Academic Juggling Act: Beginning and Sustaining an Academic Career

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Rapid expansion in the number and size of occupational therapy academic programs has resulted in a crucial need for faculty recruitment and retention. To encourage occupational therapy practitioners to consider academia as a career option, and to support those who choose this option, this article reviews higher education literature related to socialization into academia, the different types of academic institutions, the tenure system, and the process of entering into and sustaining an academic career. This literature is then correlated with issues in occupational therapy education. The article closes with specific literature-based suggestions for creating and sustaining an academic career through development of teaching skills, research agendas, and support systems.


O ccupational therapy education is in a crisis. The rapid development of new programs and the expansion of many existing programs have resulted in an urgent need for qualified faculty members. To be successful, new and seasoned faculty members must understand the values, beliefs, and expectations of their academic settings. This article reviews pertinent research on faculty life in higher education, links this research to the important issues in faculty recruitment and retention in occupational therapy education, and suggests methods to assist occupational therapy faculty members in developing and sustaining satisfying academic careers.

Socialization Into an Academic Culture

Socialization to academia may be viewed as the acquisition of the values and beliefs of an organizational culture (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). This socialization is not a one-way process but involves reciprocal interaction among many persons. The values and beliefs of the academic institution are transmitted through explicit and implicit messages. These messages may be conveyed through formal means (e.g., policies and procedures, ceremonial occasions) or through less formal means (e.g., interaction with others). Consequently, socialization occurs in multiple ways, and the messages conveying the values and beliefs of the organization are open to a variety of interpretations and misinterpretations (Tierney & Rhoads, 1994).

Men and women experience this socialization differently (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988). In a study in which highly productive faculty members were asked to identify factors that shaped their success (Davis & Astin, 1990), female faculty members named facilitating factors (e.g., hard work, achievement of satisfying relationships with students, high levels of motivation), whereas male faculty members mentioned external factors (e.g., time to pursue scholarly activities, funding from the institution). Constraints on achievement identified by female faculty members were limited time, family obligations, and high teaching loads, whereas male faculty members identified limited funding or lack of institutional backing (Davis & Astin, 1990).

Academic institutions, despite the differences among them, share a common culture characterized by academic freedom, academic honesty, and concern for the discovery and transmission of knowledge (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Tierney & Rhoads, 1994). All faculty members, regardless of rank, are expected to participate in teaching, service, and scholarly activities. Compared with those of other professions, faculty members enjoy a high level of autonomy and relative lack of direct supervision (Fife, 1994). On the surface, socialization to academic life appears to be remarkably democratic (Tierney & Rhoads, 1994). For example, published criteria for promotion and tenure are a yardstick for measuring the achievements of each fac-
faculty member. These criteria typically address excellence in teaching, research, and service, although this excellence may not be adequately defined, and faculty members may be left guessing whether their accomplishments are “good enough” to meet the implied standard of excellence (Austin & Sorcinelli, 1992; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992). New faculty members must decode such implicit messages to learn what is necessary to succeed. This entails understanding the organizational culture, developing clear goals, and enlisting the help of others to achieve their goals (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

Differences in Academic Institutions: The Carnegie Classification

Although shared characteristics of academic cultures exist, there are important differences among institutions (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education has created a typology for comparing the efforts and output of one institution to another. This classification is based on the level of outside funding and the number and type of degrees awarded annually by each institution. This typology underscores the richness of American education that, through its capacity for innovation, creates many specialized educational environments (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1994). In the 1994 edition, there are 10 classification categories, ranging from research institutions to 2-year colleges and specialized institutions.

Colleges and universities also match their institutional missions to their sources of funding and the mandate to award specific degrees (Zenas, 1988). Because of this, the Carnegie classification of a particular setting can provide a shorthand method to predict the balance of teaching, scholarship, and service expected of the setting’s faculty members. A research institution whose mission relies on externally funded research and publication may de-emphasize service and teaching. In contrast, an associate degree institution, whose primary mission is to prepare students to enter technical careers, generally emphasizes teaching and de-emphasizes research. Of course, there will always be exceptions to a typology. Nevertheless, occupational therapy faculty members who fine-tune their activities to the mission of their institutions will be in an advantageous position for promotion and tenure.

