

Motives and Barriers to Pursuing Academic Doctorates: Perceptions of Doctor of Physical Therapy Faculty

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Abstract

There is a growing need for newly trained physical therapists to meet the anticipated expansion of the profession. Still, a shortage of core Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) faculty with academic doctorates, a requirement for DPT program accreditation, limits the ability to address the need. To tackle this issue, it is essential to understand the motivations and barriers that influence DPT faculty in pursuing academic doctorates. While research has identified the perceptions of the motives and barriers to pursuing an academic doctorate in other healthcare fields, limited studies have explored these factors specifically for physical therapists.

This descriptive qualitative study aimed to examine the perceptions of core DPT faculty regarding the motivations and barriers associated with earning an academic doctorate and how it has or will affect their job satisfaction. The study was grounded in the self-determination theory. Data were gathered through virtual semi-structured interviews with 11 core DPT faculty members working in traditional DPT programs across the United States. Thematic analysis of the data revealed three key themes: a 'passion for academia,' challenges related to 'program inflexibility,' and opportunities created 'open doors' by pursuing an academic doctorate.

Addressing the shortage of DPT faculty with academic doctorates will require fostering an interest in academia among DPT students, developing flexible and affordable academic doctorate programs, and highlighting the professional benefits of obtaining an academic doctorate. These steps can help support the growing demand for physical therapists.

Keywords: academic doctorate, higher education, physical therapy, higher education administration, motive, barrier

1. Introduction

A national shortage of trained physical therapy educators exists. The shortage can be attributed to a multitude of causes, including the creation of new Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) programs, the attrition of current program directors and DPT faculty, and the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE) requirement for 50% of core DPT faculty to hold an academic doctorate. The 2024 CAPTE Standards and Required Elements modified the standard, allowing now, for 40% of the core faculty to have completed an academic doctorate, with 10% actively pursuing an academic doctorate (CAPTE, 2024). However, it is suspected that doctor of physical therapy programs are still struggling to meet accreditation standards due to a shortage of physical therapy faculty with academic doctorates. Aggregate program data collected by CAPTE (2023) confirm the faculty shortage, displaying 195 faculty openings across DPT programs in the United States, an additional 165 vacancies expected, and 51 new positions projected. With the current number of 279 accredited DPT Programs in the United States and the addition of 27 developing candidate programs, the shortage of DPT faculty is only expected to expand.

Additionally, a decline can be observed in the number of individuals earning academic doctorates across disciplines. Specifically, between 2020 and 2021, the number of academic doctorate recipients decreased by 5.4% (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2022). Filling faculty vacancies is crucial to address the profession's need for producing new physical therapy graduates and to ensure that these positions are occupied by well-trained faculty with academic doctorates capable of preparing graduates to thrive in an evolving healthcare system (Bliss et al., 2018).

To address the shortage of trained physical therapy educators and support CAPTE standards, it is necessary to examine the motives and barriers perceived by physical therapy educators to pursue an academic doctorate. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of core faculty at DPT programs in the United States and to identify the faculty's perceptions of the motives and barriers to pursuing an academic doctorate. In addition, this study explored the perceptions or anticipated job satisfaction of core DPT faculty related to an academic doctorate.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Terminal Degree Pursuit in Healthcare Professions

