

2020

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Recommended Citation

Holm, S. E., Stutz-Tanenbaum, P., & Greene, D. (2020). What Drives Engagement in Professional Associations? A National Survey of Occupational Therapy Students. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, 4 (3). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2020.040301>

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Abstract

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Keywords

Occupational therapy, professional role, students, mentors, education

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Melissa Hofmann, MSPT, PhD, for her helpful comments and suggestions to improve our survey. We also thank all the student participants for their time and responses.

JOTE

Journal of Occupational
Therapy Education

Volume 4, Issue 3

What Drives Engagement in Professional Associations? A National Survey of Occupational Therapy Students

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the factors that influence occupational therapy (OT) and occupational therapy assistant (OTA) students to join and participate in professional associations is critical to determine how to extend engagement after graduation. Previous research on health care student participation in professional associations has not included OT or OTA students. The researchers conducted an online quantitative national pilot survey to explore the perceptions of OT/OTA students and to identify supports and challenges for membership. The purposive sampling of currently enrolled students took place over three months in 2017, resulting in 251 responses representing all geographic regions in the United States. The researcher-developed survey evaluated student perceptions of professional membership challenges and supports at both the state and national levels. There was a statistically significant relationship between students participating in an organized student association and reporting membership in their state and national associations. Students sought out professional association memberships, even when their academic institutions did not provide support. A majority of students indicated that they planned to be American Occupational Therapy Association members after graduation. Students suggested that more economical membership, conference registration, and academic support could encourage active participation and engagement in their professional associations, extending beyond graduation. This study adds the OT student voice to the discussion about professional membership and engagement to the existing literature.

As occupational therapy (OT) practitioners, students, and academics strive towards the American Occupational Therapy Association's [AOTA] Vision 2025 (2017), we need to recommit our efforts to OT and occupational therapy assistant (OTA) student involvement in our professional associations. As the next generation of OT practitioners, their engagement is vital to the innovation, vibrancy, and sustainability of AOTA and the profession of OT.

Literature Review

Professional Membership Theories

Literature indicates that professional association membership in various health care professions is in decline, although there is a dearth of research as to the reasons (Ki, 2018; Reyes & Brown, 2018). A decline in membership has been associated with generational workforce changes and job perceptions, additional options for continuing education, more variety of networking and mentoring models, and membership lapses resulting in future non-renewal (Carlson et al., 2013; Ki, 2018; White & Olsen, 2004). Since obtaining and sustaining membership is a priority, there are two theories relevant to the subject of engagement in professional associations, which can provide insight into why membership is valued and renewed. Philips and Leahy (2012) described the Exchange Theory, where members weigh the benefits relative to the costs of membership. The Exchange Theory explains the perceived benefit of becoming a member as it outweighs the cost. Professional associations must consider perceptions of memberships to ensure benefits are articulated explicitly. Markova et al. (2013) referred to the Membership Value Theory, which entails the ability of an organization to meet the needs of its members. Member satisfaction predicts renewal, where renewal is based on excellent customer service and tangible benefits from professional organizations (Markova et al., 2013). A professional association must effectively communicate the values and benefits of membership that are customized, address personal and professional goals, and provide substantial value for the investment to ensure membership (Ki, 2018). Professional organizations may need to develop a business management approach to stay competitive, efficient, and vital to its members.

Perceptions of Professional Membership

As newcomers to a profession, students have a limited understanding and appreciation for the value provided by professional organizations (Michael et al., 2017). Professional organizations help a student to develop a sense of self as a novice professional for themselves and employers (Markova et al., 2013). Professional identity is a substantial factor in predicting current professional association membership (Phillips & Leahy, 2012). Involvement with professional organizations is one way that students learn to appreciate the professions' place in the health care arena, build professionalism, and develop professional values important for new practitioners (Fusco et al., 2015). Social identity theory indicates that people categorize themselves and others into groups as a way of belonging (Markova et al., 2013). People who have similar interests, beliefs, and preferences are attracted to each other (Baron & Byrne, 1987; Berscheid, 1985) and may join associations as members who hold similar views and attitudes. Professional organizations have shared values and beliefs (e.g., Code of Ethics) and provide their

members with benefits related to professional knowledge, career development, public service, and professional practice standards (Ki & Wang, 2016). Professional associations also provide opportunities for continuing education, social networking, and access to benefits (Ki & Wang, 2016), which may promote member engagement in the organizational mission and vision. In addition to encouraging professional membership, many health care associations (e.g., OT, medicine, nursing, physical therapy, public health) actively recruit and promote membership benefits to students (Michael et al., 2017). The benefits to students who engage in state and national professional organizations include developing leadership skills, instilling professional values, networking for employment opportunities, internships, scholarships, and making connections with leaders in the field (Escoffery et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2013).

