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Implementation and Outcomes of an Education Focused Professional Development Series for Occupational Therapy Practitioners

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Abstract

As new educational programs emerge and student enrollment increases, the demand for new academicians, fieldwork educators, and capstone mentors is growing rapidly within the occupational therapy (OT) profession. Academic programs must prepare practitioners to teach and supervise their students who will become OTs and occupational therapy assistants (OTA). In conjunction with the state OT association, one university doctoral OT program created and implemented a free education-focused professional development series for community partners who were interested in developing their teaching knowledge and skills. The series covered unique aspects of OT and OTA education: fieldwork, the doctoral capstone experience and project, and how to become an academic educator. In total, 131 participants attended the three-part professional development series: 10% attended all three sessions, 12% attended two sessions, and 78% attended just one session. A post course evaluation found the majority of participants agreed they will apply the information learned into their practice, they valued the free professional development opportunities, and they were interested in attending future professional development opportunities. Participants had a high level of agreement that they achieved the specific learning objectives of the course. Not only did the community partners find the sessions to be beneficial, but the university OT program noted benefits to hosting it, with 83% of the participants reporting wanting to take a capstone student and 73% reporting a desire to become an academic educator. The purpose of this educational innovation article is to disseminate the content, objectives, and outcomes of the professional development series, in addition to sharing implications for OT and OTA educational programs.

Keywords

Professional development, occupational therapy, academic educator, fieldwork education, doctoral capstone and experience

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ABSTRACT

As new educational programs emerge and student enrollment increases, the demand for new academicians, fieldwork educators, and capstone mentors is growing rapidly within the occupational therapy (OT) profession. Academic programs must prepare practitioners to teach and supervise their students who will become OTs and occupational therapy assistants (OTA). In conjunction with the state OT association, one university doctoral OT program created and implemented a free education-focused professional development series for community partners who were interested in developing their teaching knowledge and skills. The series covered unique aspects of OT and OTA education: fieldwork, the doctoral capstone experience and project, and how to become an academic educator. In total, 131 participants attended the three-part professional development series: 10% attended all three sessions, 12% attended two sessions, and 78% attended just one session. A post course evaluation found the majority of participants agreed they will apply the information learned into their practice, they valued the free professional development opportunities, and they were interested in attending future professional development opportunities. Participants had a high level of agreement that they achieved the specific learning objectives of the course. Not only did the community partners find the sessions to be beneficial, but the university OT program noted benefits to hosting it, with 83% of the participants reporting wanting to take a capstone student and 73% reporting a desire to become an academic educator. The purpose of this educational innovation article is to disseminate the content, objectives, and outcomes of the professional development series, in addition to sharing implications for OT and OTA educational programs.

Introduction

As new educational programs within the occupational therapy (OT) profession emerge and student enrollment increases, the demand for new academicians, fieldwork educators, and capstone mentors is growing rapidly (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020). However, since OT practitioners sometimes do not receive formal training, they are not always proficient enough to take on these educator roles. For example, only a limited number of fieldwork educators have access to fieldwork specific trainings, such as the AOTA Fieldwork Educators Certificate Program (Evenson et al., 2015), and new educators are often under-prepared to take on the responsibilities of being a faculty member (Foy, 2017). Additionally, less than one-quarter of OT programs require students to complete the doctoral capstone experience (AOTA, 2020; Stephenson et al., 2020), so there is no universal framework to emulate how to develop, implement, and evaluate the capstone experience (Kemp et al., 2020). As a result, the OT profession is not yet familiar with some foundational constructs. One way for practicing clinicians to learn how to take on an educator role is through engagement in professional development activities.