Research, among other healthcare professions, identified several causative motivators and barriers to the pursuit of terminal degrees and the preparation that the degree provides to take on faculty roles; however, the motives and barriers for DPT faculty have not been identified (Barrett et al., 2020; Carpenter et al., 2019; Rosenfeld & Glassman, 2024; Tucker et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2021). According to Carpenter et al. (2019), dental hygienists were more likely to pursue a terminal degree based on the support of mentors and the alignment of the degree chosen to their interests and passions. The dental hygienist who preferred working with their hands chose clinical terminal degrees, while those who preferred digesting research were more apt to pursue academic doctoral degrees. When asked about the motives for pursuing a doctoral degree, the registered nurses in Rosenfeld and Glassman's (2024) study reported that professional/personal growth, teaching, and conducting research were the major driving factors. The intrinsic desire for personal growth aligns with the findings by Tucker et al. (2020), who discovered that speech-language pathologists are more likely to pursue a Ph.D. secondary to intrinsic desires to teach and obtain more knowledge. Tucker et al. also identified that the most significant barriers to pursuing the Ph.D. were the program's cost, time, and flexibility. The participants expanded upon the barriers, stating that they would be more likely to enroll in a Ph.D. program if addressed. King et al. (2020) identified similar barriers for master's level nursing students to transition to academia. The nurses reported inexperience in academic instruction, which would result in the need for a doctoral degree; thus, earning a doctoral degree was seen as a major barrier. Williams et al. (2021) similarly analyzed the barriers to pursuing a Ph.D. by Master level's nurses. Williams et al. used the data on identified barriers to design a Ph.D. program addressing the barriers, which resulted in the pursuit and graduation of 132 Ph.D. nursing students in five years. Lastly, Barrett et al. (2020) looked at the factors supporting the preparation of junior athletic training and physical therapy faculty. The study found that obtaining an academic doctorate was the most significant factor that supported junior faculty preparation. Studies of other healthcare professionals have identified both the benefits of pursuing an academic doctorate, such as preparation for faculty roles and intrinsic motivation, and the barriers to obtaining a doctoral degree, including cost, time, and program flexibility. Though various healthcare professions have identified the above-mentioned motives, barriers, and benefits of pursuing an academic doctorate, there remains a lack of research regarding the perceptions of the motives, barriers, and impact on job satisfaction that pursuing an academic doctorate has on DPT faculty.

2.2 Terminal Degree Pursuit in DPT Faculty

As a response to the evolution of physical therapy education to an entry-level doctorate, CAPTE required that 50% of core DPT faculty possess an academic doctorate (Hinman & Brown, 2017). The standard responded to the ill-prepared clinicians lacking contemporary expertise in scholarship and education filling faculty roles. While the implementation of the standard was meant to improve the amount of research being produced and to ensure the preparation of DPT faculty, the perceptions of DPT faculty to pursue yet another degree were not considered. The research regarding the pursuit of a terminal degree by DPT faculty is limited by the age of the research and the specificity of the motives and barriers for pursuing an academic doctorate. Peterson et al. (2009) analyzed the relationship between earning an academic doctorate and the production of scholarship and achievement of tenure. The results indicated that obtaining an academic doctorate was linked to producing scholarly material, which inversely led to promotion and tenure, indicating that a relationship may exist between earning an academic doctorate and achievement of promotion and tenure. Since faculty view promotion and tenure as a critical event that impacts their future as an educator, identifying the correlation between earning an academic doctorate and achieving promotion and tenure may incentivize DPT faculty (Sonne et al., 2019). Santasier and Wainwright (2018) analyzed the characteristics for successful completion of an academic doctorate by physical therapists and found similar outcomes to those of Carpenter et al. (2019), indicating that alignment of the academic program to the passions of the participant yielded greater success in degree attainment. Therefore, ensuring the availability of programs that align with the passions of DPT faculty may be essential to increasing the number of academic doctorate recipients. Graham et al. (2011) analyzed the perceptions of the value of earning either an academic doctorate or a transitional

doctorate. The findings were similar to those by Barrett et al. (2020) in that the individuals who pursued an academic doctorate were more prepared for faculty positions. Graham et al. (2011) further recommended a follow-up study to assess changes in perceptions of the academic doctorate and its value over time, which necessitated this research study.

2.3 Synthesis of Literature Review

Physical therapy education standards are unique from those of other healthcare professions, with the requirement that 50% of core DPT faculty hold an academic doctorate. Being an entry-level doctoral degree, it is understandable that physical therapy educators possess a degree beyond what is required for entry-level practitioners. However, a shortage exists among DPT core faculty members who hold academic doctorates. Some low-level descriptive studies have discovered several motives and barriers for pursuing an academic doctorate by various healthcare professions; however, the motives and barriers for pursuing an academic doctorate by physical therapy faculty have not been identified. To reduce the gap in core DPT faculty openings and meet CAPTE accreditation standards, the motives, and barriers viewed by core DPT faculty with an academic doctorate needed to be explored. By identifying the perceived barriers, academic doctorate programs can be developed or modified to increase the number of faculty with academic doctorates., similar to the approach taken by Williams et al. (2021) with master's level nurses. Doctor of physical therapy programs and faculty holding an academic doctorate can share the motives and benefits of degree obtainment to fill faculty vacancies by DPT faculty who are well-trained to meet the needs of the expanding physical therapy profession and to produce new graduates capable of evolving in an ever-advancing health care system (Bliss et al., 2018).

