

Improving the Experiences of Marginalized Graduate Students: Findings, Strategies, and Implications for Recruitment, Retention, and the Field of Occupational Therapy



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Background

Diversification of occupational therapy (OT) and other healthcare professions is vital to provide more quality care for marginalized and underserved populations.

Many graduate healthcare programs implement at least some components of holistic admissions review (HAR), which focuses on increasing diversity, but the literature is lacking on the lived experiences of matriculated graduate healthcare students who are contributing to this diversification.

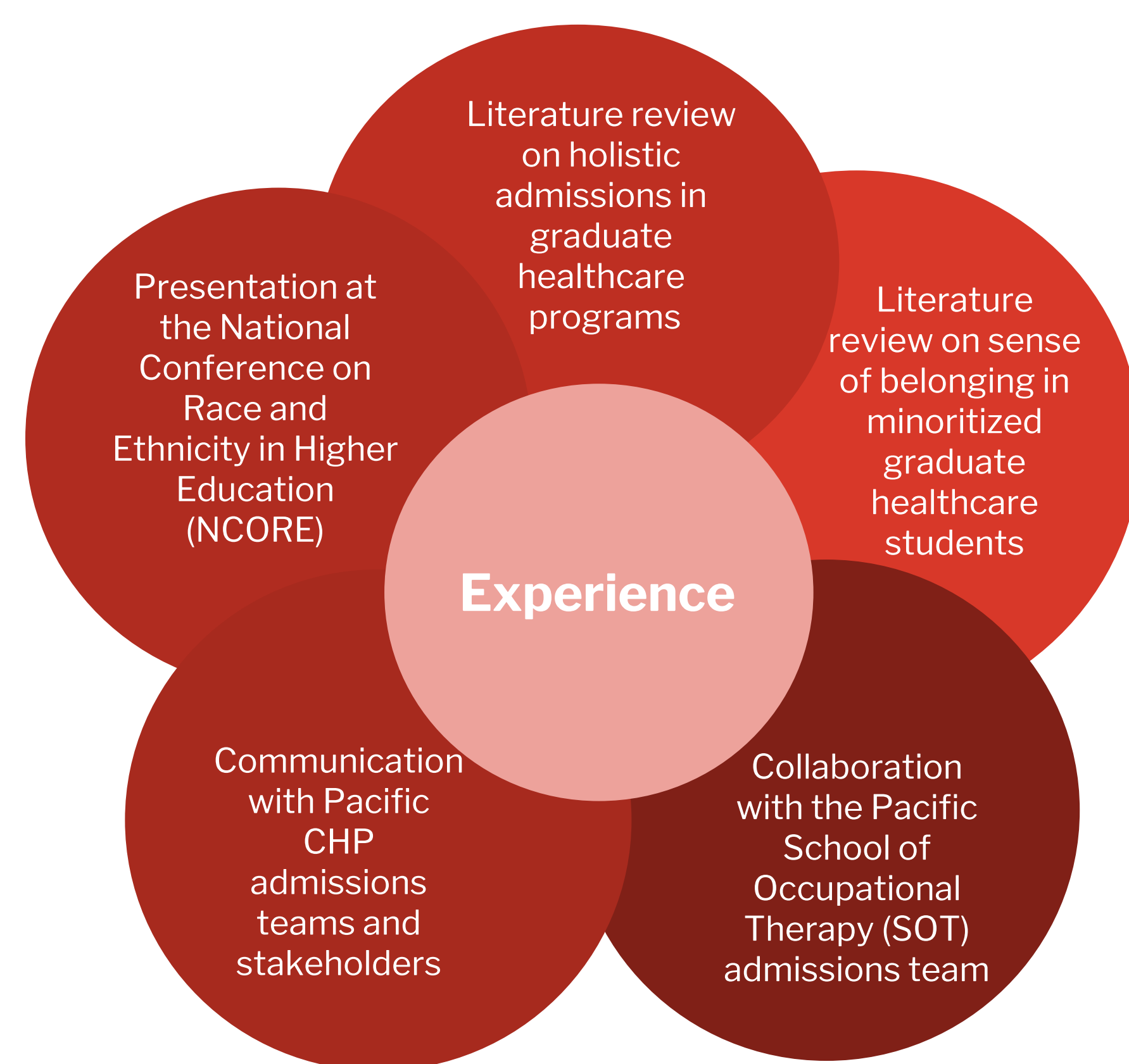
In order to uphold our profession's values and enact occupational justice, it is critical to focus on the experiences of minoritized students, not just outcomes like graduation rates.