Occupational therapy practitioners must engage in continuous professional development to grow their clinical and professional reasoning skills. Professional development may be accomplished through formal and informal education, such as attending conferences or workshops, reading journal articles, supervising students, and providing or receiving mentorship. Johnson-Coffelt and Gabrie (2017) found that OT practitioners value attending workshops and continuing education courses over other methods of professional development to achieve continuing competencies. Attendees report barriers to participating in these activities, such as a negative impact on productivity during the event, the financial hit of missing work to attend, and the overall cost of the course. Alternatively, being involved in the education of OT students is an accessible, bidirectional, professional development activity that supports learning for both the therapist and student (Burgess et al., 2018; Evenson et al., 2015). Whether serving as a fieldwork educator, capstone mentor, or embracing an academic educator role, OT practitioners can use targeted student supervisory opportunities to educate future clinicians and to further their professional development (LeVan, 2020).

Academic programs must prepare and educate the OT practitioners who supervise their students (American Council for Occupational Therapy Education [ACOTE], 2018; Barton et al., 2013; Hanson, 2011; Hills et al., 2012). Though all academic OT and OTA programs are required to adhere to standards set forth by ACOTE (2018), each program implements their curriculum, and fieldwork and capstone experiences differently. One of the ways programs can prepare practitioners to take on this educator role is through professional development activities. To that end, one university doctoral OT program created and implemented a free education-focused professional development series for community partners who were interested in developing their teaching knowledge and skills. The purpose of this educational innovation article is to disseminate the content, objectives and outcomes of the professional development series, in addition to sharing implications for OT and OTA educational programs.

Description

A partnership between an OT doctoral program at one public university and the state OT association brought community partners of both institutions a free, three-part professional development series, offering a total of nine professional development units. The series covered three unique aspects of OT education: fieldwork education, the doctoral capstone experience and project, and becoming an academic educator. Marketing for the event was completed in collaboration between the university and state OT association. Community partners were notified about each professional development course through email, social media, and word of mouth. Community partners who registered for each course completed an online registration through an invitation management system (i.e., Eventbrite). The course registration required the participant to include their contact information, demographic information, job title and area of practice, and topics of interest for future professional development courses.

All courses were held in the evening to reduce the barrier of participants missing work and negatively impacting their productivity. For each component, participants spent 90-minutes in an independent preparatory study. Registered participants received access to the online platform to retrieve and complete the prework content one week prior to the course session date. Participants then attended a 90-minute virtual live course presentation. After each session, participants were given a course evaluation through an online survey management system (i.e., Qualtrics) that included an attestation acknowledging they had completed the pre-assigned work and attended the live session and measured the learning objectives achieved. Participants also had the opportunity to provide general course feedback.

Part 1: Capstone

The first course presented content for current and potential capstone mentors that would work with doctoral OT students during the last semester of their academic program. The course objectives were met combining independent prework with a live virtual presentation that included break-out sessions and group discussion.

Course Objectives

Upon completion of this course, participants will:
- Identify at least two differences between capstone and Level II fieldwork
- Identify at least one capstone project idea for their specific practice setting
- Create at least one capstone activity or goal that supports a potential project
- Reflect on the potential of having capstone students in their specific practice setting

Course Content

The prework for the capstone course consisted of reading two capstone related peer-reviewed publications about mentorship and capstone (Doyle et al., 2019; Jirikowic et al., 2015). The mentorship article highlighted the positive outcomes as a result of mentorship as well as positive outcomes associated with knowledge acquisition and translation. The capstone article provided background on the process of capstone overall as well as challenges and benefits to capstone. To provide foundational

information regarding capstone, participants also reviewed the capstone related section of the ACOTE Standards (2018), AOTA's Vision 2025 statement (AOTA, 2017), and a weblink to the university's OT capstone webpage that contained capstone specific information and exemplar projects.

The live session of this course focused broadly on two areas. The first was to enhance the participants' understanding of the university's capstone program. The information included background of the degree progression of the entry-level OT doctorate degree, overview of student capstone requirements, timing of capstone in the curriculum, capstone focus areas, projects, outcomes, and student deliverables. The second area provided mentor specific education. This information reviewed differences between capstone and fieldwork, requirements to become a mentor (i.e. does not need to be an OT practitioner), definitions of mentoring, differences between mentor and fieldwork educator, benefits of mentorship, and mentor testimonials. The final part of this course allowed the participants to generate capstone ideas for their specific workplace and collaborate with other class participants through interactive small groups.