Promotion and Tenure

Although requirements may vary from institution to institution, the rationale for promotion and tenure is deeply embedded in the normative structure of academia. The reward structure is based on two assumptions: (a) that persons are judged on merit and (b) that a professorship is, in itself, a professional status, regardless of the discipline (Simeone, 1987). Faculty members may be hired in tenure-track and non-tenure-track positions. Non-tenure-track faculty members typically are appointed for 1 year. These appointments are renewed annually on the basis of faculty members’ performance. Tenure-track faculty members are also appointed annually until they are reviewed for promotion and tenure. This review generally occurs in the 6th year of the appointment.

Promotion and tenure are different, although in many institutions the process of achieving promotion or tenure is the same. Faculty members are tenured when they demonstrate that their teaching, research, and service contribute to the central mission and goals of the institution. Tenured faculty members have appointments that are considered to be permanent. Consequently, tenure is a long-term institutional commitment made to a faculty member (Halperin, 1995).

In contrast, promotion is an increase in rank to recognize academic accomplishments (Hiller & Ritvo, 1991; Ottenbacher & Stull, 1992). A faculty member passes through sequential ranks from instructor to assistant professor, to associate professor, to professor. At each rank, his or her work is assessed according to predetermined standards that identify the necessary competence in teaching, service, and scholarship. In many instances, published material forms the most visible measure of scholarly productivity. Non-tenure-track faculty members are eligible for promotion in many academic institutions.

Entering Academic Life

The first years of academic life are stressful for faculty members because of the many roles they must assume (Boice, 1992; Day, 1990; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992; Sorcinelli, 1994). Finkelstein and LaCelle-Peterson (1992) found that new faculty members work approximately 48 hours per week, about the same as their more senior faculty colleagues. However, new faculty members report being overwhelmed by their teaching responsibilities (Finkelstein & LaCelle-Peterson, 1992) and, as a result, spend little time on their writing and scholarly work (Boice, 1992). Female faculty members spend less time on scholarship than do male faculty members, which is likely to result in fewer publications and presentations, reducing the opportunity for promotion and tenure. Simeone (1987) found that only one fifth of new female faculty members reported that they spent 8 hours or more a week in writing compared with one third of male faculty members. Stress comes from meeting work expectations as well as expectations from sources external to work, such as family constraints and demands (Day, 1990). Female and nontenured faculty members reported feeling these time constraints more than did male faculty members and those who had already achieved promotion and tenure (Day, 1990).

The lack of feedback and clarity regarding expectations for promotion and tenure is an additional stressor (Boice, 1992; Sorcinelli, 1994). Olsen and Sorcinelli (1992) found that at the end of the first year of teaching, most new fac-
ulty members could neither explain the specific requirements for promotion and tenure at their institution nor assess their own performance for the year or report concrete feedback from their department chairperson on their performance. Added to this uncertainty are the high expectations faculty members have about their own performance (Soricinelli, 1994). Beyond these self-imposed standards, faculty members in Whitt’s (1991) study believed that they were expected to “hit the ground running,” that is, excel in teaching, research, and service beginning with their first year of teaching. Unfortunately, they perceived little in the way of direction and support from their faculty colleagues and department chairpersons.

Although these stressors seem to paint a negative picture of academic life, Olsen and Soricinelli (1992) reported that the intrinsic rewards of academia help faculty members to maintain job satisfaction despite the many stressors that they experience. These rewards include the autonomy and intellectual stimulation inherent in teaching and research. Support from colleagues, especially those in a faculty member’s field or discipline, is frequently identified as a buffer to work stress.

