

---

2020

## Career Goals and Student Perceptions of a Post-Professional Occupational Therapy Doctoral Experiential Component

Angela Lampe  
*Creighton University*

Vanessa D. Jewell  
*Creighton University*

Rebecca Dunn

Thomas Lawson

Erin Stewart

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/jote>



Part of the [Occupational Therapy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lampe, A., Jewell, V. D., Dunn, R., Lawson, T., Stewart, E., & Linhart, J. (2020). Career Goals and Student Perceptions of a Post-Professional Occupational Therapy Doctoral Experiential Component. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, 4 (2). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2020.040211>

This Original Research is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Occupational Therapy Education by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

---

# Career Goals and Student Perceptions of a Post-Professional Occupational Therapy Doctoral Experiential Component

## Abstract

Clinical doctoral education for occupational therapy includes the acquisition of advanced clinical reasoning skills, leadership capacity, and opportunities for professional development and career achievement. Post-professional students represent motivated individuals seeking to enhance their education, experiences, and explore professional growth opportunities. While not required, the final semester of a clinical doctoral program typically includes a doctoral experiential component (DEC), or culminating project. The purpose of this retrospective, mixed-methods study was to examine the DEC goals and experiences of post-professional occupational therapy doctoral (POTD) students. A total of 49 student DEC proposals, each including multiple personal goals, were categorized according to one or more POTD program goals. The most frequently selected long-term DEC goals by participants in this study were developing educative roles ( $n = 37, 27.30\%$ ), scholarly activities ( $n = 31, 22.96\%$ ), and advanced clinical skills ( $n = 31, 22.96\%$ ). The DEC goals developed by the students were also categorized according to the experience as perceived by the students. Three primary areas of growth experienced by the students during their DEC were: (1) improved self-awareness and confidence through reflection, (2) a challenging, yet fulfilling, experience and (3) translation of new knowledge and skills to practice. The outcomes of this study may offer insight for administrators and prospective students of post-professional programs and align with the American Occupational Therapy Association's Vision 2025 to produce effective and collaborative leaders capable of implementing evidence-based, client-centered, and cost-effective treatment to influence the complexities of healthcare.

## Keywords

Doctoral education, post-professional, capstone, continuing education, professional development

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge and thank the Clinical Education Team at Creighton University for development of and permission to share the Doctoral Experiential Component Proposal form presented as Figure 1 in this manuscript. We wish to express special thanks to Dr. Brenda Coppard for her assistance with this study.

## Authors

Angela Lampe, Vanessa D. Jewell, Rebecca Dunn, Thomas Lawson, Erin Stewart, and Jordane Linhart

# JOTE

Journal of Occupational  
Therapy Education

Volume 4, Issue 2

---

## Career Goals and Student Perceptions of a Post-Professional Occupational Therapy Doctoral Experiential Component

---

Angela M. Lampe, OTD, OTR/L, Vanessa D. Jewell, PhD, OTR/L, Rebecca Dunn, OTD,

Thomas Lawson, OTD, Erin Stewart, OTD and Jordane Linhart, OTD

Creighton University

United States

---

### ABSTRACT

Clinical doctoral education for occupational therapy includes the acquisition of advanced clinical reasoning skills, leadership capacity, and opportunities for professional development and career achievement. Post-professional students represent motivated individuals seeking to enhance their education, experiences, and explore professional growth opportunities. While not required, the final semester of a clinical doctoral program typically includes a doctoral experiential component (DEC), or culminating project. The purpose of this retrospective, mixed-methods study was to examine the DEC goals and experiences of post-professional occupational therapy doctoral (POTD) students. A total of 49 student DEC proposals, each including multiple personal goals, were categorized according to one or more POTD program goals. The most frequently selected long-term DEC goals by participants in this study were developing educative roles ( $n = 37, 27.30\%$ ), scholarly activities ( $n = 31, 22.96\%$ ), and advanced clinical skills ( $n = 31, 22.96\%$ ). The DEC goals developed by the students were also categorized according to the experience as perceived by the students. Three primary areas of growth experienced by the students during their DEC were: (1) improved self-awareness and confidence through reflection, (2) a challenging, yet fulfilling, experience and (3) translation of new knowledge and skills to practice. The outcomes of this study may offer insight for administrators and prospective students of post-professional programs and align with the American Occupational Therapy Association's Vision 2025 to produce effective and collaborative leaders capable of implementing evidence-based, client-centered, and cost-effective treatment to influence the complexities of healthcare.

