Posts were made to various social media platforms and targeted recipients were asked to share with others who met the inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria included being currently enrolled in an entry-level graduate occupational therapy program. Occupational therapy assistant students and occupational therapy practitioners were excluded. Individuals unable to read or write English were also excluded.

## **Procedures**

An electronic questionnaire was distributed to currently enrolled entry-level graduate occupational therapy students. Participants were emailed an invitation to participate and a link to a digital consent form via REDCap (Harris et al., 2009). After completing the informed consent form, the participants were directed to complete the survey.

## **Measures**

A single survey consisting of a background survey and an admission decisions survey with closed and open-ended questions, as detailed below, was used for this study.

### ***Background Survey***

A background survey was used to collect basic demographic information and academic background (see Appendix A for details).

### ***Admission Decisions Survey***

The study authors developed a survey to better understand applicants' experiences applying to OT schools. Study authors' experiences as students and OT educators, along with literature were used to create survey questions. Study authors each took the survey themselves, refined survey questions, and came to a consensus on the final questions to include (See Appendix B).

The admission decisions survey consisted of questions related to three portions of the application process: considerations on where to apply, considerations on where they accepted, and open-ended questions on their experience overall. The first two portions of the admission decisions survey were close-ended, asking participants to respond using a 5-point Likert scale anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree. An example question related to considerations on where to apply and where they accepted being, "When choosing programs to apply to, my application was influenced by whether or not the GRE was required." The third portion of the admission decisions survey included open-ended questions. An example question related to the overall application experience is, "what barriers did you face in the application process?"

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Quantitative Analysis***

Closed-ended survey responses were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) predictive analytics software. First, means, percentages, and standard deviations were used to describe the study sample. Associations between variables were then examined using Spearman's Rho correlation  $p < .05$ . Spearman's Rho was chosen because of the ordinal nature of the data used. Categorical data was transformed to ordinal data using optimal scaling procedures (Meulman, 1998). Next, findings from the correlation analysis guided the process of variable selection for multiple linear regression analysis. Finally, multiple linear regression analysis was used to evaluate the predictive power of correlates of interest (first-generation college student [FGCS], URM, English is not their primary language and receiving public assistance) on the independent variables (GRE and interview requirement) impacting admission preferences.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Open-ended survey responses were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013). The qualitative analysis was completed manually, without software for qualitative coding. An inductive constant comparison approach guided content analysis. Six authors independently read and coded open-ended responses for patterns and categories. Emergent categories were discussed and confirmed during two consensus meetings. The first and second authors resolved disagreements in the coding.

### **Results**

Three hundred thirty-five participants completed the study. After removing incomplete responses, 263 full data sets were used in the analysis. Data was collected from September through November 2021.

### **Quantitative Results**

#### **Participant Background**

Participants' background is presented in Table 1. The majority of participants identified as female gender (n=238, 90.5%) and White race (n=195, 74.1%). Participants' characteristics reflected the general makeup of OT practitioners in the United States, with 90.6% identifying as female and 83.7% as White (AOTA, 2019). Fifty-one percent (n=134) of students were enrolled in a master's program, and 49% (n=129) were enrolled in a doctoral program. Most participants were not FGCS (n=204, 77.6%), were not URM (n=202, 76.8%), English was their primary language (n=247, 93.9%), and their family did not receive public assistance (n=231, 87.8%).

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. Average agreement with an interview requirement impacting admission decisions when choosing programs to apply to is reported by demographic correlate of interest in Table 1. Participants who identified as FGCS reported a higher level of agreement that the GRE requirement influenced their decision to apply (M=3.5, SD=1.34) compared to non-FGCS students (M=2.84, SD=1.26). Participants who identified as URM reported a higher level of agreement that the GRE requirement influenced their application when choosing programs to apply to (M=3.18, SD=1.37) compared to non-URM students (M=2.93, SD=1.28). Participants who identified English as their primary language reported a higher level of agreement that the GRE requirement influenced their application when choosing programs to apply to (M=3.67, SD=1.4) compared to those for whom English was not their primary language (M=2.95, SD=1.29). Participants who identified as family receiving public assistance reported a higher level of agreement that the GRE requirement influenced their application when choosing programs to apply to (M=3.41, SD=1.62) compared to students whose families did not receive public assistance (M=2.93, SD=1.25).



