UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CHICAGO

Supporting Student Success: Holistic Admission Process, Outcomes, and Implications

AOTA Academic Leadership Councils (ALC) Meeting

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INTRODUCTION — Speakers



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Objectives

- Identify benefits that a holistic admissions process provides OT academic programs and the profession
- Describe the application review procedures and specific criteria that may be considered during a holistic admissions process, and their correlation with successful student outcomes
- Identify implications for initiating a holistic review process to promote equitable access to diverse OT students

The student perspective before application

45 of 56 **high school respondents were unsure they could see themselves belonging in OT.**

12 of 56 agreed they understood the role of OT.
5 of 56 agreed they understood the OT & OTA educational pathway.

2026 Medicina Academy Apprentice Program (MAAP) pre-survey (n = 56). Knowledge items combine Agree and Strongly agree.

Arias, D. (2026). Elevate OT MAAP pre-program survey (n = 56) and post-program survey (n = 52) [Unpublished program evaluation data]. University of Illinois Chicago.

Holistic Admissions Defined

An individualized review of experiences, attributes and academic preparation, while considering applicants' readiness and potential contributions.

- Mission-Aligned Selection and Retention Framework (AAMC, n.d.)
- Use transparent selection criteria and consider applicants' opportunities
- Recognize potential contributions to learning and practice
- Align selection with community and workforce needs
- Build systems that support learning and professional readiness

Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC). n.d.. ; Gottlieb et al., 2025; Stoffel et al.,2026.

UIC admissions within the full student pathway

Point in the pathway	What the institution makes possible
Outreach and preparation	Understand OT, build connections, and navigate educational options
Application and selection	Make requirements clear and assess readiness and contributions in context
Learning and progression	Provide advising, tutoring, access, and an inclusive learning environment
Fieldwork and capstone	Coordinate supported participation with placement and community partners
Certification and employment	Prepare for professional entry and identify remaining transition barriers

Stoffel et al., 2026; AAMC, n.d.

UIC mission alignment and institutional commitment

Level	Mission commitment	Leadership responsibility
University	Access to educational opportunity at a research university	Resource student access and support across the institution
College	Health equity, disability inclusion, and mutually beneficial partnerships	Share expertise, services, and community partnership infrastructure
Department	Culturally responsive practice, community engagement, and reciprocal scholarship	Recognize admissions and outreach workload and support student progression

Stoffel et al., 2026; UIC, n.d.

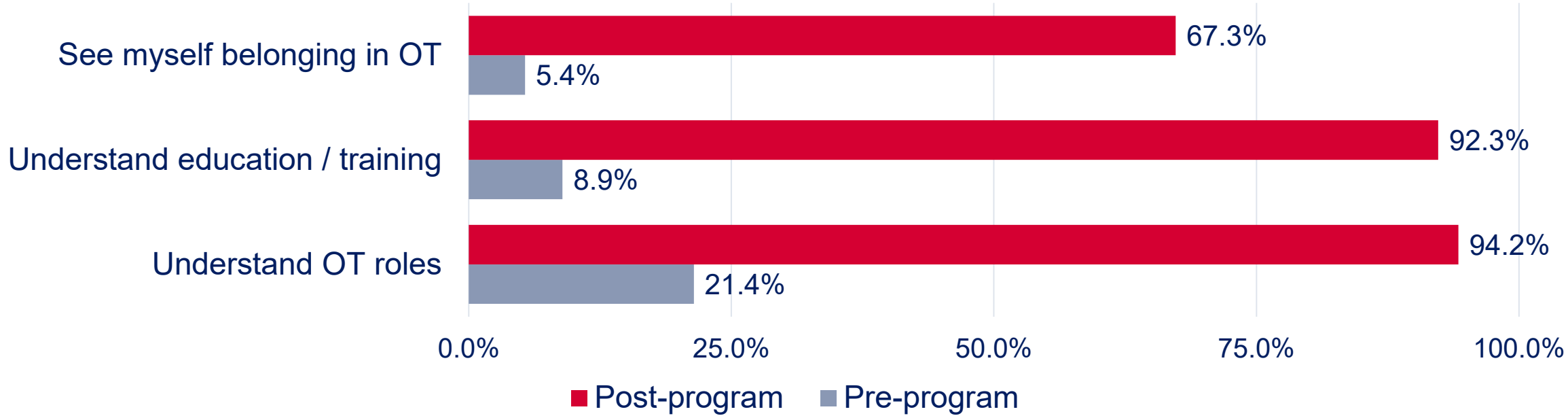
Barriers to pursuing education in OT and potential program responses