2.4 Purpose

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative research study was to explore the perceived motives and barriers to pursuing an academic doctorate by core DPT faculty in the United States and analyze their perceptions or anticipated job satisfaction related to earning an academic doctorate. The questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the perceptions of core DPT faculty on the motives for pursuing an academic doctorate?
2. What are the perceptions of core DPT faculty on the barriers to pursuing an academic doctorate?
3. How do core DPT faculty perceive that the academic doctorate has or will influence their job satisfaction?

A qualitative design was the optimal choice to describe the experiences of DPT faculty who had received or were working towards an academic doctoral degree, as little research had previously been conducted on the topic (Doyle et al., 2020). Additionally, qualitative research was chosen to complement the previously documented quantitative research regarding the pursuit of terminal degrees among DPT faculty.

The purpose and research questions were further supported and derived from Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT), which states that humans are innately motivated to achieve internal satisfaction. Ryan and Deci (2000) later expanded upon the theory and delved into the two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is defined as an internal desire to achieve satisfaction, which was reported by the participants as the primary motivation for pursuing an academic doctorate in the studies by Carpenter et al., (2019) Rosenfeld and Glassman, (2024) and Tucker et al., (2020). Extrinsic motivation is comprised of an external factor driving one to achieve an outcome. The external factors of promotion and tenure may have been a source of extrinsic motivation for the participants in the Peterson et al. (2009) study. However, according to Link (2021), extrinsic motivation alone is not influential enough to produce a desired outcome. The SDT does support the idea that extrinsic motivation can be altered to an intrinsic desire by finding value and meaning in a mundane task. An article by Singe et al. (2019) supported this theory, which stated that junior athletic trainers were motivated to pursue a doctoral degree because of an intrinsic desire for a role in academia. Link (2021) described the ability of educators to influence intrinsic motivation by providing students autonomy over their educational experience. Williams et al. (2021) similarly provided autonomy to master's level nursing students by seeking feedback regarding their barriers and concerns to enrolling in a Ph.D. program and designing the program to address their concerns. As a result, the program was able to graduate 132 Ph.D. nursing students in just five years. Doctor of physical therapy program directors could learn from the studies by Link and Williams et al. that influencing intrinsic motivation may lead to increased enrollment of DPT faculty into academic doctorate programs, thereby maintaining CAPTE standards of 50% of faculty possessing an academic doctorate.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

The research study utilized a descriptive qualitative design to enable participants to describe their experiences and perceptions of the motives and barriers faced in pursuing an academic doctorate. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to discover common themes answering the three research questions. A qualitative design was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the DPT faculty's views regarding the pursuit of an academic doctorate.

3.2 Setting and Sample

The study utilized purposive sampling of core DPT faculty that met the criteria for the study and snowball sampling by requesting participants to forward the study invitation to expand the network of potential participants.

Inclusion for this study was limited to core DPT faculty who were either interested in pursuing, currently pursuing, or had completed their academic doctorate. Participants listed as part-time or adjunct faculty were excluded from the study. Additional exclusions included faculty located at DPT programs outside of the United States or employed at non-traditional programs. Data saturation was met once the themes data were identified, and the lack of new insights or themes were observed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This qualitative descriptive study was completed and approved through William Carey University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Additional IRB approval was obtained from Indiana State University. Electronic and verbal consent were obtained before data collection began. Participation in the study was voluntary, and both written and verbal consent were obtained before participation, which included the transcription and recording of the semi-structured interviews. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning a unique numeric identifier to each participant. No direct risks were identified by the researcher for participation in this study.