**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	<i>n</i> = 263		GRE		Interview	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender						
Female	238	90.5	3.01	1.31	2.39	1.10
Male	15	5.7	2.79	1.48	2.07	0.99
Transgender, Nonbinary, Other	10	3.8	2.30	0.95	3.10	1.10
Race						
White	195	74.1	2.90	1.29	2.41	1.03
Hispanic	26	9.9	3.43	1.55	2.26	1.21
Black or African American	15	5.7	3.60	1.30	2.47	1.19
Asian	8	3	2.72	1.17	2.34	1.10
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	3	1.1	1.67	0.58	3.33	1.53
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.4	4.00	0.00	2.00	0.00
Two or More Races	8	3	2.75	1.49	2.00	0.76
Other	4	1.5	3.60	1.50	2.80	1.48
First Generation College Student						
Yes	58	22.1	3.50	1.34	2.59	1.21
No	204	77.6	2.84	1.26	2.33	1.01
Underrepresented Minority						
Yes	61	23.2	3.18	1.37	2.36	1.13
No	202	76.8	2.93	1.28	2.39	1.05
English is Primary Language						
Yes	247	93.9	2.95	1.29	2.39	1.05
No	16	6.1	3.67	1.40	2.33	1.23
Family Receives Public Assistance						
Yes	32	12.2	3.41	1.62	2.50	1.24
No	231	87.8	2.93	1.25	2.37	1.04
Type of Occupational Therapy Graduate Program						
Doctorate (OTD)	129	49	2.88	1.36	2.43	1.10
Master's (MOT)	134	51	3.05	0.71	2.37	1.04

*Note.* Means are reported for level of agreement of the GRE and interview influencing application based on the likert scale anchored by 1- strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree

### **Admission Decisions Survey**

When participants ( $n=263$ ) were asked if their application was influenced by whether or not the GRE was required when choosing programs to apply to, 37.4% agreed or strongly agreed, 20.0% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 42.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Of those who agreed the GRE influenced their application, the reasons why in order of highest to lowest frequency, were: test-taking abilities, cost of the exam, and lack of resources. When participants ( $n=263$ ) were asked if their application was influenced by whether or not an in-person interview was required, 16.2% agreed or strongly agreed, 24.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 58.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Of those who agreed the in-person interview requirement influenced their application when choosing programs to apply to, the reasons why in order of highest to lowest frequency, were: travel costs, interviewing ability, and lack of resources.

Results from Spearman's Rho correlation analysis between demographic variables of interest and GRE and interview requirements influencing their application are presented in Table 2. Participants identifying as FGCS ( $r=0.207$ ,  $p < .01$ ) or as receiving public assistance ( $r=0.127$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were significantly correlated with indicating that the GRE requirement influenced their application their application when choosing programs to apply to. None of the correlates were associated with the interview requirement influencing their application when choosing programs to apply to (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Association Between Variables and GRE & Interview Requirement*

Variable	GRE		Interview	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
1. First Generation College Student	0.21	.000**	0.08	.102
2. Underrepresented Minority	0.08	.192	-0.02	.846
3. English is not primary language	0.13	.038*	-0.03	.850
4. Receives Public Assistance	0.12	.054	0.03	.512

Note. \*\* $p < .01$  (2-tailed); \* $p < .05$  level (2-tailed)

Results from the regression analysis are presented in Table 3. Identifying as FGCS, URM, English is not their primary language, and receiving public assistance was predictive of the GRE influencing application decisions,  $R^2=.050$ ,  $F(4, 258) = 3.419$ ,  $p = .01$  (see Table 3). The R-squared value indicates that 5% of variance in GRE preference could be attributed to the demographic variables of interest, indicating a low to moderate effect size (Moore & Notz, 2021). Identifying as FGCS, URM, English is not their primary language, and receiving public assistance was not predictive of the interview requirement influencing application decisions  $R^2=.014$ ,  $F(4, 258) = .925$ ,  $p = .45$ . The R-squared value indicates that 1.4% of variance in GRE preference could be attributed to the demographic variables of interest, indicating a low effect size (Moore & Notz, 2021).

