Evaluating Entry-level Occupational Therapy Education and Practice: A Qualitative SWOT Study in the Philippines

Paolo Miguel P. Bulan
Velez College

Janice A. Rojas
Velez College

John Ray O. Suerte
Velez College

Nikki Y. Pestaño
Velez College

Maria Menierva G. Lagria
Velez College

See next page for additional authors

Recommended Citation

Evaluating Entry-level Occupational Therapy Education and Practice: A Qualitative SWOT Study in the Philippines

Abstract

Occupational therapy education plays a pivotal role in equipping professionals to meet the dynamic demands of healthcare systems. This study evaluated the Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy (BSOT) program at Velez College in the Philippines, utilizing a qualitative analysis framework to explore its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) as perceived by educators, students, alumni, and practitioners. Findings highlight the program's robust generalist curriculum, strong community-based partnerships, and interprofessional collaboration opportunities. However, challenges such as limited access to standardized assessment tools, high educator turnover, and insufficient specialization opportunities were identified. Notably, emerging demands in mental health and holistic care present growth opportunities for the program, alongside the need to address persistent threats such as brain drain and financial barriers. By leveraging strategies like expanding mental health training, fostering educator retention, and integrating stakeholder-driven curriculum revisions, the program can enhance its relevance and sustainability. This study underscores the importance of program evaluations in informing adaptive educational strategies that align with global and local healthcare needs. Future research needs to explore the long-term impacts of such initiatives on graduate outcomes and workforce retention.

Keywords

Creative Commons License

Acknowledgements

Authors

Paolo Miguel P. Bulan, Janice A. Rojas, John Ray O. Suerte, Nikki Y. Pestaño, Maria Menierva G. Lagria, Cristito P. Dimitiman Jr., April Grace A. Chiongbian, Frances Vince E. Dimitiman, Martina Nicole A. Ligutom, Debbie Rose D. Cabañero, and Jay Arr M. Sale

Evaluating Entry-Level Occupational Therapy Education and Practice: A Qualitative SWOT Study in the Philippines

Paolo Miguel P. Bulan, OTD, MAOT, OTRP; Janice A. Rojas, MAOT(c), OTRP;

John Ray O. Suerte, MAOT, OTRP; Nikki Y. Pestaño, MAOT, OTRP, RYT;

Maria Menierva G. Lagria, OTRP; Cristito P. Dimitiman Jr., MAOT, OTR, OTRP;

April Grace A. Chiongbian, MAOT(c), OTRP; Frances Vince E. Dimitiman, MAOT(c), OTRP;

Martina Nicole A. Ligutom, MAOT(c), OTRP; Debbie Rose D. Cabañero, MAOT, OTR, OTRP;

Jay Arr M. Sale, MAOT(c), SROT

Velez College

Philippines

ABSTRACT

Occupational therapy education plays a pivotal role in equipping professionals to meet the dynamic demands of healthcare systems. This study evaluated the Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy (BSOT) program at Velez College in the Philippines, utilizing a qualitative analysis framework to explore its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) as perceived by educators, students, alumni, and practitioners. Findings highlight the program's robust generalist curriculum, strong community-based partnerships, and interprofessional collaboration opportunities. However, challenges such as limited access to standardized assessment tools, high educator turnover, and insufficient specialization opportunities were identified. Notably, emerging demands in mental health and holistic care present growth opportunities for the program, alongside the need to address persistent threats such as brain drain and financial barriers. By leveraging strategies like expanding mental health training, fostering educator retention, and integrating stakeholder-driven curriculum revisions, the program can enhance its relevance and sustainability. This study underscores the importance of program evaluations in informing adaptive educational strategies that align with global and local healthcare needs. Future research needs to explore the long-term impacts of such initiatives on graduate outcomes and workforce retention.

Introduction

Occupational therapy education serves as the foundation for training skilled healthcare professionals who can advance health and well-being across diverse populations. Entry-level education requirements vary internationally. However, global standards established by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) ensure uniformity in the training of occupational therapists who can adapt to changing practice requirements (WFOT, 2016). In the Philippines, a bachelor's degree is the required qualification for entry-level occupational therapy practice (Commission on Higher Education [CHED], 2017). The first Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy (BSOT) program was established at the University of the Philippines Manila in 1962 due to the growth of occupational therapy in the Philippines in response to post-World War II rehabilitation needs (Bondoc, 2005). Over the decades, the demand for occupational therapists grew, driving the expansion of occupational therapy education to institutions beyond the national capital region.

This study focuses on the BSOT program at Velez College, an academic institution outside the national capital region. The program was established in 1992 in response to the growing demand for rehabilitation professionals both nationally and internationally. Velez College's BSOT program, approved by WFOT since 2000, is one of only five WFOT-approved programs in the Philippines. Since then, the program has been instrumental in the development of occupational therapy in the country. Moreover, the Philippines is a significant global source of occupational therapists, with a large number of graduates working abroad (Pineda et al., 2023). However, this unique position presents both challenges and opportunities for occupational therapy education in the country. By evaluating stakeholder perspectives on the BSOT program, this case study seeks to provide insights that may guide the future of occupational therapy education in similar contexts.

Further, global trends in occupational therapy education highlight challenges like specialized training demand, healthcare professional migration, and the need to adapt to evolving healthcare needs (Jesus et al., 2022, 2023). The Philippines' occupational therapy education programs have successfully trained practitioners for local and international practice, but face challenges in aligning with international standards, especially in regions outside the capital (Bulan, 2023). Likewise, limited research evaluates Philippine entry-level occupational therapy programs' response to challenges and preparation for contemporary practice, domestically and abroad (Aldrich & Grajo, 2017; Cabatan & Grajo, 2017; Cabatan & Duque, 2020).