Condition shaping access	Examples of institutional and/or program response
Uneven exposure to occupational therapy	Partner with schools and community organizations to offer recurring, hands-on OT experiences and information on educational pathways
Unclear requirements and application expectations	Publish clear prerequisites and selection criteria; offer free application advising and ongoing review of application program requirements to avoid unnecessary hurdles
Financial barriers to applying and attending programs	Coordinate scholarships and emergency aid; make costs through fieldwork, capstone, and certification transparent
Lack of mentorship and professional networks	Establish sustained peer, alumni, and practitioner mentoring; facilitate professional connections and observation opportunities
Lack of culturally responsive and equitable outreach practices	Develop outreach with community partners and students; share decisions, reflect community priorities, and account for access barriers such as language, transportation, scheduling

Tyminski & Grajo, 2024; Ramirez & Kiraly-Alvarez, 2023; Gröne et al., 2025; Arias, 2026; UIC, n.d.

Elevate OT Post-Program Pilot Follow-Up

Agree or strongly agree with each statement



Pre-program n = 56; post-program n = 52. Unmatched respondent groups; descriptive self-report.

Arias, D. (2026). Elevate OT MAAP pre-program survey (n = 56) and post-program survey (n = 52) [Unpublished program evaluation data]. University of Illinois Chicago.

Admissions barriers and UIC OT example responses

Admissions barriers	Example Responses from UIC OT
Limited guidance on navigating applications and degree options	Advising clarifies prerequisites and OT and OTA career pathways, including program length, costs, and fit with students' goals
Unclear admissions expectations	Information sessions explain application requirements and program expectations, with opportunities to ask questions
Limited access to professional role models and representation	Virtual program previews connect applicants with faculty and current students. Pre-OT Club, UIC Chapters of COTAD & Diverse-OT and mentoring sustain connections
Limited recognition of lived and culturally grounded experiences	Holistic review considers work, community service, leadership, and language fluency alongside academic preparation and potential contributions

Why and how did we develop a holistic admissions process?

- Prior to 2000: BS in OT, 56 students with a range of backgrounds
- 2000: New MS cohort of 28 was much more homogenous
- 2001: Launched holistic admissions process in line with UIC's mission
  - Individualized review process that went beyond GPA and GRE
  - Consideration was added for a range of factors, labeled as "unique qualifications"
  - The process was revised to reflect new data sources, outcome data, and federal requirements
- What were the results?