**Table 3***Regression - Predictors of GRE and Interview Requirement*

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta (B)</i>		
GRE Requirement (n=263)					
Constant	2.82	0.10		29.22	.00
First Generation College Student	0.54	0.21	0.17	2.59	.01
Underrepresented Minority	0.02	0.21	0.01	0.08	.94
English as a Primary Language	0.31	0.37	0.06	0.83	.41
Receives Public Assistance	0.23	0.27	0.06	0.87	.39
Note. $F(4, 258) = 3.419$ , $p = .01$ , $R^2=.050$					
Interview Requirement (n=263)					
Constant	2.34	0.08		29.22	.00
First Generation College Student	0.30	0.17	0.12	1.73	.08
Underrepresented Minority	-0.09	0.17	-0.04	-0.52	.60
English as a Primary Language	-0.22	0.31	-0.05	-0.71	.48
Receives Public Assistance	0.10	0.22	0.03	0.45	.66

Note.  $F(4, 258) = .925$ ,  $p = .45$ ,  $R^2=.014$

## Qualitative Results

When asked about priority factors when choosing what schools to attend, the most frequent responses (n=609) included location (28.5%), financial elements (19.0%), and application requirements (10.2%). Finally, when asked about barriers participants faced during the application process, the top three most frequent responses included financial elements (26.6%), application requirements (18.7%), and personal reasons (15.0%). When asked what supports they wished they had in the application process, the most frequent responses (n=174) included mentoring (29.9%), financial elements (23.0%), and knowledge of the application process (16.1%). Additional information and factors can be found in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Open-ended Responses: Barriers, Supports, & Priority Factors in Admissions Decisions*

Category	Total (n=609)	
	n	%
<b>Priority Factors</b>		
Location	173	28.4%
Financial Elements	116	19.0%
Application Requirements	62	10.2%
Degree Level (MSOT/OTD/Hybrid)	56	9.2%
Program Philosophy and Research Aligns with Personal Interests	33	5.4%
US News/ World Report Ranking	30	4.9%
School Reputation	28	4.6%
Program Opportunities and Ameminities	27	4.4%
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	19	3.1%
Curriculum	19	3.1%
Staff and Faculty	14	2.3%
Graduation, NBCOT, and Employment Outcomes	13	2.1%
Accreditation Status	10	1.6%
Cohort and Community	9	1.5%
<b>Barriers Encountered</b>		
Total (n=267)		
Financial Elements (cost of application, travel)	71	26.6%
Application requirements (prerequisite, forms, letters of rec)	50	18.7%
Personal (mental health, competing priorities)	40	15.0%
GRE (cost, difficulty preparing, score)	36	13.5%
Barriers due to Covid-19	28	10.5%
OTCAS (difficulty navigating, technical difficulties)	24	9.0%
Lack of knowledge/communication	18	6.7%
<b>Supports Desired</b>		
Total (n=174)		
Mentoring (Current student, alumni)	52	29.9%
Financial Elements (Scholarships, Application Fee Waiver)	40	23.0%
Knowledge on application process	28	16.1%
Access to program staff/faculty/students/facility/alumni	20	11.5%
GRE Support (academic preparation & financial)	11	6.3%
Knowledge on specific programs (Master list, Map, Demographic makeup)	8	4.6%
Requirement oppurtunities (research, observation)	6	3.4%
Writing support	5	2.9%
Understanding of OT and differentiation of OTD vs MOT	4	2.3%

*Note.* The number and % of endorsement were determined based on how many participants provided an open-ended response within the category. Participants had an option to report multiple priorities, supports, and barriers.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to understand factors in the admission processes that influenced students' applications when choosing to apply to and attend an OT graduate program and the differences in preferences of students from historically disadvantaged communities. Further OT student priority factors, barriers, and supports desired during the admission processes were explored using content analysis across all respondents, regardless of demographic background.

### **GRE Preferences**

Across the entire sample of responders, 37.4% reported the GRE requirement influenced their application when choosing to apply to an occupational therapy program. Those influenced by the GRE stated test-taking abilities, the cost of the exam, and lack of resources to assist with preparation for the exam as the most frequent reasons. Participants who identified as FGCS and English not being their primary language correlated with the GRE impacting their decision to apply to an OT program. All of the demographic variables of interest were predictive of the GRE impacting their decision to apply to a program—further calling into question the use of the GRE as an inhibiting factor in increasing the profession's diversity.

