

# The Effectiveness of Service-Learning Projects in Developing Cultural Competency in Entry Level Masters in Occupational Therapy Students

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## ABSTRACT

To be culturally competent, individuals should expose themselves to different cultural backgrounds through service-learning in addition to didactic learning. The purpose of this study was to determine if culturally related Coalition of Occupational Therapy Advocates for Diversity (COTAD), Student Occupational Therapy Association (SOTA) events, and BRIDGE ECHO sessions enhanced the cultural competency of occupational therapy students.

### Methods

32 second-year occupational therapy students at SUNY Downstate were invited to attend COTAD, SOTA and BRIDGE ECHO sessions. Students were administered the Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Checklist developed by Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society (CVIMS) pre and post completion of sessions. This assessment consisted of 30 questions and utilizes three sections for analysis of cultural competency: awareness, knowledge, and skills (“Cultural Competence...”, n.d.).

### Results

The results using descriptive statistics displayed an increase in multiple categories related to one’s cultural competency, including overall increases in one’s cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills.

## BACKGROUND

Occupational therapy is a holistic profession that fosters meaning, purpose, and fulfillment for both clients and practitioners. This underscores the essential role of meaningful occupation in person’s well-being and the necessity for therapists to understand their clients’ unique backgrounds to deliver effective, client-centered care. Central to this approach is the development of cultural competency, which should begin during the didactic phase of occupational therapy education.

Cultural competency can be cultivated through service-learning experiences that complement didactic learning. These experiences provide students with opportunities to engage with diverse communities, thereby enhancing their understanding of clients’ cultural values and priorities. Such immersion is critical, as cultural competency is not a static achievement but an ongoing developmental process that requires continued exposure to and interaction with cultures different from one’s own (Szucs et al., 2020).

This study was conducted at SUNY Downstate in conjunction with the university’s COTAD Chapter, a nonprofit organization promoting justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) within the profession. COTAD facilitated three service-learning and three intercultural events during the 2024 academic year. Additionally, six BRIDGE ECHO sessions—led by SUNY Downstate Bridge faculty specializing in geriatric mental health and dementia care—were incorporated. These sessions featured case-based presentations by residency physicians and collaborative discussions on treatment approaches.

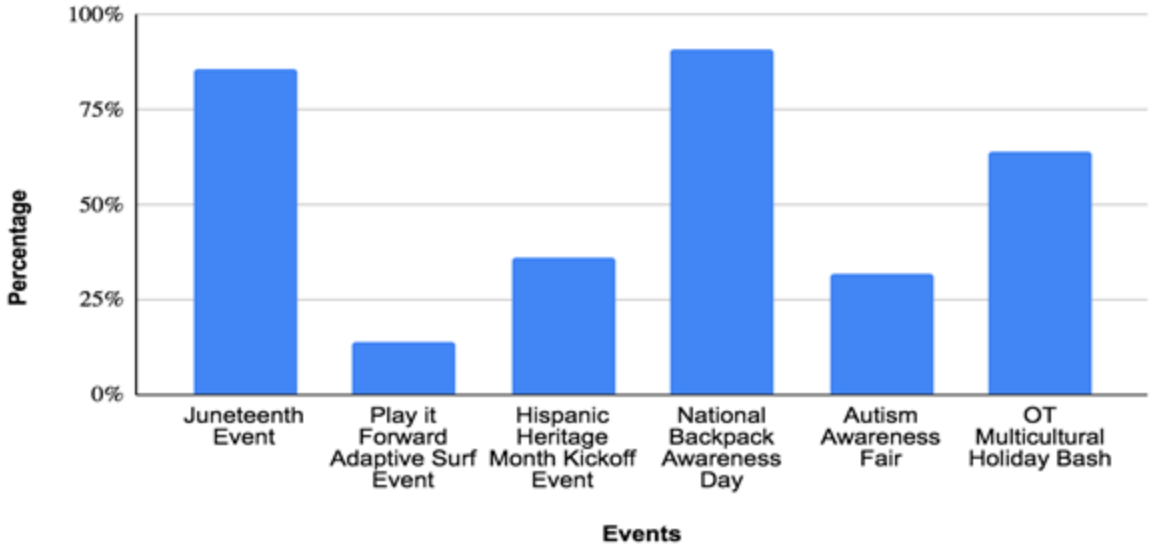
### Awareness section of the CVIMS:

Awareness		Never	Sometimes/occasionally	Fairly Often/Pretty Well	Always/very well
Value Diversity	I view difference as positive and a source to embrace.				
Know myself	I have a clear sense of my own ethnic, cultural and racial identity.				
Share my culture	I am aware that in order to learn more about others I need to understand and be prepared to share my own culture.				
Be aware of areas of discomfort	I am aware of my discomfort when I encounter differences in race, color, religion, sexual orientation, language, and ethnicity.				
Check my assumptions	I am aware of the assumptions that I hold about people of cultures different from my own.				
Challenge my stereotypes	I am aware of my stereotypes as they arise and have developed personal strategies for reducing the harm they cause.				
Reflect on how my culture informs my judgement	I am aware of how my cultural perspective influences my judgement about what are “appropriate”, “normal”, or “admirable” behaviors, values, and communication styles.				
Accept ambiguity	I accept that in cross cultural situations there can be uncertainty and that can create uneasiness.				
	I take the time needed to get more information in cross cultural situations.				
Be curious	I take any opportunity to put myself in places where I can learn about difference and create relationships.				

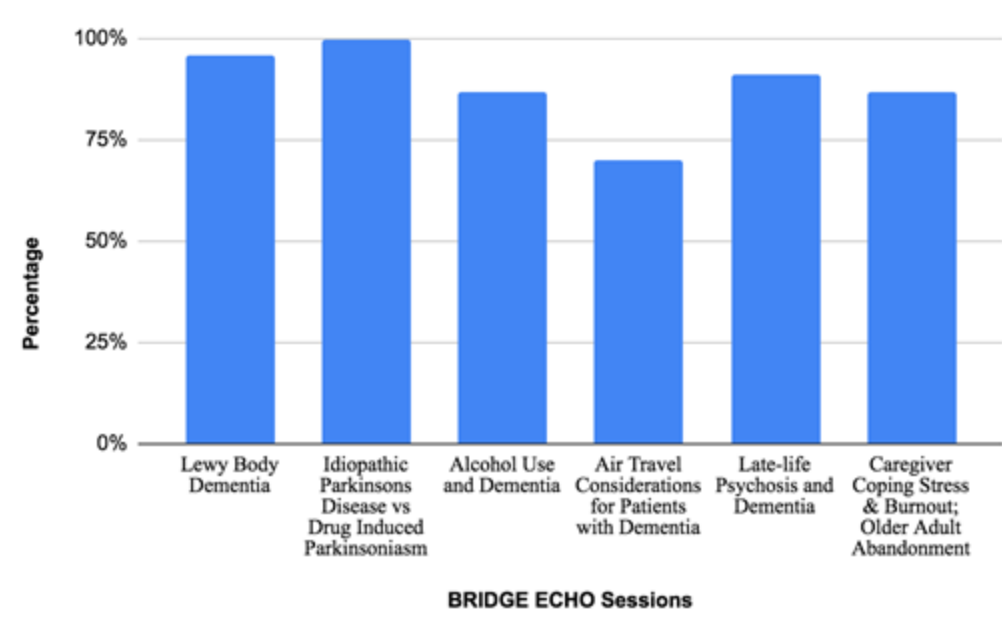
## METHODOLOGY

- Participants:** Thirty-two students from the second-year Occupational Therapy graduate program at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University were invited to participate in the study. The study concluded with a total of 24 participants.
- Preparation Materials and Activities:** The Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Checklist developed by Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society (CVIMS) was used to measure participants’ awareness of their own cultural competency. The tool included three sections—awareness, knowledge, and skills—which were assessed using a Likert-type scale.
- Procedure:** The initial assessment was administered via Qualtrics and distributed to all participants through email prior to the events or sessions. The second-year students were invited to attend six events sponsored by COTAD and SOTA, held at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University and within the surrounding Brooklyn community during school hours. The six BRIDGE ECHO sessions took place on selected Wednesday mornings via Zoom. After the completion of all events and sessions, the assessment was re-administered to the participants.