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

With recent discussion in the profession regarding changing the entry-level degree requirement from a master's to doctoral level, the post-professional occupational therapy doctoral degree (POTD) warrants examination. In August of 2017, the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®) mandated the entry-level degree requirement for occupational therapists move to the doctoral level by July 1, 2027 (ACOTE®, n.d.). A few months after the mandate was announced, ACOTE® put the mandate decision in abeyance and ultimately rescinded the mandate in August of 2018 (ACOTE®, n.d.). ACOTE's® final decision to support dual-entry degrees into the profession allows occupational therapists and educational programs the choice to remain at either a master's or doctoral level (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2019). During the mandate and then abeyance, many programs transitioned or were considering transitioning curriculum to doctoral standards and occupational therapists with bachelor's or master's degrees may be considering the doctoral degree. However, the literature related to the post-professional doctoral degree in occupational therapy and the experiences of POTD students is limited and dated. In this study, the researchers investigated the chosen DEC goals and professional growth experiences of POTD students. The findings of this study may inform occupational therapists considering returning to school to obtain a post-professional degree as well as the educators planning and leading doctoral programs.

## **BACKGROUND**

A doctoral degree is the highest degree given in education and symbolizes mastery in a specific area of study or profession. According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2017b), 4% of the labor force in the United States has a professional or doctoral degree and these degrees are associated with higher wage earnings compared to those with master's, bachelor's, and/or high school degrees. Many health science professions including medicine, dentistry, audiology, pharmacy, and physical therapy have doctoral requirements for clinical practice (Bollag, 2007; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017a).

Given the complexities of healthcare, there is need for practitioners to be adequately prepared to provide patient-centered care, work on interdisciplinary teams, integrate evidence-based practice, improve the quality of care, and utilize informatics (American Hospital Association, 2016). Continuing education through professional studies and seeking higher education are some of many forums available to prepare practitioners for complex healthcare environments.

As one forum available to prepare practitioners for the complexity of practice, a clinical (or professional) doctoral degree emphasizes advanced practice competencies and clinical leadership, proficient application of research, advanced judgement and decision-making skills, and self-reflective abilities (AOTA, 2016; Royeen, & Lavin, 2007; Salls, Provident, & Dolhi, 2012). In lieu of a dissertation, "mentored advanced clinical experiences for autonomous practice competencies," are required of clinical doctorates (Pierce & Peyton, 1999, p. 65). The clinical doctorate degree in occupational therapy prepares graduates for leadership roles through advanced practice skills, outcomes

data measurement and management, evidenced-based practice, health promotion, and interprofessional team partnerships (Brown, Crabtree, Wells, & Mu, 2016; Case-Smith, Page, Darragh, Rybski, & Cleary, 2014).

Two pathways exist for obtaining a clinical doctoral degree in occupational therapy: an entry-level and a post-professional pathway (AOTA, 2016). The entry-level pathway is for individuals who have a bachelor's degree in another field and who have completed specified prerequisite coursework (AOTA, 2016). The post-professional pathway is for individuals who have received an entry-level degree in occupational therapy from either a bachelor's or master's degree program (AOTA, 2016). At present, there are currently over sixty post-professional doctoral level programs in the United States (AOTA, n.d.).

It has been established that advanced degrees, such as doctoral degrees, contribute to personal and professional satisfaction. Various components of the entry-level clinical doctorate degree in occupational therapy have been researched (Case-Smith et al., 2014; Dickerson, & Trujillo, 2009; Mu, Coppard, Bracciano, & Bradberry, 2014; Mu, Coppard, & Padilla, 2006; Rodger, Fitzgerald, Davila, Millar, & Allison, 2011; Smith, 2007) and opinions regarding the impact of the degree for future students, employers, payers, clients/families and internationally have been shared (Brown, Crabtree, Mu, & Wells, 2015; Fisher & Crabtree, 2009). Some research is available related to post-professional master's programs in occupational therapy, however, research related to the POTD and the curricular components of the degree are limited and dated.

Twenty years ago, Dickerson and Wittman (1999) surveyed 314 occupational therapists with entry-level degrees regarding their interest in pursuing a post-professional degree. Results indicated 22% of the respondents had interest in pursuing a post-professional degree (Dickerson & Wittman, 1999). Of those interested, a desire for personal development (83%), increasing skills and knowledge (79%), a positive value of learning (50%), and a desire to teach (37%) were top reasons for pursuing a post-professional degree (Dickerson & Wittman, 1999). Copolillo, Shepherd, Anzalone, and Lane (2010) suggested leadership as a motivation for the post-professional clinical doctorate degree and described the capstone leadership project and post-professional students' experiences with becoming leaders at Virginia Commonwealth University. More recently, Salls, Provident, and Dolhi (2012) found the majority of POTD graduates were confident in using evidence-based practice and had served in leadership positions. However, fewer respondents reported participating in scholarly activities and the authors' attributed this to the short time frame between the study and graduation (Salls et al., 2012).