Present study findings indicate that OT students from diverse demographic backgrounds (URM, FCGS, English is not the primary language, & received public assistance) were less likely to apply to schools that required the GRE. This finding was consistent with previous literature identifying the GRE as a potential barrier to diversity in higher education (Cahn, 2015; Feldon et al., 2023; Luck, 2022; Wise et al., 2017; Yuen & Honda, 2019). Factors contributing to the GRE impacting a diverse student's application decision, some of which were identified by students in this study, were likely limited access to GRE preparation resources, financial resources necessary to study and prepare for the GRE, and well-publicized discrepancy in scores in diverse populations (Afeli et al., 2018; Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2021; Yuen & Honda, 2019). Further contributing to the financial burden of the GRE, many graduate programs recommend taking the GRE early so that it can be retaken if necessary to obtain a cutoff score. Reasons why these barriers particularly impact these populations may be related to systemic racism and the historical underpinnings of this assessment (Gómez, 2022; Newman et al., 2022). The GRE was designed by White psychometricians for White students. It was created during an era when it was illegal for many of these groups to apply to higher education warranting future investigation (Boykin, 2023). Furthermore, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2020) over 60% of individuals who receive a master's or doctoral degree are White, suggesting the GRE continues to be normed on a White population. ETS (2021) has also acknowledged that "performance differences can be the result of a number of factors, such as... economic and social systems in which everyone does not receive equal opportunity" (p.14).

### **Interview Preferences**

Overall, the interview requirement was not a deterrent for the demographic groups of interest. Across the entire sample of responders, only 16.2% reported the in-person interview requirement influencing their decision to apply to a program. Demographic variables did not contribute to the prediction that the inclusion of an admission's interview influenced where students apply. Participants who identified interviews influenced their application decision, cited travel costs, interviewing ability, and lack of resources as the most frequent reasons. This may suggest that the interview process presents an access issue for those with limited resources, even if it is only for a minority of the responders.

Although the literature is limited in exploring the influence of where applicants apply for graduate school, past studies do reveal that in-person interviews have more advantages than virtual interviews from an interviewee's perspective (Grova et al., 2020; Seifi et al., 2020). When considering equity in access to higher education, interviewees' preferences should be balanced with the financial barrier it presents for those with limited resources. Therefore, programs should remain open to virtual options for students with limited resources or who would need to travel long distances to interview. Whatever interview format is used, a standardized process for scoring is essential to minimize bias and maximize fairness in the admission processes (Woo et al., 2023).

### **Priority Factors**

Content analysis revealed location, financial elements, and application requirements as the top three priority factors when deciding where to apply. Location was the most frequently cited factor in deciding where to apply to OT schools, including preferences to move away from or stay close to home. Location was often tied into financial elements as participants frequently reported applying to in-state schools because of the decreased cost. One participant, who identified as having a disability with wheelchair usage, reported prioritizing schools located with access to quality healthcare and where snow and ice would not limit mobility. Although existing OT programs have limited control over program location, these results suggest that the profession should reflect on where future OT programs are located in relationship to the diversity and needs of those interested in pursuing a degree in OT. Financial concerns were cited in the context of application fees, cost of tuition, GRE preparation and completion, and travel expenses were reported by participants.

These qualitative results are consistent with this study's quantitative data results and past studies, indicating that the cost of the GRE may impact the application process, especially for students that identify as FGCS, URM, English as a second language, and receiving public assistance (Afeli et al., 2018; Cahn, 2015). Participants reported that application requirements, including but not limited to prerequisite coursework, GRE, and observation hours, contributed to the decision to apply.

Other priority factors included degree level, ranking, reputation, curriculum alignment, philosophy, and research with personal interests. Although Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) visibility within the program was the ninth most frequently cited factor for all participants in this study, those participants with a diverse background reported prioritizing programs that made their commitment to diversity visible. Participants cited they want to see the representation of faculty, staff, and student body on the program's website. This is consistent with other findings highlighting a programmatic commitment to diversity as a primary consideration for racial/ethnic minority and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students when deciding on Ph.D. clinical psychology program (Hsueh et al., 2021). Occupational therapy programs are thus called to make explicit their commitment to DEI through whom they hire and statements on their website and follow up on ensuring the program can create an inclusive culture and sense of belonging for these communities.

