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What Does the Move to Master's Level Education for the Occupational Therapist Mean for Occupational Therapy Assistant Education?

By 2007, all students entering the professional level of occupational therapy practice will have earned a Master's Degree. This, combined with other initiatives guiding health care and occupational therapy (OT) are aligning to guide us into a promising future:

- The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education Standards, which were implemented in July 2000, demand a higher level of information literacy, critical thinking, research competency, and management skills than were the requisite under the Essentials. The Standards are grounded with concepts of occupation that were absent from the previous Essentials for OT and OTA (Occupational Therapy Assistant) Education. As curricula at both levels thread these concepts and professional ideals throughout their designs, they will educate professionals who can lead significant change and proactively redirect the recycled errors of our past.
- The profession has now established the *Framework for Occupational Therapy: Domain and Process* as a guide for education and practice.

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This is a tool that offers a clear foundation in the tenets and application of occupation and client-centered care.

- Language recently adopted by the World Health Organization examines participation in roles and activity as a determiner of health and wellness. This can act as a catalyst for our promotion of OT philosophies and tenets. The alignment of this language with the terminology in the Framework will allow parties of interest to more readily understand the constructs of occupation-based practice.

The synergy of these recent developments can be a catalyst for a shift in paradigm in health care from a focus on disease and a reductionistic model of health care, to a model that will promote the more holistic perspectives of health and wellness that are the paradigm of occupational therapy. It seems to me that the stars are in alignment! It is time for occupational therapy to shine! With a shared vision of a continuum of education for future practitioners, it is possible for all levels of education to support the future of practice that will finally step out of the adolescent identity crisis we have been in for decades. Rather than be led reactively by values inherent in the medical model, we can proactively establish our rightful place as contributors to best practice in a collaborative model of health care delivery.

A Position Paper published by the Commission on Education in March 2002 was titled, "The Viability of Occupational Therapy Assistant Education." (1) This paper was generated by the expressed concern that technical level education was somehow at risk in the climate of change transitioning to the Master's Level. The definition of "viability" in the American Heritage Dictionary offers three variant perspectives of the word. The first states, "capable of success or continuing effectiveness." (2) I agree that Occupational Therapy Assistants, educated at the technical level, can continue to thrive and be effective contributors to the profession. ACOTE Standards do not dictate the degree earned from institutions. This is regulated by individual institutional prerogative. Rather, the Standards reflect criteria and outcomes that are the requisite for entry-level practice. Most OTA Programs currently offer a degree at the associate level. It matters not with what degree—Certificate, AAS, or AS, these accredited programs are successfully educating individuals who demonstrate competencies defined by Standards. The qualitative revisions required of curricula to comply with the 1998 Standards were successfully managed without significant quantitative changes in credit loads. It is unfortunate that these credits are often not recognized by transferability to professional level programs.

When examined side by side, the OTA Standards are more parallel and identical to the OT Standards than they are different. OTA Education is guided by ACOTE Standards that are parallel to those guiding professional level education.

Section B.2.0, *Basic Tenets of OT*, guides a greater breadth and depth of applied theory for OT education, however, the Standards that guide the paradigm of occupation-based practice are identical. The Standards demand identical processes for program evaluation and strategic planning. This ensures quality and development of curricula reflective of the current dynamics in practice. The variance in Standards is primarily the scope and breadth of identical criteria. Technical level education has been successful at meeting and exceeding their Standards. OTA practitioners are, therefore, excellent ambassadors of occupational therapy tenets and philosophy. In curricula, a primary objective is to guide students to "think and act like an OT." Success in this objective is inherent at all levels of OT education. At both levels, we have a shared vision and identity.

The second perspective on the dictionary definition of viability states "capable of living outside the uterus." (2) Sometimes, as an OTA educator, I have felt outside of the womb of the OT community. I have observed or been confronted with beliefs from individuals who speak and act as though the profession could only grow by nurturing practitioners who make contributions to its scholarly base. Technical education, viewed in this light, is considered "outside of the uterus." Although viable, the contributions of OTA Education would be more valuable if they could share a more symbiotic relationship with professional level practice and education. OTA Education, to truly thrive and productively contribute to the community of occupational therapy, does not need more credits of study. It needs to be accepted and valued as an integral part of the educational process. The fact that enough concern was raised to establish a Position Paper in regards to its viability, is evidence that we may not be operating from a shared vision that respects technical level education as a valued and effective part of the continuum of learning.

A third dictionary definition offers us keys to success for continued viability of OTA education: "capable of living, developing, or germinating under favorable conditions." (2) I do not believe it is in the best interest of the profession to question the viability of OTA education at the technical level. This is not evidence that conditions are favorable. As the AOTA Position paper articulates, technical programs attract a diverse student body to occupational tenets that may not otherwise be recruited to the community. Practitioners educated at the technical level can provide health care systems a cost-effective and broader application of occupation-based service. (1) In the early 1950s, training of Assistants was initiated to allow the profession to grow into markets that were demanding service when the supply of OT practitioners was inefficient to support our growth. These individuals continue to assist the growth of the profession in this time of expansion into emerging areas that are inherent in the dynamics of current challenges and health care reform.