In addition to professional benefits, there is a relationship between personal satisfaction and engagement in professional membership. For example, members who were actively engaged were more likely to report satisfaction and value from membership, which motivated commitment, than those who were not engaged (DeLeskey, 2003; Markova et al., 2013; Wilson, 1997). For student members, active engagement may develop sequentially from first being a dues-paying member, then presenting at conferences, to eventual involvement in community service, networking, skill-building, mentoring, and collaborative partnerships (Mata et al., 2010). When members are engaged (e.g., conference attendance, committee work), they establish a more reliable connection with the professional association. Member involvement reinforces and strengthens perceptions about the benefits of the organization, access to professional knowledge, and ties to the social group (Markova et al., 2013).

Additionally, there are future benefits related to student membership and involvement in state and national associations. Being a state and national member is essential for developing student professional identity and a feeling of belonging to a broader community (Markova et al., 2013). Escoffery et al. (2015) described the value of students being on association committees, which paves the way for future leadership positions as officers or committee chair positions. Encouraging students to participate in professional associations may positively influence future membership and leadership after graduation (Fusco et al., 2015).

Influence of Professionals

Employers, practitioners, and academic faculty are influential with students to effectively establish and grow their professional identity, interests, and involvement with national and state professional organizations (Phillip & Leahy, 2012). Role modeling and mentoring by faculty and clinicians are needed to reinforce student socialization, engagement, and development of profession-centered values. There is a reciprocal benefit when students join committee and mentorship programs where seasoned professionals guide and advise students (Escoffery et al., 2015). Research in rehabilitation counseling indicated that academic faculty and employers held a critical place in shaping student professional identity and appreciation for professional organization membership (Phillips & Leahy, 2012). Within academia, program and faculty support is crucial to introduce and strengthen student membership and

involvement. Although former members of professional associations indicated higher levels of academic support than current members, former members reported lower employer support than current members or those who never had been members (Phillips & Leahy, 2012). Academic programs and employers have significant influence and a responsibility to support student membership and engagement.

Membership Challenges

Literature indicates that students perceive challenges to participating in professional associations (Hughes et al., 2016; Markova et al., 2013). Many professional organizations offer student membership discounts to encourage students with limited financial resources to join or attend annual conferences (Thomas et al., 2013). Some students may be reluctant to pursue membership because of limited experience and not knowing other members (Escoffery et al., 2015). Additional difficulties include not knowing how to get involved, not having time, the cost of dues, and not being asked to join (Hughes et al., 2016; Petersen et al., 2017; Reyes & Brown, 2018). In this era of social media and readily available opportunities for connecting professionally asynchronously, volunteering and in-person professional development may not work in the busy lives of students. However, organizations need to find ways to recruit and retain student members who are the “lifblood” of our next generation of professional members and leaders (Escoffery et al., 2015, p. 310).

There is research in other professions that describes student engagement with professional associations (e.g., nursing, pharmacy, physical therapy, radiography). However, there is a paucity of data describing OT and OTA student involvement in state and national associations (Reyes & Brown, 2018). The current exploratory pilot study seeks to learn about the perceptions of OT students’ engagement in professional associations. Specifically, what are the supports and challenges of student engagement? What do students seek from their professional associations? How can faculty and OT practitioners support student involvement now and into the future? These are the questions asked in a recent national survey of OT and OTA students.

Methodology

The respective Institutional Review Boards approved this study at the two lead authors’ universities. All participants provided informed consent to take part in the pilot study.

