

Assessing the need for a northern Colorado Occupational Therapy Assistant Program: What factors indicate a need?

Elizabeth Ogg
Occupational Therapy Doctoral Student

Dr. Lorie Barker, OTD, OTR/L
Dr. Kim Schoessow-Aldaz, OTD, OTR/L, SCLV, FAOTA
Capstone Site Mentors

Introduction

The occupational therapy assistant (OTA) role plays an important part in providing occupational therapy (OT) services, but currently, an OTA degree program does not exist in northern Colorado, limiting access for local students to education required for entry to the role. By creating a regional program for students interested in a health care career, there is potential for increased diversity in the OT profession through decreased barriers such as cost, time, and geographic program proximity. This could increase access to a career with competitive wages compared to roles with similar education requirements. Aligned with the ACOTE focus area of education and CSU Capstone track of program and policy development, this project addressed issues of occupational justice and improved occupational performance within the areas of education and work by beginning a conversation on increasing regional healthcare provider education through development of a OTA degree program in northern Colorado.

Project Goal & Research Question

Project Goal: To develop a data-informed needs assessment summary report identifying factors that indicate the need for an occupational therapy assistant (OTA) degree program in northern Colorado to expand access to occupational therapy (OT) education and promote occupational justice.

Research Question: “What factors indicate the need for an OTA degree program in northern Colorado?”.

Conceptual Model & Process

Conceptual models and theories:

- PRECEDE-PROCEED framework (Green, 2005)
- Academic Program Development Guide (Kalu & Salahuddin, 2022)
- Evaluation: A systematic approach (Rossi, 2004)
- Assessment and evaluation in higher education: A practical guide (Twombly, 2024)

Emphasizing academic program development, higher education contexts, and needs assessment, they provided a robust framework for determining key considerations in completing this project

The project process included:

- Stakeholder and key informant interviews using a motivational interview techniques
- Analysis of related data from industry, education, and the US Census Bureau nationally and for the region
- Identification of factors related to the need for a regional OTA program

Literature Review

Common themes from the literature review included:

- Need for increased diversity within the occupational therapy (OT) profession (Anvarizadeh et al., 2023; Brotherton et al., 2021; K. Brown et al., 2021; Hahn et al., 2023)
- Cost of health care education (Del Rossi & Hatzel, 2024; Gesing et al., 2023, Shields et al., 2023)
- History and current role of the COTA in the profession (Fleming Cottrell, 2000a, 2000b; Kneisley & Heater, 1998; *What Is an OTR or a COTA Professional?*, n.d.)
- Career advancement within the OT field (Fleming Cottrell, 2000a, 2000b; Powell et al., 2008)
- Student factors for entry to the OT profession (Hahn et al., 2023)

Results

Interview Themes

- Lack of awareness of OT and differences in roles
- Importance of education/industry collaboration in developing a program
- Return on investment for students and institutions
- Need for pathways to different levels of OT education
- Impacts of student demographics
- Challenges concerning fieldwork sites
- Need for additional COTAs in the workforce
- Limited diversity within the profession compared to regional demographics

Quantitative Data

- 193 OTA associate programs, only 2 in Colorado , with nearest programs to 80550 zip code in Denver, Colorado and Casper, Wyoming, placing the northern Colorado region in a gap for local OTA education (ACOTE, 2025a)
- OTA is a high-demand profession in Colorado with competitive wages (Colorado Workforce Development Council, 2024, Kasturirangan, 2025a, 2025b; Lightcast, n.d.; *Northern CO labor market profile, 2025*; TalentFOUND, 2025)
- OT profession lacks racial/ethnic diversity compared to U.S. population, mirrored in the northern Colorado region (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; Harvison, 2024)

SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
• Existing health science infrastructure • Strong industry/education partnerships • High job placement rates for OTA students post-graduation • A role that offers hands-on care and career mobility	• Limited infrastructure for a new program • Fieldwork site shortages • High student debt-to-income ratio for OTD students • Low awareness of OT as a career option	• Increase local access to OT education • Diversify course delivery models • Create efficient pathways to OT education attainment • Leverage secondary school education health science programs as an entry point to an OT career	• National decline in OT program applicants • Insurance reimbursement cuts • Competition for fieldwork sites from other programs • Rising education costs and loan limits

Conclusion

There is a need:

- Industry demand exceeds available COTAs in the region
- Students are interested in the profession when they know what it is
- Identified geographic gap in OTA education in the northern Colorado region
- Lack of regional diversity representation in the OT profession

Considerations for program development:

- Inclusion of industry/education/student stakeholders from program development beginning to ensure needs of all stakeholders are considered
- Increased education of and advocacy of the OT profession vital for success of program, increasing student interest, industry buy-in, and availability of sufficient fieldwork sites
- Design program based on student need factors such as affordability; delivery models (online, in-person, hybrid); and student background, roles, and demographics
- Create pathways to education attainment in the profession through education and industry partnerships



Implications and Future Work

Direct impacts:

- Advocacy and education about OT education and the OT profession
- Facilitation of stakeholder conversations about development of an OTA program
- Identification of already established industry and education partnerships

Anticipated impacts:

- Continued conversation with stakeholders
- Opportunities for advocacy and education about the OT profession
- Creation of an efficient education pathway from high school to higher education for individuals interested in the profession
- Development of a plan for high school students to complete pre-requisite coursework using concurrent enrollment classes for entry to an OTA program

The hope is that these small impacts will eventually lead to creation of a regional OTA program, and in turn, increase student access to OT education, broaden OT services in northern Colorado, increase diversity in the profession, and impact overall quality of care for individuals utilizing OT services, leading to enhanced occupational participation for both students and clients.

Acknowledgements & References

Capstone Site Mentors:

Dr. Lorie Barker, OTD, OTR, CHT
Dr. Kim Schoessow-Aldaz, OTD, OTR/L, SCLV, FAOTA

Capstone Faculty Mentor:

Dr. Michelle LeRoy, PhD, OTR/L, BCP

Doctoral Capstone Coordinator:

Dr. Julie Silver Seidle, PhD, OTR/L

References

