Rethinking Readiness: Why Self-Regulated Learning is the Key to Resilient Healthcare Students

Renee Shepherd, COTA, Ed.D.

Background

Health science education is faced with growing tension between learner readiness and workplace demand. Faculty increasingly report declines in students' critical thinking capacities, occurring alongside intensifying clinical environments marked by higher patient acuity, heavier workloads, and reduced margin for error. Admissions committees have historically depended on standardized cognitive assessments (grade point average, entrance examination scores, and academic transcripts) to gauge academic aptitude and forecast student readiness. These measures, however, are static indicators of prior knowledge and do not capture the dynamic, non-cognitive attributes central to clinical performance. As a result, key predictors of success under pressure, including stress tolerance, self-discipline, and emotional regulation, remain largely unassessed at the point of selection, leaving a measurable gap between admissions criteria and the demands of rigorous clinical training.

Aim / Purpose

Primary Purpose: Evaluate whether standardized critical thinking scores predict graduation and completion among healthcare students.

Core Aim: Identify reliable indicators of clinical readiness and resilience to help students thrive rather than merely survive high-stress clinical environments.

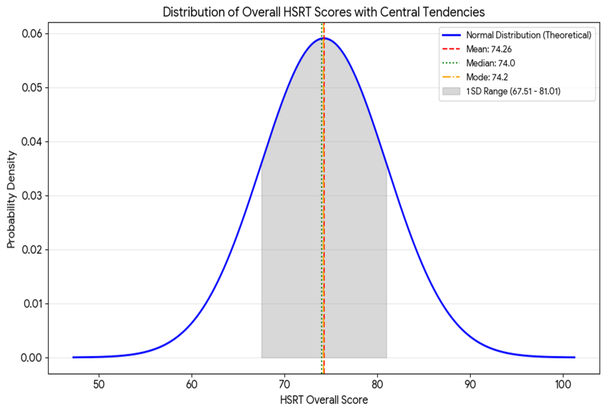
Methodology

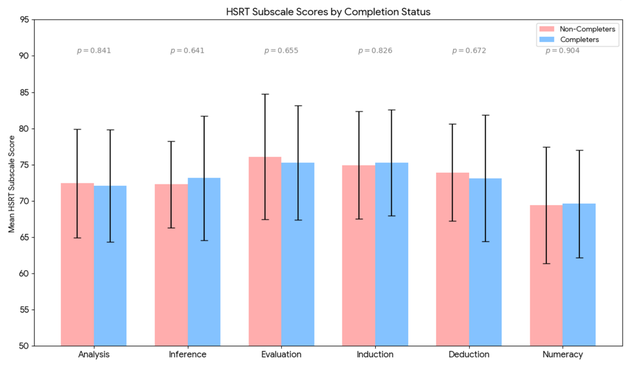
Research Dimension	Methodological Specification	Purpose & Context
Study Sample	N = 121 Occupational Therapy Assistant Students	Multi-cohort sample from public community colleges
Setting & Duration	3 Southeastern US Institutions (2019–2023)	4-year longitudinal tracking through program completion
Cognitive Metric	Health Sciences Reasoning Test (HSRT)	Industry standard critical thinking assessment
Measured Outcome	Dichotomous Graduation Status (Complete / Non-Complete)	Verified through official institutional academic records
Statistical Models	Point-Biserial Correlation & Spearman's Rho	Evaluating continuous cognitive predictor vs binary outcome

Results

Overall Predictive Validity: Analyses revealed a negligible and statistically non-significant correlation between overall HSRT critical thinking scores and program graduation rates.

Cognitive Subscales: None of the six individual subdomains demonstrated a significant association with student graduation status.





Discussion

The heavy reliance on standard cogntitive measures provide only a partial snapshot of a candidate's potential for success in clinical training. Academic indicators are valuable for assessing foundational knowledge and cognitive aptitude, yet they fail to account for the complex, non-cognitive competencies critical to navigating the challenges of high-pressure clinical environments. Attributes like stress tolerance, emotional regulation, resilience, and self-discipline play a pivotal role in determining how individuals adapt to the demands of clinical rotations, high-stakes decision-making, and patient care scenarios.

The omission of these non-cognitive skills at the stage of selection creates a disparity between admissions benchmarks and the multifaceted realities of clinical practice.

A more holistic selection process could reduce attrition rates, improve student well-being, and better prepare future clinicians for the demands of increasingly complex healthcare systems

Conclusions

Heavy reliance on standardized critical thinking exams overlooks key behavioral indicators of healthcare student persistence and readiness.

Admissions models must transition toward holistic reviews that emphasize self-regulated learning attributes, including metacognition, self-discipline, and stress tolerance

Future Directions

Holistic Admissions: Implement structured behavioral interviews and emotional regulation rubrics during applicant selection.

Embedded SRL Curricula: Explicitly teach goal-setting, metacognitive self-assessment checklists, time management, and reflective practice across didactic and laboratory coursework.

Supportive Ecosystems: Pair early academic intervention with proactive mental health resources and resilience training to prepare students for modern workforce challenges.

Contact Information

Renee Shepherd
Houston City College
Angela.shepherd@hccs.edu
713-718-7283

References

Facione, P. A., et al. *Health Sciences Reasoning Test (HSRT)*. Insight Assessment.
Shepherd, A. R. Doctoral Dissertation, South College.
Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(2), 64–70

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to the OTA programs that shared their data for analysis