DPT Students' Perception of Clinical Readiness and Confidence in Their Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSAs) Before Their First Full-Time Clinical Experience

Stephanie LaPrino, PT, DPT; Jadyn Holmes, SPT; Emily Piper, SPT; Cierra Richardson, SPT; Caileigh Saucier, SPT; Akira Warren, SPT

HUSSON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF PHYSICAL THERAPY

Background/Purpose

Clinical experiences are essential in physical therapy education to bridge the gap between didactic learning and clinical practice. Early, contextualized opportunities, such as a student-run Pro Bono clinic, enhance skill development, confidence, and preparedness. Prior research suggests early clinical exposure improves self-perceived readiness for practice[2]. Additionally, competency frameworks have identified essential knowledge, skills, and professional behaviors required before initial clinical experiences[3]. This study used a survey-based approach to evaluate Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) students' perceived readiness and confidence prior to clinical placement.

Methods

A clinical readiness checklist adapted from Timmerberg et al. (2019) was organized into 13 domains encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and professional behaviors. Participants rated perceived competence using a four-point Likert scale (Unfamiliar to Proficient). Eligible students completed an anonymous electronic survey via Google Forms after providing informed consent. No identifying information was collected.

Results

KSA Description	Level Expected	Participants not Meeting Expected Level (90-100% meeting expectation)
Theme 3: (3.1-3.3): Interventions	At Least Familiar	4.5% or Less
Theme 6: Communication	At Least Familiar	0% All Met
Theme 9: Documentation	At Least Familiar	0% All Met
Theme 13: Patient Handling (first 5 100%; Aerobic Ex.)	At Least Familiar	4.5% (all but 1 AE)

90–100% met expectations in communication, interventions, patient handling, and documentation, with only 4.5% below expectations in aerobic exercise-related tasks.

Results (Cont'd)

KSA Description	Level Expected	Participants not Meeting Expected Level (<70% meeting expectation)
1.2 Common Diagnoses	At Least Emerging	36%
1.4 Pathophysiology	At Least Emerging	50%
7.10 Introducing Self	Proficient	40.9%
10.5 Infection Control	At Least Emerging	31.8%

Students reported lower perceived competence in common diagnoses (36%), pathology (50%), infection control (31.8%), and self-introduction (40.9%), despite expected performance of "at least emerging."

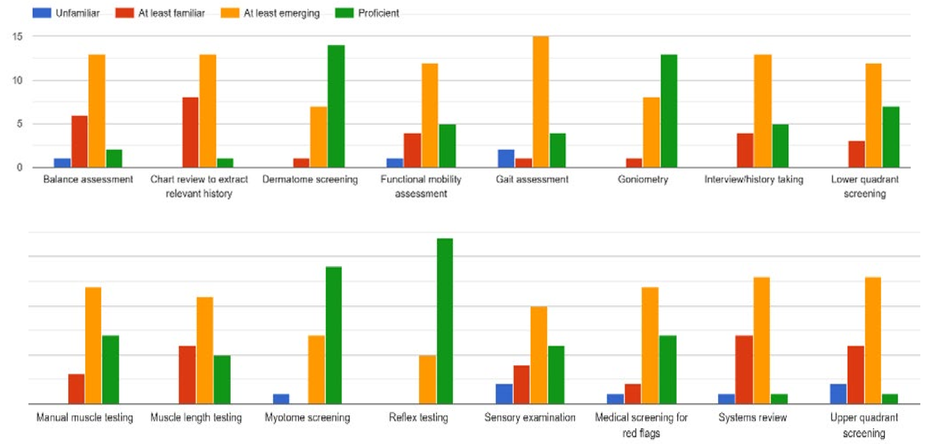
KSA Description	Level Expected	Participants not Meeting Expected Level (80-90% meeting expectation)
7.4 Build Rapport	At Least Emerging	13.6%
8.7 Punctuality	Proficent	13.6%
10.1 Contraindication	At Least Emerging	13.6%
11.2 Clinical Rational	At Least Familiar	13.6%
12.7 History Taking	At Least Emerging	18.18%
12.9 MMT	At Least Emerging	13.6%
14.3 Code of Ethics	At Least Emerging	13.6%
14.4 Clinical Expectation	At Least Emerging	13.6%
14.5 HIPPA	At Least Emerging	18.18%

In areas such as self-care, measuring muscle length, sensory assessment, legal considerations, and patient–provider relationships, 70–80% met expectations, while approx. 22% did not.

KSA Description	Level Expected	Participants not Meeting Expected Level (70-80% meeting expectation)
8.8 Self-Care	At Least Emerging	22.7%
12.10 Muscle Length	At Least Emerging	27.27%
12.13 Sensory	At Least Emerging	27.27%
14.6 Legal Aspects	At Least Emerging	22.73%
14.7 Patient Provider Relationship	At Least Emerging	22.73%

For professional skills, 80–90% met expectations, with deficits noted in manual muscle testing and HIPAA (18.18%) and Code of Ethics (14.6%).

Theme 12: Student should have BOTH the understanding and skill to perform the following examination skills:



Conclusion

DPT students reported higher confidence in communication and professional behaviors compared to clinical skills and reasoning. These findings suggest a gap between knowledge acquisition and clinical application, highlighting the need for earlier, structured clinical experiences to enhance readiness and self-efficacy. Future research should investigate students both prior to and following their initial clinical experience, with an emphasis on evaluating changes in expectations as well as measuring corresponding increases in confidence.

References & Contact Information

Stephanie LaPrino, PT, DPT

laprinos@husson.edu