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## THE VALUE OF AN ONLINE POSTPROFESSIONAL (TRANSITIONAL) DOCTOR OF PHYSICAL THERAPY PROGRAM

### Abstract

*The elevation of education is found across the business continuum. Professional doctoral programs are growing in response to the complex nature and consumer demand in business sectors. The healthcare field has experienced a demand for doctoring professions, beginning with nursing. The movement toward a doctorate in physical therapy was predicated by a federal physical therapy governing association emphasizing the need for physical therapy to become a doctoring, clinical profession. The directive resulted in the creation of transitional Doctor of Physical Therapy (tDPT) programs responding to the need for doctoral-level courses to bridge the educational gap between currently licensed physical therapists with baccalaureate or master's degrees and the newer graduates in the field who hold doctorate degrees. Programs erupted, but over time, online programs emerged as the primary method of education with flexibility and reachability for working clinicians. Outcomes of online tDPT programs are lacking and perhaps overlooked as being an essential medium within postprofessional education for professional advancement and currency. This mixed-methods study sought to understand the perspectives of tDPT graduates on the value of an online tDPT education. The 105 participants completed an online survey through the Qualtrics data gathering system. The findings included themes related to the value of a tDPT degree in improving clinical skill sets in diagnostic imaging, evidence-based practice, and differential screening. Many participants reported that they thought differently as clinicians, primarily identifying as autonomous practitioners. The overarching common theme was the value of postprofessional programs in providing education currency achievable through an online program.*

*Keywords:* online education, physical therapy, professional doctorate, transitional doctorate

### Author Information

Cheryl L. Anderson has had a rich and varied career in health care. She earned a BA in physical therapy from the College of St Scholastica, Duluth, MN; an MBA from the University of St Thomas, St Paul, MN; and Ph.D. from Walden University. She was a Minnesota-licensed physical therapist starting in 1979 and retiring in 2021. She was the director of rehabilitation for two health care systems; a corporate consultant for a national long-term care organization; director of operations for a large, multi-state rehabilitation organization; research coordinator for a VA medical center; health plan executive for a managed Medicaid plan; and part-time professor, medical writer, and private consultant. [cherylanderson7177@gmail.com](mailto:cherylanderson7177@gmail.com)

Jena Ogston PT, MPT, PhD is a Professor in the DPT program at the College of St. Scholastica and the Director of the transitional Doctor of Physical Therapy Program. She obtained her Master of Physical Therapy degree from the Mayo School of Health Related Sciences and her Ph.D. in Rehabilitation Sciences from the University of Minnesota, teaching in higher education for over 22 years. She has been a recipient of community awards and was inducted into the FSBPT Advanced Academy of Item Writers. Her scholarly activities lie in evidence-based practice, orthopedics, and foot/ankle biomechanics with similar teaching expertise. She is currently chair of the MNPTA Research Committee and EBP SIG within the APTA Academy of Physical Therapy Research. [jogston@css.edu](mailto:jogston@css.edu)

### Introduction

When the federal government notices gaps and provides directives for the private sector to fill them, practical results often ensue. This study reviewed how the federal association called American Physical Therapy Association Federal created a need that online universities have attempted to fill. The purpose was to investigate the perspectives of transitional Doctor of Physical Therapy (tDPT) graduates about the value of completing a tDPT program.

## **Background, Problem, and Gap in Practice**

In June of 2000, the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) adopted a strategic direction for the physical therapy profession's future with Vision 2020. The vision statement articulated, "By the year 2020, physical therapy services will be provided by doctors of physical therapy" (APTA, 2021, para. 2). Six elements were identified and defined to help attain the vision: autonomous practice, direct access, Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) and lifelong education, evidence-based practice, practitioner of choice, and professionalism. The progression to a doctoring profession was beneficial for numerous reasons, including the greater ability for autonomous practice (McCallum & DiAngelis, 2012) and increased professional accountability within the healthcare system.