3.4 Interview Guide

The interview guide was designed based on research conducted by Colbert (2013), Wong (2014), and Santasier and Wainwright (2018) on motivations in doctoral education with modifications to initial pursuit rather than perseverance. The questions were also modified to meet the needs of the DPT faculty population. The content validity of the interview guide was achieved by having two researchers experienced in conducting qualitative research provide feedback on the interview questions, with the researcher modifying the final interview guide accordingly. The final guide contained nine open-ended questions, beginning with the generalized question: Briefly share with me areas in your daily life that you considered when pursuing an academic doctorate. The open and generalized nature of the question aimed to develop rapport with each interviewee. The researcher added non-leading follow-up questions for expansion of ideas and clarity of response (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Confirmability, transferability, and dependability, three of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for the trustworthiness of results, were followed to enhance the rigor of the findings. An in-depth record of the decision-making tree and steps chosen throughout the study was kept, ensuring the confirmability of the findings and conclusion. Additionally, direct participant quotes and interview details were added to support the transferability and dependability of the study's findings (Amankwaa, 2016). Triangulation was also utilized to reduce researcher bias regarding deciding and reporting final themes. Triangulation was upheld by having the researcher and faculty research advisor experienced in qualitative research read and code the transcripts independently before coming together to discuss and finalize the themes.

4. Results

4.1 Recruitment

Recruitment for the study began by collecting email addresses from faculty directories on university websites associated with the DPT program to identify participants. Recruitment emails were distributed between September 21st and November 28th of 2023 to individuals listed as full-time core DPT faculty.

4.2 Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews occurred throughout October and November of 2023. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the videoconferencing platform preferred by the participant. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, with additional time available if needed. Recordings and transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy and compared to note-taking that occurred throughout the interviews.

Thematic coding was completed utilizing Creswell and Creswell's (2018) five-step analysis, which began with the organization and categorization of the data in preparation for analysis—followed by the transcription of the interviews utilizing Descript software or the transcription software found in the video conferencing platforms. Step three included identifying repeat ideas, or codes, which were later categorized for the creation of the major themes. The definition of the themes constituted step four with the addition of descriptive quotes supporting the identified themes. Finally, step five included the organization and presentation of the final results.

Eleven core DPT faculty across several DPT programs in the United States participated in the study. Nine of the 11 core DPT faculty members who participated in the semi-structured interviews had completed their academic doctorate, and two obtained their academic. Five males and six females represented various CAPTE-accredited and traditional DPT programs in the United States. The participants ranged in years of experience as physical therapists and educators and held varying faculty ranks. Additional participant characteristics can be visualized in Table 1.

Data saturation occurred after the eighth interview. However, three additional interviews added richness and diversity to the results.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Demographic	□	Percent (%)
Age		
30-40	3	27.3
41-50	1	9.1
51-60	6	54.5
61-70	1	9.1
Gender		
Male	5	45.5
Female	6	54.5
Marital Status		
Single	3	27.3
Married	8	72.7
Years as a licensed PT		
0-10	1	9.1
11-20	3	27.3
21-30	5	45.5
31-40	2	18.2
Years of Teaching Experience		
0-10	5	45.5
11-20	1	9.1
21-30	5	45.5
Academic Doctorate		
Ph.D.	6	54.5
Ed.D.	5	45.5
Tenured Faculty Member		
Yes	8	72.7
No	3	27.3
Faculty Rank		

Assistant Professor	3	27.3
Associate Professor	3	27.3
Full Professor	5	45.5
Program Director	1	9.1

A list of the participant demographics to note the diversity of the research participants is shown in Table 1.

Three major themes were identified, each relating to one of the three research questions. Thematic analysis revealed that “academic passion” was the theme for the research question on the motive for academic doctorate pursuit, “program inflexibility” for the common barrier for academic doctorate pursuit, and “opened doors” for the question on the impact of the academic doctorate on job satisfaction. The themes identified are further supported by participant quotes, which can be found below.

4.3 Academic Passion

When asked about their motives for pursuing an academic doctorate, an intrinsic desire for a career in academia was the overarching theme for many. For example, Participant 09 stated, “Well, I guess the biggest component was an intrinsic desire as an academician to hold a terminal degree.” Though Participant 09 was already an academician, they discussed wanting to be accepted as a “full-fledged member of the academic world.”

In addition, passion for performing well in their role as an academician is what influenced four of the 11 participants to pursue an academic doctorate. Participant 06 stated, “I wanted to learn the research skills, and I wanted to apply them and, also come out with a better ... skills to be a better educator.” When discussing the outcomes of the degree program and how they think earning the academic doctorate had impacted their perceptions about their job, they felt that the motive to become a better educator was met, stating, “I learned skills that made me more qualified [and] that will benefit any program.” Whether the participants were already in academia when beginning their academic doctorate or pursued their academic doctorate to achieve a position in academia, many reported a passion and interest in teaching. The academic passions arguably motivated and directed the participants' behavior to pursue the academic doctorate.

