Developing an Occupational Therapy Curriculum at a Small College

Stephen L. Heater

Key Words: curriculum • schools, occupational therapy

Small colleges and universities are increasingly turning to new program development to increase enrollments, stem decline, and ensure survival. Occupational therapy is an increasingly popular curriculum among small college and university administrators in view of its potential for attracting students, enhancing the organization's profile and mission, and generating revenue.

This study examined the development of the occupational therapy curriculum at College Misericordia, Dallas, Pennsylvannia, from 1981 to 1984. Interviews and pertinent documents, such as financial records, curricular materials, and enrollment statistics, were analyzed. The results demonstrate that the occupational therapy curriculum was instrumental in increasing enrollments and generating revenues at this small college. It can be concluded that curriculum development in occupational therapy can have a positive effect on an organization's ability to remain viable in an increasingly competitive market.

Numerous small private colleges and universities are facing enrollment decline. It is predicted that by 1994 the 18-to-22-year-old age group will be 26% smaller than in 1979 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977), and that small private colleges will have lost nearly 50% of their 1979 enrollment, making them more vulnerable as competition for the student market increases (Crossland, 1980).

Since 1970, more than 175 colleges have closed or have merged with others (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1980a). Size and lack of assets and endowments will make it difficult for small colleges to respond successfully to the many pressures brought to bear by shrinking enrollments, rising costs, and deteriorating physical plants. Jonsen, Bogue, and Chambers (1981) argued that “the best guarantees of survival remain (1) capable institutional management, (2) program flexibility to respond to new needs, (3) a sound fiscal base, and (4) the good fortune to be located in a growing part of the country” (p. 316).

One of the most common measures taken to stem decline is to identify unique and marketable curricula that are cost effective, mission central, and revenue generating. The number of small colleges and universities currently implementing occupational therapy curricula indicates that this major is seen as having potential for promoting institutional stability and growth.

This article presents the findings of a descriptive case study that sought to determine the extent to which development of an occupational therapy curriculum affected one small college's enrollment and revenue.

Review of the Literature

From 1945 until the mid-1970s, higher education experienced a phenomenal growth in enrollment. Far-reaching technological advances, a booming post-war economy, and increased governmental support for higher education, particularly in the form of the G.I. Bill, precipitated a need for colleges to adapt their curricula to meet the educational needs of large numbers of returning veterans. Enrollments in publicly sponsored institutions grew from 50% of the national share of students immediately following World War II to nearly 80% of the national share in 1979 (National Center for Higher Educational Statistics, 1980). This rapid growth in public higher education, however, began to signal a period of decline for the nation’s small private colleges and universities. Because of limited capacity for developing professional training programs and conducting research in technology and medicine, such institutions were at a disadvantage in competing for career-oriented students.
By the early and mid-1970s, small colleges, challenged by a decline in the college-aged population, spiraling inflation, and an increasingly technical and service-oriented society, adopted policies of change, often at the risk of losing their sense of mission and tradition. The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education (1975) noted that colleges needed to become more responsive to socioeconomic pressures, but warned that they did not need to lose their unique missions and identities in the process. In its report, the council stressed that colleges had to examine the most efficient ways to allocate both human and fiscal resources and that faculties and administrations had to develop receptive attitudes toward change.

Change and adaptation have become recurrent themes in contemporary reports on higher education. Mayhew's (1979) forecast for the small college was grim. He recommended various survival strategies, including more intense recruitment, visible and marketable programs of study, and vigorous capital- and fund-raising campaigns combined with drastically reduced expenditures. Mayhew argued that the college must be seen as a business, and principles of marketing and finance must be applied effectively if small colleges are to compete with institutions that have public support or large endowments.

The postwar technology and economy have pressured small colleges to alter their curricula to serve the demands of a rapidly changing labor market. Rudolph (1977) likened the college curriculum to a societal artifact that represents the needs and concerns prevalent in the culture. In his view, curricula in the United States are developing a strong bias toward a career education that prepares students for roles in service and technological professions.

