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The Capstone Fair for Promoting Initial Generation of Occupational Therapy Doctoral Capstone Ideas

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Abstract

Entry-level occupational therapy doctorate (OTD) programs across the United States navigate the challenge of designing doctoral capstone (DC) processes to provide students with adequate scaffolding to plan, implement, evaluate, and disseminate their capstone projects. The DC process starts with the daunting tasks of student generation of capstone interests and connecting with mentors for collaborative guidance. The purpose of this program evaluation project was to assess a comprehensive process, known as the Capstone Fair, for effectively and efficiently facilitating students' initial generation of capstone ideas and the match between student and Faculty Capstone Mentor. A fixed convergent, parallel mixed methods design was used to evaluate the Capstone Fair's ability to meet pre-established criteria among two student cohorts, four years apart. Outcomes indicated 100% (*n*=101) alignment of the student's identified capstone topics with the program's curriculum design; interests that demonstrated cognitive flexibility and feasibility in 96% (*n*=97) of students; a statistically significant increase in student confidence with the identification of interests ($p<.001$) and level of interest in ideas generated ($p<.001$); high student satisfaction with the process (M=4.26/5.0); high connectivity of initial interests with final executed projects in 67% (*n*=33) of projects; and a time commitment for student/faculty mentor matching of 2.5 hours with 4% post-match adjustments. The results suggest that the Capstone Fair procedures were effective for student generation of capstone interests that were curricularly aligned and demonstrate flexibility and feasibility for responding to the evolving dynamics of the DC process over time.

Keywords

Occupational therapy doctoral capstone; capstone project development; capstone mentorship

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ABSTRACT

Entry-level occupational therapy doctorate (OTD) programs across the United States navigate the challenge of designing doctoral capstone (DC) processes to provide students with adequate scaffolding to plan, implement, evaluate, and disseminate their capstone projects. The DC process starts with the daunting tasks of student generation of capstone interests and connecting with mentors for collaborative guidance. The purpose of this program evaluation project was to assess a comprehensive process, known as the Capstone Fair, for effectively and efficiently facilitating students' initial generation of capstone ideas and the match between student and Faculty Capstone Mentor. A fixed convergent, parallel mixed methods design was used to evaluate the Capstone Fair's ability to meet pre-established criteria among two student cohorts, four years apart. Outcomes indicated 100% (*n*=101) alignment of the student's identified capstone topics with the program's curriculum design; interests that demonstrated cognitive flexibility and feasibility in 96% (*n*=97) of students; a statistically significant increase in student confidence with the identification of interests ($p<.001$) and level of interest in ideas generated ($p<.001$); high student satisfaction with the process (M=4.26/5.0); high connectivity of initial interests with final executed projects in 67% (*n*=33) of projects; and a time commitment for student/faculty mentor matching of 2.5 hours with 4% post-match adjustments. The results suggest that the Capstone Fair procedures were effective for student generation of capstone interests that were curricularly aligned and demonstrate flexibility and feasibility for responding to the evolving dynamics of the DC process over time.

Introduction

Entry-level occupational therapy doctorate (OTD) programs are developing across the United States at an exponential rate. A significant aspect of developing and operationalizing an OTD program involves the required doctoral capstone (DC), a culminating 14-week experience and project designed to provide the student with in-depth exposure in one or more of eight delineated capstone focus areas. The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®) outlined accreditation standards related to the DC; however, programs have discretion in the approaches used to meet these standards (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2022). Despite the growth of programs and the significance of the DC, resources for faculty capstone coordinators to use in the planning and development of their program's DC are just beginning to become more available (Kemp et al., 2020). One significant area in which Doctoral Capstone Coordinators (DCCs) seek ideas and inspiration is in regard to methods for assisting students in generating their initial DC interests, introducing them to potential opportunities, and connecting them with capstone mentors. Developing a successful process and instructional scaffold for engaging students in initial capstone idea generation is challenging for several reasons. Students often struggle to specify their interests with initial ideas often being too broad, too diverse, and sometimes unrealistic. Additionally, capstone development involves multiple, uncontrollable and unforeseen factors that intensify the complexity of the process, such as: what sites and mentors will be available; the fit between student interest, the sites' needs, and the program's curricular design and resources; and how the students' interests tend to evolve over time. This paper describes the outcomes of an innovative educational process designed and implemented by an accredited OTD program that effectively facilitated the students' initial generation of capstone ideas and the matching with Faculty Capstone Mentors.

Literature Review

Existing Resources for Capstone Curriculum Development

Doctoral Capstone Coordinators, with their preeminent role in designing and implementing the DC, often look to the existing literature for guidance in developing and refining their program's capstone curriculum. To date, DeluIiis and Bednarski (2020) have published the only textbook that is specific to the occupational therapy DC process. It outlined resources and general considerations for the development, planning, implementation, and dissemination of the DC. The AOTA (2022) recently published a purpose and value statement which identified constructs that may be used in designing the DC such as student- and self-directed learning, mentoring, and backward design. A number of journal articles are available to inform considerations for OTD capstone curriculum development including potential frameworks for curriculum design (Delbert et al., 2020; Jirikowic et al., 2015; Kemp et al., 2021; Provident & Lape, 2020; Stephenson et al., 2020) and exemplars for more individualized aspects of capstone processes or types of capstones (Clair et al., 2022; Hinojosa & Howe, 2016; Kemp et al., 2020; Smallfield & Wood, 2019). Additionally, articles that describe various outcomes of the DC can be useful to DCCs as they identify support for effective processes and anticipate challenges related to capstone development and

implementation (Kemp et al., 2022; Kiraly-Alvarez et al., 2022; Recigno et al., 2020; Rivera et al., 2022). A few resources outside of occupational therapy, primarily in the graduate-level nursing literature, provide suggestions for capstone curriculum frameworks such as program capacity building or implementation science (Miley & Reinisch, 2016; Riner, 2015). The great majority of these resources have only become available as of 2020 and still do not address the depth of considerations when designing specific processes and procedures for facilitating programmatic efficiencies and student progression along the capstone pathway.