Post-professional clinical doctorate degrees in occupational therapy are not accredited by ACOTE®, although ACOTE® is proposing guidelines for post-professional programs (ACOTE®, 2017). Lack of accreditation may be a factor in the curriculum variance and degree requirements of POTD programs (Bollag, 2007). According to the ACOTE® proposed guidelines (ACOTE®, 2017), students in a POTD program must demonstrate skills such as advanced reasoning and knowledge, quality, advocacy, and leadership. The proposed guidelines stipulate the curriculum for post-professional programs include

a “culminating project” and, if required, an experimental residency component “reflected in the curriculum design with stated objectives, learning activities, and outcomes” (ACOTE®, 2017, p.5). The residency component, also referred to as a DEC, or capstone project, is not required but are frequently included in the final semester(s) of a clinical doctorate program. The DEC may further develop and refine a student’s professional growth in one of the following areas: “clinical practice skills, research skills, administration, leadership, program and policy development, advocacy, education, and theory development” (AOTA, 2018a, p. 3).

The DEC, as implemented in the post-professional curriculum at a midwestern university with an established post-professional program, is a 16-credit hour experience developed by students in POTD 580: Professional Trajectory and implemented in POTD 590: Doctoral Experiential Component. During the Professional Trajectory course, students reflect upon their experiences and motivation for pursuing a post-professional degree as well as work-force, professional, and societal needs. The students use this reflection to develop a DEC Proposal (see Appendix). The DEC Proposal is a written plan of the student’s long-term professional career goals, related learning objectives, and activities. The long-term professional career goals developed by the students are required to align with one or more of the post-professional program goals including advanced clinical skills, self-reflection, ethics, leadership, advocacy, educative roles, scholarship, and program development. All program goals are threaded throughout the curriculum. The DEC Proposal also requires students to identify a DEC mentor and timeframe for completion of the DEC. In POTD 590, the students self-reflect on their DEC and they receive feedback from the course instructor of record, mentor, and peers throughout the course. Students compile a final project portfolio of evidence related to their DEC learning goals, objectives, and activities.

POTD students represent motivated practitioners seeking to enhance their education, experience, knowledge, and explore various professional growth opportunities. A need exists to understand the DEC goals and experiences of POTD students. Such knowledge will help advise prospective students as well as occupational therapy practice and education related to post-professional clinical doctoral education. Through an examination of the DEC goals and reflection of the student’s experiences upon completion of their DEC, we will attempt to understand motivation for and experiences of students pursuing a POTD degree. The purpose of this retrospective, mixed methods study was to examine the DEC goals and experiences of POTD students. Specifically, the research questions were: (1) What were the most frequently chosen long-term professional career goal areas identified by POTD students in their DEC? and (2) How did POTD students perceive their professional and personal growth opportunities during a post-professional DEC?

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The researchers used a retrospective convergent mixed method design to concurrently reveal how students perceived their experience of POTD education (Creswell & Clark, 2007). The convergent mixed-methods design allowed for compilation of information assignments from POTD 580: Professional Trajectory and POTD 590: Doctoral Experiential Component. Data was kept separate for examination and prioritized equally (Creswell & Clark, 2007). The study received Institutional Review Board approval.

### **Participants**

The sample included deidentified student assignments from POTD 580: Professional Trajectory and POTD 590: Doctoral Experiential Component from an established POTD program (more than 10 years). Assignments from students who were enrolled in and received a “satisfactory grade” from Fall 2012 through Summer 2017 from both courses were included in the study. Exclusion criteria included study assignments with missing, incomplete and/or illegible responses.

### **Measures**

The researchers analyzed two course assignments for this study. Students enrolled in POTD 580: Professional Trajectory completed a DEC Proposal Form (see Appendix), which allowed for identification of “long-term professional career goals, learning objectives, learning activities, and evidence of learning objectives” (Creighton University, 2016, p.1). At the end of POTD 590: Doctoral Experiential Component, all students completed a self-reflection of their experiences while completing their DEC. The assignment titled, Student Evaluation of the DEC, measured how POTD students felt the DEC contributed to their professional and personal growth. Specifically, the researchers analyzed question four of the Student Evaluation of the DEC assignment which asked the students to comment on how professional growth had occurred for them during their DEC.

