This article places the Directions for the Future project on a continuum of interaction within the profession concerning the future of occupational therapy education and practice. Questions concerning the appropriate educational level for entry into the profession, the challenges of multiple practice environments, and research demands have confronted our profession through the years. We are now considering the characteristics required for future practice. In doing so, we are also considering the impact of the changing environment on the development of occupational therapy knowledge and on the application of that knowledge. We are taking the time today to ensure that the profession will be well prepared for tomorrow.

The origins of the Directions for the Future project can be traced to the 1950s. Since then, numerous American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) task forces have examined entry level education for the profession. In 1963, a workshop on graduate education recommended entry at the master's-degree level (AOTA, 1963). In 1976, the Report of the Mental Health Task Force proposed that graduate education as the entry level into the profession occur by 1982 (AOTA, 1976), and in 1978, the Ad Hoc Committee on Education recommended that “the master's degree be considered as the point of professional entry into occupational therapy” (AOTA, 1978, p. 12). Once again, in 1981, a committee reviewed all routes of entry into the profession, but, unlike the previous groups, this one recommended no change at that time (AOTA, 1981).

Not surprisingly, the issue arose again in 1984, when a resolution stating the need to resolve the question of entry into the profession was submitted to AOTA's Representative Assembly. After considerable debate, the Representative Assembly charged AOTA's Executive Board to manage a study examining multiple issues relating to education and practice and to provide recommendations at the 1986 Assembly meeting. These issues addressed not only technical and professional education but also concerns of past, present, and future practice; the effects of technology on health and educational environments; the profession's research needs; and the desired characteristics of future practitioners and researchers.

The Executive Board established the Ad Hoc Entry-Level Study Committee, comprising representatives from practice and professional and technical education. This committee studied all aspects of the profession for 2 years. An underlying premise of their work required the preliminary identification of those characteristics of the occupational therapist and the occupational therapy assistant necessary for viable participation in future health and educational environments. Intrinsic to this process was communication with AOTA members along with the solicitation of comments and advice from persons both inside and outside the profession.

Although the 1986 Representative Assembly expected to receive the final report, they felt that, before making recommendations, they needed additional data regarding demographics and the impact that changes in the educational system would have on the manpower supply. Subsequently, an additional year was provided to complete the study.

In 1987, a final report was submitted to the Representative Assembly, and numerous recommendations and policies were adopted. The policies included (a) support of graduate education, (b) emphasis on the importance of a liberal arts foundation for occupational therapy education, (c) support of research, and (d) continued development of an academic discipline and applied sciences in occupational therapy. In addition, an introductory statement was approved that supported multiple educational routes of entry into the profession, thus making it clear that the Association was not mandating entry into the profession.
profession at only the master's degree level.

The report's recommendations covered a wide variety of issues, including:

- Development of a hierarchy for both education and practice.
- Symposia to focus on graduate education, theory development, and research.
- Increased efforts in faculty and student recruitment, especially of minorities.
- A study of the appropriate locus of control for fieldwork.
- Additional support for graduate education.
- Development of a professional focus statement defining the overall aim of the profession.

The Representative Assembly charged the Executive Board to develop a mechanism to ensure the implementation of the approved recommendations of the Entry Level Study Committee Report, henceforth known as Directions for the Future.

Knowing that the planning and implementation process would be developmental and would require the resources of many segments of the Association, the Board appointed an ad hoc committee, called the Directions for the Future Coordinating Committee (DFFCC). The DFFCC consisted of persons representing the Commission on Education, the Commission on Practice, the Special Interest Sections' Steering Committee, the Executive Board, the Representative Assembly, certified occupational therapy assistants, the Entry Level Study Committee, the Research Advisory Council, and the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF). The DFFCC was charged to examine all recommendations and adopted policies and to determine how the Directions for the Future project could be transformed into realistic plans for the Association and the profession.

It became clear to the DFFCC that not all of the recommendations approved by the Assembly could be implemented concurrently. Consequently, some activities have begun and others will be addressed later. For example, before the notion of a hierarchy of education or practice can be addressed, we must first describe the knowledge base of the profession as well as determine the core of practice. Two current projects are addressing those questions. First, a group of theorists and scholars in the field is meeting to discuss and refine the multiple approaches to practice from which the occupational therapy knowledge base might be derived. Second, a pilot survey of master clinicians was conducted. This pilot survey yielded information about current practice and raised questions about future practice. Practice as it is and as it might be can be connected with entry level education into the profession, as well as to the research needs for the profession.

A symposium focusing on the inextricable linkage of practice, education, and research is planned for 1990. The practice survey data and the scholars' information will be incorporated into the symposium. This symposium will offer 200 participants, representing a cross section of leaders in the field, the opportunity to discuss the future of the profession. In turn, spin-offs from this symposium may lead to other symposia in educational programs, state associations, and clinical settings throughout the country. Such dialogue is intended to facilitate (a) a broad understanding of the probable nature of practice in the coming century and (b) the development of a responsive, congruent, and supportive educational system.

Other activities have commenced during the last 2 years. A Graduate Program Advisory Committee, established as part of the Commission on Education Program Advisory Committee, advises educational programs on the development of advanced graduate programs. Eventually, guidelines that differentiate advanced graduate education from entry level graduate education will exist. Additionally, a survey of educational programs concerning recruitment and retention practices is being conducted through the Minority Advisory Committee, and a study of fieldwork education is almost complete.

Throughout the Association, the DFFCC is coordinating other tasks relevant to occupational therapy practice and education. It is examining the Professional and Technical Role Analysis Project, as well as other reports. The AOTA/AOTF Clinical Reasoning Project, studies and other Foundation activities, such as the Centers for Scholarship and Research, fellowships, and support for graduate education, are important to the overall interests and goals of the Directions for the Future project.

In accomplishing its charge, the DFFCC looks at the profession's current activities and at how these activities can be linked to ensure that we remain a valued profession. We envision that, within the next several years, the work of this Committee will be incorporated into the mainstream planning efforts of the Association, thereby ensuring the continued development and growth of occupational therapy into the 21st century.

References