**Sustaining an Academic Career**

Seasoned faculty members may also experience work-related stress. This stress may come from shrinking budgets and variable enrollments as other segments of the population compete for private, state, and federal dollars (Simeone, 1987). Occupational therapy faculty members may experience stress as a result of expansion in the size of programs and increased expectations for scholarly productivity. These stressors make it more difficult to know how to sustain an academic career. To maintain a productive academic career in a particular setting, the seasoned faculty member must realize that institutional culture exerts the primary shaping influence. Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) suggested that the building of a successful career is a highly political process that requires understanding and navigating unstated institutional norms and practices. Sustaining a career means a major investment of the right kind of time and effort in the right kind of activities, and it means having access to resources and institutional backing that make ongoing scholarship possible. Thus, the more experienced faculty member must be politically astute about ongoing changes in institutional priorities. He or she must actively seek out the resources necessary to carry out tasks and, more importantly, he or she must pave the way for junior faculty members to gain access to supportive resources and networks.

**The Culture of Occupational Therapy Education**

The recruitment and retention of occupational therapy faculty members is important because of the growth in number and size of occupational therapy programs nationwide. Between 1990 and 1994, the number of full-time faculty members in accredited professional-level programs increased 39% from 452 to 589 (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1995). During this same time, the number of full-time faculty members in accredited occupational therapy assistant programs increased 52% from 247 to 375 (AOTA, 1995). Recruitment of new faculty members is difficult because the number of faculty positions exceeds the number of qualified applicants (AOTA, 1995). At the same time, seasoned faculty members are coping with rapidly changing academic programs and institutional cultures.

Because occupational therapy practitioners initially are socialized into their professional roles as clinicians, the shift to academia requires a second socialization into the faculty role. Occupational therapy practitioners entering academia generally are (a) from a graduate school in a field not directly related to occupational therapy (e.g., higher education administration, psychology, sociology) (American Occupational Therapy Foundation [AOTF], 1996); (b) from a graduate school in occupational therapy, occupational science, or a field closely related to occupational therapy (e.g., therapeutic studies) (AOTF, 1996); or (c) from clinical practice. Those attending graduate school in fields not directly related to occupational therapy may have mentoring networks largely external to the field. Doctoral students in occupational therapy, occupational science, or fields closely related to occupational therapy are more likely to be mentored by leaders in the field and to have the opportunity to teach in occupational therapy programs, to cowrite articles with occupational therapy scholars, and to assist in grant writing. These experiences provide the opportunity for valuable socialization that occupational therapists in other doctoral programs may not experience. Faculty members who enter from clinical practice may have strong mentoring networks within the occupational therapy practice community, but they may have difficulty gaining knowledge about the special challenges that academic life offers. In all cases, the new faculty member must learn how to fit into a department and institution. This entails learning from others about the values, beliefs, and culture of the department and the role of the department in the mission of the institution (Reynolds, 1992; Tierney & Rhoads, 1994; Whitt, 1991).

Parham and Zemke’s (1997) survey of professional-level OT programs indicated that 96% of the responding programs were housed in academic institutions with a tenure system. Tenured faculty members provide the leadership and stability necessary in occupational therapy programs for meeting the challenges inherent in the preparation of future practitioners. Furthermore, tenured faculty members are more likely to be the faculty members who conduct research and contribute to the development of knowledge in the field, high priorities for the profession (AOTF, 1996). These contributions also have long-term implications for academic institutions. Consequently, occupational therapy faculty members in institutions that
value and reward research must meet the norms of the institution to achieve promotion and tenure as individuals as well as to ensure long-term survival of the programs themselves (Michels, 1996). Failure to meet institutional norms may result in program closure (Michels, 1996).

**Entering and Sustaining an Academic Career: Four Vignettes**

The following vignettes portray the daily challenges faced by four occupational therapy faculty members. Jean and Jacqueline are faculty members in their first year of teaching. Both are also writing their doctoral dissertations during this year. Sarah and Donna are seasoned occupational therapy faculty members who have been educators for more than 10 years.

Jean: I have worked so long and hard for this job. I decided when I was in occupational therapy school that I wanted to teach, so this is the culmination of many years of effort. My life before coming here was not that different. I had an unstructured work life among teaching, grants, a private practice, graduate school, and family obligations, so I had plenty of practice controlling my time. What was really hard was the personal adjustment of moving, finding child care, finding a place to live, and getting the house in order at the same time that I was starting to teach. In regard to the department, I really want to fit in. Susan, my assigned mentor, has been really helpful to me. She reassures me that I am doing OK to focus on my dissertation and teaching. She has been a big help to me in advising, something I have not done before. I had enough to know that I will have to compromise my ideas to what the university wants. Sometimes I wonder if it will be worth it in the long run.

