

Introduction

Globally, students often lack access to meaningful career exploration experiences that support informed decision-making about their futures (Wang, 2024; Bullock-Yowell et al., 2014). As demand for occupational therapy (OT) increases with an aging population and rising chronic health conditions (Richards & Vallée, 2020), understanding how students choose careers is essential; however, awareness of OT remains limited among youth. Interactive and experiential learning—such as simulations and hands-on activities—can engage students, influence career decisions, and raise awareness of OT (Mu et al., 2002). Hawai'i Pacific University serves as the community partner in collaborating with local high schools to understand how students are introduced to different professions and how career exploration is currently being taught.

Project Description

The project explores how high school and undergraduate students make career decisions and how this understanding can inform strategies to raise awareness of occupational therapy.

Aloha: seeking ways to raise awareness of OT among youth through collaboration with HPU faculty and school staff and aims to inspire students to explore the profession.

Pono: providing accurate information about OT, while maintaining professionalism and emphasizing collaboration across healthcare professions to serve others.

Kuleana: using educational expertise to engage students in learning about OT, fostering interest in the profession, and contributing to community awareness.

Kokua: supporting students' exploration of healthcare careers and inspiring future practitioners to meet growing global needs through service and compassion.

Laulima: partnering with school staff across Hawai'i and HPU faculty to sustain awareness of OT and strengthen collaboration for ongoing educational outreach.

Purpose/Aims

Informed by research on how high school and undergraduate students make career decisions, the purpose is to develop and deliver interactive lectures and hands-on activities to increase the awareness of OT.

Goal 1: Identify partner programs and gather information on how students learn about careers.

Goal 2: Determine effective learning methods and develop OT-focused educational materials and activities.

Goal 3: Deliver lectures and hands-on activities to teach students about OT and the roles of OTPs.

Goal 4: Create and implement evaluation methods to assess students' understanding of OT and the roles of OTPs.

Methods

Literature Review

- How the OT profession raises awareness and grows the workforce.
- Effective career decision-making strategies and exploration tools for students.

Needs Assessment

- Key concerns identified through the literature review.
- Ten-question survey distributed to college counselors at schools across Hawai'i.

Information was organized using thematic analysis to guide and inform program development and implementation.

Program Development

- Gather information on OT (and various settings) and effective hands-on activities.
- Develop infographics: "What is OT?", "Where do OTs Work?", "How to Become an OT", "HPU OTD Program".
- Develop activities: Visual Card Game, Mirror Therapy, Nine Hole Peg Test, Dynamometer Contest, Paint with Q-Tips, Dressing w/ Non-Dominant Side, Step-by-Step Drawing, Balloon Toss, FWW + Reacher, Guess What This AE Does.
- Develop presentation slides (w/ clips).

Program Implementation

- Virtual presentations, in-person school presentations, and career fair.
- Groups: High school, college (undergraduate), parents, and teachers/counselors.

Evaluation

- Ten-question survey

Discussion

The results indicate that hands-on activities and presentations from practicing professionals are most preferred by high school students and were also most effective for increasing awareness of OT. Following the OT lecture and experiential activity, 86% of students reported understanding what OT is and what occupational therapy practitioners (OTP) do, 80% understood where OTs work, and 35% expressed interest in exploring OT as a potential career. These findings demonstrate meaningful gains in students' knowledge and interest—supporting the value of interactive, practitioner-led career education.

This project has implications for OT by highlighting effective strategies to raise awareness of the profession in Hawai'i—potentially increasing interest and recruitment into the field. By understanding how students make career decisions, OT programs and practitioners can design educational materials and targeted outreach—addressing workforce needs and ensuring that the growing demand for OT services is met across the globe.

This project was limited by factors such as sample size, geographic scope, time, and reliance on self-reported data. Future interactions could expand outreach to additional schools and colleges on all islands (particularly UH Hilo and West O'ahu) and incorporate long-term follow-up to better assess the impact of OT educational interventions.

