THE ISSUE IS

Professionalization of the Field: How Can Educational Programs Identify the Best Applicants?

For more than four decades, occupational therapists have identified a need to establish admission criteria for occupational therapy educational programs that select students with the potential for developing the profession. Many qualities are valued by the occupational therapy field, including clinical performance, research ability, theory development and application, and the ability and desire to teach others. There is a debate, however, as to whether baccalaureate graduates develop the field in the areas of research, theory, and education to the same extent as entry-level master’s degree graduates. It seems clear that a profession that values these qualities must select students for the two educational levels (baccalaureate and entry-level master’s degree) who can strengthen the profession in practice, research (including theory development), and education. This article identifies some researched requirements for selecting students who are best able to complete academic requirements and Level II fieldwork and to develop and enhance the profession.

Need for Selection Requirements

The need for selection requirements in entry-level occupational therapy programs is not new. In 1951, West called for “tailor-made” selection instruments to determine who should be admitted to occupational therapy programs. She recognized that the future of occupational therapy research and education depends on selecting qualified entry-level students.

Because the competition for seats in occupational therapy educational programs is acute, now is an ideal time for the profession to select generally approved criteria for admission. As Swinehart and Wittman wrote, the lack of information about the efficacy of how we admit students and admission criteria’s ability to predict students’ performance, combined with the increasing number of students applying to occupational therapy programs, results in educational programs having to make increasingly difficult decisions about which applicants to admit when a limited number of spaces are available. (1993, p. 19)

This lack of information about admission criteria and predictors of performance can have a lasting effect on the profession. Poor selection standards can result in students withdrawing or being dismissed from programs due to inadequate performance, after having taken valuable positions that could have gone to more qualified applicants. Also, graduates who are ill suited for occupational therapy, or disappointed in occupational therapy, leave the field and exacerbate the worker shortages. These problems could be greatly reduced if the educational programs clearly identified candidates who will successfully graduate and will develop and establish the profession.

Qualifications for a Professional Graduate

Schein (1972) included in his definition of a profession the ability to produce and defend a distinct body of practice knowledge. If this is truly a quality of a profession, then a profession can be limited by a lack of theory development and research. Storm (1990) argued that a graduate who is a competent professional should develop and disseminate knowledge and make contributions to the field. In contrast to the professional therapist with these ideal qualities, Rogers, Hill, Holm, and Wasser (1992) found that occupational therapists generally have a low level of professional involvement. They studied 10 categories of professional involvement for graduates with baccalaureate degrees, entry-level master’s degrees, and postprofessional master’s degrees: education, leadership, administration and supervision, oral presentations, publications, research, clinical practice, public relations, products development, and professional recognition. Although involvement in these 10 areas was shown to be low, the entry-level master’s graduates were involved in more categories than the baccalaureate graduates.

Benefits of Master’s Degree Graduates to the Profession

As Rogers et al. (1992) found, there are benefits of the entry-level master’s degree to the profession. Gilkeson and

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Hanten (1984) discovered that within 2 years of graduation, master's degree graduates contributed more research than baccalaureate graduates. Within 5 years, the difference was statistically significant. These master's degree graduates also engaged in more teaching than the baccalaureate graduates, which means that those with advanced degrees are using their ability and desire to educate; this can continue to develop and establish the occupational therapy profession as a whole. It appears that the time spent on master’s level instruction, because it is extensive and intensive, would benefit the profession as the occupational therapy graduates enter the field in clinical practice, research, and education.

**What Admission Criteria Lead to a Graduate Who Is a Competent Professional?**

Traditionally, admission criteria for all entry-level occupational therapy programs rest heavily upon the cumulative grade point average (GPA), with some emphasizing the prerequisite GPA. In addition to the GPA, other indicators have been found to predict retention and professional involvement. For example, Lind (1970) found that the Strong Vocational Interest Blank (now the Strong Vocational Interest Test) significantly predicted high scores in Level II fieldwork. When Posthuma and Noh (1990) examined interview scores, they found that, although candidates selected by interview scores and by GPA received similar cumulative grades, students selected because of their interview scores received higher fieldwork grades. Posthuma and Noh (1990) and Schmalz, Rahr, and Allen (1990) found that candidates selected from 4-year schools performed better than those from 2-year schools or those selected immediately from high school. Schmalz et al. (1990) recommended that occupational therapy programs weight the GPAs accordingly because some institutions have substantially different standards for indicating academic achievement. In this case, the institution’s reputation and status are as important to consider as the GPA itself. In addition, they found high-quality written essays required as a part of the admission process to be effective indicators of a student’s potential for program completion. Danka (1993) concluded that students pursue occupational therapy degrees for various reasons or values that can be matched to the educational level of the program the student is pursuing. Her research indicated that baccalaureate students value respect, security, prestige, comfort, pleasure, and excitement. Master’s degree students value societal contribution, independence, original ideas, creativity, and self-respect. These are some of the studies that provide a base of criteria for selection of entry-level occupational therapy students. Obviously, a wide range of studies are needed to confirm these criteria.

**Conclusion**

Occupational therapy educational programs are developing at an unprecedented rate nationwide. As occupational therapy continues to expand and grow as a practice and academic discipline, it will need to select applicants with the best potential to fill roles as clinicians, researchers, and educators. This will require entry-level graduates who can perform more than just the clinical function. The ongoing critical evaluation and implementation of effective criteria for admission to occupational therapy educational programs should reflect the current and future needs of the profession. Research provides insight into the factors that might be considered when selecting students for enrollment in occupational therapy educational programs:

- high GPA, especially in required prerequisite courses
- high interview scores
- previous college education at a 4-year rather than a 2-year institution
- high scores on written essays, required for admission
- reasons given for wanting to be an occupational therapist similar to those of previous students

Further research could help confirm these admission criteria. Implementation of these criteria will move the field forward selecting appropriate student applicants who will strengthen the occupational therapy profession by excelling in practice, research, and education.

**References**