Entry-level physical therapy education has evolved throughout its 100-plus year history by increasing content, practical experiences, entry-level degree requirements, and accreditation standards (Plack & Wong, 2002; Rahim & Maniyat, 2014) with visionary educators calling for the profession to move to the doctoring level (Plack & Wong, 2002). Key elements of Vision 2020 drove changes in accreditation standards in physical therapist educational programs that required the entry-level degree to be at a post-baccalaureate level. The change resulted in the conversion of all entry-level degrees to Doctor of Physical Therapy (CAPTE, 2021). There are over 250 accredited entry-level physical therapy programs, all of which offer the DPT degree (CAPTE, 2020).

With the release of Vision 2020, licensed physical therapists whose entry-level degree was a bachelor's or master's degree may have perceived potential barriers to their future careers. One barrier involved clinical education. Students enrolled in DPT educational programs require clinical internships supervised by licensed physical therapists. However, degree disparity arose between the student and clinical supervisor if the PT supervisor had not earned a doctoral degree while the student was in a DPT program. Continuing education was not viewed as enough to bridge any perceived educational gaps between clinical supervisors and doctoral students (The Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy, 2021). Post-professional degree programs (advanced master's or terminal doctoral degrees such as Ph.D., EdD, Sci) are available to advance knowledge and skills but may not be designed to bridge the clinical gap. Academic doctoral degrees do not address the clinical and professional needs of licensed practitioners. Available specialist certifications and residency programs allowed physical therapists to hone practice skills and knowledge in specific practice areas but did not necessarily result in the acquisition of a degree that bridged educational content or offered a higher academic degree.

Degree disparity created a need for action. Educational tDPTs were developed and designed to bridge content and achieve degree parity through new educational opportunities for practicing physical therapists. As of October 2012, over 15,000 graduates were reported to have obtained a postprofessional DPT degree (APTA, 2022). In 2019, of its 62,000 members, 50.4% had a DPT degree, and 7.9% had a tDPT degree (personal communication, APTA, April 6, 2020). However, unlike entry-level educational programs, tDPT programs are not accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE; APTA, 2022), resulting in a lack of centralized tracking of the number of programs available or standardization of program requirements, including assessment of student outcomes. The lack of standardization and aggregation of assessment data provides challenges to ascertain motivation factors for enrolling and professional growth resulting from completing a tDPT program.

Previous studies have investigated motivating factors for clinicians to enroll in tDPT programs. Specific to career benefits, Detweiler et al. (1999) reported that participants agreed that a DPT would assist in career advancement, aid in obtaining a higher salary, enhance professional competence, and improve the public's recognition of the professional's knowledge and integrity. Subsequently, Thomas et al. (2003) reported that the strongest motivational factor to earn a tDPT degree was the desire to learn. Reasons to pursue a tDPT program go beyond motivation factors; they include the perceived benefits of completing and receiving the degree. There have been no studies that addressed the feelings of tDPT learners who attended an online tDPT program. This study filled this gap.

The lack of current data/findings from tDPT graduates warranted investigating the perception of whether a tDPT degree is worth the commitment and work to attain one.

## **Literature Review**

Literature is also sparse regarding the value of tDPT attainment on clinical, professional, and personal goals/development. tDPT graduates reported gaining knowledge and skills consistent with current entry-level DPT

students as a benefit of tDPT program completion (Larin et al., 2010; Lombardo et al., 2001). tDPT graduates reported that the degree enhanced credibility among patients, peers, and other healthcare providers, clinical decision-making, use of evidence-based practice, and teaching (Graham et al., 2011). Expansion of their knowledge base resulted in self-improvement, improved clinical skills and patient care, professional status, and a change in the public's perception of the profession for the better (Thomas et al., 2003). Improvements in advanced decision-making and evidence-based practice resulted in meeting patients' goals and needs more effectively and efficiently (Graham et al., 2011).

Additionally, a survey of physical therapists revealed that those who earned an advanced master's degree or tDPT degree were more likely to practice in a direct access clinic compared to those who had not (McCallum & DiAngelis, 2012). Together, these studies reveal benefits tDPT graduates perceive personally and professionally along with an elevation of the profession. This literature is historical with a need to update findings for current tDPT clinicians.

