

# Evaluating Experiential Learning by Physical Therapy Students: 'The Molly Experience'

Lauren Dietz, SPT    Joseph Fiedor, PT, DPT, MS, MBA    Barbara Billek-Sawhney, PT, EdD, DPT, CGS  
Slippery Rock University, Graduate School of Physical Therapy, Slippery Rock, PA

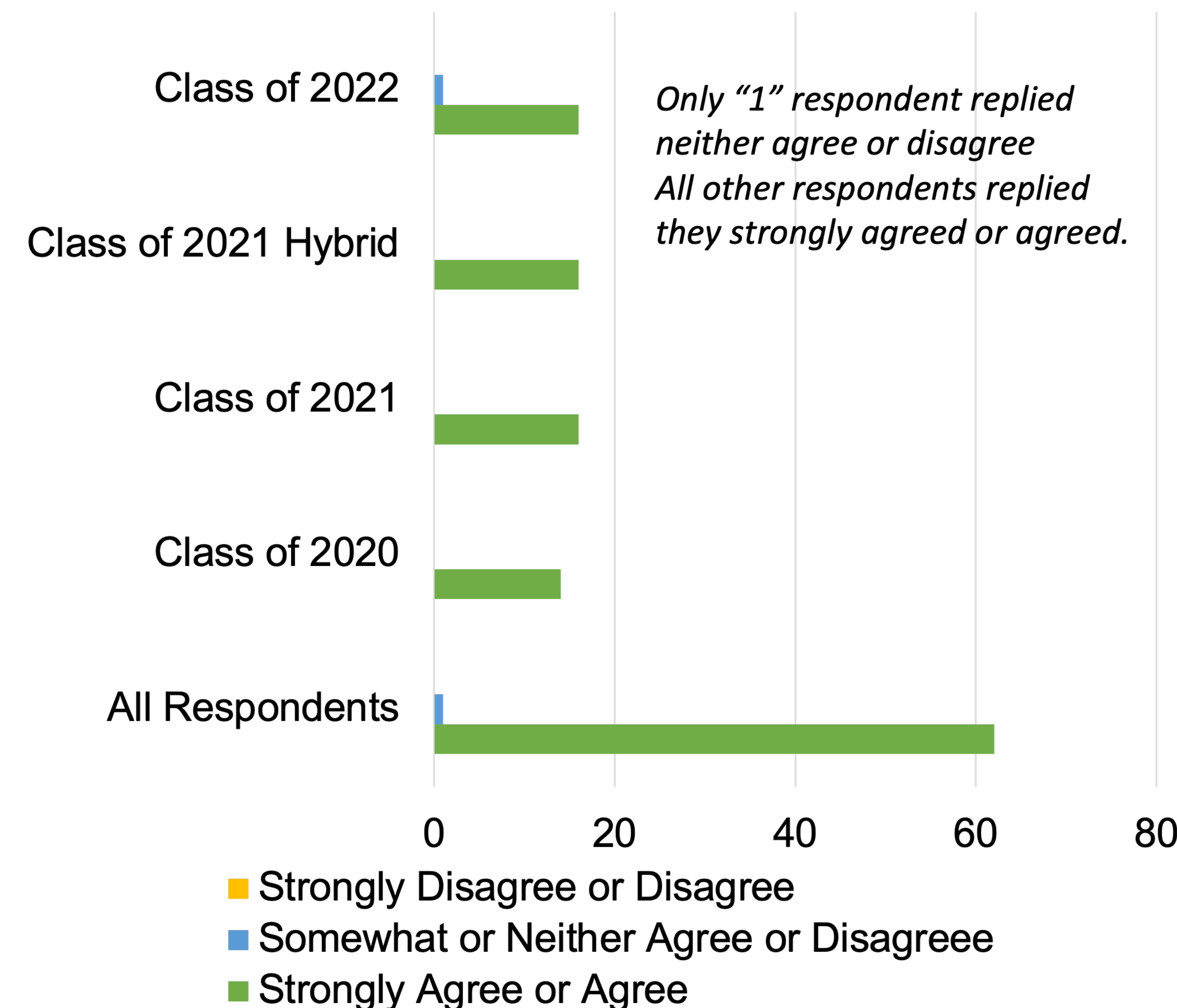
## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the students' perspective of the effectiveness of this experiential learning opportunity in academic preparation for clinical education and work.