### **Procedures**

After IRB approval, the course instructor for POTD 580 and POTD 590 de-identified all course assignments to protect the students’ identities and maintain confidentiality. The DEC Proposal form and Student Evaluation of the DEC were saved onto a secure cloud storage system for team access and data storage. The first author copied and pasted all of the student answers from question four of the Student Evaluation of the DEC assignment into one document for ease of analysis. The researchers then began analysis of the entire DEC Proposal form and question 4 of the Student Evaluation of the DEC.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics to determine the frequency of DEC goals that related to the eight OTD program goals outlined by the department. The frequency of program goals addressed in the DEC gave the researchers an understanding of the students’ areas of interest for long-term career goals.

The research team concurrently reviewed students' reflections of the DEC from the assignment titled Student Evaluation of the DEC. Utilizing thematic analysis, the researchers coded the responses on the assignments to determine ways in which professional growth occurred during the DEC. The researchers followed an approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), who detailed six phases of thematic analysis; (1) familiarization of the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) production of the report. Individually, researchers familiarized themselves with data by reading the documents, then independently coded each assignment's recorded reflection. Once preliminary codes were generated, two small groups determined initial codes and preliminary themes. After preliminary theme generation, the entire research team met to finalize, name, and define themes. The researchers wrote a manuscript (step 6) to complete the thematic analysis process.

Researchers utilized the following strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis process and findings; methodological and researcher triangulation, thick description, and reflexivity (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). Researchers engaged in methodological triangulation during this study to analyze the data from multiple perspectives and develop consistency across process (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). Researcher triangulation was completed by using group consensus before making a tally. Researchers categorized the long-term career goals into one or more of the eight POTD Program Goals. Research members engaged in reflexivity by identifying biases through journaling and engaging in rich, collaborative discussions with the research team. Finally, a thick description of the analysis process is detailed through an audit trail.

## **RESULTS**

### **Quantitative**

The researchers examined 49 DEC Proposal assignments (n=49 students) containing 135 long-term professional career goals from course POTD 580: Professional Trajectory and 106 assignments from course POTD 590: Doctoral Experiential Component. The long-term professional career goals were tallied into the apriori POTD program goals. The results are presented in order from most frequently to least frequently self-selected goal area (see Table 1).



Table 1

*Long-Term Professional Career Goals Areas Contained within the DEC Proposals*

	%	(n)*
Educative roles	27.41%	(37)
Advanced clinical skills	22.96%	(31)
Scholarship	22.96%	(31)
Program development	12.59%	(17)
Leadership	6.67%	(9)
Advocacy/policy	3.70%	(5)
Ethics	2.22%	(3)
Interpersonal skills and reflection	1.48%	(2)

\*n = 135 long-term professional career goals

**Qualitative**

Three primary themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of 106 responses to the Student Evaluation of the DEC: (1) improved self-awareness through reflection, (2) challenging yet rewarding experiences, and (3) translation of new skills and knowledge to practice. The themes represent student perceptions of growth during their DEC experience in the university's POTD program.

**Theme 1: Improved self-awareness and confidence through self-reflection.** The first theme focused on the concept of learning about oneself through self-reflection and confidence. The improved self-awareness experienced by the students was evident in their reflection of their strengths and weaknesses as well as the confidence they gained from their DEC experiences.

Many students reported professional growth by means of engaging in reflection on their strengths and weaknesses. The following are selected examples expressed by the students related to reflection on strengths and weaknesses. "I was able to put my practice under a microscope and detail the strengths and weaknesses for future professional growth." Another student commented, "Professional development means exploring myself in-depth as an individual and as a professional. It means to explore my strengths and weaknesses, understanding my vices and my gifts and in the process to develop a life-long path for continual learning." Reflection of strengths and weaknesses was evident in this comment, "I also got an opportunity to focus on my strengths and weakness as an educator and work on improving myself as a person."

Another student commented,

Doing the rotation (note: prior to 2016, DEC was called professional “rotations”) also helped me to become more self-aware and self-reflective. With the aid of my mentor, I was able to identify my weaknesses and strengths. I became more conscious of the good qualities that I have and also of the areas that I need to improve on.

Many students also reported professional growth by engaging in reflection on their increase in confidence. Repeatedly, the word confidence appeared as expressed in these chosen excerpts from the students. “As the project unfolded, my confidence that I have a voice and authority to speak to this topic increased.” Another student reported, “During this rotation, I was able to reflect on my knowledge base...this resulted in increased confidence...but also showed me areas where I could gain more knowledge...” Another specific mention of confidence from this student, “I feel more comfortable with the process of developing a program for use in an actual workplace setting. This has given me the confidence that I needed to start my own business in the future.” Finally, “I feel that my skill-set as an occupational therapy educator has grown exponentially throughout my DEC. I feel that my confidence level and awareness of teaching strategies to utilize in the classroom grew quite a bit this semester.”