Sarah: Before I came to the college I was a clinical educator, so I knew how to develop rapport with students. But in the past few years, the class sizes have increased dramatically. We spent a lot of time restructuring the curriculum. Now, each of us teaches a few units within a course. I used to believe that we were a close department, but now everyone more or less does his or her own thing. For me, that “thing” meant deciding to get off the tenure track. I never really cared about the title. After I had a family, I decided to be less focused about a career. Sometimes, I think that I do not get the professional respect I deserve, but I feel good about my choice.

The choice to get off the tenure track may have been the best option for Sarah, given her personal needs, but it means that she may lose out on some of the institutional supports (e.g., release time, student assistants, organizational support) that accompany senior faculty positions (Davis & Astin, 1990). And, as Sarah indicated, another loss is the prestige accorded to faculty members who are tenured. Sarah needs to build a base of support so that her contribution to the program is recognized and appreciated.

Jacqueline: I am having a hard time with the first year of teaching. I am panicky because I can not seem to move ahead with my research and writing while I am learning the ropes here. I am having a hard time blocking out what goes on here and focusing on my research. I feel really behind. The support is poor to fair. I have to hustle to get the basics sometimes. I need a strategy for managing my time in a distracting environment with very limited resources.

Jacqueline feels out of control as she attempts to learn what is expected of her. Her graduate work enabled her to set a research agenda, but she has not been able to move on with it because of limited resources and conflicting job demands. She needs to develop her time-management skills so that she can focus on those activities that will be most important to obtain promotion and tenure.

Donna: I like being part of the high-powered university environment. Actually, I never thought that I would start working toward my PhD, but I could see that if I wanted to keep up with the department, I would need more than a master’s degree. The semesters I teach two courses I enroll in one; when I teach one, I try to take two. I think I’m a better teacher, actually, because I can empathize with what my students are going through. What keeps me going is that it is so stimulating. That and the support that I get from the other faculty members. But, it is also so tiring. Right now I am close enough to the dissertation to be thinking about a long-term research agenda. I am smart enough to know that I will have to compromise my ideas to what the university wants. Sometimes I wonder if it will be worth it in the long run.

Jacqueline’s concerns center around her new faculty responsibilities, especially teaching and student advising. Fortunately, she is mentored by a faculty member who knows the ropes. Jean describes her ability to balance her personal and professional lives as “the culmination of many years of effort.” The next few years will be a crucial time for her to learn what her long-term obligations and commitments will be.

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Developing Time-Management Skills

Time management is an overriding concern for new faculty members. New faculty members report feeling busy all the time and feeling that they do not have enough time to do everything (Day, 1990; Sorcinelli, 1994). They struggle with balancing the work expectations of teaching, research, and service, and still having enough personal time (Day, 1990; Sorcinelli, 1994). Work demands spill over into personal time, creating stress, especially for women and minorities (Day, 1990). Not surprisingly, this spillover depletes energy, creates family tensions, and leads to impaired health (Sorcinelli, 1994). Boice (1992) found that new faculty members who focus on the most important problems and balance the time they spent on teaching and research with a moderate and efficient schedule are more successful in their faculty roles than are faculty members who do not use these strategies.

Developing Teaching Skills and Styles

Teaching is the focal point of the first year of faculty life. Most new faculty members carry a full teaching load of about five courses a year. These courses are likely to be completely new to them. Consequently, faculty members will have to spend considerable time in course preparation, even if the content area is familiar territory. Boice (1992) found that preparation for teaching completely overwhelmed other faculty activities such as scholarship and getting to know colleagues. Time spent in preparation for teaching during the first year averaged between 16 and 24 hours a week (Boice, 1992). Teaching constitutes a major responsibility for seasoned faculty members as well, and because student needs are more immediate than faculty members’ scholarship, time devoted to teaching can diminish time spent conducting research.