## BACKGROUND

Physical Therapy (PT) students at Slippery Rock University (SRU) complete didactic and clinical education coursework. Generally, the didactic portion does not afford students the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills with individuals who present with authentic impairments, i.e., patients or patient demonstrators. Through a collaborative relationship, second year PT students were mentored by 2 graduate assistants (GAs) in examining and treating Molly, a 26-year-old female with cerebral palsy (CP), for 4 hours over 2- semesters as part of the neuromuscular curriculum.

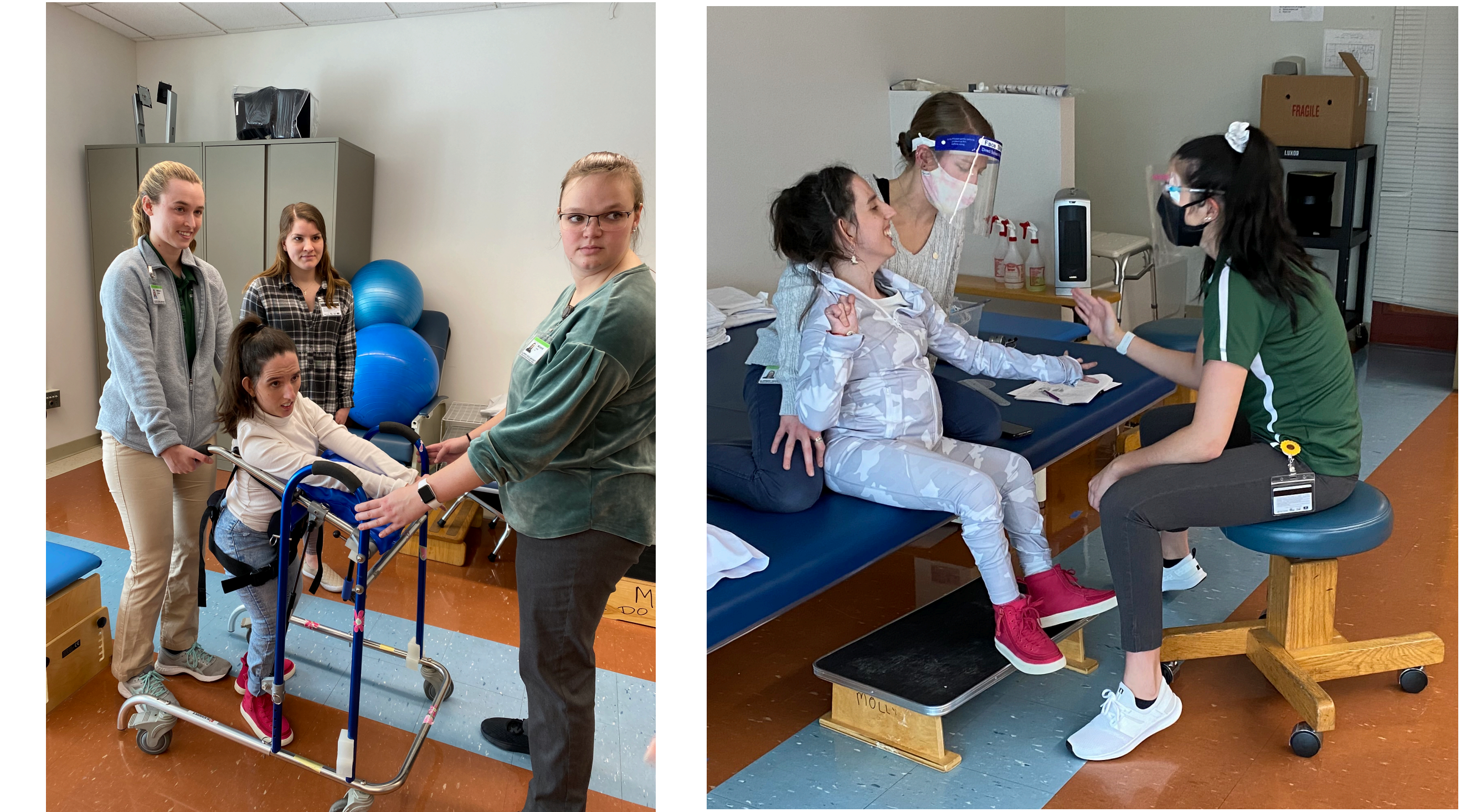
## Working With Molly Was a Valuable Experience To Me



**Figure 1.** Student responses for the statement 'Working with Molly was a valuable experience to me' separated by cohort and as a collective group.