This study is framed within the context of program evaluation theory, which emphasizes assessing the effectiveness and impact of educational programs to ensure alignment with professional standards and stakeholder needs (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Frye & Hemmer, 2012). Using this theoretical lens, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach to evaluate the BSOT program at Velez College, focusing on its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). By examining stakeholder perspectives, the study aims to provide actionable insights for optimizing entry-level occupational therapy education to meet the evolving demands of the profession.

Moreover, as occupational therapy education continues to adapt to global trends, this study offers a critical evaluation of an entry-level program in the Philippines, addressing underrepresented perspectives in existing literature. By analyzing stakeholder perspectives, the findings contribute to understanding how such programs can balance foundational generalist training with emerging demands for specialization, thereby enhancing educational programs' relevance and responsiveness. Lastly, this case study highlights opportunities for aligning educational practices with local and global healthcare needs, ensuring that occupational therapy graduates are prepared to meet the profession's challenges and opportunities.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The case study approach was selected to allow an in-depth exploration of stakeholder perspectives, including those directly involved with the program and external stakeholders such as graduates working in various practice settings, capturing the complex dynamics of occupational therapy education and its impact on local and international practice.

Participants and Recruitment

Approval for this study was obtained from Velez College and endorsed by the Department of Occupational Therapy. All stakeholders provided informed consent before participating, ensuring their involvement was voluntary, confidential, and compliant with ethical standards. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. While there were no direct financial or material benefits for participation, participants had the opportunity to contribute valuable insights that could influence the improvement of occupational therapy education and practice.

A total of 30 participants were purposively selected through email invitations to represent a diverse range of stakeholders involved with the BSOT program. The participants were drawn from Velez College's industry partners and practice placement affiliations, ensuring that key sectors within the occupational therapy community were well-represented. Participants included occupational therapy educators, students, alumni, and professionals from various practice areas such as mental health, pediatrics, community-based rehabilitation, and physical dysfunction. While practitioners affiliated with external organizations were not directly part of the academic institution, their roles as supervisors, mentors, or collaborators in practice placements provided valuable insights into the program's alignment with professional practice standards. Additionally, parents of students were included to contribute unique insights into the program, particularly regarding the support provided to students during clinical placements.

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

This study used focus group discussions to gather data from various stakeholders about the status of occupational therapy education and practice in Cebu, Philippines. While participants shared insights grounded in their experiences within Cebu, Philippines, graduates practicing abroad also provided valuable perspectives on how the program prepared them for international occupational therapy practice. Discussions were

structured using the SWOT analysis framework, a tool used to assess both internal factors—strengths and weaknesses—and external factors—opportunities and threats (Benzaghta et al., 2021). Moreover, SWOT analysis has been validated as an effective qualitative tool for identifying actionable insights and guiding strategic planning in various fields, including health and education (Ghazinoory et al., 2011). Its structured approach ensures comprehensive evaluation and facilitates meaningful stakeholder engagement.

To ensure comprehensive data collection and achieve data saturation, participants were clustered into five groups, each representing different stakeholder categories (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In-person focus groups were conducted by one researcher and another serving as the note-taker, with each session lasting approximately one hour. Although focus groups were not audio-recorded, detailed notes were taken during each session to document participant responses or transcripts accurately (Bertrand et al., 1992; Clausen, 2012). Non-verbal cues and contextual information were also recorded to capture the nuances of the discussions. A semi-structured guide was used to ensure consistency in questioning across all groups and to achieve the study's aims. The interview guide (see Appendix) focused on SWOT analysis, aiming to gather detailed responses on the four dimensions of the analysis (Benzaghta et al., 2021). The guide incorporated elements from the WFOT Quality Evaluation Strategy Tool (QUEST; Brandis et al., 2021) and the WFOT Minimum Standards for Occupational Therapist Education to anchor the discussions on occupational therapy education. These frameworks provided additional structure to assess the status of the entry-level BSOT program and its alignment with global educational standards.

Data collection took place on July 29, 2023, with all focus groups conducted on the same day. Participants consented to notes being taken during each session to record non-verbal cues and contextual information.

Data Analysis
Data were analyzed using a qualitative SWOT analysis framework in conjunction with the six-phase thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process enabled a systematic identification and analysis of data patterns, categorizing findings into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

The data analysis followed six distinct phases. First, the authors thoroughly reviewed discussion notes and transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data, identifying initial impressions and potential patterns. In the second phase, authors independently generated initial codes from the data, focusing on identifying meaningful units of information relevant to the study's objectives. These codes were developed manually, ensuring a hands-on approach to the analysis.

Each researcher analyzed the data from the focus group they facilitated, generating initial codes and themes. To enhance rigor and ensure comprehensive interpretation, a second round of analysis was conducted by the other researchers. The third phase involved searching for themes by organizing the generated codes into the four SWOT

categories. The fourth phase involved reviewing themes related to the study's aim, ensuring coherence and accuracy in reflecting collected participant data. Throughout the coding process, the authors regularly met to verify the codes and themes. Any disagreements during this stage were resolved through consensus.

The authors refined themes in the fifth phase, clearly defining each and contributing meaningfully to the overall analysis of the BSOT program. In the final phase, the identified themes and findings were reported back to participants in a big group discussion facilitated by all researchers, as a form of member checking. During this session, stakeholders were invited to review and validate the findings, provide feedback, and suggest refinements to ensure the analysis was accurate and representative of their perspectives. Feedback gathered during this session was integrated into the final thematic analysis report to enhance rigor and trustworthiness.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

The authors ensured rigor and trustworthiness by applying Guba and Lincoln (1989) principles of credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. The credibility of the analysis was enhanced through member-checking as findings were presented to stakeholders for review and verification. Investigator triangulation, with multiple authors involved in coding and analysis, reduced bias and increased reliability. The authors consisted of experienced occupational therapy educators and practitioners, which may have influenced their interpretations and interactions with the data. To mitigate potential bias, reflective journals documented researchers' thoughts and assumptions throughout the study. These entries were reviewed during peer debriefing sessions to identify potential biases and ensure interpretations remained grounded in the data to enhance confirmability. Detailed records of the research process ensured dependability, providing a clear audit trail. Transferability was enhanced by detailed descriptions of the context and participants, enabling others to evaluate its applicability to similar contexts.

