Using Interviews to Assess Non-Cognitive Traits in Physical Therapy Admissions: A Case Report

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PURPOSE

Significant literature indicates that cognitive assessments (e.g., GRE, GPA) are valid tools in predicting academic success in health professional students (Dockter, 2001; Patterson et al., 2016). However, the profession of physical therapy has a set of core values in professionalism (e.g., accountability, integrity, altruism) (APTA, 2004) that incorporates several traits that cannot be evaluated through these methods. Throughout the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) admissions process, it is important to identify candidates that will not only be successful students, but who will embody these core values upon successful completion of the academic curriculum. Therefore, it is imperative that non-cognitive assessments (e.g., interviews) be used to assist admissions committees in identifying individuals best suited for the profession (Goho & Blackman, 2006; Hollman et al., 2008). The purpose of this case report is to explore the use and impact of the interview as part of an entry-level DPT program admissions process.

CASE DESCRIPTION

Initially, a review of the University of Central Florida DPT admissions cycles for 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 was conducted to evaluate the interview process and its utility in admissions decisions. Five applicants were reviewed and summarized to further highlight the interview's impact, specifically, how closely each applicant 'mirrored' the profession's core values, as well as other non-cognitive factors like an applicant's background and preparation (see Figure 1).

ANALYSIS

Inter-rater reliability for the interview was examined using intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC [2,1]. For the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 admissions cycles, researchers compared the rank order of applicants prior to the interviews, which used information based on GRE, GPA, and observation hours, to the rank order of applicants following the semi-structured interviews, which included the previous information plus the interview scores which comprised 20% and 25% of the total score, respectively per cycle .

OUTCOMES

Inter-rater reliability for the interview was found to be excellent with raters in the same session (ICC[2,1]=.80-.92). Over the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 admissions cycles, the interview process impacted 94.2% of the applicants' positions in the rank order list with some of the effects being fairly large (see Figure 3).

	Age at Application	Gender	Major	GRE	Prereq GPA	L60 GPA	PT Hours
Case 1	21	F	Athletic Training	149Q/152V	2.87	3.86	178.5
Case 2	29	M	Marketing	163Q/161V	3.5	2.61	187
Case 3	21	F	Health Science	155Q/154V	3.8	3.94	487
Case 4	22	F	Health Science	157Q/153V	3.2	3.37	135
Case 5	22 and 23	F	Health Science	154Q/155V	4	3.91	101
Admitted Class Averages	24			155Q/154V	3.62	3.68	260

Note. GRE=Graduate Record Examinations, Q=quantitative, V=verbal (scores 130-170, higher score indicates better performance); prereq GPA=DPT prerequisite grade point average; L60 GPA=grade point average of last 60 credits hours taken; PT hours=number of PT observation hours.