A more recent phenomenological study specifically investigated the value of the tDPT on practice and professionalism (Wise et al., 2016). Based on one-to-one interviews, four themes emerged: 1. Personal excellence (surpassing professional expectations and providing improved quality of care); 2. Excellence of the profession (incorporating the APTA's core values into daily practice, fostering advocacy, pursuing leadership roles, and empowering colleagues); 3. Prestige (improving sense of respect from colleagues and other health care professionals); 4. Self-efficacy (improving communication inter-and intra-professionally and with patients and their family members; stepping outside their comfort zone to advance practice and the profession). Collectively, the four themes address benefits to both the clinician and the profession.

When entry-level programs moved to the DPT, it was possible to determine changes to program content, which could guide the development of tDPT programs. APTA recommended several content categories, including, but not limited to, evidence-based practice, diagnostic imaging, differential diagnosis, and pharmacology (APTA, 2006). Institutional leaders who developed tDPT educational programs designed curricula that met institutional and profession-related goals independent of further oversight or requirements. As of January 1, 2022, there were three onsite, 15 distance, and 13 combined onsite/online tDPT programs across the United States (APTA, 2022).

### **Applied Framework**

The framework for this study relied on educational program techniques. Timmerberg et al. (2022) reminded practitioners that competency is critical for health professionals. They espoused the use of a competency-based education framework when considering how physical therapists operate in the healthcare industry. Some of the concepts within that framework include competency domains, milestones, essential tasks, proficiency scales, and entrustment supervision scales (p. 3). Domains of competency include communication, professionalism, and knowledge (p. 4), and Timmerberg et al. (2022) explained that a need for creating commonly defined outcomes and learning competencies is critical for the profession. Understanding graduates' use of their competencies can assist curriculum designers with improving the content provided in degree programs.

### **Research Technique**

The study was a descriptive educational evaluation of a program. The study was requested, administered, and overseen by the College of St. Scholastica and its Institutional Review Board. The secondary data was provided to the authors of this study, and this report helps put the feedback into practical perspectives.

### **Research Question**

What are the perspectives of tDPT graduates on the value of completing their tDPT program?

### **Program Background**

The College of St. Scholastica, Duluth, MN, implemented a distance, online-only tDPT education program in 2007. The tDPT curriculum was based on the increased content and depth included in the accredited entry-level DPT educational program when it converted from the entry-level master's degree to the entry-level Doctor of Physical Therapy degree. Specifically, the program consists of six semester-long courses with content related to pharmacology, differential screening, diagnostic imaging, evidence-based practice, health policy, and professional

integration (The College of St. Scholastica, 2022). The program conferred the first degrees in 2010, with over 700 graduating since its inception.

### Data Collection

An online Qualtrics survey was developed and administered electronically over a two-year academic period to graduates of the college's tDPT online program. The survey's closed and open-ended questions were designed to gather information regarding respondents' demographics and the value of their degree in professional practice. One closed question asked about motivating factors for pursuing the program, and one closed question inquired about meeting program outcomes directly related to elements of Vision 2020. Three open-ended questions were specifically designed to identify how the tDPT program impacted professional practice. The project was approved by the College of St. Scholastica's Institutional Review Board.

### Instrumentation

A link to the survey was made available to program graduates through email and was posted on the college's tDPT Alumni Facebook page. Additional survey reminder notifications were sent and posted 2 weeks following the end of each semester: Spring, summer, and fall during the two academic years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021. The survey was open for 2 weeks following the reminder emails.

One of the closed-ended questions related to motivating factors and program outcomes included "On a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), how well do you feel you met the program outcomes (related to Vision 2020)?"

- Evaluate and apply current health legislative policies to be an advocate within professional practice.
- Demonstrate critical thinking and problem-solving required of autonomous practitioners.
- Apply leadership skills reflective upon the physical therapist as an autonomous practitioner.
- Demonstrate commitment to the physical therapy profession, including but not limited to life-long learning.
- Evaluate published studies related to physical therapy practice, research, and policy and integrate the findings.

