Terminology Quandary in Education

(education program definitions, professional education, occupational therapy education)

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Communication about issues related to occupational therapy educational programs has been handicapped by the lack of agreement about program definitions. A conceptual framework for describing educational programs is presented. Present problems in terminology are elucidated through application of this framework. A proposal is put forth for clarifying program terms, definitions, and classification.

Effective communication depends on an agreement about the meaning of basic terms. The word communication is derived from the Latin communis, meaning common (1, 2). When people communicate, they are trying to establish a commonness with someone. Definition is essential to the communication process.

A definition is a “precise statement of the essential nature of a thing.” (2, pp 137-138) A definition delimits the meaning of a term by specifying, describing, or explaining what is included in its meaning. Definitions are sometimes referred to as verbal maps (2). Just as a map must clearly depict the area it represents if it is to ease travel, so, too, a term must accurately represent the thing it symbolizes if it is to facilitate communication.

Communication about educational issues within occupational therapy has been severely handicapped by the lack of agreement about the meaning of the terms applied to our educational programs. A term such as basic master's program has different meanings for different therapists. This results in a failure to communicate effectively about issues such as professional competencies and eligibility for certification. The purpose of this paper is to clarify educational terminology in occupational therapy by delineating a conceptual basis for describing educational programs, specifying the present quandary in terminology, and proposing new program definitions and a new classification scheme.

(Conceptual Framework

Components.) Professional education is an instruction sequence that prepares students for professional practice. Preparation for professional practice was characterized by McGlothlin as consisting of the basic arts and sciences and the professional sciences and their application (3). From this conceptual orientation, the basic arts and sciences are recognized as an integral part of professional education rather than as a pre-professional component. Including the liberal arts and sciences as a part of professional education serves as a reminder of their contributions to professional education and practice.

Although the occupational therapy literature contains no extensive discussion of the role of the liberal arts and sciences in occupational therapy education, The Essentials of an Accredited Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist (Essentials) (4) stipulate that the underlying educational philosophy is liberal and requires interdisciplinary study. In considering the relationship between general education and occupational therapy education, the Mental Health Task Force concluded that the current provision of 2 years of liberal education and 2 years of occupational therapy education is inadequate preparation for mastering occupational therapy knowledge and for practice (5).

Additional insight into the concerns expressed by the Mental Health Task Force is provided by Crawford's analogies concerning the nature of liberal, professional, and scholarly education (6). Liberal education introduces the student to the notion of a storehouse of knowledge. It demonstrates the utility of the storehouse for solving problems and provides skills in discovering what is stored up. Professional education allows one to explore in depth one room of that storehouse, where-

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as scholarly education teaches how to add new knowledge to the storehouse.

Hence, each type of education makes a unique contribution to the preparation of a professional. The liberally educated person has broad knowledge of the major branches of learning and of the intellectual processes in those branches. This fosters an understanding of the self, others, society, and the world, and instills an appreciation of the links between the past, present, and future. The development of competence in reasoning skills provides the basis for further cognitive growth. The professionally educated person has learned to apply knowledge to solve human problems. This application requires competence in problem solving and technical skills. The liberally educated professional is thus not only competent in skill but has developed a social awareness sufficient to understand the humanistic value of this skill. Skills in adding to knowledge to improve understanding of a phenomenon characterize the scholarly individual. Thus, the scholarly professional advances the professional science.

A Framework of Occupational Therapy. Perspectives of occupational therapy education have been heavily concentrated on the professional as opposed to the liberal or scholarly components. Our research needs have been translated into education requirements only recently (7). Furthermore, there has been little attempt to achieve an appropriate balance of these three components.

In occupational therapy, it has been common practice to dichotomize professional education, either as basic or as advanced. Using the Statement on Advanced Professional Education of The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) as the authority, basic professional education is defined as the instructional sequence that provides an introduction to the knowledge and skills unique to occupational therapy and that prepares students for entry into occupational therapy practice (8). Basic professional education is viewed as essential for practice and the requirements for basic professional education are given in the Essentials (4).

Basic professional education has the same connotation as entry-level education. The meaning of these terms has been made somewhat more specific by the acceptance of the role delineation study by the AOTA representative assembly in March 1981 (9). Within the context of that study, entry-level practice was operationally defined as the first year of practice. It follows that basic professional education is the instructional sequence that emphasizes the knowledge and skills required to practice occupational therapy during the first year of practice.