Capstone Idea Generation

Accreditation standards specify that the DC is an individualized, student-directed project and related experience that requires the completion of specific components prior to the capstone experience. These components include a needs assessment, literature review, learning objectives, and outcome evaluation plan (ACOTE, 2023). As such, it is important that each student identify a focus area, topical interest, and learning objectives for their individual capstone early in the curricular pathway.

Challenges of Idea Generation

The initial capstone interest or idea generation process can be challenging for OTD students at this earlier stage within the curriculum, as their professional development process and their understanding of occupational therapy's role in a wider variety of contexts are not well-developed when they are encouraged to begin making decisions about the direction of their capstone development (Kemp et al., 2020). The student experiences the perplexing necessity of initiating and focusing capstone plans while also remaining fluid and flexible to allow for the potential changes in the needs of the student, mentors, and sites over time (Stephenson et al., 2020). A literature review can aide the student in identifying relevant and recommended topics; however, this process still requires that the student initially select a topic area in order to guide search parameters.

The complexities of initial idea generation are common with other graduate student scholarship endeavors such as thesis and dissertation processes. Roberts and Riggs (2019) described these processes as a series of often "disconnected hurdles" for students to navigate. Other authors described how topic identification is a frequently overlooked scholarly process (Luse et al., 2012) and one that requires extended time for students to discover a viable and meaningful project idea (Miley & Reinisch, 2016). Grant and Osanloo (2014) depicted identification of foundational frameworks to guide scholarly interests as one of the most important aspects of the student's work, but one of the most difficult.

Many of these issues may be associated with the students' challenges in developing or using cognitive flexibility skills. Cognitive flexibility, one of the most recognized predictors of academic performance, is defined as the ability to mentally shift between different perspectives or approaches for adapting to a changing context (Algharaibeh,

2020; Zheng et al., 2024). Limitations in cognitive flexibility can contribute to the generation of ideas, plans, or solutions to challenges that are inadequate in scope, meaning, and viability (Alsaif et al., 2024).

Strategies for Facilitating Idea Generation

A few intriguing ideas for facilitating the student's initial capstone direction are briefly suggested within occupational therapy literature. Deluliis and Bednarski (2020) recommended inviting capstone site representatives to the classroom, having sites present proposals on potential projects, and having students engage in a literature review process for the purposes of identifying knowledge gaps. Other proposed strategies have included a process where students review and rank preference for written proposals that were submitted by sites (Jirikowic et al., 2015) and a process that involved a student-driven online discussion board of capstone ideas, inviting current capstone experience students to return to campus to share their experiences, and providing examples of exemplar projects (Stephenson et al., 2020). Some programs focus capstone opportunities around the specific scholarship pursuits of faculty which are shared via written materials, presentation, and/or mini-interviews between faculty and students. Despite the guidance of these sources, none are focused on this topic nor provide sufficient detail for replication or validating the effectiveness of the suggested strategies.

Within the non-occupational therapy education literature, Luse et al. (2012) provided a framework for assisting doctoral-level students in the selection of a research topic which included strategies such as brainstorming during the reading of literature, considering perspectives of other disciplines, explaining one's ideas to someone unfamiliar with the topic, creating a graphical representation of ideas, reflecting on one's own long-held personal areas of interest, and developing a theoretical understanding of a problem before focusing on a solution. In contrast, the Backward Design method, often employed in OTD programs' capstone development processes, facilitates initial project idea generation by first thinking about a desired end-product or outcome (AOTA, 2022; Jenson et al., 2017). Exposure to a variety of perspectives or sources of information, opportunities to engage in mindful reflection, and facilitated perspective-taking or cognitive reframing are strategies which support the development of cognitive flexibility (Bricker et al., 2024). While these suggested methods have viable strengths, challenges remain for implementation such as managing the resource needs and logistics of scheduling the various site, faculty, and student representatives and discerning if methods are sufficient for effective student idea generation.

Faculty Capstone Mentorship

In addition to idea generation, the matching of individual students with a faculty mentor is a challenging component of the DC process. ACOTE standard D.1.1. stipulates that the DC be designed through collaboration of the student, a faculty member within the OTD program, and an individual with content expertise (ACOTE, 2023). The *OTD Capstone: Purpose and Value* statement recognizes the variety of roles associated with the mentoring relationship during the DC including technical guidance and offering direction for potential topics and opportunities (AOTA, 2022). The faculty capstone

mentor may or may not also serve as the content expert. Occupational therapy doctorate programs have different styles in how they approach their structure of faculty capstone mentorship (Deluliis & Bednarski, 2020). Some programs employ all or most of their core faculty with doctoral degrees to serve as Faculty Capstone Mentors while others use a smaller, designated subset of their faculty for this role. Programs have diverse levels of engagement or responsibility for the faculty as mentors. Various methods used to connect the student with a faculty mentor include the student-initiated request; more mutually agreed upon processes such as an interview; or the assignment of faculty/student matches by the DCC based on their knowledge of faculty expertise, workload capacity, and student interests. Stephenson et al. (2020) described their program's approach, in which the DCC serves as the primary faculty mentor, except in rare instances when a faculty member's expertise highly aligns with the student's DC interest. The authors outlined their nine-step, student-driven process for selecting a capstone mentor/content expert. Kemp and Crabtree (2018) highlighted the value of DCCs matching students' abilities to the demands of the setting similar to the process of matching OT students with Fieldwork sites. Once again, there is discretion allowed within accreditation standards and minimal guidance within the literature on best practices related to the engagement and methods of matching Faculty Capstone Mentors with students.