4.4 Program Inflexibility

When asked about the barriers to pursuing an academic doctorate, participants reported program inflexibility as the main barrier that influenced the choice of academic doctorate program they enrolled in. Many of the participants were married with children. While family was not considered a barrier to enrollment in an academic doctorate program, many participants reported wanting a flexible program to maintain involvement with family and needing to continue full-time work while pursuing the degree in order to support their family and the cost of the degree. Participant 05 exclusively looked at “flexible” programs for consideration of the family and small children, stating, “I have kids, and I’m married, so I had to consider the flexibility of the program...I was looking for something that had minimal synchronous requirements because of the unpredictable future of having children.” Being able to balance multiple roles of parent, spouse, and student was important for Participant 05. Participant 10 felt the same, though they did not touch on familial impact. When looking at the program's convenience, they stated, “The variables were cost, flexibility, ... scheduling, and then time to completion. Those were, ...on my day-to-day basis, I need to know that I can keep my job and not sacrifice my ... income to get this degree.” The flexibility that the hybrid and non-traditional programs offered to maintain their current work positions outweighed the barriers and costs required of the traditional Ph.D. programs. While several of the participants reported an initial interest in pursuing a traditional Ph.D. design, the traditional program did not allow the participants to continue to work. Participant 09 stated,

Yes, my original desire was to get a Ph.D. in anatomy, but unfortunately, those programs would not allow students ...to work, at least [not] work full time. They [Ph.D. in anatomy programs] were looking for 100% dedication to the Ph.D. program.... They were not work friendly.... I could not stop working at that time.

Overall, the barriers of balancing family commitments and maintaining their work schedule necessitated the pursuit of a more flexible academic doctorate program that was cost-effective for many.

4.5 Opened Doors

When asked about their perceptions of how, or has, the academic doctorate influenced their job satisfaction, there were indirect reports of job satisfaction. Several participants found new roles in academia that matched their

academic passions, which led to an indirect influence of the academic doctorate on their job satisfaction. Therefore, the theme “opened doors” was attributed to the opportunities for academic positions or promotions. For example, Participant 07 stated, “I couldn't have gotten the position without it, ..., getting my Ph.D. ...allowed me to get tenure and ...promoted.” Participant 07 also reported their renewed satisfaction with their job and that earning the academic doctorate enabled them to receive their faculty position. Participant 07 went on to say how their day-to-day has changed, stating,

It's enjoyable....One of the benefits of faculty life that maybe I didn't ...know about ...[was] I can go and see my daughter's performance at 3 o'clock on an afternoon... [if] I'm not teaching, because I know that there's things that I might need to do [with class work] that I can do at night... or I can do them on Saturday. It's just that flexibility.... I felt like, in the clinic, I missed out on a lot of those things.

Completing the academic doctorate led to new roles for Participant 09, who stated, “After I finished my Ed.D., it opened the door...The knowledge that I gained in my Ed.D. allowed me to take on some administrative roles that ultimately led to becoming a program director and chairperson.” Participant 09 went on to state: “Probably the one thing that was not really a motivating factor was [that] I [was]...not doing it necessarily for more pay. Even though when it opened up new doors, like administration that came with financial benefits, ... that wasn't really on the forefront of my mind.” The intrinsic desire to pursue an academic doctorate was the leading cause for internal satisfaction, not job satisfaction, but indirectly created new professional and financial growth opportunities. Thanks to the doors the academic doctorate opened, the positive impacts were expressed as pleasure in their academic work, their abilities to improve their teaching and research skills, career accomplishments, and career / professional promotional achievements.

5. Discussion

This research study aimed to describe the experiences of core faculty in DPT programs across the United States, focusing on their perceptions of the motivations and barriers to pursuing an academic doctorate. Additionally, the study explored core faculty's anticipated views that earning an academic doctorate has or will impact their job satisfaction. These findings aim to address the current shortage of DPT faculty with academic doctorates, which, in turn, meets CAPTE standards.