### **Barriers**

Financial elements, application requirements, and personal reasons were the three most frequently cited barriers during the OT school admission process. Financial elements were cited consistently across quantitative and all domains of qualitative questions, calling the profession to advocate on a systemic level for changes in payment systems to higher education to most comprehensively address the disparities in access due to the lack of funding to support higher education. Without systems-level changes to the cost of higher education in the US, it is difficult to imagine a path to decreased barriers for those from historically disadvantaged communities matriculating into OT programs changing significantly. However, OT programs must continue seeking financial support through grants and scholarships to mitigate costs while advocating for systemic change.

Application requirements, including but not limited to prerequisite course work, and letters of recommendation, were frequently cited barriers, particularly the variation across programs and limited access to OT practitioners to observe and obtain recommendations. Although individual programs may have a specific perspective on what is needed to succeed in that program, the profession is called to streamline admission requirements as much as possible to increase access of applicants to apply to a variety of programs without further financial and time burdens of attempting to meet multiple admission requirements.

Personal factors identified as barriers frequently included mental health concerns and competing priorities. Mental health and well-being are a growing concern in the profession, given the demands of graduate school and on healthcare professionals, which the COVID-19 pandemic has confounded in recent years (Popova et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2022). Occupational therapy school applicants are not immune to these stressors. These findings suggest that OT programs examine and increase their flexibility by allowing deferrals and flexible timeframes during the application and matriculation process and engage with applicants with empathy for the many demands they are facing.

### **Supports Desired**

The top three supports desired during the application process included mentoring, financial support, and increased knowledge of the application process. Students desired additional mentoring and support throughout the application process, including navigating the Occupational Therapy Centralized Application System (OTCAS) and understanding admission requirements. The profession is called to identify students interested in OT early in their application process and provide support, such as mentoring, tips for interviewing, prerequisite courses, writing support for personal statements, study strategies, navigating OTCAS, how to find observation opportunities. Potential support may be in the form of 1:1 and group mentoring, didactic content, and resources. State and national associations are called to organize and support applicants through such means. Students also desired centralized information regarding OT schools, including location, costs, and demographic makeup, which state and national organizations could support. One response reflected the importance of transparency with demographic makeup.

We did not look specifically at the barriers and supports from people of color and other historically disadvantaged groups. We suggest that the support listed by study participants would benefit all individuals applying to OT programs, including disadvantaged and groups with limited available resources. Occupational therapy programs should be aware of any fee waivers available to students for the GRE, OTCAS, or other program requirements and make them visible to applicants. Programs could support applicants, particularly those with limited resources, by having current students or alumni available to support applicants throughout the application process. The findings of this study align with previous research which revealed that OT practitioners and students of color desired individualized mentoring, financial support, and connections with national organizations specifically for people of color (Ford et al., 2021).

### **Limitations**

The vast majority (69.9%) of our participants in this study identified as White. This makes it difficult to get a true picture of what impacts the decision-making process regarding admissions of people of color and other historically disadvantaged demographic subgroups (i.e., gender, disability, sexuality status). Future studies should seek to include a higher number of historically disadvantaged demographic students to confirm the significance of the results. Additionally, data was gathered only from participants already in OT programs. Because all participants had matriculated, we cannot know the limitations for those who did not apply or never matriculated into programs. Future surveys should investigate the barriers faced by those who were interested in OT school but chose not to apply.

### **Implications for Occupational Therapy Education**

In order to best meet the needs of those served by the profession, AOTA is committed to increasing diversity within the profession, starting with our academic programs (AOTA, 2021). This study provides evidence that the financial impact on admission requirements such as the GRE and in-person interviews serve as barriers for applicants



from historically disadvantaged communities. Therefore, admission committees are called to critically reflect on their admission requirements, including the purpose and benefits of all their requirements, particularly the GRE and in-person interview requirements. Admission requirements are only a piece of the puzzle for increasing diversity within the profession. Based on the results of this study, it is also recommended that programs and professional organizations explore the development of resources that would make OT programs more accessible to individuals across all backgrounds and support the goal of increasing diversity within the profession. Examples of resources include reducing the cost of applications, having virtual interview options, providing centralized resources for the application process, mentoring programs for applicants, and providing financial support.