According to Conrad and Wyer (1980), American higher education has nearly turned its back on curriculum evaluation and has focused almost entirely on curriculum development and implementation. Current financial woes have forced small colleges to attract more students by changing their programs of liberal education. Sagen (1979) observed that the labor market is a major influence on the college curriculum and that the entire college environment has changed to meet the needs of consumers.

The Carnegie Council (Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education: A summary, 1980b) proposed that a typical college response to the decline in enrollment and to changes in the economy is to attain program flexibility and to develop institutional specialization. Because 58% of the undergraduate population is enrolled in professional programs, it suggested that college administrators and boards of regents reexamine their institutions' identities and missions. Curriculum, in its opinion, must offer what the consumer wants; therefore, colleges should proceed steadily toward providing educational programs that are both mission compatible and consumer oriented.

Knowles (1970) argued that administration and faculty must be jointly involved in planning for curriculum development and stressed that academic planning is ultimately influenced by the potential for increasing revenue from students and from external sources such as grants. He identified the need for colleges to anticipate changes that might be brought about by curriculum development and noted that such changes are most likely to affect fiscal resources and students.

As demand for occupational therapy personnel has increased, colleges and universities have responded by developing educational programs in this field (AOTA, 1985). Currently, 13 professional and 9 technical level educational programs are being developed or have been initially accredited ("Listing of Educational Programs," 1984). Of these, 6 are in small private colleges or universities with total enrollments of less than 3,000 students each.

The future of small private colleges and universities is uncertain. The literature review indicates that curriculum development is a necessary strategy to ensure stability and growth of these institutions. Although there is speculation that curriculum development influences the high-risk college's ability to remain competitive, little documentation has chronicled how the development of a new curriculum has affected particular colleges.

Methods
The purpose of this study was to determine how the development of the professional level occupational therapy curriculum at College Misericordia, Dallas, Pennsylvania, affected organizational stability and growth as measured by enrollment changes and revenues generated. A descriptive case study method was used. Despite its inherent limitations, a case study is a useful qualitative measure for research in organizations (Becker, 1968; Goffman, 1959).

Following an extensive literature review on curriculum development and organizational change, key personnel were interviewed to ascertain personal perceptions of how the development of the occupational therapy curriculum affected the college. Relevant documents, including planning materials, budgets and fiscal reports, enrollment statistics, and registrar's reports, were analyzed to determine specific changes resulting from the development of the curriculum.

Historical Background
Established in 1924, College Misericordia is the oldest institution of higher learning in Luzerne County,
Pennsylvania. Full-time enrollments grew steadily from 47 in 1924 to 1,045 in the fall of 1964. In 1965, enrollments began to decline, and by 1970 there were indications that the college was no longer effectively competing for the student share regionally. Four other colleges had opened in Luzerne County since 1940, and two of these were publicly supported institutions with substantially lower costs and a large menu of curricula for career-oriented majors. By 1978, College Misericordia's full-time enrollment fell to 768, nearly 26% below the record enrollment in 1964.

In 1979, the college's first lay administrator was appointed president and charged with the task of returning the college to a more stable financial condition. The college soon became coeducational, and a sweeping review of the academic program ensued. In the spring of 1980, a group of college administrators, called the "850 Club," to underscore the college's target of enrolling 850 full-time students, met to discuss strengthening some career programs, such as business and nursing, and adding others, such as computer science and occupational therapy (Kirk, 1983).

Encouraged by the success of the occupational therapy assistant curriculum at Mount Aloysius Junior College, Misericordia's sister institution in Cresson, Pennsylvania, the 850 Club explored the feasibility of developing a professional level program and found substantial support for the idea. In June 1980, a consultant was employed to help develop a proposal for the initiation of the program. The formal proposal was submitted to and approved by the college's board of trustees in October 1980.