Other students expressed increased confidence without specifically using the word. For example, “Before completing this semester, I was indecisive on rather [whether] I had the abilities to become a college professor. After this semester, I know I can do this.” Another student stated, “I am now a believer that anything is possible. I was able to apply my role as a leader in this rotation while I was developing this program on my own.”

In conclusion, throughout the DEC students became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and the DEC increased their confidence often resulting in affirmation that their skills were aligned with their long-term professional career goals.

**Theme 2: Challenging yet rewarding experiences.** The second theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis was that many students expressed their DEC was a challenging yet rewarding experience. The challenge for some students was they set stretch goals for their DEC as articulated by this student, “The business ‘world’ is not comfortable for me. This rotation really challenged me to think, speak, and write with a whole new language.”

In some reflections, students reported that a challenging aspect of the DEC was that they were in control of their own learning. For example, “Learning to pace myself in self-study was challenging. I felt that as the semester progressed I got better at this.” Another student wrote, “There were multiple challenges in this professional rotation. The biggest challenge was adjusting to the new found role of being a driver of my own learning. I am used to receiving directions on what to do and how to do every semester. Professional rotation is self-directed.”

Other students were challenged by exposure to different roles or positions and unfamiliar situations as stated by one student, “It [DEC] forced me out of my comfort zone.” Another student expressed, “I did find myself growing in appreciation for all that my department head has to contend with. It can be overwhelming trying to meet the needs of a large and diverse department and planning for potential students and employees is an extra challenge.” Another student commented, “I believe my professional communication skills were effectively challenged through this process in order to improve my ability to effectively work towards future program development goals and objectives.” This student stated, “I did grow professionally during this rotation. Learning web design was new and difficult, however, I am so glad that I have this new skill.”

Most students expressed the challenges they encountered helped them grow as articulated by this student, “Anytime I experience a challenge; growth seems to be the outcome.” Another student commented, “I was challenged throughout the experience to grow professionally both through the experience itself, and to reflect upon my own expectations and future plans.” This student used creativity to overcome the challenges, “This rotation challenged my time management, communication and frustration tolerance with the lack of communication and direction from [reference removed]...[I] found creative ways to meet the targets.”

In summary, many students found the DEC challenging, yet rewarding. Students expressed they were positively impacted by the challenges. DEC students learned from the challenge such as this student, “I will never forget the experience I gained in submitting a manuscript for publication and presentation.” Other students were positively impacted by the challenge as identified by this student, “I had no idea what I was doing. It was challenging, fun, and I grew in confidence.” The challenge inspired some students to take on future challenges as voiced by this student, “Now I feel satisfied with my accomplishments and feel I can take on other challenges.”

**Theme 3: Translation of new knowledge and skills to practice.** The third theme expressed by students during their DEC was the knowledge and skills they developed or refined during their DEC translated directly to practice. One student stated, “Professional rotation was an exciting and thrilling experience for me. The knowledge and skills gained during this rotation were not something I could only learn from reading books and articles.” One student said, “I have also learned how to aggregate all the information and knowledge learned from the entire POTD courses...to modify and improve my skills to be a successful OT educator.”

Many students’ translation of knowledge and skills directly applied to their long-term professional career goal areas. As the student quoted previously, another student pursuing an educative long-term professional career goal stated, “I have also learned the strategies and skills to effectively communicate with students and provide them with constructing feedback.” Another student commented, “Gaining skills for designing

courses, writing effective grant proposals, and implementing grant funding are core skills for future academic endeavors.”

Knowledge and skills were also translated into advanced clinical practice goal areas as noted by this student, “I am better equipped to provide advanced OT to all patients in psychiatry and introduce these strategies into traditional medical model clinics.” Another student stated, “Completing this Experiential Component has made me more competent in the skills I use in treatment sessions and as a result I feel I have grown professionally.” A student who completed an advanced practice DEC in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) stated, “I was able to grow in my confidence recognizing I did have years of experience and foundational skills that would transfer to practice in the NICU.”

Another student who pursued a scholarly DEC stated, “My DEC further hones my skill in asking, investigating, and integrating, which helps me grow as an occupational therapy scholar.” Another student expressed, “I have learned how to apply my knowledge of research methodologies and instructional methods and evaluation in my training to be an academician sometime in the future.”

Students who completed program development and leadership DEC made comments such as this student,

I had the opportunity to create, organize, and implement a successful project in my community. I was able to utilize my skills as a therapist and then also utilized the learned information from the PPOTD program to further expand my knowledge and experience.

Another student with a leadership-focused DEC stated, “[My DEC] strengthened my ability to work collaboratively in different situations and demonstrate leadership roles.”

