Collaborating for Political Action

Awareness has increased regarding the need for occupational therapists to be involved in the legislative activities that occur at the state level. The ability for state occupational therapy associations to provide input regarding state policy depends on available personnel or membership size, vision of leadership, adequate financing, and strategies used. Because of restrictions created by lack of personnel and limited finances, creative use of association resources is essential. The Indiana Occupational Therapy Association (IOTA) has devised an effective collaborative relationship with the professional-level master's degree program in occupational therapy at the University of Indianapolis. This paper briefly describes the life cycle of political issues and the corresponding responsiveness of this politically oriented collaboration.

Life Cycle of an Issue

One's understanding of the life cycle of an issue is important when teaching future occupational therapists how to influence state policy for the benefit of occupational therapy consumers. According to Ostrow (1985), an issue goes through a predictable cycle, beginning with the identification of a problem by a limited group of persons, who then attempt to educate others regarding its concerns. Eventually, these concerns are brought to the attention of legislators, who offer a potential solution in the form of proposed legislation. Once a legislative issue becomes law, the regulatory process begins in terms of the development and promulgation of rules that govern application of the law. After the rules and regulations are promulgated, enforcement of the law completes the life cycle of an issue. The ability to successfully influence an issue depends on whether the issue is in the education, legislation, regulation, or enforcement stage.

The best time to influence an issue is at the beginning of the life cycle. At the very least, occupational therapists must be able to intervene during the legislative stage. Too often, occupational therapists become aware of an issue only when it reaches either the regulation or enforcement stage. Therapists then want to explore ways to influence the issue due to its potentially negative effect on their practice or their consumers. Unfortunately, both the regulation and enforcement stages offer the fewest opportunities in which one can affect the issue.

For example, in 1984, only a few days before final regulatory hearings, IOTA became aware of Medicaid regulatory proposals that would greatly restrict the practice of occupational therapy assistants. The IOTA legislative committee presented testimony against the proposed rule changes, but their objections made no difference in the final ruling. The momentum of this identified issue was overpowering, partially due to the late stage in the life cycle at which action was taken. The appropriate time to affect these rules was not during the final hearing, but rather, at the time when the restrictive regulatory language was first proposed, or better yet, when the concern regarding occupational therapy assistants was first raised by the state department of health.

Collaboration

State associations must be able to initiate action at the proper point in the life cycle of an issue. To develop appropriate strategies, these associations often spend valuable time gathering information about the nuances of the particular political system. Unfamiliarity with the state's legislative process or maintenance of few interactions with important agencies responsible for regulation detracts from the short response time that may be necessary for effective intervention. It makes sense, therefore, for us to teach future occupational therapists the knowledge and skills essential for interacting with important political systems at propitious times.

The professional-level master's degree program in occupational therapy at the University of Indianapolis offers a course in health systems. Students enrolled in this class can take advantage of the program's location in Indianapolis, the capital of Indiana. The class is scheduled during the semester that coincides with the legislative session. At the beginning of the semester, a lobbyist specializing in child care and health care issues conducts class sessions that acquaint students with the legislative process, current legislative issues, the tracking and monitoring of bills, and strategies for communicating with legislators. These initial class sessions are held in the state capitol, which allows the students to meet their state legislators and the lobbyists representing ma-
ajor health concerns (e.g., lobbyists for the Association for Retarded Citizens or the Council on Volunteer Organizations for the Handicapped).

The students are divided into groups, each of which selects and monitors different bills that IOTA's legislative committee has identified as potentially affecting occupational therapists or their consumers. The students in each group share monitoring responsibilities by taking turns attending legislative committee hearings and legislative sessions. Additionally, the students are expected to research the issues inherent in each bill and are required to articulate the major arguments representative of all sides of the issue. They maintain communication with IOTA's legislative committee by attending meetings and submitting monitoring reports, both oral and written, to the committee members. The reports indicate the major points in the bill content; list the bill sponsors; and delineate supporting and opposing legislators, organizations, or other groups.

If IOTA's legislative committee deems that action must be taken regarding the monitored bills, the students contact IOTA's members to educate and activate them for letter-writing or telephone campaigns. Although IOTA's legislative committee assumes responsibility for appearing before legislative committee hearings to present testimony, the students may assist the committee by formulating persuasive arguments. By monitoring and researching health care legislation, the students become acutely aware of emerging trends. In response to these emerging trends, the students develop strategic plans for submission to IOTA's Board of Directors, who may elect to incorporate the ideas into the association's long-range planning.

Results

This university-state association collaboration has had a positive influence on IOTA's ability to undertake political action. IOTA's effective lobbying for removal of controversial language in a bill amending the Physical Therapy Practice Act (Indiana Code 25–23.5) occurred due to the students' monitoring of the 1987 legislative session. The students were also an important force in IOTA's successful campaign to achieve passage of the Occupational Therapy Certification Act (Indiana Code 23–82) in 1989.

During the 1990 legislative session, students helped IOTA prevent attempts to pass legislation that would amend physician-referral language into the occupational therapy certification law. The students assisted in mobilizing IOTA's support of legislation necessary for the state of Indiana's eligibility for early intervention funds under the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986 (Public Law 99–457) and the Occupational Therapy Certification Act (Indiana Code 23–82). Additionally, the students helped prevent consideration of a bill that would have allowed persons failing their occupational licensing examination to review the contents of the test. Passage of this bill would have jeopardized Indiana's use of the American Occupational Therapy Certification Board's certification examination. More importantly, loss of test security could compromise consumer protection from unqualified practitioners, because the test's validity as a screening tool for entry into the profession would become suspect.

Summary

Students involved in this university-state association collaboration have expressed excitement in helping to create progressive changes for occupational therapists and their consumers. After graduation, many of these students have continued their participation in IOTA's legislative committee and have assumed leadership roles in other IOTA activities. IOTA has benefited from this collaboration in terms of improved responsiveness during the legislative stage of an issue's life cycle.

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References


Occupational Therapy Certification Act (Indiana Code 23–82).


Physical Therapy Practice Act (Indiana Code 25–23.5).

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