Part 2: Fieldwork Education
The second course targeted new and experienced Level I and Level II fieldwork educators. The course objectives were met combining independent prework with a live virtual presentation that included active learning strategies and group discussion.

Course Objectives
Upon completion of this course, participants will:
- Identify all of the requirements to become a fieldwork educator and state two unique characteristics of this OT program's mission and vision
- Identify at least three steps to build a fieldwork education experience at your site
- Identify at least three models of providing fieldwork education
- Reflect on the benefits of providing education to the future generation of OT practitioners

Course Content
The prework for the fieldwork education course was created to help the attendees understand the purpose and goals of fieldwork within OT and OTA education and explore a non-traditional fieldwork supervision model. The attendees reviewed suggested fieldwork objectives and activities for both Level I and Level II experiences. Participants were also required to read an article about a non-traditional fieldwork supervisory approach, the collaborative model of fieldwork supervision, that may be implemented for all OT and OTA educational degree levels (Hanson & DeIuliis, 2015).

The live session of this course focused on three concepts of fieldwork within OT and OTA education. The first part of the course provided an overview of fieldwork education in general and then highlighted unique and specific factors about the hosting OT program's fieldwork curriculum. The next part of the course described how to create a manual that provides structure for students' fieldwork experience, while also emphasizing qualities of an effective fieldwork educator. The final part of the course

explained different fieldwork supervisory models, such as the traditional apprenticeship model and the collaborative fieldwork supervision model. Throughout the live session the presenter used active learning strategies such as asking the attendees to complete a poll and contribute to a word cloud.

Part 3: Academic Educator
The third and final course was designed for practitioners interested in becoming an academic educator in an OT or OTA program. The course objectives were met combining independent prework with a live virtual presentation that included ongoing interactive group discussion.

Course Objectives
Upon completion of this course, participants will:
- Identify the requirements to become an academic educator for an OTA and OT program.
- Describe the unique roles of faculty within an OTA and OT program
- Understand the general responsibilities of a faculty member
- Explain the structure of designing a course

Course Content
The prework for the academic educator course required the participants to read one peer reviewed publication about the similarities and differences between a clinician and academician (Crist, 1999) and a handout describing how to develop a curriculum vitae that may be used to apply for a faculty position. They were also required to review material about how to create a syllabus and design an effective course. Lastly, participants received several resources that they could draw upon throughout the course or at a later date. These resources included weblinks to several university resources, such as learning and teaching principles, Bloom's Taxonomy, teaching strategies, and active learning concepts.

The live session of the course focused on two concepts within OT and OTA programs, understanding the scope of higher education and then being an academic educator. The first part of the class provided foundational knowledge about accreditation requirements, including ACOTE standards about faculty requirements at all degree levels; how to apply for a faculty position; an overview of a faculty member's roles and responsibilities, such as teaching and student related activities, scholarship, and service; and the similarities and differences about the roles and responsibilities within different degree programs and academic institutions (i.e. public, private, research intensive, etc.). The second part of the course concentrated on teaching about qualities of an effective educator and how to design a course, including knowing the structure of a class syllabus, different forms of learning assessments, and planning a course schedule. Throughout the live session the presenter posed questions to the participants to allow for interactive and ongoing dialogue among the group.