Procedure

There was no existing survey that met the needs of the research. Therefore, an original survey was designed and distributed. The survey was disseminated by AOTA through the OT Academic Fieldwork Coordinators (AFWC) listserv using Survey Monkey® (Survey Monkey, Inc. Palo Alto, CO). The AFWCs were encouraged to forward the survey link to their student body via email. Students had a choice to voluntarily consent and participate in the survey online by using a web link. The survey was anonymous, and no student identifiers were obtained. At the time of the survey, there were 397 OT and OTA accredited entry-level programs in the United States (U.S.) serving 30,500 students (AOTA, 2018).

To develop the survey, the first two authors searched the literature to identify the general benefits and challenges of professional association memberships from a variety of perspectives (Jimerson, 2014; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Simon et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2013). General motives for membership included access to resources, annual conference events, and employment opportunities. Next, to understand student reasoning for membership, the first author posted two open-ended questions on an online occupational therapy webpage for OT and OTA students. Students were asked to respond to the following, “share in your own words what being a student member of AOTA or your state OT association means to you” and “share what you wish AOTA or your state OT association knew about student membership and engagement.” From the 49 anonymous responses, overarching motivations and challenges were developed (e.g., connecting with others, access to resources, volunteer opportunities, and membership fees). The student responses and synthesis from the literature review were used to create a pilot survey for distribution to the OT and OTA programs in Colorado. Students who completed the survey (N = 44) provided feedback on questions or ranking options that were unclear, identified concerns, and made further recommendations. The authors incorporated student feedback and consulted with a survey researcher to improve instructions, reduce ranking options (i.e., from seven to three) to minimize survey fatigue and confusion, and re-group questions based on national or state association focus.

The final survey included 37 questions that explored perceptions, motivations, and challenges to professional membership. The survey included demographics, program information, professional membership status, program membership requirements, academic support, future membership plans, and students’ perceptions of challenges and supports to engage in state and national professional associations. The survey contained a variety of ranked questions, multiple-choice, Likert scale (5-point ranking scale), and short answer text box responses. A sampling of survey questions, category, and type are provided in Table 1. Skip logic was employed to minimize survey fatigue.

Table 1

Survey Question Category, Type, and Sample

Category	Type	Sample
Program information	Multiple choice	I am an entry-level occupational therapy (OT) or occupational therapy assistant (OTA) student in the following type of program: Entry-Level Doctorate (OTD); Entry-Level Master’s (MOT); MA or MS, OT; Bachelor’s, OTA; Associate’s, OTA
Professional membership status/plan	Likert scale	I plan on being a member of AOTA when I complete my degree and am a new practitioner Strongly agree (5) to Strongly disagree (1)

Program membership requirements	Yes/No (dichotomous)	Does your academic program require student membership in the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)? Yes or No
Academic support	Multiple choice	Check all types of assistance that your academic institution provides supporting student membership in AOTA. Pays one year of membership; Provides discounts or reimbursements for attending conference or other discounts (e.g., exam study guide); Provides release time from classes and assignments; My academic institution does not provide assistance for student membership for AOTA
Perceptions: membership challenges and supports	Ranking	Rank the reasons students choose not to be student members of AOTA with (1) being the top reason for not being a member, to (2) for the second reason, and (3) for the third reason. Financial; Time management; Not relevant to current learning needs or uncertain about the value of membership
Perceptions: open-ended	Short answer	Please provide any additional information that can help us to understand what being a student member of your OT professional organizations means to you.

Note. MA-Master of Arts; MS-Master of Science

Data Collection and Analysis

Two hundred and fifty-one entry-level OT and OTA students in the U.S. initially participated in the survey, which remained open for 12 weeks. Subject attrition affected survey item completion. The sample was purposive considering the authors' interest in individuals who would likely have a professional interest in answering the questions, leading to meaningful results. Contact information for the subscribers to the AOTA AFWC listserv was known only to the listserv administrators, and the researchers did not have access to any identifiers. The timing of the survey distribution coincided with the ending of the 2017 Annual Conference and Expo. The analysis included descriptive statistics through question summaries, individual responses, and open-ended response tools from Survey Monkey® (Survey Monkey, Inc. Palo Alto, CO) and IBM SPSS Statistics 25. Chi-Square analysis was used to test relationships between categorical variables. Correlations between Likert Scale items were determined using Pearson product-moment correlations because the data responses were numerical (with no qualifiers) and therefore were considered interval/ratio data.