Using the same statement as the reference, advanced professional education is defined as "education beyond the basic professional level. It refers to the education which occurs after professional certification and includes that portion of a program for a first professional graduate degree which exceeds the basic essentials of an approved education program." (8, p 158) The Guide for Graduate Education in Occupational Therapy Leading to the Master's Degree defines advanced study in occupational therapy as that which exceeds the essential knowledges and skills for occupational therapy certification (10). Advanced professional education is concerned with the education of advanced clinicians, practitioner-scholars, educators, and administrators. The terms advanced professional, post-professional, post-entry level, and graduate education are all used synonymously to refer to education above and beyond that required by the Essentials (4). According to the graduate guide, occupational therapists completing advanced professional education should exhibit beginning competencies in knowledge development, skills in applying core concepts to specific practice areas, leadership characteristics, and qualities of a self-directed learner (10). These objectives are consistent with those outlined for graduate programs by the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States (11).

Accreditation. The distinction between basic and advanced professional education becomes particularly salient when accreditation is considered. Accreditation refers to the process of evaluating and recognizing the performance and quality of an educational institution or program (12). Basic and advanced professional education are both accredited. Institutional accreditation applies to both basic and advanced professional education, whereas programmatic accreditation is restricted to basic professional education.

Basic occupational therapy education is accredited by the Committee on Allied Health Education and Accreditation (CAHEA) of the American Medical Association. The Accreditation Committee of the AOTA collaborates in this process. The type of accreditation given by CAHEA is referred to as specialized or programmatic accreditation. This type of accreditation is based on the Essentials (4) and is intended to assure that the purposes and accomplishments of the program meet the needs of society. CAHEA currently accredits three types of occupational therapy programs: bac-
calaureate, certificate, and basic master’s. Graduates of these programs are eligible to take the certification examination for the occupational therapist, registered.

Basic occupational therapy education is reviewed together with advanced occupational therapy education by regional accrediting associations. The type of accreditation given by a regional association, such as the Middle States Association of Colleges, is referred to as general or institutional accreditation. It signifies confidence in the institution’s purposes and its ability to accomplish them. Hence, neither AOTA nor CAHEA has authority over advanced professional education. Control lies with the educational institution offering the program.

**Educational Programs: Definition and Classification**

**Terms and Definitions.** An adequate conceptualization of the various kinds of education—liberal, professional, and scholarly—provides the basis for understanding the different types of occupational therapy educational patterns. These patterns are formed by combining liberal, professional, and scholarly learning in various ways and proportions.

The predominant types of educational patterns that appear operational are portrayed in column I of Figure 1. The terms for each of the six patterns are listed in column II. Pattern 1 represents a baccalaureate program, and comprises about 2 years of liberal education and 2 years of basic professional education. Pattern 2 provides equivalent professional education, but this is preceded by 4 years of liberal education. This pattern represents a post-baccalaureate certificate or a basic master’s program. Patterns 3 and 4 also incorporate 4 years of liberal education. Each pattern also has a scholarly component. Patterns 3 and 4 differ in terms of the goals of the professional education component. Pattern 4 incorporates advanced professional education, whereas Pattern 3 does not. The distinction between basic and advanced professional education is indicated by the solid line symbolizing programmatic accreditation by AMA. The portion of the curriculum to the left of the line is basic, and to the right, advanced. Patterns 3 and 4 are both labeled basic master’s programs. Patterns 5 and 6 are similar in liberal and professional components. Pattern 6 incorporates a scholarly component, whereas pattern 5 does not. Both patterns represent advanced master’s programs.

This analysis highlights the present quandary in terminology. A definition requires a term and a specification of the distinctive characteristics of the thing being defined. These characteristics distinguish the thing from other things of a similar kind (2). Figure 1 makes it apparent that the differences inherent in Patterns 2, 3, and 4 are obscured by the use of one term—basic master’s program. Similarly, the differences seen in Patterns 5 and 6 are obscured by the label advanced master’s program. In these instances the same terms are used to refer to several different types of educational commodities.

**Classification.** The second part of definition is classification. Classification is the process of assigning terms to classes and in so arranging them to make clear their similarities and differences (2). According to the present classification system, educational Patterns 1 through 4 are classified as professional programs. Other terms used synonymously with professional are basic professional and entry-level. Less commonly, the term undergraduate education is applied. Patterns 5 and 6 are now classified as post-professional. Other terms in use are advanced professional, post-entry-level, and graduate. The classification scheme is given in column III of Figure 1.

A classification scheme is formulated around an organizing principle. This principle is used to determine the class to which a term belongs. For example, the basic master’s program is placed in the class of professional instead of post-professional based on the organizing principle. The organizing principle currently employed in occupational therapy is not readily apparent from Figure 1. It appears to be based on program entrance requirements. Any program that requires occupational therapy certification before admission is classified as post-professional, whereas any program incorporating requirements for certification is classified as professional. The asterisks (*) have been added in Figure 1 to indicate the point of entry into the occupational therapy program.