Background

This university's OTD program is an accredited, in-person, single-campus, three-year program that includes: two preparatory capstone courses occurring during the second year of the didactic curriculum; another preparatory course occurring online during the second Level II Fieldwork; and the capstone experience and project occurring during the last capstone course in the final semester. The program admits one cohort of approximately 50 students each year. The primary instructional design used by the program is Subject-Centered Integrative Learning in OT (SCIL-OT) which provides learning opportunities that require students to meaningfully and intentionally connect the various topics and skills learned throughout the curriculum to the profession's core subject, the dynamics of occupation (Hooper et al., 2015). The capstone curriculum is grounded in the SCIL-OT model as well as Community-Engaged Scholarship (Van de Ven, 2013) for being collaborative and responsive to the real-world needs of community partners/stakeholders.

This program has designed and implemented a strategic process for facilitating students' initial capstone idea generation. The process, titled the Capstone Fair, involves specific methods for introducing students to the DC; inspiring and communicating initial capstone ideas; and matching student interests with feasible opportunities, real-world needs, and faculty mentors. The Capstone Fair was first implemented with its inaugural cohort of students in 2021. With promising initial outcomes, the Capstone Fair has been replicated with slight adjustments each year. With the fourth iteration of the Capstone Fair, this project sought to evaluate and articulate student and programmatic outcomes for this innovative educational process.

Purpose of Project

The goal of this program evaluation project was to assess the OTD program's process for effectively and efficiently facilitating students' generation of capstone project ideas and to share lessons learned with other OTD programs. The following criteria were used to guide the comprehensive evaluation of the Capstone Fair process. The Capstone Fair process will result in:

1. 100% alignment of the students' identified capstone topics with the program's curriculum design;
2. outcomes that indicate the cognitive flexibility or feasibility of student generated topics of interest in at least 75% of responses;
3. statistically significant increase in level of interest ratings for the students' self-identified topics;
4. statistically significant increase in confidence ratings related to identification of capstone interests;
5. high average student satisfaction of 4+ on a 5-point scale;
6. and efficiency in matching students to Faculty Capstone Mentors as evidenced by time commitment for the matching process of under 3 hours and post-initial match adjustments < 10%.

Methods

Program Evaluation Design

This program evaluation project used a fixed convergent, parallel mixed methods design to evaluate the Capstone Fair process' ability to meet the pre-established criteria listed above. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously, and findings were merged to draw conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Approval for this project was obtained by the university's Quality Improvement Review Board.

Participants

This project analyzed the programmatic data of the OTD program's students from two cohorts who completed the Capstone Fair: the inaugural class of 2023 (n = 51) and more recent class of 2026 (n = 52). Each cohort completed the Capstone Fair in the first year, third semester of the program. Participation in the Capstone Fair is a required learning experience associated with a professional seminar course occurring every Spring semester.

Capstone Fair Procedures

The Capstone Fair included procedural elements that spanned the entire semester. A few introductory elements were completed at the beginning of the semester, and the more concentrated elements were completed in the last few weeks of the semester. The process was designed to inspire meaningful and feasible ideas while also facilitating the students' cognitive flexibility. See Table 1 for a timeline and description of the major components of the Fair.

Table 1

Sample Timeline of Major Procedural Elements of the Capstone Fair

Timeline*	Procedural Element
Week 1 Class (20 minutes)	• Introduce a professional development self-study assignment involving review of inspirational capstone resources available on the program's online learning management system (e.g., previously completed capstone projects; capstone site profiles) and completion of a reflective report by the end of the semester • Students complete the Survey of Initial Capstone Knowledge
Two Weeks Prior to Capstone Fair	• Students receive an email prompt to prepare for the Fair by identifying at least 3 capstone topic ideas of interest • Students complete the Initial Capstone Ideas Survey
Week 13 Class (2 hours)	Capstone Fair Part A Meeting • Students are divided into small groups of 7 – 10 • A faculty member rotates every 15 minutes to each group to review and discuss a different list of potential capstone sites categorized as emerging community-based, traditional OT, or academic/research sites • Students use Worksheet 1 to make notes about ways to approach their interests across different types of settings (i.e., "How can I pursue my interest of pediatric sensory interventions and advocacy at different types of sites?")
Week 14 Class (2 hours)	Capstone Fair Part B Meeting • Students are divided into 7 groups (the number of capstone focus areas offered by the program) • A faculty member rotates every 15 minutes to each group to review a description of a capstone focus area • Students use Worksheet 2 to make notes about ways to approach their topical interests from the different capstone focus areas (i.e., "How can I approach my interest in occupational therapy's role in the NICU from the education, practice skills, and program development focus areas?")
End of Semester	• Students attend the program's half-day Scholarship Symposium where the graduating capstone students present their projects • Students complete and submit their Initial Capstone Preference Form • Students complete the Post Capstone Fair Survey
Semester Following the Fair	• DCC processes the completed Initial Capstone Preference Forms and matches each student with a Faculty Capstone Mentor based on shared interests and faculty workload considerations • DCC presents the proposed matches to the faculty for discussion and adjustments as needed • DCC informs the students of their assigned Faculty Capstone Mentor at the start of the first capstone course

*****Based on a 16-week semester

Data Collection

Outcome data was collected from the two worksheets, three surveys, and Preference Form that were completed by students in each cohort. Students completed the first worksheet during the Capstone Fair Part A meeting and the second worksheet during Part B. These worksheets were designed to facilitate cognitive flexibility while approaching broad capstone topical interests from a variety of focus areas and settings. See Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix A for an example of a completed Worksheet 1 and 2.