## A Qualitative Response from an Alumnus in Class of 2020

*"I work in a small outpatient physical therapy clinic where we rarely see patients with cerebral palsy. Through my clinical rotations, I worked in a nursing facility and an outpatient PT clinic where I had not treated a single patient with a similar level of function as Molly. Long and behold, I had a young man contact our clinic who was in need of skilled PT care. The initial evaluation was scheduled with one of my coworkers who is more experienced with PT but was not confident with that diagnosis. Both my coworker and the patient felt uncomfortable during evaluation and the patient did not want to return. When the patient's caretaker called to reschedule, she asked if there was anyone more comfortable working with the patient in which I volunteered. If it wasn't for Molly, her family and their willingness to be both our patient and educators, I would not have been comfortable to work with my patient. With that being said, he now loves coming to PT to hang out with his buddy (me) and he works hard and is becoming less and less dependent for his care givers. Molly has helped make me a better physical therapist and more comfortable working with patients with her diagnosis."*



## DISCUSSION

- Quantitative and qualitative results of the survey were extremely positive with only 1 outlier quantitatively.
- 'The Molly Experience' was a valuable opportunity that provided students with an authentic and meaningful experience which enhanced their:
  - Knowledge of neurologic PT and CP
  - Communication skills
  - Psychomotor patient handling skills
  - Documentation skills
- Zoom sessions were less effective for assessing cardiopulmonary status and performing gait training when comparing results from those who participated in-person for 2 sessions to those who had 1 session via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic in-person restrictions.
- The GAs were found to be effective in mentoring peers when working with Molly.

## SUBJECTS

Invitation to participate in this research study was sent to SRU PT students in the classes of 2020, 2021, and 2022 via email. A total of 140 students were invited with 63 participating in the study. See Table 1 for cohort response rate and description. GAs who performed the peer mentoring and investigators of this study were excluded from participation.

## METHODS & MATERIALS

This study was approved by the SRU IRB. A mixed methods study was employed using a convenience sample. A peer reviewed, 26 question survey was developed by investigators using keywords from the domains of learning, a Likert scale, and open-ended questions. Feedback was attained from 11 educators, clinicians, and GAs to enhance content validity, identify any ambiguity, and determine time required to complete survey. Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using frequency and themes, collectively and by cohorts.

## RESULTS

The 'Molly Experience' was perceived as a valuable experience by 62 of the 63 (98.4%) students quantitatively based on closed-ended responses (Figure 1).

Qualitative findings reinforced the quantitative findings. Twenty-seven participants expressed positive comments on the value of the experience with many of them stating that it prepared them for clinical education and future careers.

The qualitative analysis of 'what were the most positive aspects of working with Molly' were enlightening and revolved around 4 themes: simulation of clinical practice (described 41 times); the psychosocial aspects of working with Molly (20 times); the positive learning environment 12 times); and the benefit to Molly (11 times).

## CONCLUSIONS

During the didactic portion of health-related professional programs, experiential learning opportunities are often limited. 'The Molly Experience' provides the opportunity for students to work with an individual with a developmental disorder affecting the total person. This experiential learning activity was perceived by students as a valuable learning experience that allows students to apply knowledge and psychomotor skills they learned during their didactic education to prepare for clinical education and work. The investigators recommend authentic educational initiatives, such as 'The Molly Experience' be continued for the didactic phase of the curriculum with exploration of other unique opportunities.

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**Table 1.** Survey participation and description of each cohort including: the number invited to participate, the number of respondents and the description of their experience

Cohort	Sent Surveys	Completed Surveys (Response Rate)	Description
Class of 2022	47	17 (36.2%)	1 session; 2 hours in fall semester; currently, 2 <sup>nd</sup> year students at time of survey
Class of 2021 In Person	18	16 (88.9%)	2 sessions; 4 hours total in-person, 2 hours in each of 2 courses, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students at time of survey
Class of 2021 Hybrid	28	16 (57.1%)	2 sessions; 2 hours total in-person, approximately 1 hour via Zoom, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students at time of survey
Class of 2020	47	14 (30%)	4 hours total, 2 hours in each of 2 courses, alumni at time of survey
Total	140	63 (45%)	All 3 cohorts combined