Because teaching is central to success as a faculty member, preparing for this role before entering academia is a good idea. Presenting guest lectures or teaching laboratory sections of courses is a good way to start. Other strategies to learn about teaching involve seminars in graduate school, courses in college teaching, reading, or observations of a master teacher. Teaching involves more than content mastery. The mechanics of teaching, such as course outline preparation, lecture strategies, active learning methods, and student evaluation methods are also essential. Boice (1992) observed that new faculty members have the tendency to overprepare for teaching. Consequently, he recommended 1 1/2 hours of preparation for each hour of class. Institutional support, such as a center for teaching excellence or faculty development, can provide considerable assistance in this regard (Boice, 1992).

Sustaining a Research Agenda

Faculty members in many institutions are expected to conduct research, publish articles in refereed journals, and write grants. In addition to these external expectations, faculty members themselves voice ambitious goals related to success in research (Boice, 1992). New faculty members complain that they do not have time to do their research during the school year so they often wait for large blocks of time in the summer (Boice, 1992). In contrast, expert scholars have learned to embed their research in their daily routines (Pierce, 1996). Most expert scholars focus on their research in the mornings, develop tricks for quickly getting back into their work when they return to it, and have office space that is quiet and relatively free from interruptions. During the academic year, expert scholars blend research and teaching into their schedules. Summer and holiday vacations provide more time for research (Pierce, 1996). Boice (1992) found that new faculty members who work on their research 1 hour a day are more productive than those who wait for large blocks of time. He also found that new faculty members who develop peer relationships through a writing group or research seminar are also more productive researchers. Finally, organizing space and establishing a routine predict greater scholarly productivity.

Building a Base of Support

New faculty members often report a sense of isolation and lack of intellectual simulation (Sorcinelli, 1994). In part, this may be caused by having just left graduate school where they were surrounded by peers (Tierney & Rhoads, 1994; Whitt, 1991). This isolation may also relate to the culture of the department and the size of the institution. Established faculty members may be more concerned about their own research agendas than about the development of a new faculty member (Sorcinelli, 1994). Because the new faculty member may be unsure of the department culture and feel overextended, he or she may not know how to approach established faculty members for help (Boice, 1992). Committee work, seminars, and colloquia provide opportunities to become connected to the broader academic community. Service activities within occupational therapy provide additional opportunities to develop a network of professional colleagues. Meetings at the AOTA Annual Conferences, such as the AOTA Education Special Interest Section, the Doctoral Network, and various research colloquia and sessions, offer the opportunities to learn and to meet persons with similar interests.

Concluding Thoughts

Nearly 25 years have gone by since Alice Jantzen (1974), in her Eleanor Clarke Slagle lecture, called attention to academic occupational therapy as a career specialty of the profession. Her description of academic occupational therapy at that time spoke to the shortage of qualified faculty members, the explosion in numbers of potential students, and the need for new faculty members to be enculturated into the special world of academia, a world that has its own jar-
gon, values, and reward systems. The issues of which she spoke are even more burning today; for example, the shortage of qualified faculty members has reached the point of crisis in the profession.

Perhaps this shortage exists because occupational therapy practitioners, in general, believe that academia imposes too great a shift away from the familiar routines of clinical practice or because they do not see academia as a rewarding career track. Becoming a faculty member requires that one acquire a new set of skills and work within an institutional system that is quite different from the health care systems in which practice usually takes place. The rigors of teaching, research, and service can be demanding and may be overwhelming for new faculty members who are not informed about how the academic system operates. But academia also can be tremendously rewarding when one is given the support, guidance, and “insider’s tips” needed to navigate the system successfully. The rewards are powerful enough to pull many outstanding clinicians into this career path for the long term—rewards such as sharing innovative ideas with colleagues, nurturing students, developing new practice skills in teaching, shaping the future of clinical practice through research, and pursuing knowledge in an area about which one feels passionate. Jantzen (1974) argued that the vitality of occupational therapy in academia is essential to the health of the profession as a whole. This article’s orientation to the academic culture and the strategies for success in teaching, research, and networking provides insights into academia that may encourage practitioners to explore a career in academic occupational therapy. The entire profession stands to benefit when occupational therapy faculty members thrive as teachers and scholars in the world of the university, where new ideas are born and new clinicians are nurtured. ▲

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