Results

Demographic Variables

A total of 251 students from OT and OTA programs in 25 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey instrument. However, not every student responded to every question. The majority of the survey respondents were enrolled in entry-level Master of OT programs, primarily in their first year of studies. All regions were relatively equally represented, with the lowest number of responses from the northeast and the highest responses from the west. The Academic Programs Annual Data Report (AOTA, 2018) indicated that the percentage of students who identified as female in OT and OTA programs ranged from 86-90%; this survey reported 92% ($n = 231/251$). Additional study results (e.g., type of program, regional program location, and year of study) are compared with similar data provided in AOTA's Academic Program Report (2018), which are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Survey Program and Regional Results Compared to AOTA Data (2018)		
Characteristic	Freq. (%) Survey	Freq. (%) AOTA
<u>Program type</u>		
Master's OT	130 (51.79)	162 (40.81)
MA/MS OT	39 (15.54)	-- ^a
OTA	48 (19.12)	215 (54.15)
OTD	34 (13.55)	20 (5.04)
Total	251 (100)	397 (100)
<u>Regional distribution</u>		
Northeast	49 (19.52)	89 (22.42)
Midwest	65 (25.89)	111 (27.96)
South	67 (26.69)	153 (38.54)
West	70 (27.89)	44 (11.08)
Total	251 (100)	397 (100)
<u>Year of study</u>		
1 st	113 (45.03)	--
2 nd	54 (21.51)	--
3 rd	16 (6.38)	--
Level II Fieldwork	66 (26.30)	--
OTD Capstone	1 (0.39)	--
Unknown	1 (0.39)	--
Total	251 (100)	

Note. MA-Master of Arts; MS-Master of Science; OTA-Occupational Therapy Assistant; OTD-Doctor of Occupational Therapy

^a No data available

Membership and Academic Program Engagement

Of 241 students, over half (62.2%; $n = 150$) indicated their academic institution required student membership in AOTA. However, 62.7% (146/233) indicated there was no academic institutional support (e.g., class release time, reimbursement, dues funded) for membership, even when the program required membership. Out of 214 students, the majority reported that they were AOTA members (82.2%; $n = 176$). Students were asked if they planned on being AOTA members after graduation. Most respondents (88.3%; $n = 189/214$) agreed or strongly agreed, while 9.8% (21) indicated they were uncertain about membership.

When students ($N = 241$) were allowed to choose more than one option, academic faculty, then classmates, were identified as the primary encouragers for professional association engagement [92.5% ($n = 223$) and 61.8% ($n = 149$)] respectively, followed by staff and OT practitioner support. Very few students (3.7%; $n = 9$) reported receiving no encouragement for student membership. Additionally, a significant number of students (93.8%; $n = 226/241$) indicated they were aware of active faculty involvement in professional associations.

Significant Membership Associations

Three-quarters of the students (75.6%; 183/242) stated they were members of their voluntary student service organization, the Student Occupational Therapy Association [SOTA]. Of the 235 participants who responded, there was a statistically significant relationship between current membership in SOTA and membership in professional associations [AOTA ($p < .001$) and state associations ($p < .001$)]. Of the students who reported membership in SOTA, 77% ($n = 141$) also reported being members of AOTA, and 53% ($n = 97$) indicated state association membership.

There was a statistically significant relationship between program type and current membership in AOTA ($p < .001$). Through chi-square analysis, students in OT doctorate (OTD) programs were more likely to be AOTA members ($X^2_{(2)} = 17.654$, $p \leq .001$). Additionally, students in master's programs were more likely to be AOTA members ($X^2_{(2)} = 16.84$, $p \leq .001$) compared to their OTA counterparts. Finally, there was a correlation between students' level of agreement on planning future membership in the two organizations, AOTA and state OT associations ($r = .68$).

Engagement with AOTA

When asked to rank the most important reason for their membership in AOTA, students chose to stay informed about current trends and best practices in the profession, including emerging areas of practice, research, and evidence-based practice or resources (61.7%; $n = 137/222$) over the other options. The next highest reason given was students wanting to support or advocate for the profession of OT (26.3%; $n = 58/220$). Finally, students wanted to connect with other students (e.g., socialize) or potential employers (e.g., career opportunities) (12.2%; $n = 27$).