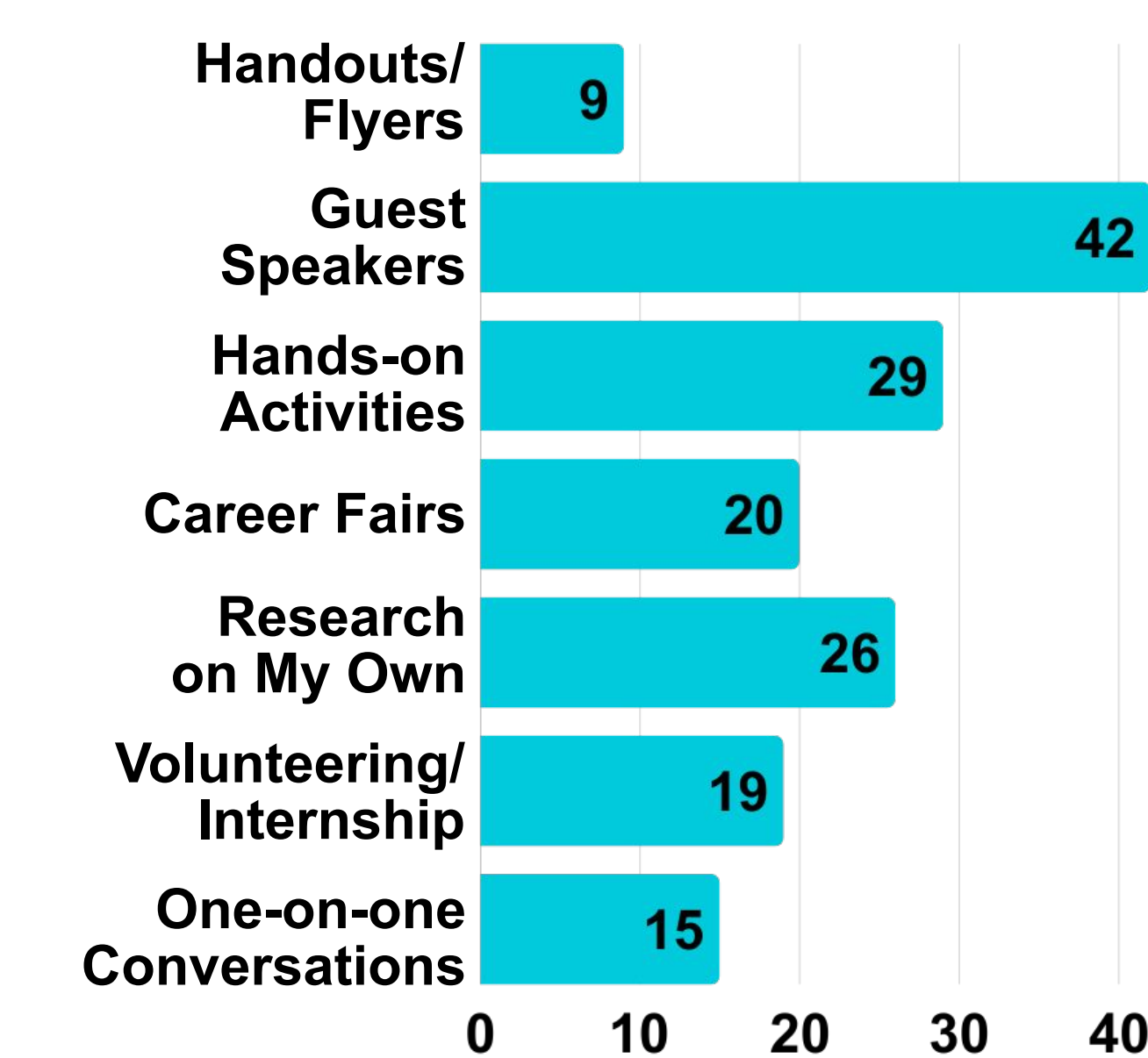
Results/Outcomes

62 public, charter, private schools contacted
→ 23 agreed to receive educational materials
→ 6 extended invitation to present to students

10 colleges and universities contacted
→ 4 agreed to receive educational materials
→ 2 extended invitation to present to students