This capstone experience explored the gaps and connections between HAR and a sense of belonging in minoritized graduate healthcare students.

Research Question

What gaps exist between the admissions and on-campus experiences of historically marginalized healthcare professions graduate students and how can these be improved upon?

Methods

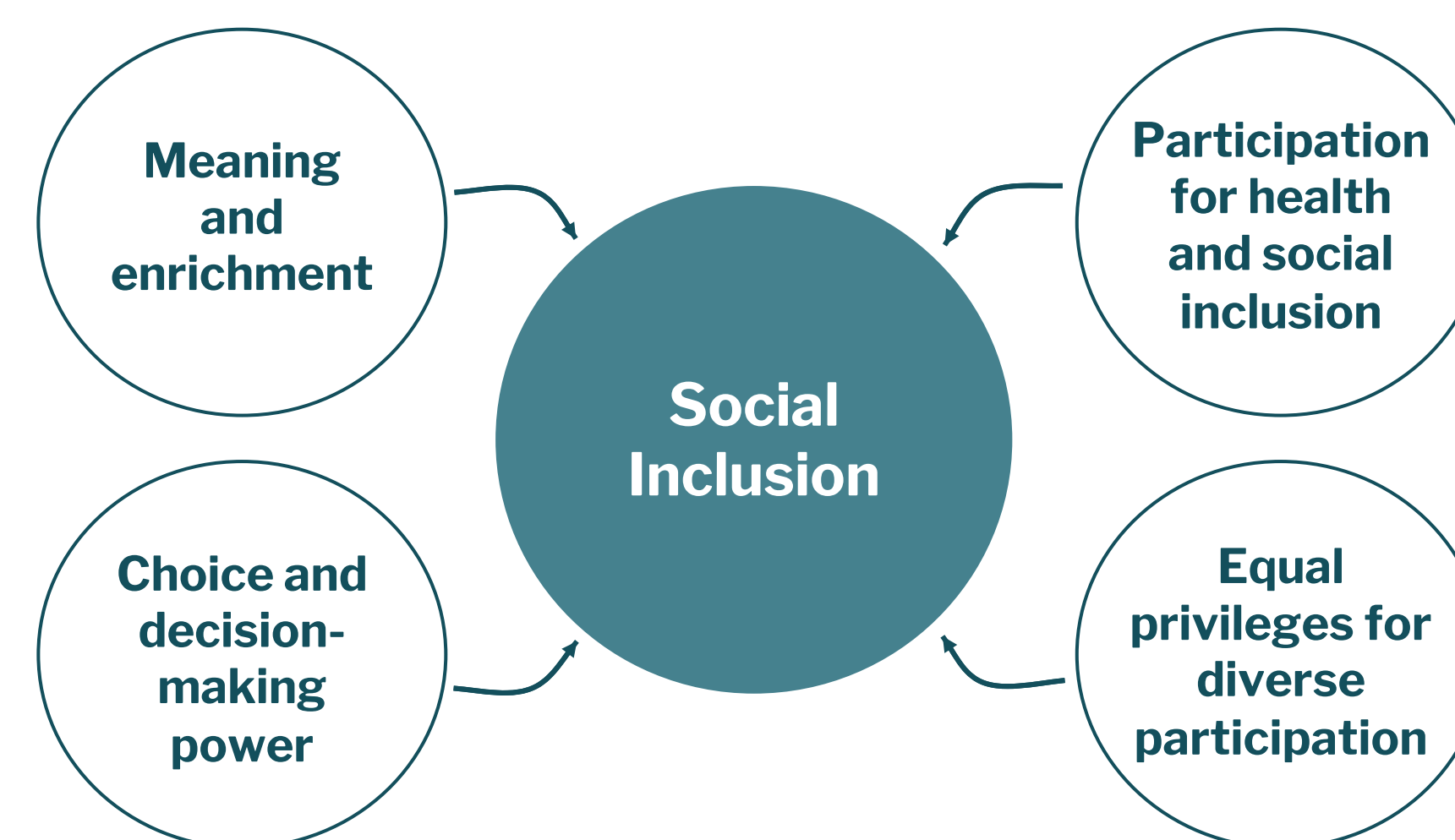


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Guiding Framework

Participatory Occupational Justice Framework (POJF)