Most students (68.6%; $n = 153/223$) ranked that resources for financial support would make AOTA membership more meaningful (e.g., scholarships, reduced or graded membership costs, reduced conference costs). Next, students requested improved education and support for entry-level practice (21.2%; $n = 47/221$). Finally, students were interested in creating more opportunities to connect, network, or engage with practitioners and students from other programs (10.8%; $n = 24/222$).

The primary ranked reason students were not members of AOTA was identified as financial (82.8%; $n = 184 /222$). Next, students indicated that either AOTA membership was not relevant to their current learning needs, or they were uncertain about the value of membership (10.4%; $n = 23/221$). Lastly, time management interfered with becoming a member (6.7%; $n = 15/221$).

Discussion

This national exploratory pilot study provides insight into the OT and OTA student voice with regards to their perspectives around national and state association membership. Regarding the influence of academic programs and faculty on student involvement in professional associations, the results from this survey align with previous research results from OT practitioners and students in related health care professions (e.g., pharmacy, physical therapy, rehabilitation counseling). The results from this survey indicated that a high proportion of students were aware that faculty were actively engaged in professional associations through being members, presenting at conferences, and serving in leadership roles. Additionally, when students were provided with multiple options, they identified that their faculty (92.5%) provided the most encouragement to engage with professional organizations, followed by classmates in the same academic program. As the primary encouragers for professional association engagement, faculty appear to be instrumental in supporting a professional culture and sense of responsibility for membership. The findings also indicated that not only did more students join AOTA than were required by their academic institutions, but that students were members even if there was no support from their academic program. This result could indicate that there are a strong commitment and sense of value instilled through the academic inculturation of students. Faculty carry forward the role of professional associations by helping to develop students' identity as OT practitioners and valuing the resources from engagement in these organizations.

Influencers of current student membership in professional associations, like academia, is essential. However, identifying factors that influence future association membership is critical. SOTA, spanning over fifty years in AOTA, has facilitated the development of future leaders through political advocacy, community service, fundraising, and professional development (AOTA, n.d.; Assembly of Student Delegates, 2014). In this study, student membership and involvement with SOTA was associated with plans for future membership in national and state professional organizations. Related to the research by Mata et al. (2010), inculturation to professional associations begins with membership. Members of SOTA may have a positive association with OT-focused membership, which may inspire plans for future professional engagement. The survey results also revealed an association between students planning on future membership

in state associations also being more likely to plan to join AOTA after graduation. As described in the research by Hughes et al. (2016), the Texas Physical Therapy Association (TPTA) developed the *Reach 100 Campaign*, building upon a collaborative effort across students, faculty members, and volunteers to gain 100% membership in both state and national organizations. Additional health care professions that offer a combined state/chapter and national membership include the American Physical Therapy Association, the American Nurses Association, and the American Academy of Physician Assistants. If students project that they will be more likely to be members of both state and national associations after graduation, options to facilitate dual membership could benefit the profession.

This study found that over 82% of the students indicated that financial limitations challenged their ability to acquire AOTA membership, which is consistent with research on why other healthcare students do not pursue professional membership (Fusco et al., 2015; Hughes et al., 2016). The results from this survey indicated that membership was not relevant to students' current learning needs, or they were uncertain about the value of membership as reasons for deferring membership. These findings are in agreement with other research (Hughes et al., 2016; Phillips & Leahy, 2012), suggesting that students did not see the benefits of membership as crucial and limited their understanding of the value of membership outweighing the cost. Devaluing membership continues after graduation, as shown by a survey of active OT practitioners in Alberta, Canada, which found the top two reasons for not continuing membership were the cost and uncertain benefit of being a member (Reyes & Brown, 2018). Both the Exchange and the Membership Value Theories (Phillips & Leahy, 2012; Markova et al., 2013) support professional associations' responsibilities to ensure that membership benefits are clearly articulated and that the needs of the student and new graduate members are considered and addressed.

Limitations

There were two significant limitations in this study that could be addressed with future research. First, this was an exploratory pilot study completed in the U.S. with a return rate of 0.8%, which restricted the overall statistical significance, power, and generalizability of the results. The access to an expected number of study participants could have been constrained due to the chosen survey dissemination method (i.e., an optional AFWC national association listserv). Study responses were also reduced when planned follow up reminders and access to student delegates to encourage student participation were unexpectedly prevented.