Two of the three surveys were completed by both cohorts. The Survey of Initial Capstone Knowledge was completed by only the most recent cohort due to the addition of this survey in the fourth year of Capstone Fair implementation. This survey served as a pre-survey of student confidence with identifying their initial capstone interests using a 5-point Likert rating scale. The Initial Capstone Ideas Survey was completed by both cohorts two weeks prior to the Capstone Fair Part A Meeting. This survey included the same confidence rating from the previous survey along with a 5-point Likert rating of the student's level of interest related to their list of three self-identified topical and capstone focus area ideas. Students from both cohorts completed the third and final survey after completing the Capstone Fair. This Post Capstone Fair Survey repeated the confidence and interest rating scales as well as a 5-point Likert satisfaction rating related to the perceived effectiveness of the Capstone Fair for shaping their initial capstone interests.

At the conclusion of the semester, students completed the Initial Capstone Preference Form. See Appendix B for a representation of the content of the Initial Capstone Preference Form. Lastly, the DCC documented the time required to complete the associated tasks for using the information provided by the Preference Form to assign students with a Faculty Capstone Mentor.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative analysis methods were used to evaluate the Capstone Fair using the aforementioned six criteria. Criteria 1 and 2 outcomes related to the students' topic alignment with the curriculum design and the flexibility/feasibility of the topic respectively. Both criteria were evaluated via qualitative content analysis of the data gathered from the Worksheets 1 and 2 and the Preference Form. The coding for curricular alignment involved identifying the presence of words and concepts consistent with the dynamics of occupation and the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (AOTA, 2020). The coding for flexibility/feasibility involved identifying the presence of evidence that the student successfully shifted each of their capstone interests across at least two different capstone focus areas and two types of settings; named populations and settings that are known to be accessible to the program; and articulated ideas that were outside traditional occupational therapy practice settings. These qualitative outcomes were then converted through the process of quantitizing (Sandelowski et al., 2009) to evaluate if the following a priori target was achieved: 100% of students identify topics aligned with the curriculum design and 75% of student responses demonstrate topic flexibility/feasibility.

Criteria 3, 4, and 5 outcomes related to student level of interest in self-identified topics, confidence in topic identification, and satisfaction with the Capstone Fair process respectively. Quantitative statistics were used to evaluate all three criteria using data gathered from the pre- and post-surveys completed by the students. A target measure for each criterion was established a priori: statistically significant improvement in Likert scale ratings (i.e., level of interest and confidence items) and mean satisfaction rating of at least 4.0 on a 5-point scale. Repeated measure statistical tests were used to determine if the Capstone Fair had an effect on student level of interest and confidence ratings. Specifically, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was used to determine this difference within both cohorts with the exception that the Friedman test was used to evaluate change in confidence for the more recent cohort because it is the only cohort that completed the rating in all three surveys. A Multivariate Kruskal Wallis test was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the two cohorts on post-Fair ratings of confidence, interest, and satisfaction. Jamovi 2.3.28 was used for all statistical analyses, and the case-wise deletion method was used to manage missing data points. The quality of topical commitment (i.e., level of interest) was further evaluated through qualitative content analysis comparing the inaugural cohort's Initial Capstone Preference Forms and the scholarly question associated with their completed capstone project. Each student entry was coded according to the following degree of connection between their initial interests and completed project: maximal, moderate, minimum, or no connection.

Finally, Criteria 6, process efficiency in matching students to a faculty mentor, was evaluated through a descriptive analysis of the documented number of hours for the matching process and the percentage of post-match adjustments following faculty review.

Results

Demographic Information

Data from one hundred and one entry-level OTD students from the inaugural 2023 cohort (*n* = 50) and 2026 cohort (*n* = 51) were included in this program evaluation project. Both cohorts included a high percentage of females and white students in the age range of 20 – 24 years. No statistically significant difference in age, gender, and race between the two groups were found; however, a statistical significance for ethnicity was found (see Table 2).

Curricular Alignment and Flexibility/Feasibility

Content analysis revealed 100% (*n* = 101) curricular alignment of student submitted capstone interest areas. See Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix A for a sample of a completed Worksheet 1 and 2 with select curricular consistent words underlined in red. The criteria for cognitive flexibility/feasibility of capstone interests was met in 96% (*n* = 97) of responses. The entries that did not meet the criteria (*n* = 4) were limited in the variation of capstone ideas across two or more different types of settings (e.g., only indicated pursuing their capstone interests in a pediatric inpatient rehabilitation setting).

The participants also indicated the top three capstone focus areas they were most interested in pursuing (see Table 3). Eighty-five (84%) of the student selections involved at least one of the three capstone focus areas emphasized by the program as their primary focus area of interest: program development, education, and leadership. Only 5% (*n* = 5) of students indicated the practice skills focus area as their primary area of interest.