Open-ended questions addressing the value/impact of tDPT on professional practice included the following:

1. What were the perceived benefits of the tDPT program to you?
2. What were your personal motivators to obtain your tDPT degree?
3. From your tDPT education, what do you perceive to be the greatest impact on your own practice or practice patterns?
4. What are your thoughts on how the program may have assisted you in changing how you practice or became more prepared to be an autonomous practitioner?

### Survey Response

The potential population included 236 tDPT graduates who graduated in the two years prior to the initiation of the research. A total of 105/236 (44.5%) responses were received. Descriptive statistics were gathered regarding the age of the therapist, years of clinical practice, place of an entry-level degree, current clinical practice area, geographical residence/practice setting, and motivating factors to pursue their tDPT. Responses to the closed-ended questions of how well program outcomes were met show that most respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each.

### Participants

Respondents averaged 25.5 (+/- 8.6) years in clinical practice, and the mean age was 49.9 years (+/- 8.0). Nearly 30% were trained in places other than the United States. Practice settings included the following:

- outpatient 44%
- hospital/acute care 10%
- academia 6%
- school-based 11%
- skilled nursing 8%
- other 3%
- private practice 11%
- homecare 7%

## Limitations

The survey was limited to graduates of one tDPT program. Some graduates may have missed the survey because a current email address was unavailable, they did not see the notification on the tDPT Alumni Facebook, or they lacked interest. However, the response percentage of 44.5% was respectable, providing instructive results.

## Results

Outcomes (Table 1) of the College of St. Scholastica tDPT program are designed to integrate evidence, differential diagnosis, skills, and knowledge in clinically meaningful ways, which are consistent with the APTA described expectations for transitional programs (APTA, 2006). Of the students who completed their program, the number who agreed or strongly agreed that they had achieved the outcomes are provided (out of 105 responses).

**Table 1**

*tDPT Outcomes and Student's Perceptions*

Outcome	Agree/Strongly Agree
Evaluate and apply current health legislative policies to be an advocate within professional practice.	32
Demonstrate critical thinking and problem-solving required of autonomous practitioners.	36
Apply leadership skills reflective upon the physical therapist as an autonomous practitioner.	34
Demonstrate commitment to the physical therapy profession, including but not limited to life-long learning.	35
Evaluate published studies related to physical therapy practice, research, and policy and integrate the findings.	36

Open-ended questions were analyzed using an iterative process: Open codes were first applied to comments, and these codes were then analyzed collectively to determine categories and identify themes. Ultimately, two themes emerged from the written comments: Personal advancement as a physical therapist and Advancement of the profession. Within these themes, categories and underlying concepts are nested. Figure 1 provides the nested results.