“Academic passion” was identified as the motive for all the participants to pursue an academic doctorate. The intrinsic desire to pursue a career in academia aligned with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, which states that intrinsic desire is often required to produce a desired outcome. Further, five of the eleven participants were also extrinsically motivated to pursue an academic doctorate to achieve their internal desire for a career in academia. The theme “program inflexibility,” related to participants' need to continue full-time work and to balance family and work constraints, was influential when deciding which program, the participants enrolled in. To account for these barriers, participants enrolled in cost-effective and flexible programs to meet their unique needs. Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory supports this finding, which states that individuals have a built-in drive to achieve their potential. The participants were driven by their intrinsic desires and passions and adapted by finding alternative paths to maintain success and fulfill their intrinsic desires. The theme “opened doors” demonstrated an inferred relationship to job satisfaction. The “opened doors” reflect the theme of “academic passion.” Participants did not directly report that the academic doctorate influenced their job satisfaction; instead, for some, it opened doors to a position in academia or enhanced their skill set in academia, which aligned with their academic passions. These results are similar to those of Watson et al. (2024), who found that allied health professionals who pursued a doctoral degree in the UK were able to obtain academic roles because of a PhD. The participants in the Watson et al. study were also generally satisfied with the skills gained from obtaining their doctoral degree in training/educating others and conducting research. Overall, the participants in this study similarly reported satisfaction with their decision to pursue an academic doctorate as it reaffirmed their passion for academia, thus achieving internal satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

This study's findings further support the need to address the shortage of trained DPT faculty by encouraging student physical therapists to pursue careers in academia, as many of the participants identified in the study had passions for academia early on, some of which sprouted from mentorship. Hiring individuals pursuing an academic doctorate would aid in maintaining CAPTE requirements; however, support from the hiring institution in cost or flexible teaching hours to maintain enrollment and balance of responsibilities would be beneficial. Lastly, sharing the benefits these participants reported, such as that the academic doctorate facilitated the achievement of promotion and tenure, enhanced their skills as educators, and helped them obtain employment in their desired position in the academic role, may encourage other junior faculty or clinicians to consider enrollment in an academic doctorate program.

5.1 Limitation

The study is limited to core DPT faculty employed full-time at traditional DPT programs in the United States. It does not provide the perceptions of DPT faculty employed at non-traditional DPT programs or those with part-time or adjunct employment. Another limitation is the small sample size and use of purposive and snowball sampling for faculty recruitment. Furthermore, the study's results are limited to the perceptions of the DPT faculty that participated in the study, and their perceptions may not be true for all DPT core faculty. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to all DPT faculty.

5.2 Future Research

Future research is recommended to complete a similar study on a larger scale with an increased sample size. Additionally, participants who work part-time or are adjunct faculty and/or employed at non-traditional DPT programs may be included for improved representation of DPT programs and faculty members across the United States. In addition, analyzing the perceptions of DPT students on the motives and barriers to pursuing an academic doctorate would be influential, as many of the participants in this study identified a passion for academia early on. Finally, the perceptions of current clinical physical therapists warrant exploration, as many of the participants in this study practiced clinically for years before pursuing their academic doctorate. Understanding the clinical physical therapist's views could enable the design and support needed to persuade physical therapists into a career in academia, thereby decreasing the shortage of DPT faculty with academic doctorates.

6. Conclusion

Physical therapy education is experiencing a critical shortage of DPT faculty possessing academic doctorates, which impacts programs' ability to maintain accreditation secondary to CAPTE standards (CAPTE, 2024). The study's findings match that of current literature identifying academic passion as the motive for pursuing an academic doctorate, program inflexibility as the most significant barrier, and that the academic doctorate opened doors for the participants, which indirectly increased the participant's job satisfaction. The insights learned from the current study should be a basis to support the motives, address the barriers with the creation of cost-effective and asynchronous programs with limited travel, and share the benefits that earning an academic doctorate can have on core DPT faculty in enhancing their skills as an academician and aligning with their passions which would ultimately lead to an increase in number of trained physical therapy educators to support the continued growth of the field.

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Authors' contributions

Nicole Mix was responsible for the investigation, methodology, experiment, study design, data collection, and analysis. Eileen Creel was responsible for supervision and guidance and assisted with data analysis and revisions. Maria Osborne was responsible for revising, editing, and offering suggestions for the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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