Findings

Participant Characteristics

A total of 30 stakeholders participated in this study, representing a diverse range of perspectives within the BSOT program. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participant distribution by stakeholder group.

Table 1

Distribution of Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Number of Participants (N = 30)
Educators	6
Mental Health practitioners	4
Pediatrics practitioners	4
Community-based practitioners	4
Physical Dysfunction practitioners	2
Alumni	3
Students	3
Parents of students	2
Quality assurance personnel	2

Themes of the SWOT Analysis of the BSOT Program
Through thematic analysis, data was organized into distinct themes that capture the participants' experiences and perspectives on key aspects of the BSOT program (see Table 2). These themes are presented below, along with supporting quotes from participants to illustrate the key findings.

Table 2

Themes from SWOT Analysis

SWOT Component	Themes
Strengths	• Comprehensive Curriculum for Generalist Practice • Fostering Interprofessional Collaboration • Strong Community-Based Learning Partnerships
Weaknesses	• Limited Access to Standardized Assessment Tools • High Educator Turnover Impacting Consistency • Insufficient Specialization Opportunities
Opportunities	• Expanding Holistic Care and Wellness Models • Growing Demand for Occupational Therapy in Mental Health • Enhancing Interdisciplinary Research and Advocacy
Threats	• Brain Drain Due to Migration • Financial Barriers to Services and Training • Persistent Mental Health Stigma

Strengths

Comprehensive Curriculum for Generalist Practice
The BSOT program's curriculum was widely regarded as a significant strength, particularly in its capacity to prepare students for generalist practice in various occupational therapy settings. The curriculum's integration of classroom-based theory with hands-on fieldwork was frequently mentioned as an effective approach to ensuring students were well-prepared for the real-world application of their knowledge. Educators emphasized the importance of this integration, stating:

> "What we teach in the classroom can be applied during fieldwork sessions. It's important for students to see the connection between theory and practice."

Participants emphasized the connection between theory and practice, stating that the curriculum offered students a comprehensive understanding of occupational therapy principles, adaptable across various clinical and community settings. An alumni participant commented:

> "The program prepared me well for different practice areas, from pediatrics to physical dysfunction. I felt confident working in different settings, both here and abroad."

The curriculum's focus on generalist skills was seen as essential to the adaptability of graduates in both local and international practice environments. Stakeholders noted the program's strength in producing occupational therapists competent in traditional practice and emerging fields like mental health and community-based rehabilitation.

Fostering Interprofessional Collaboration
A key strength identified by stakeholders was the BSOT program's emphasis on interprofessional collaboration. The program encouraged students to work alongside other professionals, such as speech therapists, physical therapists, and special education teachers, creating opportunities for multidisciplinary learning and practice. This collaborative environment was seen as essential for preparing students to meet the complex needs of clients in various settings. Pediatric practitioners explained how this collaboration played out in practice:

> "OTs work together with speech therapists and special education teachers to help kids do well in the classroom. It's about seeing the child holistically, not just from one discipline's perspective."

Likewise, educators emphasized the importance of fostering teamwork among students in the program's approach to occupational therapy education. By learning to collaborate with other professionals, students were better prepared to address the diverse challenges they encountered in clinical practice. Another participant shared:

> "We teach our students to work in multidisciplinary teams because that's what they will face in practice. It's important they understand how to communicate and collaborate with other professionals."

The program emphasized interprofessional learning, ensuring graduates were not only skilled in their own practice but also capable of working effectively within multidisciplinary teams. Stakeholders agreed that this focus on collaboration enhanced both student education and client outcomes.

Strong Community-Based Learning Partnerships

Another significant strength identified by stakeholders was the BSOT program's strong partnerships with community-based organizations and centers. These partnerships offered students hands-on learning experiences in community-based occupational therapy practice, allowing them to apply their knowledge in real-world settings. Community-based practitioners highlighted the value of these partnerships:

> "Our collaboration with the BSOT program has been beneficial for both students and the community. The students get to practice what they've learned, and we get to expand our services."

Partnerships allowed students to develop their skills in diverse environments, such as home health, pediatrics, and mental health, while also contributing to the community's needs. Another participant from a community center shared:

> "We've been working with the BSOT program for years, and it's a win-win situation. The students are exposed to real clients, and we get to help more people in need."

Stakeholders emphasized that these community-based learning experiences enhanced the students' understanding of occupational therapy beyond clinical settings and helped them develop competencies in areas such as community engagement, advocacy, and health promotion. This strong network of community partnerships was a key strength of the BSOT program, ensuring that students received comprehensive, real-world training.

Weaknesses

Limited Access to Standardized Assessment Tools

A significant weakness identified by stakeholders was the limited access to standardized assessment tools within the BSOT program and in practice settings. Due to resource constraints, many practitioners and students relied heavily on clinical observations and adapted assessments that could influence the consistency and quality of care provided. One community-based practitioner described the challenges associated with this limitation:

> "We don't have access to standardized assessments, so we rely a lot on skilled observation. It works, but it's not always ideal, especially when you're trying to provide evidence-based care."

This lack of access to standardized tools was seen as a barrier to both student training and professional practice. Practitioners and educators alike expressed concern that the lack of these resources could hinder students' ability to provide consistent and effective care once they graduate. An educator explained:

> "Our students are well-prepared in terms of clinical reasoning, but the lack of standardized tools is a real issue. It limits their exposure to evidence-based assessments."