Table 2

Demographic Information of the Participating Cohorts

Variable	2023 Cohort	2026 Cohort	*p*-value
Total participants: *n*	50	51	
Gender: *n* (%)			0.977
Male	4(8.0%)	4(7.8%)	
Female	46(92.0%)	47(92.2%)	
Age: *n* (%)			0.517
20 – 24	50(100.0%)	49(96.1%)	
25 – 30	-	1(1.9%)	
31+	-	1(1.9%)	
Race: *n* (%)			0.097
Asian	5(10.0%)	1(1.9%)	
Black or African American	2(4.0%)	1(1.9%)	
White	41(82.0%)	47(92.2%)	
Other	2(4.0%)	2(3.9%)	
Ethnicity: *n* (%)			0.048
Hispanic/Latino	15(30.0%)	7(13.7%)	
Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino	35(70.0%)	44(86.3%)	

Table 3

Selected Capstone Focus Areas of Interest

Capstone Focus Areas: *n* (%)	Selected as Primary Interest	Selected Within Top 3 Interest
Program development	44 (44%)	91 (91%)
Education	31 (31%)	80 (80%)
Advocacy	10 (10%)	63 (63%)
Leadership/administration	10 (10%)	34 (34%)
Practice skills	5 (5%)	21 (21%)
Research skills	0	8 (8%)
Theory development	1 (1%)	4 (4%)

Note. *n* = 101.

Level of Interest, Confidence, and Satisfaction

Within group analyses using ratings on pre- and post-surveys were completed to determine changes in levels of interest and confidence for each cohort. Between group analysis using satisfaction ratings on the post-surveys was completed to determine difference in perceived satisfaction between the cohorts. The data set had incomplete records as some students did not complete one or more of the survey items. The case-wise deletion method was used to exclude all cases that had one or more missing values for variables for each respective analysis. As a result, there was a variation in *n* for each of the analyses.

Within Group Analyses: Interest and Confidence

Results revealed a significant difference in the pre- and post-Capstone Fair ratings for level of interest in self-identified topics ($p < .001$) and confidence in topic selection ($p < .001$). Comparison of ranks indicated that significant differences for both items were in the direction of improvement with significantly higher ratings following the completion of the Capstone Fair for both cohorts. Table 4 provides the medians, interquartile ranges (IQR), and the results of the Wilcoxon signed rank tests for both items for the 2023 cohort. Table 5 provides the medians, IQRs, and the results of the Wilcoxon signed rank tests for the level of interest item for the 2026 cohort. Table 6 provides the medians, IQRs, and the results of the Friedman test for the confidence item for the 2026 cohort. This repeated measure test was used because students in the 2026 cohort completed the confidence item on three occasions during the semester; whereas, the 2023 cohort only completed this rating immediately prior and following the Capstone Fair. Post-hoc analysis (Durbin-Conover) revealed statistically significant difference among all three time comparisons: Initial and Pre-Capstone Fair ($t = 3.38$, $p = .001$); Initial and Post-Capstone Fair ($t = 7.58$, $p < .001$); and Pre-Capstone Fair and Post-Capstone Fair ($t = 3.59$, $p < .001$).

Table 4

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Capstone Fair Ratings (2023 Cohort)

Item	Pre-Capstone Fair Median (IQR)	Post-Capstone Fair Median (IQR)	Wilcoxon Statistic	*p*	Effect Size
Level of Interest	3(3-4)	4(4-4)	40.5	<.001	-0.84
Confidence	3(2-3)	3.5(3-4)	34.5	<.001	-0.75

Note. $n = 44$; IQR is the interquartile range between the 25th and 75th percentiles.

Table 5

Comparison of Pre- and Post-Capstone Fair Ratings (2026 Cohort)

Item	Pre-Capstone Fair Median (IQR)	Post-Capstone Fair Median (IQR)	Wilcoxon Statistic	*p*	Effect Size
Level of Interest	4(3-4)	4(3-4)	21.0	.032	-0.6

Note. n = 36; IQR is the interquartile range between the 25th and 75th percentiles.

Table 6

Comparison of Initial, Pre- and Post-Capstone Fair Ratings (2026 Cohort)

Item	Initial Median (IQR)	Pre-Capstone Fair Median (IQR)	Post-Capstone Fair Median (IQR)	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*
Confidence	2(2-3)	3(2.75-4)	4(3-4)	32.9 (2)	<.001

Note. n = 36; IQR, is the interquartile range between the 25th and 75th percentiles.

Between Group Analyses: Satisfaction

Between group analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between the two cohorts for the interest and confidence items; however, there was a statistically significant difference in perceived satisfaction (U = 680, *p* = .035) with the 2026 cohort having the higher satisfaction ratings. See Table 7 for medians, IQRs, and the results of the Mann U Whitney tests.

Table 7

Comparison of Post-Capstone Fair Ratings (Between Group Comparison)

Item	Cohort 2023 Median (IQR)	Cohort 2026 Median (IQR)	Mann U Whitney Statistic	*p*	Effect Size
Interest/Commitment	4(3-4)	4(4-4)	760	0.204	-
Confidence	3(4-4)	4(3-4)	803	0.355	-
Satisfaction	4(4-5)	5(4-5)	680	0.035	0.244

Note. Cohort 2023, *n* = 44; Cohort 2026, *n* = 45. IQR is the interquartile range between the 25th and 75th percentiles.

Descriptive Analysis

Connected with topical commitment (i.e., level of interest), a comparative content analysis was completed of the 2023 cohort's (*n* = 49) Initial Capstone Preference Forms and the scholarly question associated with their capstone project completed two years post-participation in the Capstone Fair. The analysis revealed that 67% (*n* = 33) of students had an exact or near exact connection between their initial interests generated during the Capstone Fair and their final capstone project. As an example of high topic connectivity, a student indicated an interest in the topic of human trafficking on their Preference Form and their final capstone project was the development of a state approved continuing education course on human trafficking for occupational therapy practitioners. Twenty-six percent of interest comparisons had moderate (14%, *n* = 7) to some (12%, *n* = 6) connection between their initial interest and their final projects. Only 6% (*n* = 3) of students had no connectivity between their initial interests and their final projects.

