Occupational Therapy Entry-Level Program Applicants: A Survey of Northwest Schools

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Recruitment of occupational therapy students requires both expansion and broadening of ethnic, cultural, age, sex, and geographic distribution. Information used to guide recruitment activities can be limited, quickly outdated, and regionally nonspecific. Applicants to all entry-level programs in the Northwest were surveyed to assess trends that could influence recruitment practices. One hundred thirty-five (82.8%) of the 163 applicants surveyed responded to a questionnaire that probed for sources of exposure to occupational therapy, career goals, and educational preferences. Applicants indicated having an initial interest in allied health or education fields, yet only 36% began college with occupational therapy education in mind. Volunteer or work experience in specific practice settings was identified by approximately 80% of the applicants as an influence in seeking an education in occupational therapy. Career influences, goals, and educational program preferences did not differ among applicants based on age, residential background, grades, or previous degree. An absence of applicants of ethnic minority allows limited application of findings to these targeted groups.

Despite a need for increased personnel, the number of persons applying to allied health education programs is declining (American Medical Association, 1988). This has intensified the shortages of personnel in allied health and has created a competitive atmosphere for the recruitment of students (Chapman & Holzemzer, 1985; Staff, 1989). With shortages in personnel and a recognized need to broaden the ethnic, cultural, age, sex, and geographic distribution of practitioners, a collaborative recruitment campaign has been developed in occupational therapy (Acquaviva, 1986; Masagatani, 1986). Recruitment was renewed as a 1990 priority of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and of state occupational therapy associations (Whiting, 1990). The national recruitment campaign has involved AOTA’s Public Relations Division and Minority Affairs Program, the AOTA Committee of State Association Presidents, the Black Caucus, occupational therapy education programs, and practitioners throughout the country (Grady, 1990; Staff, 1990). The campaign uses media materials; information exchange systems, such as the prospective student label program; the AOTA 800 number; and personal contacts with occupational therapy practitioners (Staff, 1990).

Occupational therapy recruitment goals and activities have been influenced by studies related to allied health recruitment and exposure of prospective students to the field of occupational therapy. An identified barrier to recruitment is the potential applicant’s perception of allied health professions. In a survey of high school and college counselors by Kosegi and Feeley (1989), perceived difficulty with precareer curriculum, lack of awareness of health careers, poor preparation and dislike of natural sciences, greater opportunity in non-health fields, and low salaries were reported as factors limiting students’ interest in allied health careers.

Studies specific to recruitment of occupational therapists began in the 1960s (Bailey, 1968; Pickett, 1962). Since that time, several authors have investigated sources of exposure to the profession as an influence in recruitment. Among 500 occupational therapists registered after 1969, survey respondents cited that interest in occupational therapy developed from personal contact with a health care professional, family members, or friends (Townsend & Mitchell, 1992). Madigan (1985) determined that respondents, consisting of 100 occupational therapy assistant students and 163 occupational therapy students from four schools in Illinois, usually learned about the profession from an occupational therapy practitioner or occupational therapy student. In a national study of 1,337 occupational therapy and 506 occupational therapy assistant students from 119 programs in 1983, Wyrick and Stern (1987) determined that exposure to occupational therapy came primarily from occupational therapy students. Other sources included family, friends, and parents; volunteer activity or employment; contact or...
visits with a health care provider, or college guidance offices.

Findings from previous studies have led to the suggestion of various methods to enhance recruitment. Townsend and Mitchell (1982) recommended the following methods: (a) personal contact and promotion of volunteer jobs; (b) development and use of books, magazines, and newspapers; (c) use of guidance counselors and career days; and (d) recruitment of students from other fields and students with existing degrees. Expansion of information available to a wider variety of students was proposed by Madigan (1985) and combined recruitment activities of occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs toward the general population, practicing therapists, and existing students. Additionally, Wyrick and Stern (1987) encouraged special efforts toward recruiting males and minorities.

Ongoing study of occupational therapy trainees to demonstrate effectiveness of recruitment practices and to clarify social trends has been suggested (AOTA, 1985; Madigan, 1985; Townsend & Mitchell, 1982; Wyrick & Stern, 1987). Monitoring of occupational therapy education programs has identified some changes in students' characteristics. Between 1984 and 1989, admission of students from ethnic minorities increased from 8.3% to 9.7%; male students, from 5.3% to 9.3%; students with disabilities, from 1.3% to 1.9%; and older students (over 25 years of age), from 18.0% to 26.1%. In 1990, occupational therapy programs increased available training spaces by 2.6% and experienced an increase of less than 1% in qualified applicants. Twenty-three of the 64 baccalaureate programs reported that they did not fill from 1 to more than 20 training spaces (AOTA, 1990).