The limited availability of these tools was also linked to broader resource constraints, affecting not only the BSOT program but also occupational therapy practice across the country. This weakness was highlighted as a critical area for improvement, both in the context of education and the broader practice environment.

High Educator Turnover Impacting Consistency

Stakeholders were concerned about the high turnover rate of educators in the BSOT program, which had negatively impacted the curriculum's continuity and consistency. Frequent changes in faculty members were seen as disruptive to both students' learning experiences and the overall quality of the program. Students shared their experience with this issue:

> "We've had teachers who stayed for a semester or two, but then left when they got better opportunities abroad. It's hard because we just get used to one style of teaching, and then we have to adjust again."

Likewise, educators acknowledged the challenges posed by high turnover, noting the constant changes in teaching staff made it difficult to maintain continuity in the curriculum and build long-term relationships with students. An educator explained:

> "It's tough to deliver a consistent program when we're dealing with turnover. We try our best to keep the curriculum stable, but there's always an adjustment period when new faculty come in."

This instability was attributed, in part, to the global demand for occupational therapists, which often led to educators leaving for better opportunities abroad. While the program benefitted from having dedicated faculty members, the ongoing issue of educator turnover presented a significant challenge to maintaining a stable and effective learning environment.

Insufficient Specialization Opportunities

Stakeholders also highlighted the lack of opportunities for students to pursue specialization or advanced training within the BSOT program. The curriculum offered a robust foundation for generalist practice, but many students and alumni sought more targeted learning experiences in specialized areas such as mental health, pediatrics, and community-based rehabilitation. An alumni shared:

> "The program prepared me well for general practice, but I wish there were more opportunities to specialize in areas like mental health. I had to pursue additional training after graduation to focus on that."

Moreover, educators acknowledged that resource constraints and limited funding often hindered the creation of specialized courses or certifications within the program. An educator mentioned:

> "We focus on preparing our students for generalist roles, but we recognize the need for more specialization tracks. Unfortunately, the resources just aren't there to support it right now."

The absence of formal pathways for specialization was seen as a limitation of the program, particularly considering the growing demand for occupational therapists with expertise in specific fields. Stakeholders emphasized the need for the BSOT program to explore options for offering more specialized training opportunities to meet the evolving needs of the profession.

Opportunities

Expanding Holistic Care and Wellness Models

An exciting opportunity identified by stakeholders was the potential to expand the BSOT program's focus beyond traditional medical models and incorporate more holistic care and wellness-based approaches. As healthcare shifts toward more comprehensive and person-centered models, there is a growing recognition that occupational therapy should embrace broader aspects of well-being, including mental health, lifestyle interventions, and community-based wellness programs. A community-based practitioner expressed optimism about the program's potential to grow in this direction:

> "There is so much room for OTs to go beyond the medical model. We can help people with wellness, prevention, and overall quality of life, not just rehabilitation."

Educators also recognized the potential benefits of incorporating more holistic care approaches into the curriculum, especially in community-based and non-clinical settings. One educator noted:

> "Our students need to learn how to approach OT from a holistic perspective. It's not just about treating physical dysfunction but also about improving overall well-being."

Stakeholders believed that by expanding the program's focus in these areas, the BSOT program could better prepare students to address the full spectrum of clients' needs and help contribute to broader health outcomes in the community.

Growing Demand for OT in Mental Health

Stakeholders identified the increasing demand for occupational therapy services in mental health as a significant opportunity for the BSOT program to expand its focus. With the rise in mental health issues globally and locally, there is a clear need for occupational therapists who are equipped to provide therapeutic interventions for individuals with mental health conditions. This growing demand presented a chance for the program to offer more targeted training and specialization in this critical area. A mental health practitioner explained the importance of this opportunity:

> "There is a need for OTs in mental health, especially in community-based settings. We have the skills to help clients with mental health challenges, but we need more focus on this in the curriculum."

Further, educators acknowledged that mental health is an area where occupational therapists could have a significant impact, particularly in terms of promoting community reintegration, independence, and quality of life for individuals with mental health conditions. One educator shared:

> "Our graduates are increasingly finding opportunities in mental health, but we need to do more to prepare them for this. It's a growing field, and we need to make sure they have the skills to succeed."

Stakeholders expressed that this opportunity aligned with the global trends in occupational therapy, which recognize mental health as a vital area of practice. Stakeholders suggested that expanding the BSOT program's emphasis on mental health could help address a critical need in the community while positioning graduates for success in this growing field.

Enhancing Interdisciplinary Research and Advocacy

Stakeholders highlighted the opportunity to strengthen interdisciplinary research and advocacy within the BSOT program. As healthcare becomes increasingly collaborative, stakeholders expressed a growing need for occupational therapists to engage in research that crosses disciplinary boundaries, advancing knowledge and improving client outcomes. Moreover, stakeholders noted that occupational therapists can play a crucial role in advocacy, particularly in promoting health and wellness initiatives at the community and policy levels. A community-based practitioner emphasized the value of interdisciplinary research:

> "We need more collaboration with other health professionals in research. Occupational therapists can contribute so much to health promotion and wellness, especially in areas like client education and advocacy."

Moreover, educators recognized the importance of advocacy as a skill that should be embedded in the curriculum. They pointed to opportunities for students to be involved in projects that focus on health promotion, policy change, and community outreach. An educator shared:

> "It's important that our students not only learn clinical skills but also understand how to advocate for their clients and the profession. Research and advocacy go hand in hand."

Threats

Brain Drain Due to Migration
Stakeholders identified the ongoing migration of graduates and educators to countries offering better salaries and career opportunities as a significant threat. This "brain drain" has a detrimental effect on the sustainability and quality of the BSOT program, as it leads to a loss of skilled professionals in education and practice. The global demand for occupational therapists often draws talent away from the Philippines, creating challenges for local institutions to retain experienced educators and practitioners. An alumni member shared their experience of migrating for better opportunities abroad:

> "After graduating, I decided to work abroad because the salary and opportunities are so much better. It's hard to stay when you know you can earn more and have more growth overseas."