Faculty Mentor Matching Efficiency

The DCC documented the time and associated tasks for the 2026 cohort faculty mentor matching process. The time associated with the DCC facilitating the match between the student and Faculty Capstone Mentor based on the student's interest areas and the faculty's experience, interests, and workload demands was two and a half hours (see Table 8). Post-match adjustments following faculty review were 4% (*n* = 2).

Table 8

Task and Time Requirements for Faculty Mentor/Student Matching

Task	Time Requirement
Code Preference Forms, inputting data into a spreadsheet	1 hour, 40 minutes
Assign students to a faculty mentor	21 minutes
Create mentor assignment document	13 minutes
Present to faculty for comment via in-person report at faculty meeting	11 minutes
Make post-presentation adjustments	5 minutes
Total	2 hours, 30 minutes

Discussion

The outcomes of this program evaluation project provided evidence of the efficiency and effectiveness of a specific educational strategy designed to facilitate OTD students' initial generation of capstone interests and the matching of students with a Faculty Capstone Mentor. All predetermined quality markers were met or exceeded for the effectiveness of the Capstone Fair in producing capstone ideas with high curricular alignment and flexibility/feasibility, improved student commitment to and confidence in identifying their ideas, high student satisfaction with the process, and efficiency with the student/faculty matching process.

The need for specific strategies to assist students with the complexities related to early capstone ideation and planning is supported in the literature (Kemp et al., 2020; Roberts & Riggs, 2019). The Capstone Fair process resulted in the initial generation of capstone topics that were curricularly aligned in terms of consistency with occupational therapy domains and processes described in the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (AOTA, 2020), and the dynamics of occupation articulated by the SCIL-OT instructional design adopted by the program. Accreditation standards specify that the DC is an integral part of the program's curriculum design and reflects the mission and philosophy of the program (ACOTE, 2023). The SCIL-OT model developed by Hooper et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of implementing learning strategies that aid occupational therapy students in their deep understanding of the explicit connection of topics with the profession's core subject of occupation. The outcomes provided support that the Capstone Fair assists students with identifying topics with occupation-based relevance.

In addition to the ideation challenges that OTD students experience related to their limited early understanding of the profession's distinct role and value, they often struggle with identifying ideas that are flexible to the evolving contextual dynamics occurring during the DC (Stephenson et al., 2020). This ultimately influences the feasibility for implementing ideas and their responsiveness to community needs (Ivey et al., 2016). Anecdotally, OTD students tend to understandably fixate on ideas that are more highly steeped in traditional occupational therapy practice settings, emulating a Level II Fieldwork experience, and therefore gravitating toward the practice skills capstone focus area. This phenomenon creates an incongruence with this OTD program's capstone emphasis on non-traditional or emerging practice settings and the capstone focus areas of program development/evaluation, education, and leadership/administration. To counter this occurrence, the Capstone Fair accentuated procedures to facilitate the students' cognitive flexibility by taking their general topical interests and brainstorming implementation across different types of settings and the different capstone focus areas. Literature supports that cognitive flexibility is a vital component to the student's professional development and responsiveness to dynamic circumstances (Algharaibeh, 2020; Kercood et al., 2017; Nowrouzi-Kia et al., 2023). Program faculty and students refer to this as the "flex factor." The outcomes indicate that the strong majority of students successfully flexed their ideas across settings, including emerging settings, and approached their ideas from different capstone focus areas. It is notable that the results revealed the desired high selection of program-emphasized focus areas and a low selection of the practice skills area, which was expected to be high if students were exhibiting less flexibility in their capstone ideation.

Participating students indicated improved confidence with capstone processes, improved interest in selected ideas, and high satisfaction with the Capstone Fair process. These results indicate that this comprehensive educational process responds to the need for specific strategies for early capstone idea generation suggested in the literature (DeIuliis & Bednarski, 2020; Jirikowic et al., 2015; Stephenson et al., 2020). The process has limited reliance on complex coordination and demanding logistical procedures, such as those related to scheduling site and current/former capstone students to synchronous or in-person events or retrieving information from multiple

sources to relay to students. The Capstone Fair process efficiently facilitates the initiation of the backward design model supported by occupational therapy and non-occupational therapy education sources (AOTA, 2022; Jenson et al., 2017). The quality of initial ideas generated by the Capstone Fair process is further supported by the analysis that revealed the predominantly high connectivity of initial interests with the final capstone project, occurring two years post-Fair. Despite slight adjustments over four iterations of the Capstone Fair, analysis of program evaluation data supports consistent, high-quality outputs. The small group discussions around potential capstone ideas, sites, and focus areas appear to be perceived as meaningful and engaging. The higher satisfaction ratings for the most recent cohort may be indicative of the success of annual quality enhancements made by the program. For example, although the Capstone Fair continues to provide flexible options for both in-person and virtual implementation, the most recent iterations of the Fair were implemented via the in-person format. Consistent with recent research on the use of a video conferencing platform versus in-person learning experiences (Vandenberg & Magnuson, 2021), the faculty and students anecdotally appear to prefer the in-person format when feasible.