Most occupational therapy educational programs take responsibility for student recruitment, although some rely on the college or university or a larger department or school (Carleton, 1990). The most useful activities identified by schools were the mailing of brochures to prospective students, pairing of prospective students with current students, health fairs and career days on campus, stories and ideas sent to local radio and television stations, speeches to high school students, the sending of career information to guidance and career counselors, and the providing of students with contacts in the occupational therapy community. Recruitment activities are directed toward students who may have already expressed interest in occupational therapy. Recruitment practices that most effectively attract persons to the profession, that facilitate the development of career goals, and that lead students to apply for education are less clear.

In planning recruitment strategies for the Northwest region (i.e., Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Alaska), limited, outdated, or regionally nonspecific information was all that was available for the establishment of priorities and activities. Specific regional findings are not reported, and the Northwest region was underrepresented in national studies (Wyrick & Stern, 1987). Occupational therapy recruitment activities and personnel needs may vary by state and may be influenced by geographic, economic, educational, and social factors (Staff, 1989).

In the Northwest region, occupational therapy personnel serve major metropolitan areas as well as sparsely populated and geographically isolated rural settings. Personnel challenges in the Northwest region represent national issues, such as quantity of therapists, need for ethnic diversity, and geographic distribution of practitioners. The Northwest has three entry-level occupational therapy education programs: (a) the University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington, which has both baccalaureate and entry-level master's programs; (b) the University of Washington, Seattle; and (c) Pacific University, Forest Grove, Oregon. To date, occupational therapy programs within each university conduct independent recruitment activities.

The purpose of this study was to identify characteristics of applicants in the Northwest, providing insight about students at the time of application for occupational therapy education. Previous studies have surveyed students already admitted for education or practicing therapists who recalled earlier influences. By contrast, occupational therapy applicants offer us a look at persons with the greatest diversity at a time more closely associated with the decision-making process. The applicants were surveyed to determine trends in exposure to occupational therapy, allied health, and education as well as college program preferences, career goals, and demographic characteristics. We hoped to use the information collected for directing recruitment activities in the Northwest, for augmenting the existing applicant pool, and for isolating groups that might require special recruitment practices (e.g., rural residents, minorities, males, and applicants seeking a second degree).

Method
Subjects
Each school in the Northwest region—Pacific University, the University of Washington, and the University of Puget Sound—provided names and addresses of all qualified applicants to their entry-level education programs, which were to begin in the fall of 1990. Identified were 176 applicants for an estimated 90 training positions among all schools (i.e., Pacific University = 25, the University of Washington = 25, the University of Puget Sound = 40). Thirteen applicants had applied to more than one of the three programs, resulting in a total applicant count of 163 across all schools. Figure 1 shows the number of local, in-state, in-region, and outside-of-region applicants to each program and the combined total for all three schools.
Questionnaire
A questionnaire was developed to cover content areas labeled and sequenced as “Exposure to occupational therapy,” “Application preferences,” “Career goals,” and “Applicant characteristics.” Faculty members from each university reviewed the questionnaire content. Field testing was done on a sample of first-year occupational therapy students from the University of Washington to suggest improvements in clarity and ease of administration. The final questionnaire consisted of 42 items; 34 were fixed alternative-choice questions offering from 2 to 24 choices per question with an open option (i.e., “Other”). Most questions prompted applicants to check all answers that applied, and three questions directed applicants to check their top three choices. Other questions secured demographic responses. (The questionnaire is available from the authors upon request.)

