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An Historical Inquiry of Past & Present Trends in American Occupational Therapy Education: Factors Influencing the Need for a Clinical Doctorate and its Impact on the Profession's Future

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In the United States many factors pushed the occupational therapy (OT) profession to develop a clinical doctorate (OTD). We conducted a literature-review and found that the development of the OTD was influenced by a lack of formal education and training at the professions inception, higher degree requirements in adjacent allied health professions, the lack of an academic and science-driven knowledge base, the need for faculty members holding doctoral degrees, and the disempowerment of the profession in the medical hierarchy.

The objectives of our presentation are to 1) highlight the trends that led to the development of the OTD; 2) examine the impact of the OTD on the profession's future; and 3) open a dialogue with our colleagues in Latin America to identify and discuss differences and similarities in past, present, and future OT educational programs.

Through a historical inquiry, we examine how the advent of the OTD was propelled by the profession's unique identity, the necessity to apply theory and research to practice, the need for doctorate-level faculty, and the establishment of terminal doctoral degrees in nursing and physical therapy programs.

An understanding of regional histories of OT in the United States and Latin America is essential to appreciate the distinct purpose and projections in OT and OS educational requirements. Higher educational requirements produce diverse and quality therapists who are equipped to address the challenges confronting OT within a local and global context.

Given the competitive nature of the American healthcare system, and with the support of a scientific base of knowledge to support practice, it is imperative to produce therapists with increased competency and skills in order to retain OT's position among allied health professions. Individuals obtaining an OTD provide a higher level of skilled practice, bring advanced clinical skills to a classroom setting, and bridge the gap between research and clinical practice.

This presentation challenges the profession to examine how the history of OT has shaped educational requirements regionally, and to push for higher educational requirements to position OT as a viable profession in the 21st Century.