The outcomes further suggest that the Capstone Fair was an efficient method for facilitating the match between students and a Faculty Capstone Mentor. The student/faculty mentor dynamic is important for early and ongoing guidance of the DC (AOTA, 2022; DeIuliis & Bednarski, 2020). This Capstone Fair process may be appealing to DCCs, faculty, and students because it required limited time commitment and centralized procedures with the DCC serving as a liaison who is often equipped to understand the demands and interests of faculty along with the interests and needs of students. At the same time, it involved faculty in early capstone processes as they served as small group facilitators during the Fair, facilitating faculty-wide engagement and future student/faculty DC collaboration.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

The outcomes of this program evaluation project have the following implications for the design and implementation of DC educational processes within OTD programs:

- An intentional, replicable educational process, involving early self-study exposure to capstone ideas available online, individual worksheets and small group discussions, attendance at the program's capstone scholarship symposium, and articulation of initial capstone interests via a Capstone Preference Form, can effectively assist students with generation of capstone ideas which demonstrate cognitive flexibility.
- OTD programs engaging in a systematic process such as the Capstone Fair can effectively meet expectations related to the curriculum alignment of their DC.
- OTD programs and students can benefit from processes such as the Capstone Fair to efficiently facilitate an effective match between student and Faculty Capstone Mentor.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings are reflective of a relatively small sample size of two cohorts within one OTD program, limiting generalization to future cohorts and other programs. Programs who do not have a team of faculty who are able or willing to engage in capstone

development processes, a course in which to connect the components of the Fair for student accountability, or physical or virtual space for multiple-mini discussion group rotations may have difficulty replicating the Capstone Fair as depicted in this paper. The program evaluation design did not include a comparative analysis of the Capstone Fair with other methods for initiating students to the capstone process. Other limitations include the use of a non-validated survey, variation in the number of surveys conducted for the two cohorts (i.e., 2 for the 2023 Cohort and 3 for the 2026 Cohort), and potential bias related to analysis being conducted by the developers and implementers of the program. There were several student participants who did not complete some elements of the program evaluation documents analyzed, requiring the use of the case-wise deletion method to manage missing data points.

Future quality improvement initiatives related to the Capstone Fair include more explicit scaffolding for completing the worksheets and Preference Form for enhanced uniformity and annual evaluation of generated data. Future research could apply a design that would allow researchers to compare the outcomes of groups using varied components of the Capstone Fair or with methods used by other programs for the purpose of validating which strategies are most effective for accomplishing program objectives. It would also be beneficial to study the effectiveness of replicating the Capstone Fair within other programs in order to move toward validating a Capstone Fair fidelity measure.

Conclusion

This project evaluated the efficiency and effectiveness of the Capstone Fair for generating initial capstone project ideas and facilitating the student/Faculty Capstone Mentor match according to pre-determined criteria. The outcomes suggest that the procedures connected with the Capstone Fair are effective for student generation of capstone interests that are aligned with the program's curriculum design and demonstrate flexibility and feasibility for responsiveness to the evolving dynamics of capstone processes over time. OTD programs searching for innovative methods to more intentionally facilitate the initial engagement of students in the capstone process and promote cognitive flexibility during capstone development may want to consider the implementation of the procedures reflected in this project.

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Appendix A

Figure 1

Sample of Completed Worksheet 1

Capstone Opportunities Fair: Day 1 Worksheet

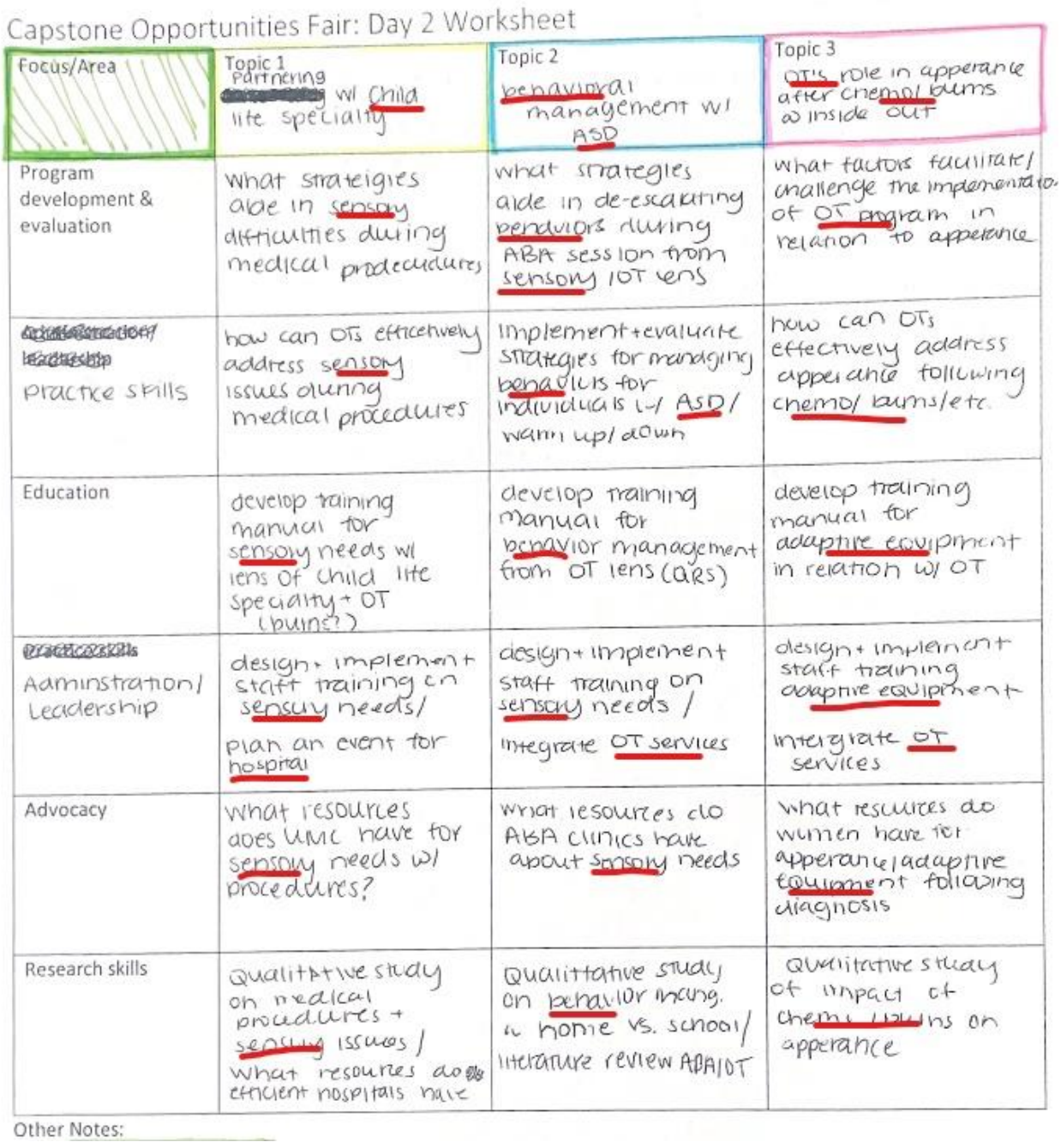
Focus areas: Program development & evaluation, administration/leadership, education, advocacy, practice skills, research skills