### Conclusion

Key demographics of interest, including FGCS and public assistance status were predictive of the GRE influencing an applicant's decision to apply. Study findings paired with questionable validity of the GRE in predicting success as an OT practitioner call into question its use as an admission requirement. Moreover, additional recruitment efforts are necessary beyond changes to GRE requirements. For instance, programs that have an interview requirement for admissions, should examine the purpose of this interview and the format used (in-person versus virtual) as the travel costs, interviewing ability, and lack of resources to prepare for an interview may present barriers for those with decreased resources.

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## Appendix A

### Background Survey

#### Background Survey Questions

Please complete the questions below to confirm your eligibility to participate. By clicking "SUBMIT" below, you are agreeing to participate and will be redirected to our survey.

My current age (in years) is \_\_\_\_\_

Please check all that apply

- African American
- Caucasian
- White hispanic
- Non-white hispanic
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Two or more races
- Prefer not to say
- Unknown
- Other

Please describe \_\_\_\_\_

I am part of the LGBTQ+ community

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to say

I am

- Male
- Female
- Nonbinary/genderfluid/gender non-conforming
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Please describe \_\_\_\_\_

I graduated from a high school at which many of the enrolled students qualified for free or reduced price lunches

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

I am the first generation in my family to attend college (neither my mother or my father attended college)

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

I am a first generation American (neither my mother nor my father are naturalized citizens)

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to say

## Appendix B

## Admission Decisions Survey

*Admission Decisions Survey Questions*

Page 4

**Part 1: Admissions Preferences**

Please complete the survey below. Thank you!

When choosing programs to apply to...

My application was influenced by whether or not the GRE was required.

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither Agree nor Disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

My application was influenced by whether the GRE was required (choose all relevant answers)

- Due to cost of the exam  
 Due to my test-taking abilities  
 Due to lack of resources (GRE prep books, nearby testing centers)  
 other reason

My application was influenced by whether or not in-person interviews were required

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree nor disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

My application was influenced by whether or not in-person interviews were required (choose all relevant answers)

- Due to travel costs  
 Due to my interviewing abilities  
 Due to fear of discrimination  
 Other reason

I prefer virtual interviews

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I prefer in-person interviews

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree nor disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I applied to programs because they marketed themselves heavily on my undergraduate campus

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I applied to programs because their marketing included racially diverse faculty and students

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I seriously considered in-state programs

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree



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I seriously considered out-of-state programs	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Neither agree or disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree
I seriously considered MOT programs	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Neither agree or disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree
I seriously considered OTD programs	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Neither agree or disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree
I seriously considered hybrid programs	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Neither agree or disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree
I seriously considered programs that offered a dual Masters and Doctorate (or post-professional) degree track	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Neither agree or disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree
I seriously considered every type of entry-level program (MOT, OTD, Hybrid, and dual degree)	<input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Neither agree or disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree

## Part 2: Final Decision Process

Page 4

Please complete the survey below. Thank you!

I selected my current school because...

I selected my current OT program because it was the only program I got accepted to

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I selected my current OT program because of the number of current underrepresented minority students there

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I selected my current OT program because of the number of underrepresented minority faculty there

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I selected my current OT program because of the cost of tuition

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I received financial aid (i.e. loans) for my current OT program

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I selected my current OT program because they offered me a scholarship

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither Agree nor Disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I selected my current OT program because they offered me a graduate assistantship or research assistantship

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither Agree nor Disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I selected my current OT program because they offered peer mentoring

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

I selected my current OT program because they offered student-faculty mentoring

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Neither agree or disagree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree

### Part 3: Open Response

page 7

Please complete the survey below.

Thank you!

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45) What were that priority factors that impacted what schools you chose to apply to?

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46) What were the priority factors that impacted the school you chose to attend?

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47) What supports did you use during the application process?

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48) What supports do you wish you had during the application process?

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49) What barriers did you face during the application process?

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