Many students, regardless of long-term professional career goal area, recognized the knowledge and skills needed to work collaboratively with others on interprofessional teams as expressed by this student, “I have been able to use my skills and knowledge to build a team of people that are willing and motivated to make this project a success.” Another student stated, “Not only do I feel I am more efficient at working with groups of people, I have also networked with professionals and athletes across the state and I feel that I have a lot more knowledge and information on resources to share with clients.” Many students translated the knowledge and skills they gained throughout the DEC into new career paths and opportunities.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study, we identified the frequency of long-term professional goal areas and perceptions of professional growth POTD students following the completion of a DEC experience. In terms of professional goal areas, the percentage of students completing DEC with emphasis on advanced clinical practice was not surprising given the clinical emphasis of the OTD degree. The percentage of students completing DEC with emphasis on educative roles and scholarship was not expected. Because students

in this study developed the DEC toward the end of their curriculum, it was not clear if the students entered the OTD program with interest in academia, or if they became inspired as they progressed through the curriculum. Regardless, practitioners prepared to serve in faculty roles are needed in the occupational therapy profession, particularly to keep pace with the predicted 24% growth rate in employment between 2016 and 2026 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019) and the increase in education programs and faculty shortages due to aging and qualifications to teach (Harvison, 2018). Practitioners with advanced clinical knowledge and interest in scholarship can help produce evidence on the value of occupational therapy as is emphasized by AOTA (AOTA, 2015).

Through reflection, students emerged from the program with self-awareness and confidence, and they were eager to apply those skills in practice. Educational literature supports improved self-awareness and confidence as developed through self-reflection. Self-confidence is one of several traits frequently associated with being an effective leader (Braveman, 2016). Self-awareness is a trait described by Baedke and Lamberton (2018) as “a person who is self-aware, in turn, strives to be authentic, confident but humble, curious and open-minded, and eager to learn and improve” (p. 5). According to Wain (2017), becoming a reflective practitioner increased self-awareness, self-identity, personal growth, and led to more job satisfaction. Furthermore, self-reflection corresponded with increased confidence and ability to make informed clinical decisions (Wain, 2017).

The confidence gained through self-reflection also led to students overcoming perceived barriers and completing their learning objectives. Often students selected goals that were personally meaningful and simultaneously challenging. Completing meaningful and challenging goals gave the students confidence to translate these skills to varied practice settings. Practice settings that increasingly require people who are skilled at solving challenging and complex problems to improve the quality of care (American Hospital Association, 2016).

Students in our study reported that their experiences in advanced practice settings created opportunities and opened doors for future opportunities including career changes and/or advancement. Similar to the fellowship programs emerging in the profession, POTD students dared to create long-term professional goals within practice settings and with mentors who guided their experiences. It is well-known that mentors are instrumental to career success.

Occupational therapists who are self-reflective, confident in their skills, motivated by challenging experiences, and prepared to develop programs and implement new knowledge into practice represent a cohort of practitioners prepared to be effective and collaborative leaders able to propel the profession to achieving its Vision 2025 goals (AOTA, 2018b). The goals and experiences developed through the DEC by participants in this study prepared them to be effective leaders within complex healthcare systems, academic environments and interprofessional teams.

### **Limitations**

This study was a retrospective records review; as such the research exhibited no control over the methods of data collection. The data sample was small and limited to students at one midwestern university's POTD program. There is also a lack of available research of the POTD and the DEC which limited the scope of analysis and comparison of trends and relationship to any previous studies. Finally, application of the study results may be limited as not all POTD programs require students to complete a DEC.

### **Future Research**

This research is baseline data from one midwestern university POTD program, however, this study suggests there is a need for more research on outcomes of POTD DEC experiences nationwide. Researchers in occupational therapy education could explore outcomes of the POTD DEC across multiple academic institutions. During a comparative study, occupational therapy education program researchers would benefit from developing a standardized student self-assessment tool that more consistently measures student perceptions of their DEC experience. More research is needed to determine what DEC areas are frequently/not frequently selected by students in POTD programs. POTD programs should consider evaluating DEC experiences by utilizing a combination of student perceptions of DEC experiences as well as tracking students' chosen professional trajectory in a POTD program.

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

Occupational therapy educators should be mindful that the DEC can be a remarkable experience for a post-professional student's professional growth and future career. Because students expressed that the skills and knowledge gained during their DEC translated directly to practice and sometimes created opportunities for new positions and/or advancement, occupational therapy educators working with post-professional students should advise the students to thoughtfully create long-term professional DEC career goals that are of interest to the student and that will help the student grow professionally. Additionally, the results of our study suggest that post-professional students may benefit from self-reflection, and may need support and encouragement from educators, peers, and mentors as they navigate their DEC.