**Figure 1**

*Themes, Categories, and Concepts from Qualitative Responses*

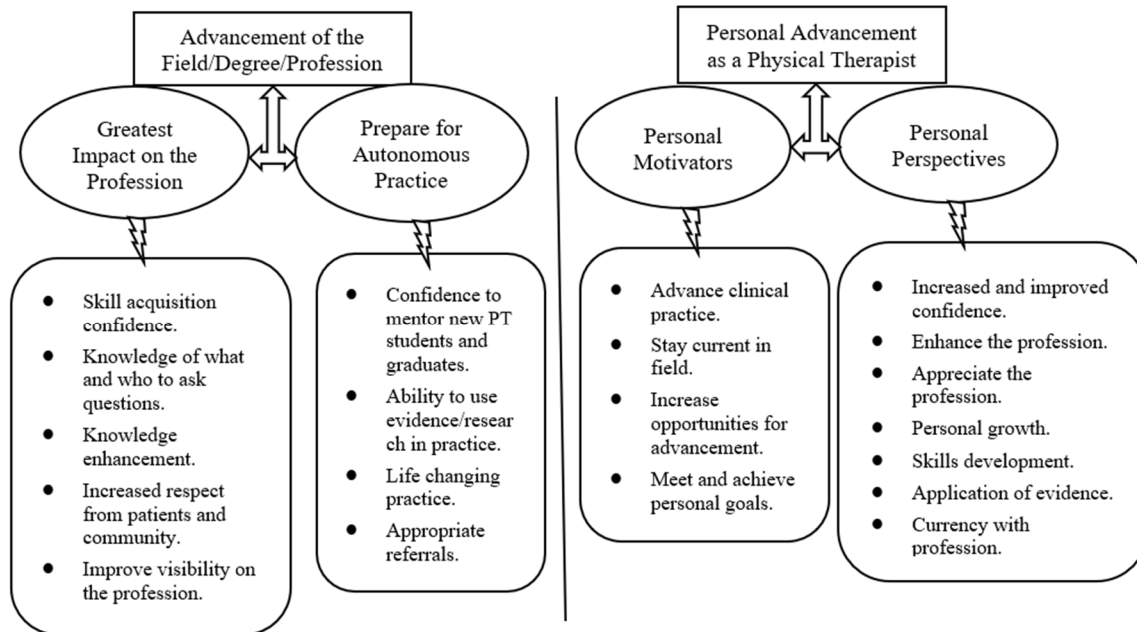


Table 2 provides evidence from the participants’ comments that support the findings in Figure 1.

**Table 2**

*Evidentiary Quotations and Responses*

Advancement of the Profession	Personal Advancement as a Physical Therapist
<p>“The largest benefit to me as full-time academic faculty was feeling like I am now much more knowledgeable about contemporary clinical practice and the ideal role of a PT in today’s healthcare environment.”</p> <p>“Overall, the tDPT program enhanced my view of PT as a doctoring profession. This led to a desire to learn more in each class to support my teaching and clinical responsibilities.”</p> <p>I am far more comprehensive in my patient initial evaluation. I look at actual imaging rather than just radiologist reports. I look closely at the medication list and find that I am considering it in the choice of interventions I select. I monitor vitals throughout an episode of care. I use SBAR communication with other providers and colleagues. I am more involved in community wellness efforts such as fall prevention. I spend several hours per week in the professional literature. I am active in the APTA.</p> <p>“The program has improved my assessment skills and screening for systems to ensure appropriate referrals are made as well as opportunities for professional growth”</p>	<p>The course works in this program have broadened my perspectives significantly compare (sic) to my previous practice not only for physical therapy but also for the aspects of general patient medical care. I found myself as a higher level of medical provider by completing this program which has given me a deeper understanding in the medications, healthcare policies, or differential diagnoses.</p> <p>“Earning a DPT degree opened plenty of career opportunities for me. One of them was landing a position in my dream practice setting - outpatient orthopaedics and sports clinic.”</p> <p>“Got me excited about being a PT again”</p> <p>“...advance in my profession, improve myself as a therapist, keep up to date with where the profession is going”</p> <p>“...stay current with the practice and align with the American Physical Therapy Association”</p>

Advancement of the Profession	Personal Advancement as a Physical Therapist
<p>“The realization that as PT’s we have a strategic and relevant opportunity to benefit the landscape of healthcare in the US through our interventions.”</p> <p>“I am in the school setting and after taking the EBP course, I felt more confident to challenge some of the practices that are widely used with little to no support. I believe that using EBP will help to reduce costs and improve expectations”</p>	<p>“The program helped facilitate my knowledge to speak confidently to other health care professionals. The program gave me the power to conduct pertinent research to assist with my discussions with other professionals.”</p>

### Discussion and Implications

The diversity of program graduates augments the findings of the survey. People who attended the program represented various practice areas and geographic regions, indicating content applicability across the broad spectrum of the profession. With an average of 25.5 years of clinical practice, students were motivated to attend the tDPT program to achieve a personal goal, stay current with the profession and advance patient/clinical skills. Of those who responded to how well they met the program's outcomes, the overwhelming majority indicated agreement. The program outcomes relate to elements of the profession’s Vision 2020, particularly as it applies to evidence-based practice, life-long learning, autonomous practice, and professionalism. These findings that professional goals can be achieved through an online environment are supported through literature reviews (Bragg et al., 2021; Leary et al., 2020).