Procedure
Applicants received a questionnaire 1 to 2 weeks after application deadlines and were asked to return the questionnaire in a postage-paid envelope within 4 weeks. A cover letter stated that neither completion of the questionnaire nor its content would have any bearing on their selection by a school. Postcard reminders were mailed if questionnaires were not returned, but prior to applicants receiving notification of offers of acceptance into a program. Only aggregate data were made available to each university, well after completion of the selection process. Questionnaires were number coded to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1
Characteristics of Applicants (N = 135)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Total ( (n = 135) )</th>
<th>First Academic Degree ( (n = 81) )</th>
<th>Second Academic Degree ( (n = 51) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (in years)</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \bar{x} = -2.89, df = 130, p &lt; .005 )</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>19-48</td>
<td>19-46</td>
<td>21-48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ( \chi^2 = 0.15, df = 1, p = .90 )</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status ( \chi^2 = 0.16, df = 1, p = .89 )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic origin ( \chi^2 = 2.26, df = 3, p = .519 )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of high school graduation</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential background ( \chi^2 = 3.22, df = 2, p = .851 )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prerequisite grade-point average ( \bar{x} = .40, df = 121, p = .69 )</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \bar{x} = .40, df = 121, p = .69 )</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis
Responses are reported as frequencies, and chi-square or independent \( t \) tests were conducted with use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences \(^{1}\) program to isolate various segments of the applicant pool. Visual analysis of response frequencies and ranking were carried out to determine differences within the applicant pool on the basis of age, previous degree achievement, residential background (i.e., rural, suburban, or urban), and grade-point average (GPA).

Results
Of the 163 questionnaires sent, 135 were completed and returned, for a response rate of 82.8%. Table 1 shows the respondents’ characteristics and contrasts the demographic makeup of those seeking a first versus a second baccalaureate or entry-level master’s degree. The respon-
Applicants' interests

Initial interest in careers in health or education was identified by 47% of the respondents. Interest in health care, education, and occupational therapy was indicated by 31% of the respondents, whereas only 22% identified initial interest in occupational therapy alone. Sixty-four percent did not begin college with occupational therapy education in mind.

Figure 2 shows sources of exposure to occupational therapy practice that influenced the respondents to pursue an education. Typically, the respondents identified at least four influential sources from a list of 15 possibilities. Volunteer and work experience in practice settings, personal research with the use of career information resources, and the influence of important persons were most commonly cited. Interests in other health and education careers were also queried. On average, each applicant identified an interest in four other career pathways. Interest in physical therapy was identified by approximately 70% of the respondents. At least 20% of the respondents also expressed interest in either psychology, counseling, social work, special education, nursing, speech pathology, or medicine. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that they had actually applied to a training program other than occupational therapy. If they had applied, it was most often to a physical therapy (n = 11) or nursing (n = 7) program.

College and Program Preferences

Seventy-three percent of the respondents were not attending the university to which they were applying for occupational therapy education (27% were applying to a program in a university that they already or had previously attended). Seventy-four respondents indicated that they were applying to only one occupational therapy education program, which would begin in the fall of 1990 (m = 2.0, SD = 1.8, range = 1 to 10). Eighty-seven percent were first-time applicants to an occupational therapy edu-

![Figure 2. Source of applicants' exposure to occupational therapy (N = 135).](http://ajot.aota.org/)

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Characteristics</th>
<th>Program Characteristics</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
<th>Training Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reputation (74%)</td>
<td>Characteristics of curriculum (78%)</td>
<td>Close to home (50%)</td>
<td>Reasonable cost (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of opportunity (50%)</td>
<td>Quality of faculty (57%)</td>
<td>Attracted to region (40%)</td>
<td>Financial aid (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of college (39%)</td>
<td>Location (52%)</td>
<td>Proximity to family (20%)</td>
<td>Scholarships (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/cultural (26%)</td>
<td>Opportunity of acceptance (44%)</td>
<td>Not a factor (10%)</td>
<td>Work/work study (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State versus private (22%)</td>
<td>Finances (24%)</td>
<td>Away from home (13%)</td>
<td>Transportation (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban (10%)</td>
<td>Housing (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Urban (3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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cational program. College or program characteristics that attracted respondents are listed in Table 2. The reputation of the college and characteristics of the curriculum and the faculty were most often indicated as important considerations in selection.