Additionally, the responses received were weighted strongly to the programs in the western US region, which has the least number of academic programs. A future study distribution method could include a randomized selection of OT and OTA programs weighted to represent the regional sectors more equally to reduce selection bias, limited data access, and regional skew. The sample size could be increased through more intentional communication with AFWCs, having control over follow up reminders, and including a student on the research team to facilitate student engagement. Next, although the survey had been tested, revised, and refined to reduce survey fatigue, the

format may have lacked sustained appeal to the student population. Calculating a response rate was not possible because the number of students the survey was sent to was unknown. However, the data collection results indicated a dropout rate of 16.73%. It is possible that the online survey, at 37-questions, may have taken too long to complete. Eight of the questions required ranking responses, which may have felt repetitive. The question format with the highest skip rate was the short answer comment boxes following each of the ranked questions at 92%. By removing comment options, converting ranking questions to multiple-choice, and eliminating questions that appeared confusing, the survey could be streamlined to 24 questions, which could increase completion rates in future studies.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

In the U.S. and Puerto Rico, the number of OT practitioners and students is estimated at 213,000; student numbers comprise 16.43% ($n= 30,500$) of the total number (AOTA, 2020; AOTA, 2018). The practitioner and student AOTA membership are estimated at 60,000, which is less than one-third (28.16%) of the total number of practitioners and students in the U.S. (AOTA, 2020). Therefore, increasing student membership in state and national associations is a worthwhile investment. The future success of a health care profession, like OT, is largely dependent on student members who join in developing a professional vision for success, network with experienced practitioners to learn about the practice and advocate to ensure OT services are accessible and available.

Professional associations support their members through advocacy and education so that the profession can best meet society's needs. A vibrant, vital membership relies not only on sustaining membership, but also inviting and engaging new members, which starts with students. Understanding student needs and challenges are essential to ensure we have future leaders. Ours is the first study to identify OT and OTA students' viewpoints about membership engagement in the OT profession. The results, although from a small sample size, provide insight on the influence of academic institutions and faculty on membership. The data indicate support for a relationship between being a student OT member in a service organization and being more likely to be a member of one's state or national association. Regarding the challenge to membership, high dues relative to students' finances were identified as the primary limiting factor.

Academic programs provide students with the foundation for professional identity, values, culture, and commitment to service critical to the viability of professional organizations. Given an influential role, faculty could serve as primary role models and facilitators of professional engagement to initiate and nurture the connections with state and national organizations, addressing the needs of students and entry-level practitioners beyond clinical practice. By engaging the student early in the academic program, faculty support could increase a student's longer-term commitment to membership after graduation. Additionally, academic coursework might promote state and national association partnerships through shared service activities, employment networking, matching doctoral students to capstone projects in the community, research, lobbying the legislature, and professional mentorship.

State and national organizations need to be explicit, articulating the value-added in membership at the student level and transitioning into professional roles, especially given that students desire information about current trends and best practices in the profession. National and state associations could collaborate to share a common goal of promoting student membership with the idea that when students graduate, they will continue their membership. There is an opportunity to strengthen partnerships between state and national associations through SOTA to enrich these related professional organizations now, with potential for future membership. SOTA provides a local, more personalized, relevance for student involvement, expanding to a broader scale through state and national organizations. Many state associations have student representatives on the Board of Directors, and there are strong linkages with AOTA through the Assembly of Student Delegates. Within the Assembly of Student Delegates, students serve as liaisons between the national association and the students in the academic program, a critical role, and responsibility to serve as a “voice” for the academic program (AOTA, 2014). Students can be a vital part of achieving the Vision 2025 (AOTA, 2017), which challenges us to be inclusive in addressing health, well-being, and quality of life for individuals, communities, and populations.

Conclusion

This study provides initial quantitative validation that students seek out professional association memberships regardless of academic support. By participating in an organized student association, OT and OTA students are more likely to be members of their state and national associations. Faculty are the most influential in supporting professional behavior development and engagement in state and national professional organizations. However, all OT practitioners have a responsibility to mentor students and support their professional development. By strengthening relationships between state, national, and academic institutions, students will be more likely to experience an interconnected network that upholds the meaning behind being an OT and OTA professional.

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