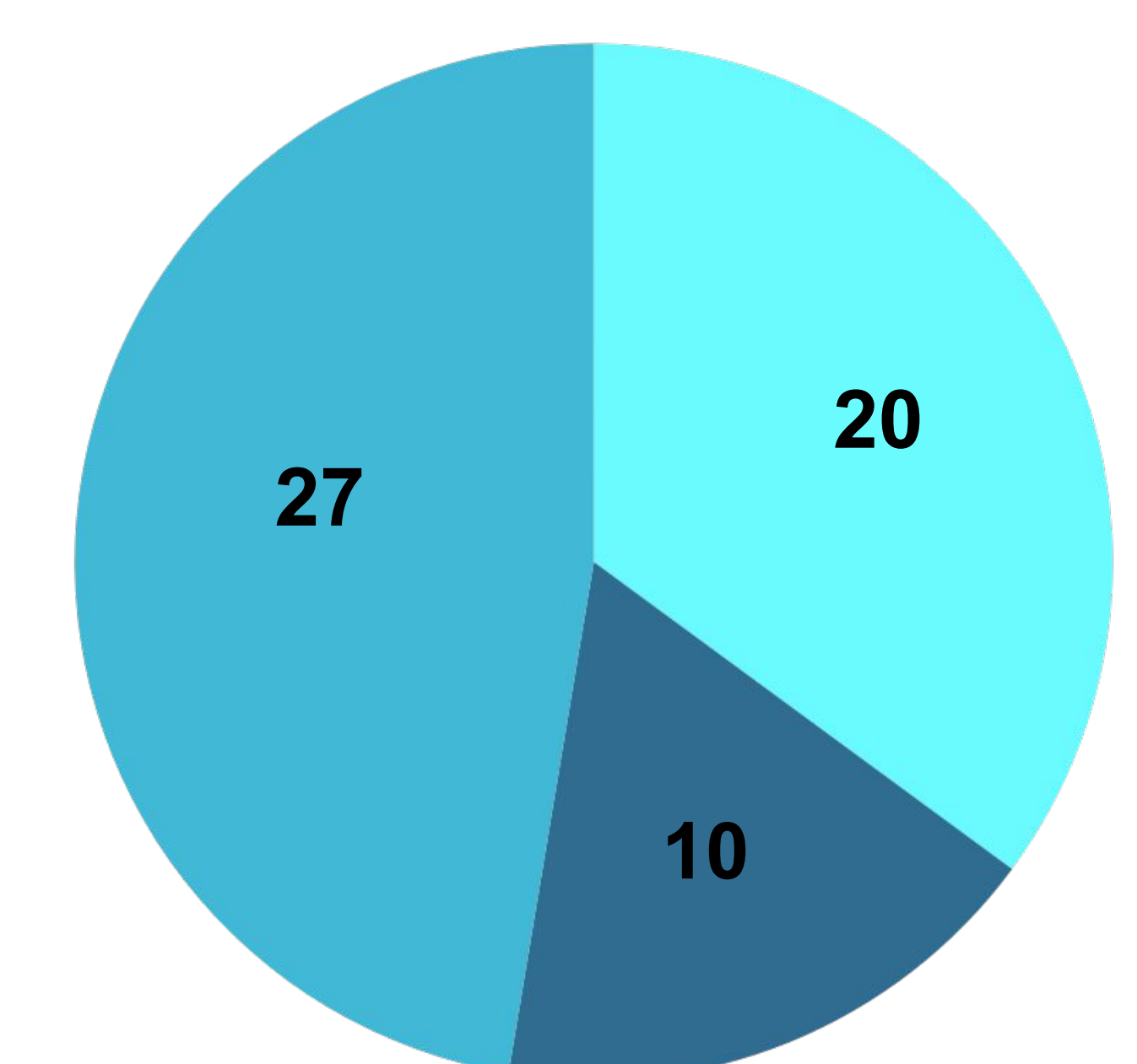
- Slideshow and lecture composed, hands-on activities developed, and infographic handouts created.