Original graphic inspired by 3, 4.

Findings

A general underlying theme was extracted from both the CHP study and reviewing the literature: **connection**. Throughout the entire experience from admissions to graduation, students remembered and/or were most impacted by a sense of connectedness and/or belonging.

Most common themes from review of the literature:

- Campus/institutional climate should be inclusive of all
- Bias and discrimination experienced by students directly affects their sense of belonging
- Faculty play a key role in student experiences
- More comprehensive programming is needed beyond holistic admissions practices
- Minoritized practitioners are most likely to serve vulnerable/low-income populations
- Decreasing financial barriers increases access
- Meaningful mentorship has a positive impact on recruitment and retention
- Sustainability

Successful efforts that have been implemented for increasing access and sense of belonging:

- Financial support**
Reduced costs • Grants • Scholarships • Work study
- Social support**
Faculty relationships • Safe spaces/groups • Mentoring
- Academic support**
Tutoring • Remediation

Discussion

While my research began asking the question of what gaps exist between the admissions and on-campus experiences of minoritized graduate students, the theme of connectedness guided me in a slightly different direction. Rather than looking at the specific phases of admissions, it became clear that there were valuable lessons in identifying the gaps between programs' diversification efforts and diverse students' experiences. Underlining all of these was **belonging and inclusion**. By making OT education more accessible and inclusive, we make OT more accessible and inclusive, thus upholding our values of justice, equality, altruism, and freedom. Students entering graduate education already must experience the challenges of rigorous programs; and minoritized students face additional challenges due to a lack of access and/or sense of belonging, barriers that we have the control to remove.

Another important takeaway from my experience is that graduate school is one continuous process for students; therefore it must be treated as one continuous process by administrators and stakeholders. It is vital that programs implementing holistic admissions processes also have comprehensive programming that aligns with HAR. When healthcare professions design their programs from the lens of their values - such as using the Experiences-Attributes-Metrics (EAM) model of HAR, this "demonstrates a measure of fairness, which is not only a hallmark of social justice, but exemplifies caring."²

Implications and Future Directions

While it is still important to attempt to make macro level changes (such as revising ACOTE standards), these can take time. Programs can begin fostering inclusive environments with immediate micro level efforts such as mentorship and student support groups. Comprehensive strategies that programs can use to promote program-wide continuous change include:

- o Focusing on the **pipeline** - educating pre-grad students about OT, as well as adequately preparing them academically for OT higher ed programs
- o Creating **bridge programs** with undergraduate universities
- o Making **institutional changes**, such as implementing faculty bias and inclusion training, more inclusive curricula, and accountability measures

As stated, this work is ongoing and efforts must be made for sustainability, such as continuously reviewing and updating the literature and keeping programs up to date with best practices. Students should be included in these processes wherever possible to ensure the most informed and equitable practices.

The population only continues to diversify, and OT must keep up. If we want to provide the best care to our increasingly diverse population, we must have practitioners who are motivated and equipped to do so, and this starts in the educational arena.

Acknowledgements

I am beyond appreciative for the support, patience, inspiration, and grounding of my capstone site mentor, Dr. Talina Corvus, who I had the pleasure of getting to know throughout this process, and who anyone would be lucky to call their mentor, instructor, or friend.

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I must acknowledge the SOT admissions team for being so collaborative, inclusive, and encouraging; and SOT director, Dr. Jenny Pitonyak, for "walking the walk"; and for introducing me to NCORE, a transformative experience that has fostered so much community, support, growth, and belonging. And thank you to all the CHP faculty and staff who gladly shared their knowledge and practices with me.