* actually helping pts
* also add practice skills

Site or Opportunity	Topic 1 pediatrics/ ASD/ behavior management	Topic 2 women's health domestic violence/ sexual abuse	Topic 3 peds/ women's breast health cancer/ burns	Focus 1 education	Focus 2 program development/ evaluation	Focus 3 administrative/ leadership
* Lighthouse Learning Academy *	OTs role in ABA/ behavior management			behavioral management plan teachers/parents/ ABA	developing OT eval new behavioral program	adding OT
Inside Out Foundation Womens health		possible to see these type of pts in this setting	OT role in apperance/ how to address	education on adaptive equipment pragmatic	establish OT role through program development	business (OT) expansion? adding OT
Voices of Hope Foundation Womens health		OT role in domestic violence survivors	possible burns/OT role in education/ apperance/ planning	education (resource) self-efficacy pragmatic	new program classes, work w/ counselors	business (OT) expansion? adding OT
* UMC Child Life Specialist Program *	OT role in partnering w/ child life		burn pt/ breast cancer in pediatrics	resources on procedures, patient education	how would OT partner w/ child life w/ eval	interaction w/ child-life
Science Spectrum	sensory-based intervention			resources on benefits of sensory	sensory-based program @ science spectrum (inclusive)	would OT have a role here?

Figure 2

Sample of Completed Worksheet 2



Capstone Opportunities Fair: Day 2 Worksheet

Focus/Area	Topic 1 Partnering [redacted] w/ Child life specialty	Topic 2 behavioral management w/ ASD	Topic 3 OT's role in apperance after chemo/ burns w inside out
Program development & evaluation	What strategies aide in sensory difficulties during medical prodecudures	what strategies aide in de-escalating behaviors during ABA session from sensory lOT lens	what factors facilitate/ challenge the implementation of OT program in relation to apperance
[redacted] practice skills	how can OTs effectively address sensory issues during medical procedures	implement+evaluate strategies for managing behaviors for individuals w/ ASD/ warm up/ down	how can OTs effectively address apperance following chemo/ burns/etc.
Education	develop training manual for sensory needs w/ lens of child life specialty + OT (burns?)	develop training manual for behavior management from OT lens (ABS)	develop training manual for adaptive equipment in relation w/ OT
[redacted] Administration/ Leadership	design+ implement+ staff training on sensory needs/ plan an event for hospital	design+ implement staff training on sensory needs / integrate OT services	design+ implement staff training adaptive equipment+ integrate OT services
Advocacy	What resources does UMC have for sensory needs w/ procedures?	What resources do ABA clinics have about sensory needs	What resources do women have for apperance/adaptive equipment following diagnosis
Research skills	Qualitative study on medical procedures + sensory issues / what resources do efficient hospitals have	Qualitative study on behavior manag. in home vs. school/ literature review ABA/OT	Qualitative study of impact of chemo burns on apperance

Other Notes:

Appendix B

Initial Capstone Preference Form

This document serves the purpose of enabling you to express initial capstone interests and your understanding of the necessary cognitive flexibility required to successfully complete the doctoral capstone. Faculty will use this information to match you with a Faculty Capstone Mentor.

List three capstone topics of interest from highest to lowest interest. The topics can be listed as specific or broad themes of interest (e.g., sleep hygiene strategies for adults) or as a scholarly question (e.g., How can OTs effectively address sleep hygiene strategies?). For each topic, describe how the topic could be addressed within 2 – 3 of the capstone focus areas and within a community, traditional OT, and educational/research setting.

Topic 1: _____
- Variation by Capstone Focus Areas:
  - Focus Area 1: _____
  - Focus Area 2: _____
  - Focus Area 3: _____
- Variation by Settings:
  - Community Setting: _____
  - Traditional OT Setting: _____
  - Educational/Research Setting: _____

Topic 2: _____
- Variation by Capstone Focus Areas:
  - Focus Area 1: _____
  - Focus Area 2: _____
  - Focus Area 3: _____
- Variation by Settings:
  - Community Setting: _____
  - Traditional OT Setting: _____
  - Educational/Research Setting: _____

Topic 3: _____
- Variation by Capstone Focus Areas:
  - Focus Area 1: _____
  - Focus Area 2: _____
  - Focus Area 3: _____
- Variation by Settings:
  - Community Setting: _____
  - Traditional OT Setting: _____
  - Educational/Research Setting: _____