

Personal Statement –OT

If you were to ask me four years ago when I was applying to my prospective undergraduate colleges what were my professional aspirations, my answer would be that I simply wanted to help people. I have always been passionate about working with children, but I had not quite figured out what professional path would be the perfect fit. I would like to share with you how I decided to choose occupational therapy as my career and how my academic experiences, research background, and personal hardships have prepared me for graduate school.

I began at the University of Illinois as a Psychology major because it seemed to be the most logical way to work with children. Shortly after beginning my freshman year, I realized that this major was not for me and I began to search for a new profession. My sister suggested I look into occupational therapy (OT) and I immediately was intrigued. I arranged to observe a pediatric occupational therapist and found myself envying the role that she had in her patients' lives. Since then I have been able to shadow in a variety of OT settings. These settings made me aware of the diverse ways that occupational therapists are able to help their clients. Shadowing has taught me that occupational therapists believe in utilizing a holistic approach to help patients reach their highest level of independence. I really enjoyed that the therapists addressed not only the physical needs of their patients, but their psychological needs as well.

In my search for a new major I discovered human development and family studies. This major has prepared me for the OT profession by giving me knowledge of typical development in all aspects of a person's life including social, emotional, physical and more. By doing so, it has helped me to have an understanding of when a person's development is atypical. Given this knowledge, I noticed that my 6-month-old cousin seemed to be constantly tilting his head to the right. I told my aunt about my concern and I suggested that she mention it to her pediatrician. At his next check up, the doctor diagnosed my cousin with congenital torticollis. Without the help of his occupational and physical therapists my cousin would likely have been delayed in reaching his developmental milestones. Being able to see the appreciation that my aunt had for the work done by those therapists made me realize the impact I will be able to make on the lives' of families as an OT.

I also feel my years at the University of Illinois have helped motivate me to strive to make the most of my educational opportunities. One way I did this was through the James Scholar program. This honor is offered to students who have shown high academic achievement. I have enjoyed the experience of being a James Scholar because the program encourages students to push themselves to go above and beyond and learn more than what is taught in the classrooms. With this program I was able to work alongside a small team in an human development lab. Our research focused on the impacts that growing up in an impoverished area may have on children's development. This research made me realize how much a child's environment influences their development. As an OT, I'll need to take into account the resources a person has at home to help them continue their therapy outside the office setting. This lab experience also allowed me to learn to collaborate well with a team in stressful situations to accomplish a common task. I believe that this is an important skill to have for graduate school, but even more so it will be helpful within the field of OT. Working with people from an assortment of majors was analogous to the way that occupational therapists often have to work on teams with speech therapists, physical therapists and other physicians to help a patients reach their health goals. Everyone had a different part of the research project that they were responsible for but we had to come together to collate our data and draw conclusions in much the same way doctors and therapists must use their professional expertise to come together and create a plan that will be most beneficial to the patient.

Additionally, the University of Illinois is preparing me for my career in occupational therapy by providing me the opportunity to explore the world. I participated in a study abroad experience, volunteering in hospitals and shadowing an OT while in South Africa. This experience allowed me to enter my master's program with a unique outlook on possible therapy options. I am excited to see how the therapeutic needs of children and the techniques therapists use to treat them differ across cultures. I also believe that immersing myself within the South African culture prepared me to be mindful of the unique aspects of a person's cultural background when working with clients. On this trip I gained knowledge of another culture's view of how therapy can be beneficial while learning how to be sensitive to cultural differences.

While I believe the University of Illinois has done a fantastic job of preparing me for my academic goals, my personal experiences have also helped prepare me for my career. In the beginning of my sophomore year my dad suddenly relapsed with cancer. Seeing my dad, the strongest man I know, at his weakest was infuriating. I wanted to be able to help him in some way but unfortunately there was nothing that could be done. Right before he passed away I promised him that I would continue to pursue my academic path. Losing my father was one of the hardest things I have experienced and I decided to take a semester off to recover. It was the promise I made to him and my determination to make him proud that encouraged me to carry on in my academic goals. Experiencing this personal tragedy has shown me that I have the strength to persevere through any obstacle that I may encounter on the path to achieving my goals.

Looking back I knew nothing could be done for my dad at his weakest moment but I take comfort in knowing that this is not the case for all people who are experiencing a moment of weakness in their life. I look forward to using my skills as an OT to give hope when a person feels that all hope has been lost. While observing I saw many patients who seemed defeated after experiencing a stroke or being in an accident. As an OT, I want to be the person to help patients realize that therapy can help them regain strength. In spite of my personal hardships, I have managed to keep an optimistic outlook on life and see the good in every situation. I hope to use this positive outlook to help motivate my clients to reach for their highest potential, even when they are feeling hopeless.

In these last four years I have learned more lessons than I ever could have imagined. My undergraduate experiences, both academic and personal, have encouraged self-discovery, personal growth, and ultimately helped to prepare me for graduate school. I am excited to begin the next stage of my academic journey and even though I am one step closer to trading my student status for that of a professional, I believe that in the field of occupational therapy learning is a lifelong process. I look forward to continuing this learning experience in graduate school and I am eager to take the next step towards becoming an occupational therapist.