Figure 1: Case Study Breakdown

"Good interview – TAKE! Suspect [applicant] will be a superstar".
"Great interpersonal skills; would be a good fit and is well-rounded".
"Poor communication; did not interact well with other interviewees; I don't feel she would interact well with cohort".
"Applicant demonstrated poor interpersonal skills which was evident throughout interview. Also, felt a 'superiority' affect which concerns me regarding her ability to accept constructive feedback".
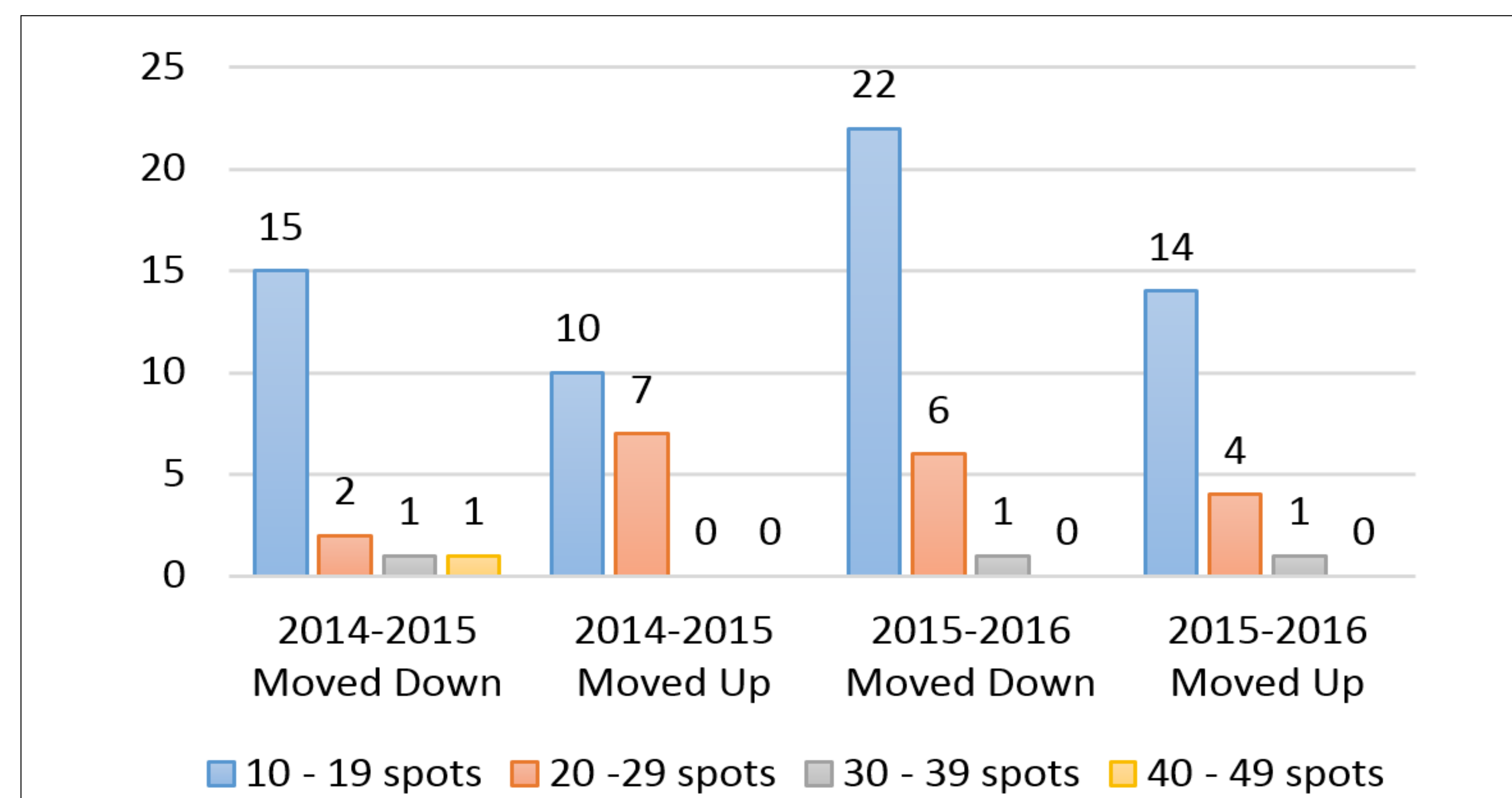
Figure 2: Sample Faculty Interview Comments

Figure 3: Interview Impact on Rank Order of Applicants

Three of the five applicants (Case 1, 2, and 4) demonstrated positive non-cognitive qualities and desired core values through the interview process and were offered admission based primarily on this input. Faculty reviewer comments for these applicants indicated there was very strong evidence of patient/client focus, communication skills, and integrity (see Figure 2). Alternatively, the other two applicants (Case 3 and 5) demonstrated traits during the interview that concerned the faculty reviewers. Case 3 was found to lack many of the core values of the profession when interviewed. Based on the interview, this candidate was not offered admission, despite having high cognitive scores (GRE, GPA) which otherwise made them competitive. Case 5 was unique in that this candidate was accepted during a prior admission cycle, matriculated and then withdrew abruptly from the program within the first two weeks. The candidate reapplied and despite ranking in the top 30 was not offered admission based on the faculty believing the candidate did not meet several of the profession's core values.

DISCUSSION

This case series report contributes significantly to the literature as it demonstrates assessing non-cognitive traits through admissions interview can potentially alter the composition of an incoming class. Physical therapy education not only builds general knowledge and skills, but also has a responsibility of ensuring graduates possess the core values of our profession. Identifying these individuals during the admissions process is crucial to this endeavor. Almost half of current physical therapy programs do not assess these traits through an interview process, which can raise questions about the quality of professional that is entering the field of physical therapy.

Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between scores from interviews, such as the behavioral interview (Janz, 1982; Hollman et al., 2008), and admissions decisions as well as student and graduate success.

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