Educators echoed this sentiment, expressing concern about the program's ability to maintain a consistent teaching staff due to the notions of better prospects abroad. An educator explained:

> "We see a lot of talented faculty members leaving for positions in other countries. It's difficult to maintain continuity in the program when turnover is so high."

Financial Barriers to Services and Training
Another significant threat identified by stakeholders was the financial barriers that restricted access to occupational therapy services and limited the availability of resources for training within the BSOT program. Limited funding, especially in community-based and rural areas, led to reduced access to essential tools, equipment, and services for clients and students. This financial strain affected the ability to provide high-quality occupational therapy care and hindered the development of more advanced training opportunities within the program. A community-based practitioner described the challenges faced due to financial constraints:

> "We struggle with funding, which means we can't always offer the services our clients need. It also limits what we can provide for students in terms of training and resources."

These financial barriers also impacted students' learning experiences, as the lack of equipment and standardized assessment tools could limit their ability to practice effectively and gain exposure to evidence-based care. An educator explained:

> "Without the proper funding, it's difficult to give students the resources they need for their training. We do our best with what we have, but there are limitations."

Persistent Mental Health Stigma
An ongoing threat identified by stakeholders was the stigma surrounding mental health, which affected both occupational therapy services and community engagement. Despite efforts to promote mental health awareness, stigma was a significant barrier to seeking care, receiving treatment, and engaging families and communities in the therapeutic process. This stigma also limited the development of mental health services within occupational therapy, further exacerbating the issue. Mental health practitioners shared their concerns about the impact of stigma on service delivery:

> "The stigma around mental health is still strong. Many families are hesitant to get involved in therapy because of it, and this really affects our ability to provide the care that's needed."

Participants identified persistent mental health stigma as a significant threat to occupational therapy practice and education. This stigma affected students' ability to engage fully in mental health placement and may hinder their confidence in pursuing careers in this practice area. The stigma also challenged the program's efforts to prepare students for diverse practice settings, potentially limiting their exposure to and competence in mental health practice.

Likewise, educators and practitioners alike noted that mental health awareness campaigns and psychoeducation efforts are still needed to overcome these challenges. One educator mentioned:

> "We're working on educating the community, but the stigma around mental health is deeply rooted. It's a barrier to effective care and limits what we can do as therapists."

Discussion
Findings from this study align with existing literature on occupational therapy education and practice, particularly in the context of generalist training and global workforce challenges. The comprehensive curriculum of the BSOT program, which was highlighted as a key strength by stakeholders, echoes the recommendations of the WFOT and other accrediting bodies (CHED, 2017; WFOT, 2016) which emphasize the

importance of preparing entry-level occupational therapists to be generalists, capable of practicing across diverse settings (AOTA, 2021). In the United States (US) and international context, generalist training is critical for equipping practitioners to serve diverse populations, particularly in rural and underserved communities where specialized services are often scarce (Cahill et al., 2015; Kanny & Crowe, 1990). Likewise, in the context of the Philippines, generalist training prepares graduates to work across a broad range of practice areas, addressing the needs of rural communities where access to healthcare and rehabilitation services is limited. Moreover, global occupational therapy trends increasingly emphasize the integration of community-based rehabilitation and interprofessional collaboration, enabling practitioners to address social determinants of health and engage in holistic, person-centered care (Lucas Molitor & Naber, 2020; Reitz et al., 2020). These trends underscore the dual importance of maintaining a robust generalist curriculum while also exploring pathways for advanced training in emerging fields, such as mental health and community-based care, to meet both local and global healthcare demands (Lemez & Jimenez, 2022).

However, our findings also resonate with broader challenges identified in the literature, particularly the issue of limited access to standardized assessment tools. As noted by Duncan and Murray (2012) and Laver-Fawcett (2014), resource constraints often limit the ability of occupational therapy programs to provide students with the necessary tools for evidence-based practice. This challenge is not unique to the Philippines, as US-based or international programs serving resource-constrained communities may similarly struggle to provide adequate resources for evidence-based training. Innovative strategies, such as leveraging open-access tools or simulation-based learning may mitigate these limitations (Grant et al., 2021; Rider et al., 2024; Shea, 2015). Moreover, the reliance of occupational therapists on clinical observations without standardized assessments highlights the need for adaptation to available tools and resources by using locally available or low-cost alternatives, modifying existing tools to fit the context, and integrating innovative methods, such as digital solutions or community-based measures, to enhance the consistency and reliability of assessments (Duncan & Murray, 2012; Gallagher Worthley & Trudell, 2022; Grant et al., 2021; Laver-Fawcett, 2014).

The growing demand for occupational therapy in mental health as a key opportunity is also reflected in recent literature. Findings from this study suggest that while the BSOT program equipped graduates with foundational knowledge and skills for generalist practice, it did not sufficiently prepare them to address the complexities of mental health practice (CHED, 2017). There is a need for more targeted training in mental health, such as specialized coursework, practical placements, and exposure to community-based mental health programs (Lucas Molitor & Naber, 2020; Reitz et al., 2020). Moreover, additional preparation in psychosocial interventions and interprofessional collaboration is critical for ensuring graduates can meet the rising demand for mental health services (Bulan et al., 2024; Lucas Molitor & Naber, 2020). Occupational therapists are increasingly recognized for their role in community-based and preventive mental health settings, as discussed by Bulan (2023) and Reitz et al. (2020). Similar challenges exist in the US and other countries, where there is a growing recognition of

occupational therapists' potential in mental health but limited incorporation of mental health training in entry-level programs (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2021; Lucas Molitor & Naber, 2020; Reitz et al., 2020). Expanding mental health education in occupational therapy aligns with global trends emphasizing interprofessional collaboration and holistic care approaches, enabling practitioners to address complex health needs in diverse settings (Brandis et al., 2021).