In January 1981, a program director was hired to develop the curriculum, which was based on a 1 + 3 model (i.e., students would enter the 1st year of the program as preoccupational therapy majors and then pursue professional level courses the following 3 years). This model allowed the program to recruit students for the fall of 1981, while giving the program director more than a year to prepare the professional level content.

Recruitment began in earnest in the spring of 1981, and admissions officials hoped to enroll 15 to 20 preoccupational therapy students for that fall. A full complement of at least 60 full-time students was expected in the occupational therapy program in fall 1984. Personnel needed would include two full-time instructors, one part-time instructor, and one full-time secretary. It was imperative that the curriculum meet these minimal student enrollments in order to be cost-effective. The occupational therapy curriculum was intended to be the keystone in the college's plan to increase enrollments.

Results

The initiation of the occupational therapy program brought with it a marked increase in overall college enrollments from 1980 to 1984. Table 1 shows that occupational therapy enrolled a total of 159 students in the fall 1984 semester. This number represented 15.6% of the total student body on campus, making occupational therapy the second largest major. Actual enrollment surpassed initial enrollment projections by 165%

College Misericordia had underestimated the popularity of the occupational therapy major and its potential for attracting students. Admissions personnel interviewed related that surveys of high school students' interests had not prepared the college for the number of applicants. The application pool of 45 to 50 qualified freshman per year surpassed projections. One official commented that the attractive, suburban location of the college presented an alternative to the urban locations of most other occupational therapy curricula in the region. Another official mentioned that a number of parents were inclined to select this particular occupational therapy curriculum because they perceived the College Misericordia campus to be "safe." The fact that the curriculum was not yet accredited did not seem to affect the applicant pool or enrollment. One administrator commented that College Misericordia's history of implementing high-quality programs in nursing and allied health may have given applicants confidence in the school's ability to see the occupational therapy curriculum through to full accreditation.

By offering the only professional level occupational therapy educational program in a 150-mile radius, College Misericordia enhanced its profile as a progressive institution of learning with a growing menu of majors. As one admissions official stated, "The quality and marketability of our occupational therapy [program] has given College Misericordia a regional edge in recruitment." Enrollment statistics support this contention: 80% of all incoming occupational therapy students were from within the college's traditional catchment area. A survey conducted

---

**Table 1**

**Undergraduate Enrollments, 1980–1984**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total FTE</th>
<th>FTE in Occupational Therapy</th>
<th>Change in Total Enrollment (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>1,066</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>1,020</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: FTE = full-time equivalent students. Numbers reflect enrollment in the fall semester.*

*a This decline reflects the closing of several programs as part of the college's long-range plan.*

---

The American Journal of Occupational Therapy
in 1983 demonstrated that one of the major reasons students chose the occupational therapy curriculum at College Misericordia was because it was "closer to home" than other available options.

Table 2 shows the fiscal resources allocated for the development of the occupational therapy program for 4 fiscal years. Although the figures appear modest, they reflect a substantial financial commitment for a small college. Capital expenditures were kept at a minimum by reallocating space and equipment from a discontinued art major to the occupational therapy curriculum. Faculty-to-student ratios of 1:40 in lectures and 1:20 in laboratories kept personnel costs low as the curriculum developed. By the 1984–1985 academic year, the program's personnel consisted of four full-time registered occupational therapists, one full-time secretary, and 4 part-time certified occupational therapy teaching assistants. The operational budget of $21,700 was the largest allotted to any academic program on campus except for nursing.