Graduates' responses to open-ended questions revealed two themes: Advancement of the profession and Personal/professional advancement as a physical therapist. Both themes are in close keeping with elements of Vision 2020. In their own words, graduates described gaining "the realization that as PTs we have a strategic and relevant opportunity to benefit the landscape of healthcare in the [United States] through our interventions" and "more knowledgeable about contemporary clinical practice and the ideal role of a PT in today's healthcare environment." Comments such as these are reflective of the advancement of the profession.

Concerning the theme of personal/professional advancement as a physical therapist, graduates stated they were able to “land a position in my dream practice setting,” “have a deeper understanding in the medications, healthcare policies, or differential diagnoses,” and “facilitate my knowledge to speak confidently to other health care professionals. The program gave me the power to conduct pertinent research to assist with my discussions with other professionals.” These excerpts indicate personal and professional growth resulting from tDPT program completion. As one respondent stated, program completion “Got me excited about being a PT again.”

Perhaps surprising was less emphasis on degree parity as a prime result of pursuing the tDPT degree. It appears that those interested in and who completed the tDPT program were more committed to the profession with greater altruistic value. While degree parity may have been a motivating factor, the program's value was greatest in the advancement of the profession and personal advancement as a physical therapist.

### Practical Application

Online programs have changed the way mid-career professionals access graduate programs. The emergence of online professional doctoral programs was met with resistance from academic institutions in the mid-1990s. However, the online format allowed working professionals to earn graduate degrees. Professional doctorate programs are growing in the academic marketplace.

Academic organizations that provide professional doctorate programs may find that it is the learners’ desire for advanced knowledge that is the driving force behind graduate school attendance. The authors of this study were surprised to learn that degree parity may have been the reason adult learners first sought a tDPT program. However, learner perseverance and perspectives after the program finished were focused on the value of advanced learning and less on parity.

Many working professionals will seek advanced and professional degrees. Academic organizations should continue to determine why learners seek advanced knowledge and find ways to provide desired knowledge in accessible

modes such as online learning. The tDPT participants found value in the learning and indicated a strong desire and commitment to their profession.

### **Conclusion**

Licensed physical therapists whose entry-level degree was either a bachelor's or master's degree have numerous options for furthering their education, one of them being a tDPT program. Little evidence exists to demonstrate the value of pursuing an online tDPT program. Based on the data collected from one program, clear evidence exists that graduates of the program gained greater confidence in their inter- and intra-professional communication and clinical decision-making. Graduates also experienced greater pride and status as physical therapists in their clinical settings. Although the findings of this study are localized to one program, perhaps graduates from other online post-professional programs have similar experiences. Lack of standardization or accreditation of tDPT programs can be problematic; however, hopefully, any tDPT program aims to advance our profession, and those affiliated with a CAPTE-accredited entry-level DPT program have goals with commensurate standards and expectations.

The option of a tDPT program for licensed physical therapists is a viable one. Graduates gain knowledge and skills in pharmacology and differential diagnosis, including diagnostic imaging, which, in turn, improves their clinical practice. Although continuing education courses may provide content in similar areas, the courses may lack depth and breadth of the topic or focus on a particular practice area. Transitional DPT programs provide similar coverage of content in entry-level programs where courses are enhanced by diverse backgrounds and experiences enriching professional growth and development.

Completion of a tDPT program aligns licensed physical therapists with elements of APTA's Vision 2020. It is a transformative experience for graduates who find improvement in their clinical practice, an increased sense of professional development, and experienced advancement in the profession. These results will assist in meeting the APTA's current vision for the profession: "Transforming society by optimizing movement to improve the human experience." The benefits of tDPT program completion are both tangible and intangible. Encouraging others to complete a tDPT program is in the best interest of practitioners and the profession so the profession can continue its upward trajectory and status in our healthcare system.



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