Enrichment of our scholarly base is certainly one factor that will ensure occupational therapy's viability in health care of the future. It is not, however, the best model for all valued practitioners to begin their educational process. The 1998 Standards outline a developmentally appropriate continuum that articulates outcomes that are the core concepts of all practitioners. These are the majority of Standards that are identical. They then articulate a progressively enhanced breadth and scope that are the requirements for practitioners who will assume supervisory roles, managerial roles, and offer service that is insightful to the needs for an enhanced scholarly base for the profession. The "favorable condition" required for viability of all levels of education, and for the future growth of occupational therapy, is a shared vision and mission, together with the acceptance of the value provided to the academy and to practice from those who meet technical level Standards in OT education.

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OTA-OT PARTNERSHIPS: OFFERING EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

We see the change to post-baccalaureate degree entry level for the occupational therapist as a renaissance for occupational therapy assistant (OTA) education. Although an OTA curriculum is typically not found in a comprehensive university that offers 55 undergraduate majors and 10 master's degrees, the University of Southern Indiana (USI) has an educational program for the occupational therapy assistant (initially accredited in 1998) as well as a program for the occupational therapist (initially accredited in 1993). As program direc-

tors, we have determined that the change in professional entry level has had a positive impact, which has effected a clearer demarcation between the types of practitioners, resulting in new options and opportunities for people who wish to enter the occupational therapy field.

The new demarcation between types of practitioner education is primarily a timing issue. Before the change in entry level for occupational therapists, USI offered a 4-year baccalaureate degree for people who wanted to be occupational therapists and a 2.5-year associate degree for those who desired to be occupational therapy assistants. (At USI, the OTA curriculum is approximately six months longer than expected because of the university's 25-credit general education requirement for all associate degrees.) Although OTA majors are eligible to begin practicing in less than three years, we found that because USI is a comprehensive university, more than half of the OTA graduates continued taking undergraduate courses to earn a bachelor's degree in health services (BHS), a completion program designed for students holding associate degrees in a professional field. Thus at commencement, OTA grads earning the BHS sat intermingled with occupational therapy majors who also earned a baccalaureate degree. The two types of practitioners earning a seemingly similar degree resulted in confusion in the university and the surrounding geographical area. With the entry-level change, the timing is clearly a 2.5-year versus a 5-year option. Even if OTA students opt for a baccalaureate completion program, there is a clear difference between a bachelor's and a master's degree.

The clear demarcation has resulted in new options and opportunities at all levels. At the student level, faculty who are cross-trained in recruiting and advising for both curricula can offer options that provide an optimal matching of student and program from the first advising session. Students who want to become occupational therapists, but have circumstances that require a faster option, have an opportunity to graduate from the OTA curriculum first, allowing them to enter the field and earn a good living while pursuing courses in the occupational therapist curriculum on a part-time basis. At the program level, these options and opportunities have positively effected improvements in student numbers, particularly in the OTA curriculum. The improved student numbers have in turn positively affected program budgets, which has resulted in additional equipment shared by both curricula. Indeed, the clear degree demarcation has allowed USI to realize the true OTA-OT partnership envisioned when the two educational programs were started. At the university level, the new opportunities offer a more suitable alignment with the university's mission statement of serving traditional and nontraditional students, and the options

have improved student retention, especially if students begin as occupational therapy majors, but are more suited for the OTA curriculum.

To experience this rebirth of OTA education, we recommend that OTA curricula form partnerships with area occupational therapy programs. Within the partnership, faculty could become adept at advising and recruiting for both programs. The prospective student who inquires at either curriculum could be matched with the optimal program. Students who wish to enter the field more quickly could complete the OTA curriculum first. Finally, the occupational therapy major who is more suited for the OTA curriculum could easily transfer to a different program.

As occupational therapy educators, at USI, we are afforded the opportunity to continue with our goal of assisting our clients, who are our students, in achieving maximal occupational role performance by fitting the program to the individual.

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IMPLICATIONS OF THE MOVE TO MASTER'S LEVEL EDUCATION FOR THE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST AND FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSISTANT EDUCATION

The Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) educational process has progressed just as the Occupational Therapist (OT) educational process has advanced. If anything, the move to a master's level education for the OT has increased the content value and necessity of the two-year technical education for the OTA. Also, when considering the costs of education, occupational therapy education is enticing.

The two-year associate degree has also grown and developed with a greater depth of the education required to practice. This technical education focuses mainly on direct care skill development leading to excellent patient care. An OTA has good clinical reasoning and critical thinking skills, technical skills,

and strong interpersonal relationship abilities for working with patients or clients of all ages, with a wide diversity of diagnosis. Additionally, they have the skills to participate collaboratively in innovative practice. Many community colleges have smaller class sizes and more direct student faculty contact than the larger colleges and universities, thus allowing high-quality practice skill development.

It takes more years and more educational funding to earn a master's degree. How many people can afford this greater educational cost? Meanwhile, the Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant (COTA) can earn an associate degree in a two-year community college, probably living at home, at a significantly lower cost.

In conclusion, from my observations of the COTAs currently in practice, there appears to be a new and increased demand for them. Therefore, just as the educational preparation for OTs extends, it behooves those of us in OTA education to continue to set high standards and goals for our students to meet the needs of the work environment today. Clearly, this change in entry for the OTs will ripple into opportunity for OTAs.

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