### COTAD/SOTA EVENTS ATTENDED

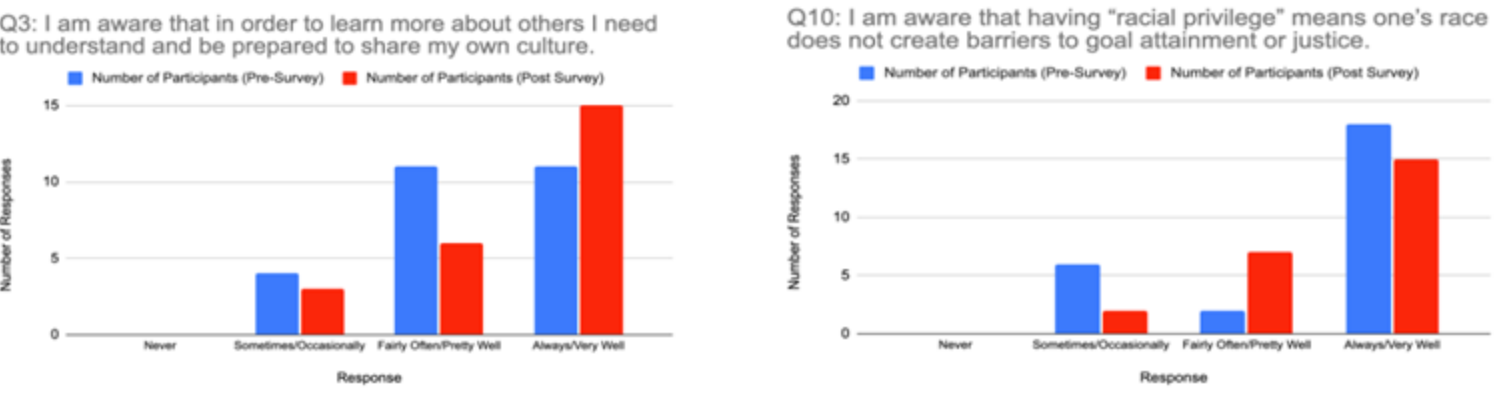


### BRIDGE ECHO SESSIONS ATTENDED



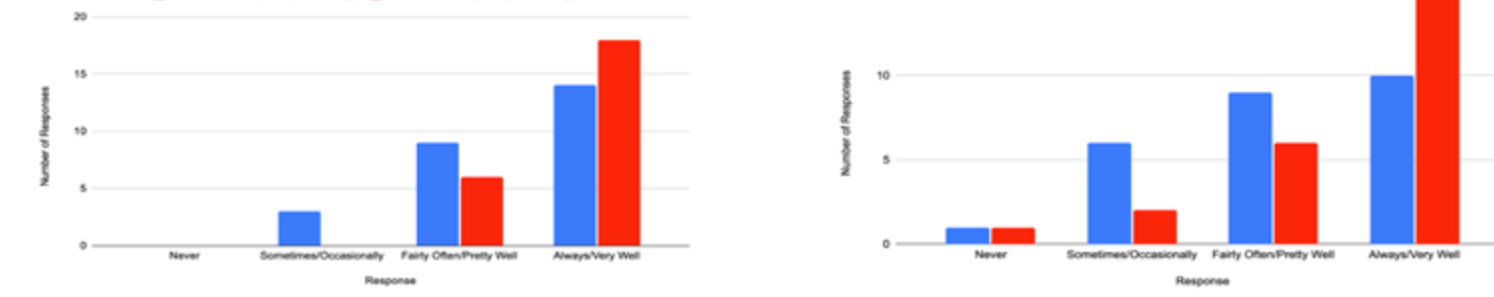
## RESULTS

### Awareness

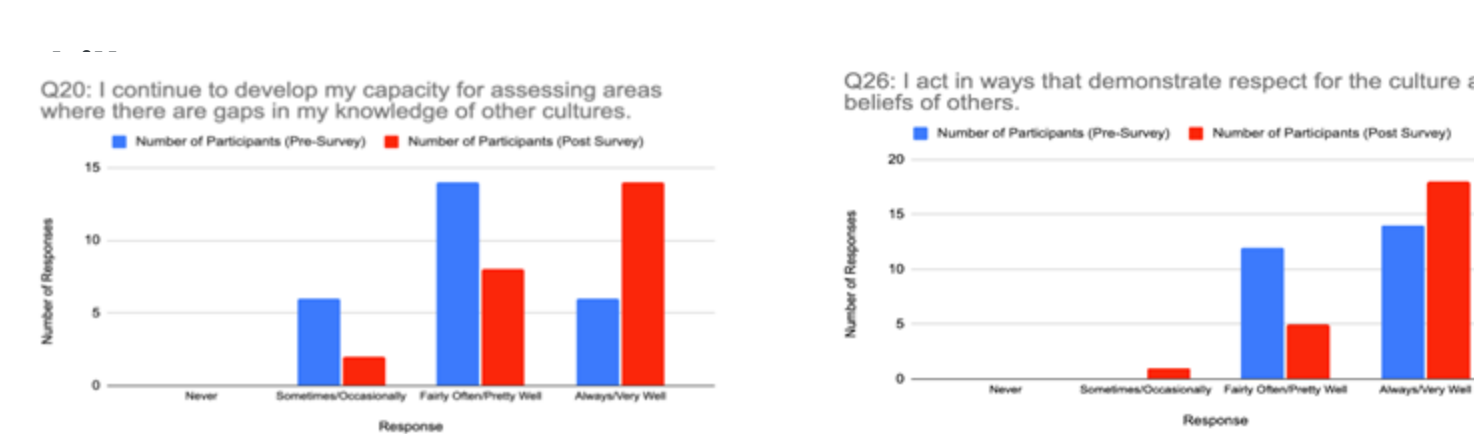


Awareness: Prior to engaging in the COTAD, SOTA, and BRIDGE ECHO sessions, 42% of participants noted that they felt very well on this topic, and following the service opportunities 63% of participants felt very well aware. For question 10, there was also a 21% increase in the number of participants who noted “fairly often” which signifies that they recognized the impact of racial privilege in achieving goals or receiving justice.

### Knowledge



Knowledge: After the COTAD, SOTA, and BRIDGE ECHO service-learning, there was a significant increase in the participants’ response to being more knowledgeable in the diversity and change of culture, and their family’s immigration and assimilation story. However, there was only a 6% increase for participants who selected “always” for the statement that states they recognize that achieving cultural competency involves a commitment to learning over a lifetime.



Skills: For question 20, there was a noticeable increase in choosing the “always” response. In the pre-survey, 23% of participants answered “always.” However, in the post-survey, 58% of participants answered “always.” The 35% increase in answering “always” showed that participants increased their own ability to know what their limitations were with respect to other cultures. Additionally, for question 26, there was a 21% increase in individuals who always felt they acted in ways that demonstrated respect for the culture and beliefs of others.

## DISCUSSION

The COTAD, SOTA, and BRIDGE ECHO events and sessions appeared to have a positive impact on the development of cultural competency among second-year Occupational Therapy students at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University. Participation in these events provided students with opportunities to engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and lifestyles. These interactions facilitated greater exposure to, and understanding of, how to effectively engage with various communities as future occupational therapy practitioners. The sessions offered an expanded perspective on cultural diversity and contributed to a broader scope of cultural awareness.