### **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this research was to investigate the chosen DEC goals and experiences of professional growth of POTD students. This study sought to describe long-term career goals and experiences of students pursuing a POTD degree and contribute to the body of knowledge about the impact of DEC on students. The results may also inform practitioners considering returning for a post-professional degree, educators leading and planning doctoral level programs and the profession of occupational therapy. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the quantitative data revealed students most frequently selected DEC to practice educative roles, advanced their clinical skills and to purpose scholarly projects. The qualitative data revealed the DEC were challenging and rewarding experiences and helped the students improve self-awareness and confidence and translate new knowledge and skills to practice. The limitations of this

study should be considered when interpreting the results. Opportunities exist for future research to explore the DEC within post-professional programs and the implications for students, employers, educator's, academic programs, and the profession.

---

## References

- Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®). (n.d.). *ACOTE's® update on the entry-level education*. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/EducationCareers/Accredit/Announcements/ACOTE-Update-on-Entry-Level-Education.pdf>
- Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®). (2017). *Draft ACOTE® post-professional guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/Publications-News/AOTANews/2017/Open-Hearing-ACOTE-Post-Professional-Guidelines.aspx>
- American Hospital Association. (2016). *Critical conversations on the changing healthcare environment: Workforce development*. Retrieved from [https://www.healthcareercenter.com/pdf-files/Critical\\_Conversation\\_Workforce\\_Report.pdf](https://www.healthcareercenter.com/pdf-files/Critical_Conversation_Workforce_Report.pdf)
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (n.d.). *Postprofessional programs in OT – Doctoral level programs*. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/Education-Careers/Find-School/Postprofessional/PostprofessionalOT-D.aspx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2015). *Articulating the distinct value of occupational therapy*. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/Publications-News/AOTANews/2015/distinct-value-of-occupational-therapy.aspx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2016). A descriptive review of occupational therapy education. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70, 7012410040. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot2016.706S03>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2018a). *2018 Accreditation council for occupational therapy education (ACOTE®) standards and interpretive guide*. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/EducationCareers/Accredit/StandardsReview/2018-ACOTE-Standards-Interpretive-Guide.pdf>
- American Occupational Therapy Association. (2018b). *Vision 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/publications-news/otp/archive/2018/01-22-18-vision-2025/vision-2025.aspx>
- American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). (2019). *Results from RA 2019 spring meeting: Motions include OT and OTA entry-level mandates*. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/Publications-News/AOTANews/2019/Results-RA-Spring-Meeting-Motions-Include-Entry-Level-Mandates.aspx>
- Baede, L., & Lamberton, N. (2018). *The emerging healthcare leader: A field guide*. Foundation of the American College of Healthcare Executives, Health Administration Press: Chicago, IL.
- Bollag, B. (2007). Credential creep. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(42), A10.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Braveman, B. (2016). *Leading & managing occupational therapy services: An evidence-based approach*. Philadelphia, PA: FA Davis.
- Brown, T., Crabtree, J. L., Mu, K., & Wells, J. (2015). The next paradigm shift in occupational therapy education: The move to the entry-level clinical doctorate. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69, 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2015.016527>
- Brown, T., Crabtree, J. L., Wells, J., & Mu, K. (2016). The entry-level occupational therapy clinical doctorate: The next education wave of change in Canada? Le doctorat clinique menant à l'entrée en exercice de l'ergothérapie: la nouvelle vague de changement en enseignement au Canada?. *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 83(5), 306-316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008417416656206>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017a). *Education and training assignments by detailed occupation*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/education-and-training-by-occupation.htm>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017b). *Profile of the labor force by educational attainment*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2017/educational-attainment-of-the-labor-force/pdf/educational-attainment-of-the-labor-force.pdf>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2019). *Occupational outlook handbook occupational therapists*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/occupational-therapists.htm>
- Case-Smith, J., Page, S. J., Darragh, A., Rybski, M., & Cleary, D. (2014). The issue is: The professional occupational therapy doctoral degree: Why do it? *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 68(2), 55. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2014.008805>
- Copolillo, A., Shepherd, J., Anzalone, M., & Lane, S. J. (2010). Taking on the challenge of the centennial vision: Transforming the passion for occupational therapy into a passion for leadership. *Occupational Therapy in Health Care*, 24(1), 7-22. <https://doi.org/10.3109/07380570903304209>
- Creighton University Department of Occupational Therapy. (2016). *Post professional OTD program doctoral experiential component (DEC) manual*. Unpublished Manual, Department of Occupational Therapy, XXX.
- Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. P. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Curtin, M., & Fossey, E. (2007). Appraising the trustworthiness of qualitative studies: Guidelines for occupational therapists. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 54, 88-94. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1630.2007.00661.x>
- Dickerson, A. E., & Trujillo, L. (2009). Practitioners' perceptions of the occupational therapy clinical doctorate. *Journal of Allied Health*, 38(2), 47.
- Dickerson, A. E., & Wittman, P. P. (1999). Perceptions of occupational therapists regarding postprofessional education. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 53(5), 454-458. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.53.5.454>
- Fisher, T. F., & Crabtree, J. L. (2009). Generational cohort theory: Have we overlooked an important aspect of the entry-level occupational therapy doctorate debate?. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63(5), 656-660. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.63.5.656>