The brain drain phenomenon observed in our study aligns with global workforce shortages in occupational therapy. Migration of skilled professional to higher-income countries poses a threat to the sustainability of occupational therapy programs in low- and middle-income countries by creating educational and practice gaps (Jesus et al., 2022; Pineda et al., 2023). Likewise, rural and underserved areas in the US often experience similar challenges in retaining occupational therapists (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022). Addressing this issue requires strategies like peer mentorship, where experienced practitioners guide early-career therapists to enhance skills, build professional resilience, and foster community (Gallagher & Hamed, 2022; Wissemann et al., 2022). Localized professional development, which involves contextually relevant training and career growth opportunities tailored to practitioners in resource-constrained settings, is equally critical.

Our findings emphasize the need for the BSOT program to implement these strategies. For example, fostering alumni-student mentorship, offering advanced training in emerging fields, and advocating for better working conditions can enhance workforce retention (Gallagher & Hamed, 2022; Lemez & Jimenez, 2022). These efforts align with recommendations for strengthening the local occupational therapy workforce, as seen in other contexts (Cabatan et al., 2020; Wissemann et al., 2022). Globally, government-led incentives, such as loan forgiveness programs and career advancement opportunities, have been successful in mitigating workforce migration (Lemez & Jimenez, 2022). By integrating such approaches, the BSOT program can address workforce sustainability challenges while preparing graduates to succeed in local and global contexts.

Limitations
While our study's generalizability may be limited due to its focus on stakeholders from a single program in the Philippines, the insights gained are likely reflective of challenges and opportunities faced by occupational therapy programs in similar resource-limited environments. Additionally, focus group discussions may have introduced biases, such as dominant voices influencing the data. Another limitation was the decision not to audio record the focus groups, which may have affected the accuracy and completeness of the data. This decision was made to respect participant preferences, but it relied on detailed notetaking, which could have missed subtle nuances. Despite these limitations, the methods were well-suited to the study's goals, enabling a comprehensive evaluation that can inform future curriculum development and strategic planning.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

The findings from our study offer insights into the future development of occupational therapy education and practice, in contexts like the BSOT program at Velez College. The program is well-suited to global occupational therapy trends as it prepares generalist practitioners, but the results of this study highlight opportunities for action, including expanding training in mental health and community-based care to address emerging needs and improve graduate readiness. Integrating more targeted training in mental health, holistic care, and wellness models can better prepare graduates for the evolving demands of occupational therapy practice, locally and globally (Bulan & Lagria, 2020; Bulan & San Antonio, 2023). Furthermore, addressing the lack of access to standardized assessment tools and providing more specialization opportunities will enhance the program's capacity to produce well-equipped graduates for evidence-based practice and advanced roles.

The tension between generalist and specialist roles is not unique to the Philippines. A Norwegian study highlighted the challenge of balancing broad-based training with the increasing demand for specialization, especially in community settings where occupational therapists perform diverse tasks (Horghagen et al., 2020). US-based programs also face similar challenges in preparing graduates who are adaptable generalists while offering pathways for specialization to meet evolving professional demands (AOTA, 2023). To address this, programs like BSOT can explore elective specialization tracks alongside core generalist training, providing a balanced approach to meet local and global professional needs.

The findings from this study also highlight the potential for occupational therapy programs to leverage SWOT analyses as a framework for engaging stakeholders and aligning educational strategies with professional and societal needs (Brandis et al., 2021). By involving educators, students, alumni, and practitioners, programs can identify gaps and opportunities that may not be evident through standard curriculum reviews. This approach fosters collaboration and ensures that programs remain adaptable to evolving healthcare landscapes. For the BSOT program, integrating regular SWOT analyses into strategic planning could provide a structured means of monitoring progress and addressing challenges proactively. More broadly, adopting this methodology across occupational therapy programs can contribute to the global advancement of education standards and practice outcomes, particularly in resource-limited contexts where strategic alignment with local and international demands is critical (Benzaghta et al., 2021; Brandis et al., 2021).

Persistent mental health stigma identified in this study highlights a critical challenge for occupational therapy education. For the BSOT program, this stigma may limit students' willingness to engage in mental health placements, affecting their preparedness for practice in this area (Lyons & Ziviani, 1995). Addressing this issue is critical for developing well-rounded practitioners capable of meeting diverse healthcare needs. Similar challenges exist globally, including the US, where mental health stigma can impact the recruitment and retention of occupational therapists in mental health practice

settings (Scanlan et al., 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022). Integrating anti-stigma education and increasing exposure to mental health practice in entry-level programs may mitigate these challenges and enhance student competence and confidence.

Recommendations for Future Research
Future research could build on our findings by exploring the specific impacts of these proposed changes on both students and practitioners. For example, longitudinal studies could examine how expanding specialization tracks and improving access to resources affect the quality of education and practice. Qualitative research could also examine the lived experiences of occupational therapists navigating challenges such as mental health stigma, resource limitations, and migration pressures. Moreover, qualitative studies could explore how occupational therapists in resource-constrained environments adapt to these challenges, and how students perceive the value of specialization opportunities versus generalist training. These in-depth explorations could provide rich data to inform more responsive and context-specific educational strategies and policies for occupational therapy.

Moreover, future research could explore how global discussions on occupational therapy education, including debates on entry-level degree requirements, might shape programs in the Philippines and internationally. Lemez and Jimenez (2022) emphasized the balance between generalist training and specialization pathways in evolving occupational therapy education. Understanding how these trends can be adapted to local contexts could offer valuable insights for optimizing occupational therapy education worldwide.