My preferred method for learning about careers is... (Check all that apply)



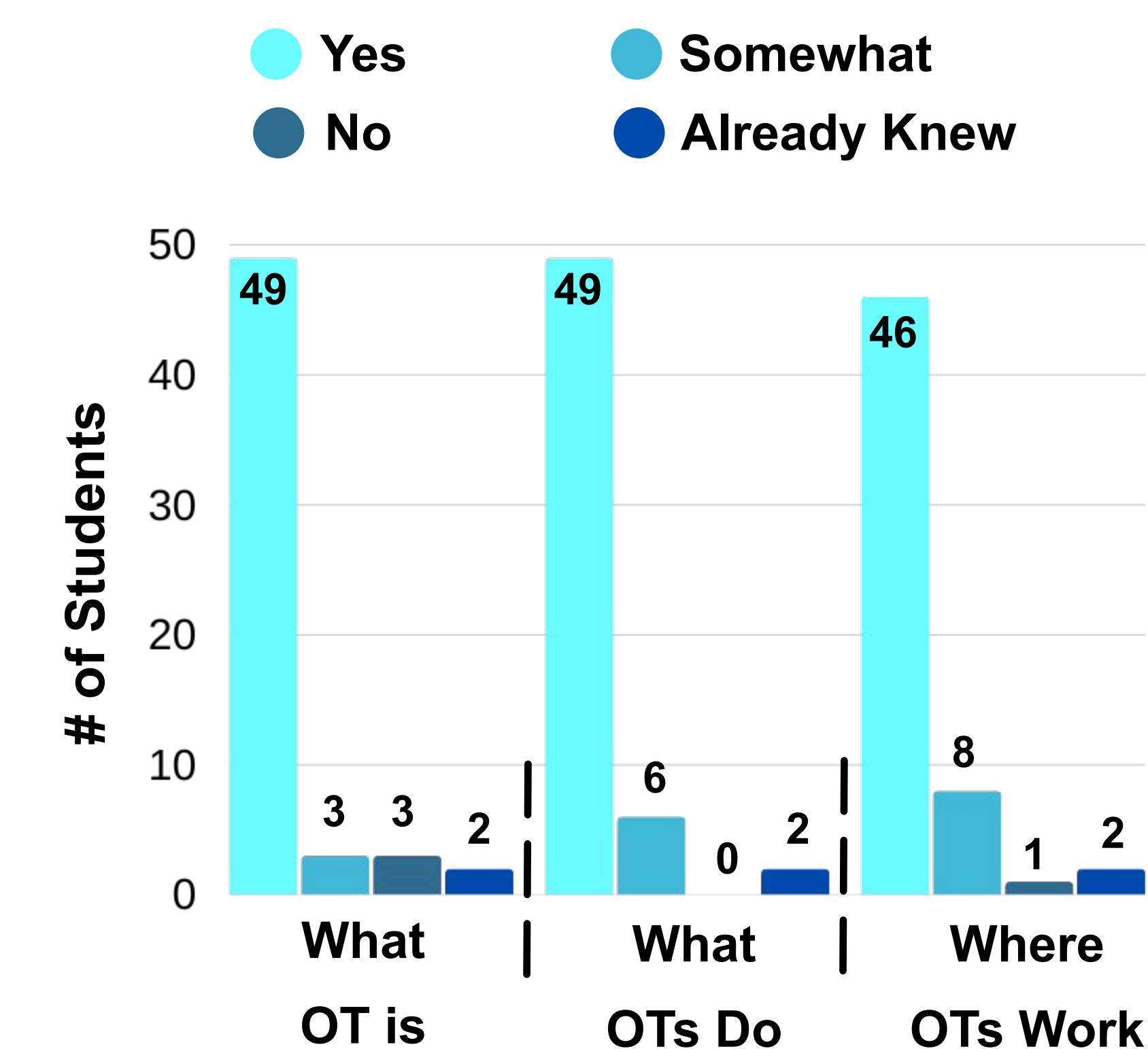
After This Presentation, I am Interested in Learning More About Becoming an OT

Yes No Somewhat



- All were used in six virtual and in-person presentations to raise awareness about OT and the roles of OTPs.
- Evaluation methods created and distributed to assess students' understanding.

After This Presentation I Understand...



References