Outcomes

The professional development series was a quality improvement project and did not require internal review board approval from the University. A total of 131 participants attended all or part of the professional development series: 10% attended all three sessions, 12% attended two sessions, and 78% attended only one session. Forty percent of the participants had previously served as fieldwork educators and 13% had served as capstone mentors for the university program before attending the professional development series. Participants were mostly registered OTs (OTR) and had one to 25 years of clinical practice experience. The largest subset practiced in adult acute care. Table 1 describes the demographic data of participants for each session.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

	Capstone	Fieldwork Education	Academic Educator
Number of Participants	29	58	44
Practitioner Designation	25 (86%) OTR 4 (13%) OTA	46 (79%) OTR 11 (19%) OTA 1 (2%) Other	35 (80%) OTR 7 (16%) OTA 2 (4%) Other
Years of Practice	Mean = 14.66 yrs. (SD+- 9.23)	Mean = 11.22 yrs. (SD+- 9.21)	Mean = 12.44 yrs. (SD+-9)

Top 3 Practice Settings Represented	Acute Care-Adult
	Outpatient-
	  Pediatrics
	School based
		Acute Care-Adult
		School based
		Outpatient-
		  Pediatrics
			Acute Care-
			  Adults
			School based
			Outpatient-Adult

Taught in a formal capacity before	17 (58%)	22 (37%)	21 (49%)

Each course evaluation asked participants three identical questions (see Table 2). Predominantly, the participants thought that they: (1) could apply the information learned into their practice setting, (2) valued free professional development opportunities, and (3) would be interested in attending future professional development opportunities.

Table 2

Application, Value, and Interest Outcomes

	Capstone (*n*=29)	Fieldwork Education (*n*=58)	Academic Educator (*n*=44)
I can immediately apply information presented in my work or practice*	24 (82.75%)	54 (94.74%)	38 (86.36%)
I value having free professional development opportunities*	28 (96.55%)	57(100%)	40 (90.90%)
I am interested in attending future professional development opportunities*	28 (96.55%)	57 (100%)	41 (93.18%)

*Categories of strongly and somewhat agree were collapsed for reporting overall agreement with questions

Each session offered course specific content objectives. Participants highly rated the majority of course objectives for all three sessions, finding a consensus that the learning objectives were achieved. The results of the learning objectives for each session may be found in Figures 1-3. Categories of strongly and somewhat agree, and strongly and somewhat disagree were collapsed for reporting overall agreement with objectives. Additionally, 83% of the participants who attended the capstone course reported they would be interested in taking on a capstone student; 73% of those who attended the academic educator course reported an interest in becoming an academic educator.
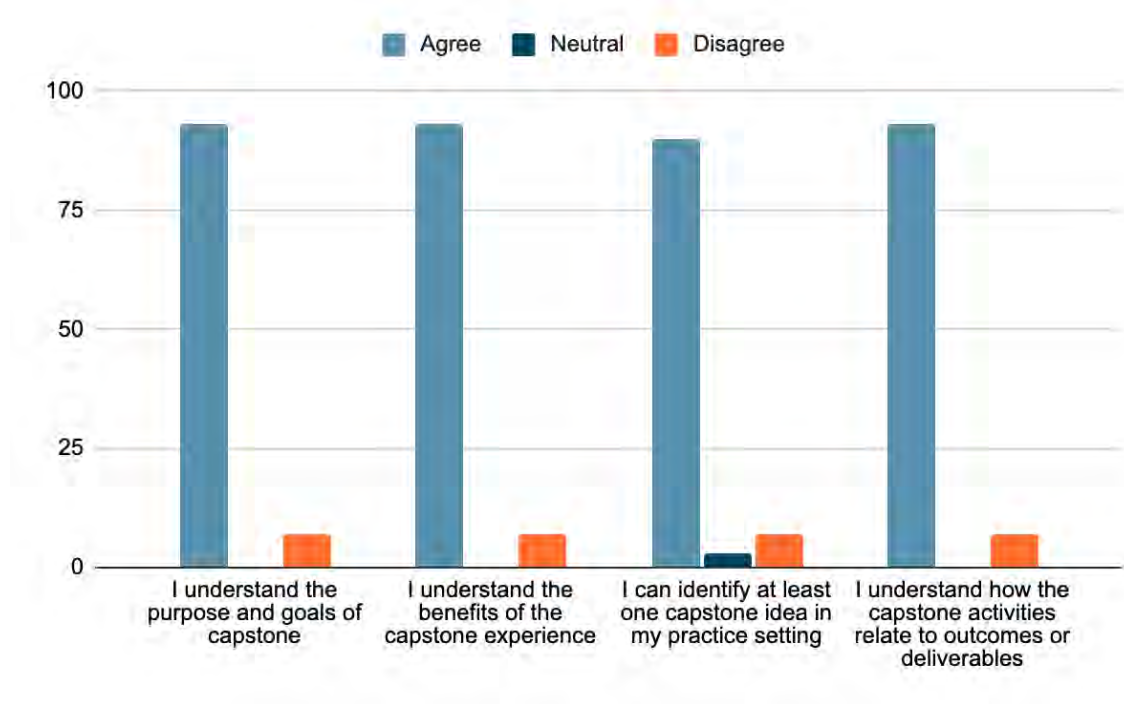
Figure 1