Conclusion
This study highlights the critical role of the BSOT program in addressing evolving healthcare demands through generalist training, while identifying areas for growth, including enhanced mental health education, access to standardized tools, and strategies to address workforce sustainability. The findings highlight the importance of balancing foundational generalist preparation with opportunities for specialization, particularly in mental health and community-based care. By leveraging tools like SWOT analyses and integrating evidence-based curriculum changes, occupational therapy programs can foster responsive and sustainable education that meets local and global needs. Broader implications suggest that similar programs worldwide may benefit from adopting SWOT analysis as a tool for continuous quality improvement, aligning with accreditation processes and global trends in education. Regular evaluations can foster adaptability and relevance, ensuring occupational therapy graduates are well-prepared for practice in diverse contexts. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these enhancements, particularly on graduate outcomes and workforce retention, to inform strategies that strengthen the field of occupational therapy education globally.

References

Aldrich, R. M., & Grajo, L. C. (2017). International educational interactions and students' critical consciousness: A pilot study. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *71*(5), 7105230020p1-7105230020p10. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2017.026724

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2021). Occupational therapy scope of practice. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *75*(Supplement_3). https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2021.75S3005

American Occupational Therapy Association. (2023). A descriptive review of occupational therapy education. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *77*(Supplement 3). https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2023.77S3006

Beerkens, M., & Udam, M. (2017). Stakeholders in higher education quality assurance: Richness in diversity? *Higher Education Policy*, *30*(3), 341–359. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-016-0032-6

Benzaghta, M. A., Elwalda, A., Mousa, M., Erkan, I., & Rahman, M. (2021). SWOT analysis applications: An integrative literature review. *Journal of Global Business Insights*, *6*(1), 55–73. https://doi.org/10.5038/2640-6489.6.1.1148

Bertrand, J. T., Brown, J. E., & Ward, V. M. (1992). Techniques for analyzing focus group data. *Evaluation Review*, *16*(2), 198–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X9201600206

Bondoc, S. (2005). Occupational therapy in the Philippines: From founding years to present. *Philippine Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *1*, 9–22.

Brandis, S., von Zweck, C., Bressler, S., Alchourn, C., Buchanan, H., Clouston, T., Cox, C., Moreno, L., Reistetter, T., & Zur, A. (2021). Quality evaluation strategy tool (quest): Using quality indicators in occupational therapy WFOT workshop. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, *68*(S1), 150. https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12738

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bulan, P. M. P. (2023). Occupational therapy and the local context: Exploring opportunities for occupational therapy practice and education with stakeholders in Metropolitan Cebu. *World Federation of Occupational Therapists Bulletin*, *79*(2), 221–227. https://doi.org/10.1080/14473828.2020.1732680

Bulan, P. M. P., & Lagria, M. M. G. (2020). COVID-19 and the local landscape of occupational therapy education: A case report about the voices of Cebuano occupational therapy educators and students. *World Federation of Occupational Therapists Bulletin*, *76*(2), 108–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/14473828.2020.1805202

Bulan, P. M. P., Lagria, M. M. G., Pestaño, N. Y., Suerte, J. R. O., Trinidad, J. F. S., & San Antonio, N. R. (2024). A qualitative exploration on the role of occupational therapy in mental health and psychosocial support for students in the university setting in the Philippines. *Acta Medica Philippina, 58(22).* *https://doi.org/10.47895/amp.vi0.8731*

Bulan, P. M. P., & San Antonio, N. (2023). Strategies, facilitators, and barriers in managing academic occupational disruptions: Implications for occupational therapy education. *Acta Medica Philippina, 58(10), 23–34.* https://doi.org/10.47895/amp.vi0.7813

Cabatan, M. C. C., & Grajo, L. C. (2017). Internationalization in an occupational therapy curriculum: A Philippine–American pilot collaboration. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *71*(6), 7106165010p1-7106165010p9. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2017.024653

Cabatan, M. C. C., Grajo, L. C., & Sana, E. A. (2020). Building the capacity of the next-generation Philippine occupational therapy academic workforce: Insights from an occupational profile study. *Acta Medica Philippina*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.47895/amp.vi0.1441

Cabatan, M. C., & Duque, R. L. (2020). Perspectives on occupational therapy education in Southeast Asia. In S. D. Taff, L. C. Grajo, & B. R. Hooper (Eds.), *Perspectives on occupational therapy education: past, present, and future* (pp. 143–151). Slack.

Cahill, S. M., McGuire, B., Krumdick, N. D., & Lee, M. M. (2015). Rural practitioners' involvement in response to intervention. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention*, *8*(2), 149–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/19411243.2015.1040943

CHED. (2017). *CMO No. 52, s. 2017. Policies, Standards and Guidelines for the Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy Education (BSOT) Program*. Philippines. https://ched.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CMO-No.-52-Series-of-2017-Policies-Standards-and-Guidelines-for-the-Bachelor-of-Science-in-Occupational-Therapy-Education-BSOT-Program.pdf

Clausen, A. (2012). The individually focused interview: Methodological quality without transcription of audio recordings. *Qualitative Report*, *17*(19). https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1774

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.

Duncan, E. A., & Murray, J. (2012). The barriers and facilitators to routine outcome measurement by allied health professionals in practice: A systematic review. *BMC Health Services Research*, *12*(1), 96. https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6963-12-96

Frye, A. W., & Hemmer, P. A. (2012). Program evaluation models and related theories: AMEE Guide No. 67. *Medical Teacher*, *34*(5), e288–e299. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2012.668637

Gallagher, R. G., & Hamed, R. (2022). Benefits of peer-mentorship for entry-level occupational therapy students: A descriptive study. *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *10*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1946

Gallagher Worthley, J., & Trudell, T. (2022). The use of visual thinking strategies to enhance observation skills of entry-level occupational therapy students. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, *6*(3). https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2022.060307

Ghazinoory, S., Abdi, M., & Azadegan-Mehr, M. (2011). SWOT methodology: A state-of-the-art review for the past, a framework for the future. *Journal of Business Economics and Management*, *12*(1), 24–48. https://doi.org/10.3846/16111699.2011.555358

Grant, T., Thomas, Y., Gossman, P., & Berragan, L. (2021). The use of simulation in occupational therapy education: A scoping review. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, *68*(4), 345–356. https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12726

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage.

Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine*, *292*, 114523. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523

Horghagen, S., Bonsaksen, T., Sveen, U., Dolva, A. S., & Arntzen, C. (2020). Generalist, specialist and generic positions experienced by occupational therapists in Norwegian municipalities. *Irish Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *48*(2), 133–146. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOT-03-2020-0006

Jesus, T. S., Mani, K., Ledgerd, R., Kamalakannan, S., Bhattacharjya, S., & von Zweck, C. (2022). Limitations and recommendations for advancing the occupational therapy workforce research worldwide: Scoping review and content analysis of the literature. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(12), 7327. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19127327

Jesus, T. S., Mani, K., von Zweck, C., Bhattacharjya, S., Kamalakannan, S., & Ledgerd, R. (2023). The global status of occupational therapy workforce research worldwide: A scoping review. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *77*(3), 7703205080. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2023.050089

Kanny, E. M., & Crowe, T. K. (1990). A comparison of occupational therapy practice in rural and urban school systems. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *10*(4), 10–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/875687059001000403

Laver-Fawcett, A. (2014). Routine standardised outcome measurement to evaluate the effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions: essential or optional? *Ergoterapeuten*, *4*, 28–37.

Lemez, S., & Jimenez, D. (2022). Occupational therapy education and entry-level practice: A systematic review. *Education Sciences*, *12*(7), 431. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070431

Lucas Molitor, W., & Naber, A. (2020). Designing interprofessional education curriculum to maximize collaborative competency. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, *4*(1). https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2020.040106

Lyons, M., & Ziviani, J. (1995). Stereotypes, stigma, and mental illness: Learning from fieldwork experiences. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *49*(10), 1002–1008. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.49.10.1002

Pineda, R. C., Abad-Pinlac, B., Yao, D. P. G., Toribio, F. N. R. B., Josephsson, S., & Sy, M. P. (2023). Unraveling the "greener pastures" concept: The phenomenology of internationally educated occupational therapists. *OTJR: Occupational Therapy Journal of Research,* 44(4), 661-670. https://doi.org/10.1177/15394492231205885

Reitz, S. M., Scaffa, M. E., Commission on Practice, & Dorsey, J. (2020). Occupational therapy in the promotion of health and well-being. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *74*(3), 7403420010p1-7403420010p14. https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2020.743003

Rider, J. V., Frasier, L., & Parkin, J. (2024). Enhancing simulation fidelity in occupational therapy education: Considerations for standardized patient training and implementation. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, *8*(1). https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2024.080115

Scanlan, J. N., Still, M., Stewart, K., & Croaker, J. (2010). Recruitment and retention issues for occupational therapists in mental health: Balancing the pull and the push. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, *57*(2), 102–110. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1630.2009.00814.x

Shea, C.-K. (2015). High-fidelity simulation: A tool for occupational therapy education. *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *3*(4). https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1155

U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022). *Behavioral health workforce: Barriers to recruitment and retention limit access to care (GAO-23-105250)*. https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105250.pdf

Wissemann, K., Bloxsome, D., De Leo, A., & Bayes, S. (2022). What are the benefits and challenges of mentoring in midwifery? An integrative review. *Women's Health*, *18*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17455057221110141

World Federation of Occupational Therapists. (2016). *Minimum standards for the education of occupational therapists*. https://www.wfot.org/resources/new-minimum-standards-for-the-education-of-occupational-therapists-2016-e-copy

APPENDIX

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Introduction:
In this discussion, we will explore the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the BSOT program at Velez College. Our conversation will be anchored by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) Minimum Standards for the Education of Occupational Therapists and the WFOT Quality Evaluation Strategy Tool (QUEST). These frameworks will guide our evaluation of the program's quality in relation to global occupational therapy standards.

General Questions (SWOT Framework):
1. **Strengths**
   - Can you describe the key strengths of the BSOT program? What are the favorable attributes that support the delivery of quality OT education and practice in your area?
2. **Weaknesses**
   - What do you see as the internal challenges or weaknesses of the program that might be affecting the quality of OT education and services?
3. **Opportunities**
   - What are the external factors or trends that you believe present opportunities for improving OT education and services provided by the program?
4. **Threats**
   - Are there any external conditions or threats that could harm the program's ability to deliver quality OT education and practice? How do these affect the program?

Probing Questions (Based on WFOT QUEST and Minimum Standards):
- **Appropriateness**
   - What knowledge, skills, and competencies are essential for ensuring that the program delivers the right services at the right time, in the right context, and to the right population?
- **Sustainability**
   - How can the program ensure that the necessary resources (financial, educational, human) are available long-term without compromising the future of OT education and services?
- **Accessibility**
   - Are there any challenges in terms of physical or financial access to OT education and services? What are acceptable timelines and costs for these services?
- **Efficiency**
   - How do you perceive the program's efficiency in utilizing its resources, such as staff, equipment, and facilities, to maximize productivity?

- **Effectiveness**
  - How do evidence-based practices and research findings guide the quality of education and services provided by the program?
- **Person-Centeredness**
  - How does the program address the needs and expectations of students, patients, and other stakeholders in delivering OT education and services?
- **Safety**
  - What measures are in place to ensure the safety of students, faculty, and clients within the program? Are there significant risks, and how are they addressed?