Last but certainly not least: to every single person who has supported me throughout this journey that has culminated in this capstone experience; thank you for helping me get to this point.

“We are intentionally inclusive and equitable and embrace diversity in all its forms.”

-AOTA Vision 2025¹

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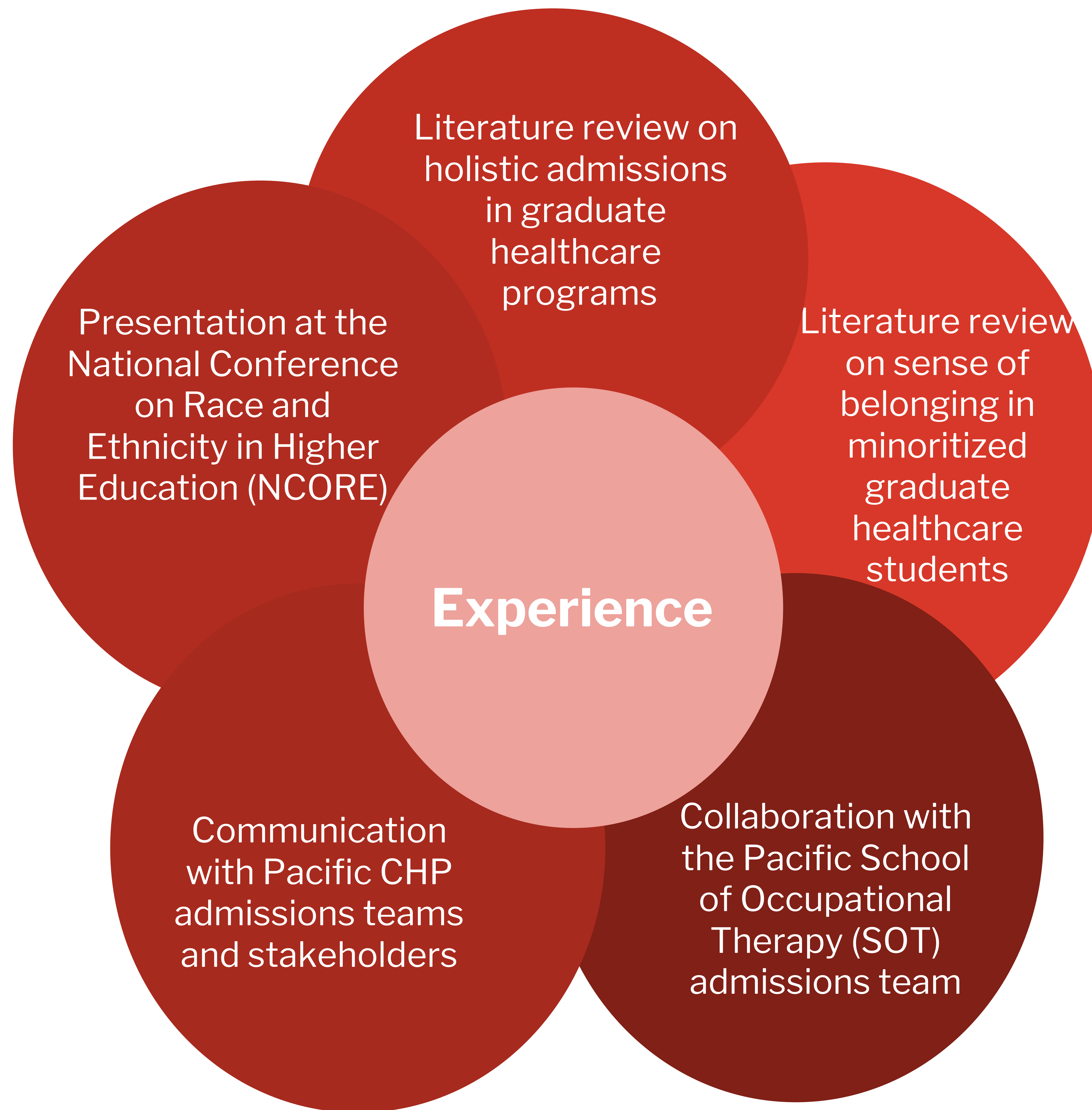
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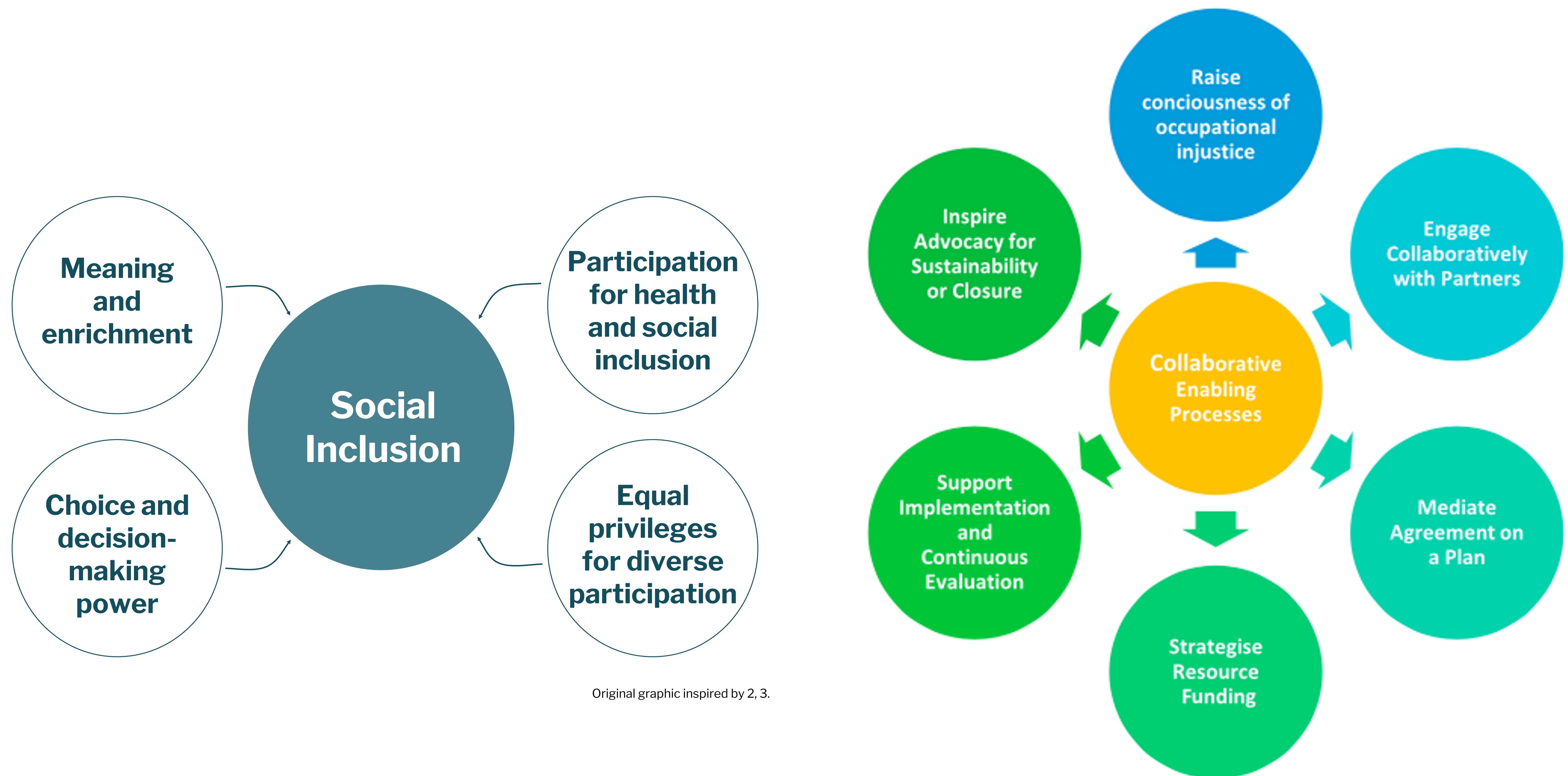
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