Capstone Course Learning Objectives

Figure 2

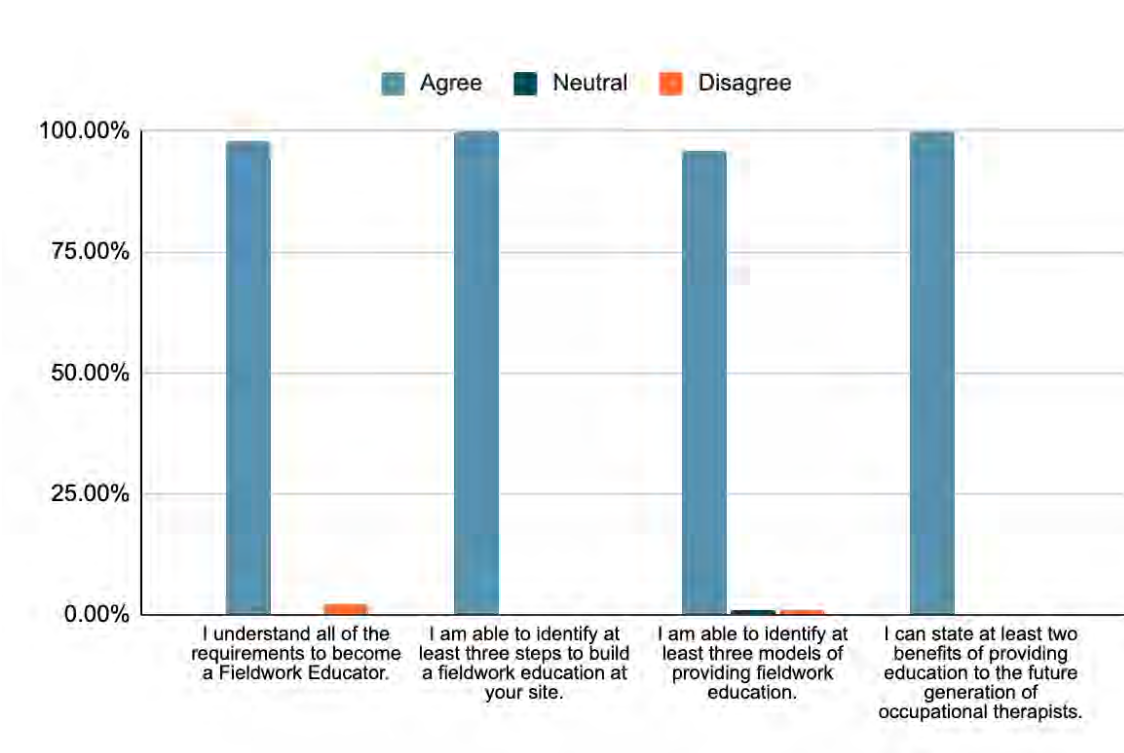