**Proposal.**

The foregoing analysis has specified the ambiguities surrounding educational terminology, program definition, and classification. The following suggestions are made to facilitate communication about educational issues and professional competencies:

1. Refine the terms applied to educational programs.
2. Classify educational programs on the basis of educational goals.
3. Delimit the meaning of the terms used for programmatic accreditation to connote only basic occupational therapy education.

The proposed terms for the educational programs are shown in column IV, Figure 1. By refining the
labels, confusion is avoided since each educational pattern has its own unique term. In addition, by selecting terminology that is descriptive of educational requirements, the demands of each pattern become clearer. The proposed scheme thus more adequately identifies the outcomes of each educational pattern. Since the outcomes have meaning for employment, the scheme enables more effective communication between potential employers and employees.

The proposed scheme was developed a priori; that is, it is based on assumption. The utility of the scheme depends upon its adequacy for defining existing occupational therapy programs. Usefulness must be determined by a description of program characteristics. Terminology may then be expanded or reduced as required by the data gathered and the desired degree of specificity. For example, a term such as Basic-Advanced Professional Master's may need to be devised to cover a first professional degree at the master's level, which includes both basic and advanced professional education and is preceded by an undergraduate degree in a field other than occupational therapy.

The second recommendation is to use educational goals as the organizing principle for classifying programs, thereby replacing the current system, based on entrance requirements, with a system based on exit requirements. It is suggested that programs leading to basic professional competence be classified as undergraduate, whereas those terminating in advanced professional or research competencies, or both, be classified as graduate. The proposed classification scheme has been added to Figure 1 (in column V).

Acceptance of the above terms and classification scheme results in the following definitions:

1. A baccalaureate program is an undergraduate educational sequence that leads to basic professional competence.
2. A post-baccalaureate certificate program is an undergraduate educational sequence that is completed after baccalaureate education, and leads to basic professional competence.
3. A basic master's program is a graduate program that leads to basic professional competence and beginning competence in research.
4. A basic-advanced master’s program is a graduate program that incorporates basic professional competence and leads to advanced professional competence and beginning competence in research.

5. An advanced professional master’s program leads to advanced professional competence.

6. An advanced master’s program leads to advanced professional competence and beginning competence in research.

The lack of consensus on the meaning of the terms used to designate accreditation status ensues from the refined terminology scheme. At the present time, occupational therapy educational programs are accredited according to degree or program level. For instance, the Certificate of Accreditation reads “Occupational Therapy Program Basic Master’s Degree Level.” Programmatic accreditation applies only to basic professional education. Use of degree or program terms to award accreditation status is confusing since some of the programs presently labeled basic master’s include more than just basic professional education. The refined labels result in further complications. Therefore, it is suggested that accreditation status be based on the completion of a basic occupational therapy program regardless of degree or program level.

Summary
The lack of consensus in occupational therapy about the definition of occupational therapy educational programs has led to communication problems in discussing issues related to professional competencies. A conceptual framework for viewing educational patterns—comprising liberal, professional, and scholarly education—was outlined. Professional education was viewed as basic or advanced, depending on whether it met or exceeded the requirements for programmatic accreditation, and ultimately, for certification.

Use of the proposed framework to describe educational programs revealed that the terms basic and advanced master’s programs were used to refer to dissimilar educational patterns. Also, the terms post-baccalaureate certificate and basic master’s programs were applied to similar educational patterns. Furthermore, the analysis showed that the classification principle was based on requirements met before entry into the occupational therapy educational sequence.

A three-part proposal was made as an initial step in resolving problems in program terminology, definition, and classification. First, the present repertoire of four terms was expanded to six. The terms baccalaureate, post-baccalaureate certificate, basic master’s, basic-advanced master’s, advanced professional master’s, and advanced master’s were selected and applied to the educational patterns. These labels enable a more accurate description of program requirements and made the demands of each pattern clearer. Since the scheme was developed a priori, its adequacy must be determined by use. Second, programs were classified based on their goals or exit requirements rather than their entrance criteria. It was suggested that programs providing only basic professional education be classified as undergraduate programs. Programs providing advanced professional education or beginning competence in research, or both, would be regarded as graduate. Third, since the use of program labels for identifying programmatic accreditation status implies more than basic professional education, it was suggested that the term basic occupational therapy education replace program terms.

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REFERENCES