

UNDER-REPRESENTED STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS DURING THEIR JOURNEYS TO PHYSICAL THERAPY SCHOOL

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PURPOSE

One way to reduce health care disparities is to ensure that the workforce reflects current demographics. Increasing the number of under-represented minority (URM) physical therapists (PT) starts with recruitment, admission, and retention of URM PT students. The purpose of this study was to learn how current URM PT students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison were exposed to the physical therapy field; the barriers and supports that they experienced between exposure and admission; and their perspectives on ways that PT programs can facilitate recruitment and retention of URM PT students.

METHODS

Nineteen current URM PT students were asked the following questions via an anonymous Qualtrics survey:

- 1) How did you become interested in physical therapy?
- 2) What barriers did you face on your way to physical therapy school?
- 3) What supports helped you along the way?
- 4) What recommendations do you have for recruiting and successfully matriculating students who are under-represented in physical therapy?

RESULTS

The response rate was 100%.

How Participants Became Interested in Physical Therapy:

The majority of participants in this study learned about physical therapy through personal sports injuries.

Barriers:

Most participants were first-generation and were overwhelmed by the application process.

A preponderance of participants felt a lack of confidence due to discouragement from professors while taking prerequisite courses. Examples included being asked why they were in a particular class, being told not to be disappointed if they could not successfully complete the course, or questioning whether they knew how hard it was going to be.

A prevailing number of participants stated that the biggest barriers were the following pre- and post-costs of applying to PT school:

- Numerous prerequisites
- GREs
- Transcripts
- Applications

A few participants were apprehensive that they may be the only URM.

Supports:

Support for all participants came primarily from family and friends.

One participant stated that an undergraduate advisor was helpful.

One participant expressed that a professor was encouraging.

Most participants shared that professors were not useful.

Many participants cited the UW-Madison's PT Program Admissions Office as being a friendly and supportive resource.

Participant Recommendations for Increasing Diversity through URM Recruitment:

- Promote exposure to physical therapy through venues other than sports.
- Start exposure at an early age.
- Connect interested applicants to current URM PT students or graduates, especially to help with the application process.
- Work with professors of prerequisite courses to encourage more support of URMs.
- Implement a holistic admissions process.
- Offer admissions fee waivers and financial assistance.
- Ensure a safe and inclusive educational environment by celebrating differences and incorporating diversity throughout the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

In order to diversify the physical therapy workforce to reflect current demographics and counter health care disparities, current URM students suggested that exposure to PT begin at a young age. Based on student perspectives, It is imperative that barriers are confronted and support is provided as URMs navigate the course to PT education. Once matriculating, URM students stressed the importance of a safe and inclusive environment.