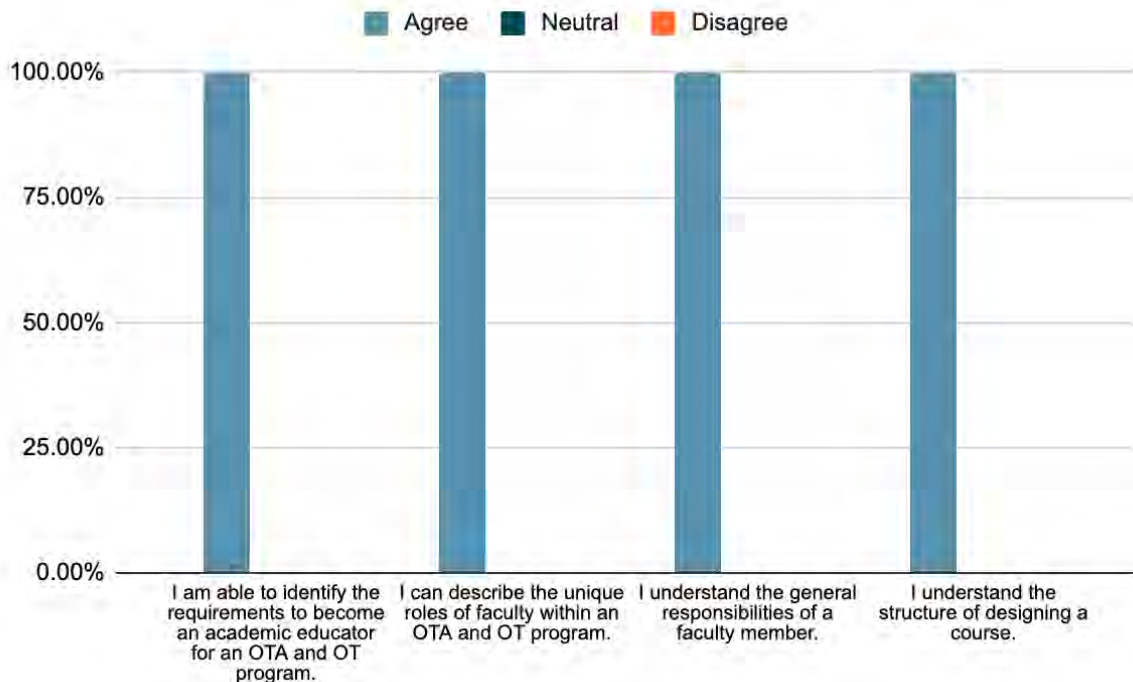*Fieldwork Education Course Learning Objectives*