Given the changing landscape of healthcare, it remains essential for future occupational therapists to engage in experiences that foster cultural understanding and competency. This study supported the notion that such experiential learning opportunities were beneficial in enhancing cultural competency. However, continued research is warranted to explore and refine strategies that promote meaningful engagement with diverse populations within occupational therapy education.

Future studies should consider incorporating service-learning components directly related to occupational therapy practice to evaluate their specific impact on cultural competency. Comparative analysis between discipline-specific service-learning experiences and those more broadly related to general healthcare may provide insight into the relative effectiveness of each approach. Existing literature has predominantly focused on cultural competency in the context of general healthcare, with limited attention directed toward its development within the field of occupational therapy.

## LIMITATIONS

- The data shows a general consensus that there was a positive impact on cultural competency after the events and sessions were attended, but it is still important to understand the specifics of those impacts.
- There were 28 responses to the pre-survey and 24 responses to the post-survey. Therefore, four fewer people filled out the post-survey.
- The number of events/sessions that participants attended were not analyzed in relation to the post-survey self-assessment.



**Service-Learning Event- COTAD Chapter and SOTA volunteered at two local public schools in Brooklyn for Backpack Awareness Day and demonstrated backpack safety tips for the school-aged children.**



**Intercultural Event- COTAD Chapter hosted a Juneteenth Event to highlight the history, importance, and common celebrations of this holiday.**