Stoffel et al., 2026

Outcomes for Students Who Enrolled 2012-21

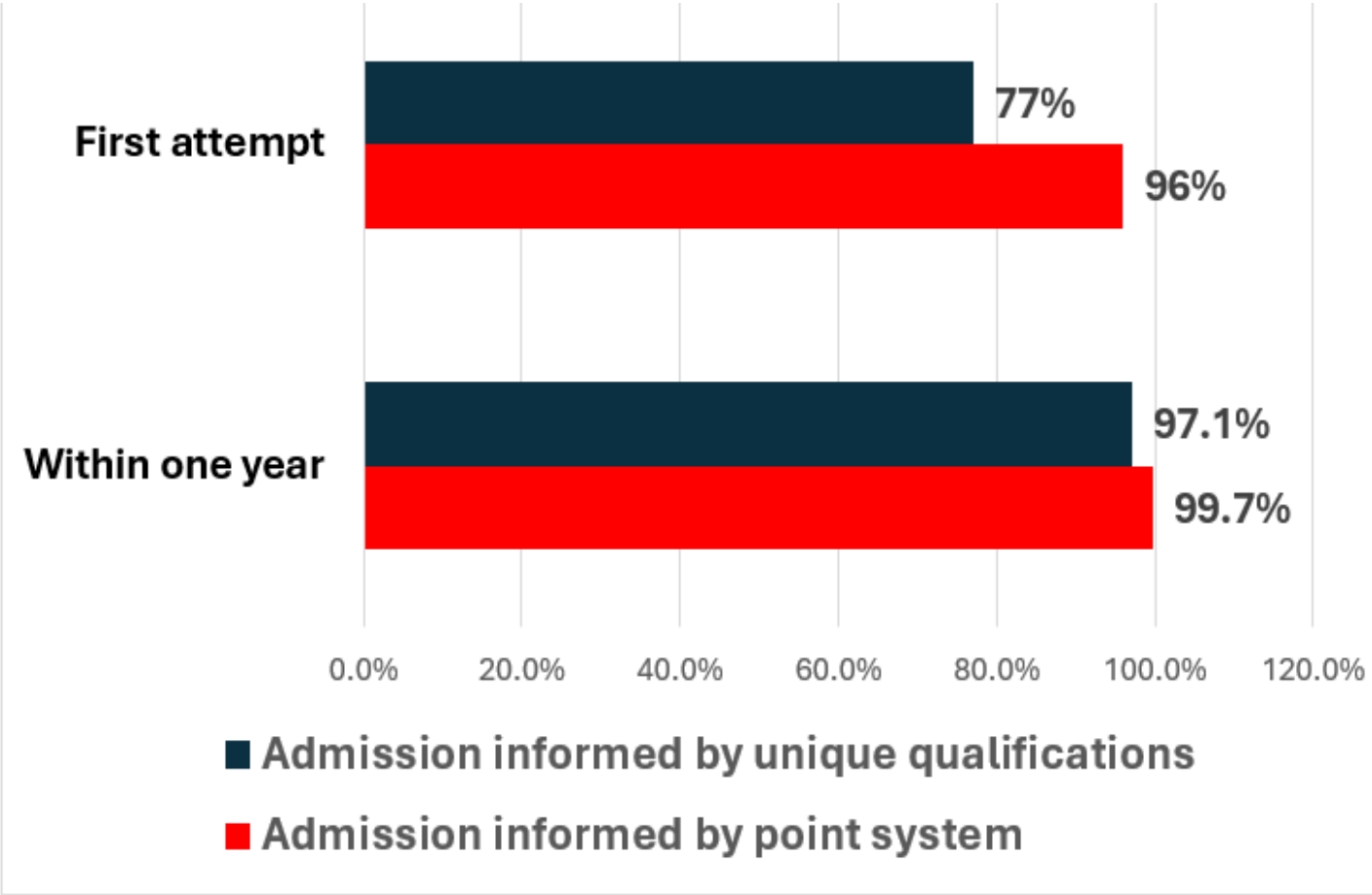
Of the 434 enrolled students out of the 792 who applied:

- **67%** (289) of the enrolled students were admitted based on rating points
- **33%** (145) had "unique qualifications" that were considered in the admission decision
- **40%** (174) of the enrolled students reported non-White race or ethnicity

- **Total graduation rate: 98.6%**, 428 of the 434 enrolled students graduated
  - **Subgroup graduation rates: 99.7%** of the students admitted on points alone and **96.6%** of the students whose admissions decision was informed by unique qualifications graduated
  - Of the six students who did not graduate, four withdrew for personal reasons and 2 were dismissed due to failing a course or fieldwork

Stoffel et al., 2026

Proportion of 2014-23 Graduates Passing the NBCOT Exam



Stoller et al., 2020

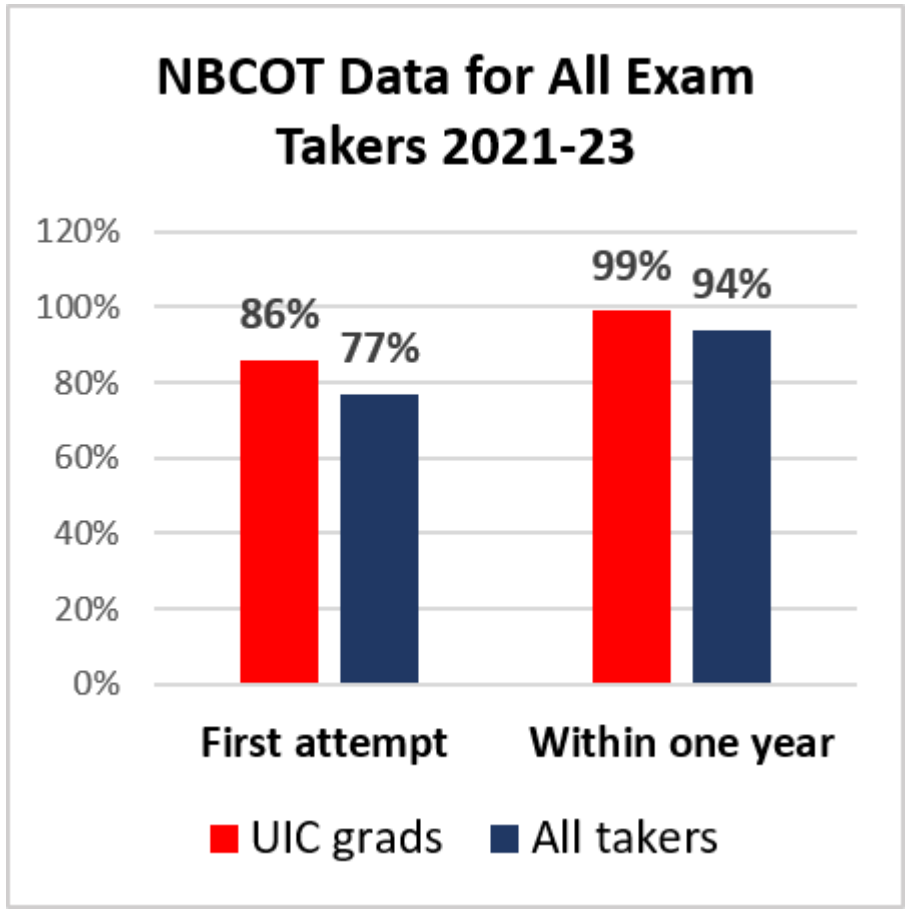
Possible contributing factors:

- Financial pressure to get a job
- Limited study time and resources
- Tendency to get lower scores on standardized tests

Response:

- Panel of graduates
- Graduates formed study groups
- Support from advisors and faculty
- Department providing more preparation and support

Comparison of 2021-23 UIC Graduates to National NBCOT Exam Pass Rates



Comparing 10 year and 3 year periods

- Pass rate for this time period, the final 3 years of the 10 year period, rose from 77% for the 10 year period to 86%, despite COVID disruptions
- Two more graduates passed the exam after the one year mark, after taking a hiatus
- Two graduates out did not pass the exam after multiple attempts and are working in related fields

Stoffel et al., 2026

Components of the UIC Occupational Therapy Holistic Admissions Process

1. Preparing for the admission process each cycle
2. Collecting applicant data
3. Reviewing applications
4. Selecting applicants
5. Evaluating the admissions process
6. Evaluating the outcomes of the process

Overview of Holistic Admissions File Review



PRE-SCREENING

COMMITTEE REVIEW

FINAL REVIEW

What makes this possible?

- Department-level support
  - Staff assistance
  - Workload time for committee members
  - Paying a community member to be on the committee
- Student supports throughout the program
  - Multi-layered advising
  - Free tutoring
  - NBCOT exam prep support
  - Disability, fieldwork, and well-being resources
  - Guidance on licensure steps & employment preparation

What changes have occurred?

- Elimination of GRE as a requirement (2023)
- Race/ethnicity no longer considered (2024)
- UIC-specific essay updated (after OTCAS personal statement prompt changes in 2025)

- Ongoing review of item weighting and committee process each cycle

What have we learned over time?

- Holistic admissions can be successful if there is adequate support
- OTCAS data on applicants' economic and educational challenges has provided key information to inform admissions decisions
- Fieldwork failure can derail the student's trajectory and career plans
- It is a mistake to admit too many students needing a lot of support
- Autonomy and a "firewall" for the admissions committee is crucial
- Admission practices impact the student, faculty, and the profession
- Roles in recruitment and admissions can be very fulfilling

Coordinated efforts to promote student access and success

Responsibility	A decision within reach
Admissions and outreach	Review one application requirement or information gap with prospective or recently admitted students
University, college, and department leaders	Allocate staff time and resources for advising, accessibility, and student support
Faculty, fieldwork, and capstone educators	Address barriers to participation and establish clear support contacts across transitions
AOTA and academic programs	Share useful approaches and identify barrires that require coordinated action (great use of CoPs!)

Stoffel et al., 2026; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2023; Matthews et al., 2022

Closing Thoughts

- Holistic review recognizes academic readiness, experiences, and potential in context
- Student success requires support through education and entry into the profession
- Thoughtful review and student support require sustained institutional commitment
- Ongoing evaluation keeps the process aligned with the program's mission

Questions to Consider

1. Where do prospective students, enrolled students, or graduates encounter gaps in guidance or support along your program's pathway?
2. What is one change your program could make, and what resources would help sustain it?
3. Which barriers require collaboration beyond your program, and what role could your institution, partners, or AOTA play?

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Thank you!

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