- Harvison, N. (2018, April 19). Current trends in accreditation and higher education. Retrieved from <https://www.aota.org/~media/Corporate/Files/EducationCareers/2018-conference-resentations/2018-Trends-in-Accreditation-Higher-Education.pdf>
- Mu, K., Coppard, B. M., Bracciano, A. G., & Bradberry, J. C. (2014). Comparison of on-campus and hybrid student outcomes in occupational therapy doctoral education. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 68*, 51. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2014.685S02>
- Mu, K., Coppard, B., & Padilla, R. (2006). Graduate outcomes of first entry-level occupational therapy doctoral program in the United States. *Education Special Interest Section Quarterly, 16*(1), 1-4.
- Pierce, D., & Peyton, C. (1999). A historical cross-disciplinary perspective on the professional doctorate in occupational therapy. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 53*(1), 64-71. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.53.1.64>
- Rodger, S., Fitzgerald, C., Davila, W., Millar, F., & Allison, H. (2011). What makes a quality occupational therapy practice placement? students' and practice educators' perspectives. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal, 58*(3), 195-202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1630.2010.00903.x>
- Royeen, C., & Lavin, M. A. (2007). A contextual and logical analysis of the clinical doctorate for health practitioners: Dilemma, delusion, or de facto? *Journal of Allied Health, 36*(2), 101-106.
- Salls, J., Provident, I., & Dolhi, C. (2012). Outcomes of an online post professional doctorate degree in occupational therapy. *Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences & Practice, 10*(2), 4p.
- Smith, D. L. (2007). Perceptions by practicing occupational therapists of the clinical doctorate in occupational therapy. *Journal of Allied Health, 36*(3), 137-140.
- Wain, A. (2017). Learning through reflection. *British Journal of Midwifery, 25*(10), 662-666. <https://doi.org/10.12968/bjom.2017.25.10.662>

**Appendix**

**Department of Occupational Therapy**

**Post-Professional OTD**

**Doctoral Experiential Component (DEC) Proposal**

Check which proposal you are submitting: \_\_\_\_\_ Initial Submission      \_\_\_\_\_ Revised Submission

<b>Name</b>	
<b>Address</b>	
<b>Phone</b>	
<b>E-mail</b>	
<b>Date submitted to</b>	

**Long Term Professional Career Goal(s):** \_\_\_\_\_

*Using the chart below, indicate your (1) learning objectives, (2) learning activities, & (3) evidence of learning objective accomplishments*

*for all 16 credit hours of your Doctoral Experiential Component (DEC) Plan.*

Learning Objective	Proposed Learning Activities Corresponding to Learning Objective	Proposed Evidence to Show Accomplishment of the Learning Objective (Evaluation Plan)

Long Term Professional Career Goal(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Learning Objective	Proposed Learning Activities Corresponding to Learning Objective	Proposed Evidence to Show Accomplishment of the Learning Objective (Evaluation Plan)

Using the chart\* below, explicate your plan for completing ALL 16 credit hours of Doctoral Experiential Component (DEC).

\* You may add more rows to the table if needed.

\*\* Students must follow the credit guideline (i.e. of 4, 6, 8, or 12 credits) unless otherwise directed by the instructor in the case of a course waiver or additional credits in replacement of elective credits.

\*\*\*Students are required to complete 16 credits of Doctoral Experiential Component (DEC). However, students may have between 8 and 22 credits depending on waivers and the addition of Rotation credits in replacement of elective credits.

<b>Rotation Dates</b> (start & end dates; this can be the year and semester)	<b>Number of credits</b> (4,6 8 or 12 credits**)	<b>Long Term Career Goal</b> (number)	<b>Objectives &amp; Activities to be addressed &amp; completed during rotation</b>	<b>Rotation Site</b> (name, address, phone, fax)	<b>Professional Rotation Mentor</b> (name, address, phone, email)
<b>Total of Credit hours must = 8- 22***</b>					

**Briefly describe how your rotation plan addresses one or more OTD Program Goals.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Academic Clinical Education Coordinator      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date