Figure 3

Academic Educator Course Learning Objectives

Participants provided optional feedback through an open-ended question in the course evaluation. The following quotes highlight feedback from each session:

Capstone Course
- "It was great to learn from others of different perspectives on ideas for the workplace and students."
- "I appreciated having the advanced reading so I had a sense of tonight's content."
- "At first, I did not think this would apply to me, but learning about capstones I have a new excitement for the future with Northern Arizona University! Our small group all had amazing ideas!"

Fieldwork Education Course
- "I have been a fieldwork coordinator for most of my career and appreciate the information in this course."
- "Very informative. I will be attending in March again and we would love for you to come and speak at our hospital."
- "Great presentation! I would value more education on the models of fieldwork and what works best in certain settings."

Academic Educator Course
- "Good info, all new information to me as I don't have any experience with teaching."
- "Loved this course! Well done presentation and enjoyed the information and especially all the course preparation work articles and suggestions! I look forward to more of these!"
- "This was great for me to begin looking into entering academia. I have always had an interest in this since my master's program, however I haven't felt prepared, so this was nice to think about how to continue developing my CV [curriculum vita]."

Discussion

Occupational therapy and OTA academic programs need to find innovative ways to recruit, educate, coach, and mentor community partners who either currently or will potentially work in student education. These opportunities help to build strong connections with community partners and mutually beneficial collaborations. Faculty have expertise in the instruction of future OT practitioners and can play a key role in training practicing clinicians as they prepare to work with students. As evidenced by the large turnout and positive responses received from one university's OT professional development series, more academic programs should consider developing and implementing similar activities. Additionally, allowing the attendees and faculty to come together to interact around targeted education topics allowed for a community of practice to develop. Communities of practice are a powerful way to not only network but also learn from others through sharing of experiences and exchanging of ideas (Wegner et al., 2002). This was an unintended value and welcomed benefit.

In addition, the professional development series had significant benefits to the university's OT program, some of which may not have happened if the series was not offered. The program built new and strengthened existing connections with community partners. Most of the participants had not previously partnered with the university, yet after the series, a large number of them expressed a desire to supervise students or collaborate with the program in the future. With the ongoing shortages of fieldwork placements and qualified faculty members in the OT profession, this response was welcomed (AOTA, 2020; Foy, 2017; Varland et al., 2017). For example, an attendee invited the Academic Fieldwork Coordinator (AFWC) to present at a hospital network about implementing the collaborative fieldwork supervision model. Two other fieldwork sites also expressed interest in implementing this non-traditional model in the future. Another attendee invited the Capstone Coordinator and AFWC to present at another large hospital network regarding best practices for fieldwork and capstone rotations. Lastly, a large portion of the participants in the third course reported an interest in becoming an academic educator; a few of the attendees followed up with the department chair about options to teach at the university in the future.

Another program advantage included the course instructors sharing the mission, vision, and targeted learning outcomes during each session, which helped increase participants' understanding of the department. Distinct program implementation and processes can lead to confusion with community partners that collaborate with multiple OT and OTA programs. This professional development series allowed the participants to better understand the uniqueness and value that this university's OT program brings within the state.

Limitations

This professional development series was the first time the university's OT program developed and offered virtual education focused courses to community stakeholders. As such, a few limitations must be noted. Offering a virtual professional development course may have created selection bias as this allowed some participants to attend with ease but may have limited others to participate due to lack of access to technology or experiencing technical difficulties during the night of a session. The course content for each session was developed by the faculty from the doctoral OT program. Although every effort was made by the faculty to provide evidenced-based instructional content related to both OT and OTA programs, the presenters may not have provided the same detail or examples for all OT and OTA levels of education programs. Lastly, there was assessment bias present with the post-course survey questions. The faculty created the survey questions and sought to capture the participants' perceived value and benefit of each course and in doing so, the questions may have been biased. Additionally, the surveys were completed anonymously by the participants, so the faculty did not have an opportunity to validate the responses or feedback.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Opportunities exist to prepare community partners to take on educator roles and can also be of equal benefit to the OT and OTA academic program. Several implications for academic programs to consider when offering a similar professional development activity are now realized following this series:

- Partnerships with state OT associations can be key for reaching a larger audience and building lasting connections.
- Using an invitation manager allows the program to collect demographic information and other data that may be useful in planning future education topics.
- An online survey management system (e.g., Survey Monkey, Qualtrics, Redcap) can acquire secure contact information for attendees who self-select to partner with a program or express interest in specific content.
- Offer professional development units for attendees that are recognized by the state OT and OTA licensing board and National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT).
- Market the event early and often. Use several avenues to share information about the event, such as through social media, email, and word of mouth.
- Free courses are desirable but may also result in a low turnout. Less than half of the people who registered to attend a course actually attended and completed it in its entirety. Consider increasing the course capacity to account for those who may not attend.

- Consider offering the professional development activity via a virtual platform outside of work hours to allow for a larger group of community partners from a variety of geographic areas to attend.
- Future research is recommended to determine if offering education focused professional development classes increases the number of fieldwork educators, academicians, and capstone mentors within the OT profession. Additionally, research needs to be done to evaluate if the education focused courses offered by the one university's OT program increased the knowledge and skill development of fieldwork educators, capstone mentors, and academicians.

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