Table 3 demonstrates that the investments in the program proved to be a worthwhile risk for the college. The program generated substantial profits each year during the development process. The $606,362 profit realized in the 1984–1985 academic year represented 9.2% of the college's total operating budget for that period. One administrative official inter-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal Year</th>
<th>Resources Allocated</th>
<th>Revenue Generated</th>
<th>Net Profit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981–1982</td>
<td>$24,857</td>
<td>$145,420</td>
<td>$120,563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982–1983</td>
<td>$57,561</td>
<td>$267,705</td>
<td>$210,144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983–1984</td>
<td>$81,813</td>
<td>$516,600</td>
<td>$454,787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$265,419</td>
<td>$1,637,275</td>
<td>$1,371,856</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Revenues reflect tuition and fees only.

viewed stated that the occupational therapy major helped to "substantially reduce the college's cumulative deficit." He continued that the major allowed the college to reach into more "affluent areas" outside the traditional catchment area, thereby decreasing the college's dependence on governmental financial aid programs. Another official summarized by stating that the advent of the occupational therapy curriculum "helped balance the books."

Small colleges receive additional significant revenues through ancillary services such as meals and housing for residential students. The new curriculum helped in this area, too. Of the 159 students enrolled in occupational therapy in 1984, 75% were classified as residents, bringing 119 students into previously unoccupied dormitory space. According to student services personnel, the occupational therapy program helped to fill the dormitories to capacity, thereby increasing the profits realized from ancillary services.

Table 2
Fiscal Resource Allocation for the Occupational Therapy Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Therapy Budget</th>
<th>Total College Budget</th>
<th>Percent of Total Budget Allocated to Occupational Therapy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY 1981–1982</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Salaries</td>
<td>$6,281</td>
<td>$5,154,856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital</td>
<td>1,060</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$7,341</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 1982–1983</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Salaries</td>
<td>$8,695</td>
<td>$5,479,491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital</td>
<td>3,146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$11,841</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 1983–1984</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Salaries</td>
<td>$17,173</td>
<td>$6,161,845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital</td>
<td>64,188</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$81,813</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY 1984–1985</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Salaries</td>
<td>$21,700</td>
<td>$6,590,366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital</td>
<td>79,488</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$101,188</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers do not add up exactly to total because of rounding.

Table 3
Revenue Generated Versus Resources Allocated

Discussion
The occupational therapy curriculum at College Misericordia seems to have succeeded for a variety of reasons. The college identified an untapped student market and pursued it aggressively. Further, occupational therapy's status as a fast-growing profession with ample job opportunities for graduates made it an attractive major. The college's location in an underserved, suburban region of the country provided a distinct recruitment advantage. Students interested in occupational therapy as a career gained the option of remaining closer to home for their education, and parents seemed comforted by the perception that the college was safer than those in urban areas.

The administration played a strong role in planning for and implementing the occupational therapy curriculum. The curriculum was a key ingredient in the college's long-range plan for increasing enrollment, and the program was allocated the resources necessary to ensure its growth. Because it was viewed as an investment in the college's future, ample planning was involved to minimize risks.

Finally, it should be noted that the occupational therapy curriculum was compatible with the college's mission and long history of providing education in...
the areas of allied health and nursing. This fact may have contributed to the consumer's willingness to risk enrollment when the program was unaccredited.

Conclusions

The development of the occupational therapy curriculum at College Misericordia enhanced organizational stability and growth as measured by increased enrollment and revenues generated. Also, key personnel interviewed expressed the opinion that the occupational therapy curriculum returned the college to a more stable financial condition.

Further study is needed to determine the ways in which curriculum development in occupational therapy affects an institution's mission, viability, and organization. Such studies lead to the development of successful models, needed by institutions in parts of the country where occupational therapy personnel and educational programs are lacking.

Acknowledgments

I thank Dr. Joseph Fink, president; Dr. Arthur Kirk, former vice president (now president, Keuka College, Keuka Park, NY), and the administration, students, and faculty of College Misericordia, Dallas, Pennsylvania, for their encouragement and support. I would also like to thank Dr. Richard Gibbon and Dr. Norman Newburg of the University of Pennsylvania and Dr. Sheila Pringle and Christine L. Hischmann, MS, OTR/L, of College Misericordia for their sound advice and guidance.

References