**Career, Salary, and Educational Goals**

The applicants were given a list of 24 conditions that cause disability and were asked to choose those characteristic of persons with whom they as occupational therapists would like to work. The respondents chose the following conditions: (a) developmental or learning disability (46%), (b) birth defects (34%), (c) stroke (27%), (d) spinal cord injury (23%), (e) hand injury (21%), (f) head injury (21%), (g) cerebral palsy (19%), (h) mental health disorder (19%), (i) alcohol or substance abuse (10%), (j) Alzheimer disease (10%), (k) AIDS (10%), and (l) 12 other conditions (less than 10% each). The respondents indicated the age groups with whom they would like to work as follows: children (87%), adults (76%), senior citizens (61%), and infants (52%). Preference for working in hospital settings was common (i.e., rehabilitation hospital, 60%; pediatric hospital, 47%; general hospital, 46%). Private practice was desired by 44% of the respondents, and 39% of the respondents expressed interest in working in the school system. Respondents from urban settings selected school systems as their first choice, whereas school systems ranked fourth and fifth among those from rural and suburban settings.

The respondents indicated that the major influences for selection of a job would be job satisfaction (94%), followed by employment opportunity (51%) and financial security (43%). Among those who already had a baccalaureate degree, job flexibility ranked second to job satisfaction, whereas for those who did not have a baccalaureate degree, job flexibility ranked sixth among influences for selection of a job. Ninety-six percent of the respondents anticipated securing full-time employment after training. After 3 to 5 years of practice, a full-time salary of between $30,000 and $35,000 was expected by 36% of the respondents; 33% of the respondents expected a salary greater than $35,000 per year. Professional roles that the respondents envisioned fulfilling after 5 years were as follows: (a) staff therapist, 59%; (b) private practitioner, 55%; (c) manager or supervisor, 41%; (d) educator, 37%; (e) researcher, 33%; and (f) student supervisor, 29%. Beyond the degree program to which they were applying, 46% of the respondents were considering seeking a master's or doctorate degree, whereas 47% were unsure.

**Discussion**

Analysis of persons who are applying to educational programs provides the viewpoint of those who are actively involved in a decision-making process. For Northwest schools, this group can help direct recommendations for recruitment priorities and procedures. Although we anticipated that the applicants to Northwest schools would reflect the most diverse range of interests and demographic characteristics, they appear to be homogeneous. Analysis and recommendations can be valuable for attracting similar applicants but offer little guidance for targeted groups, such as ethnic minorities, males, and other groups poorly represented among current applicants. Nevertheless, to the extent that the questionnaire responses are valid in portraying essential factors in decision making, specific recruitment strategies can be proposed. Suggestions are based on applicants' identification of sources of exposure to allied health professions and occupational therapy as well as their use of information resources.

Recruitment practices that were recently identified as most useful by curricula were not shown to be highly influential to applicants responding in this survey. Those procedures that assist prospective students who have already developed an interest in occupational therapy are more easily identified and implemented by curricula. However, applicants responding in this study acknowledged sources of initial interest and influence that may not be easily nurtured through specific recruitment activities.

**Developing Initial Interest**

According to the respondents, interest in occupational therapy most commonly develops from a more generic interest in allied health and education. Persons interested in this type of work appear unlimited and unrestrained by knowledge of specific jobs and credentials. One can investigate career options by volunteering in and researching options within work settings (e.g., hospitals, schools). It appears that volunteer and work experiences confirm decisions to pursue education.

Occupational therapy should capitalize on workplace exploration by offering personal contact, orientation programs, and materials to volunteers and entry-level workers in practice settings. Any environment in which an occupational therapist may be working is also likely to involve persons who may be exploring interests in job or career development. Practitioners are encouraged to obtain access to volunteers and other entry-level workers who may become potential applicants to occupational therapy or other allied health programs. The creation of volunteer opportunities within occupational therapy practice settings will enable exploration of career choices. Practitioners must have easy access to relevant materials to assist these potential trainees in their exploration of career opportunities and educational programs.

Given generic interest in allied health and education, occupational therapy schools ought to take the opportunity to collaborate with other disciplines in sponsoring
programs that enable exploration of various educational options. Because applicants are commonly interested in other fields, such as physical therapy and psychology, contacts with these educational programs and the students who are exploring these options are encouraged.

Recruitment Materials

Recruitment materials need to reflect points of interest identified by potential students. Factors that contribute to job satisfaction among therapists and career development opportunities within the profession appear to be important themes considered by applicants to Northwest schools. Income viability and job opportunities are pragmatic issues that should be clearly addressed in career literature. Diagnostic groups, age groups, and practice settings that applicants identified may be used in recruitment brochures to best attract future students. A growing interest in private practice opportunities might also be portrayed in marketing materials. Recruitment materials should address persons who are already in the work force as well as youth considering training and employment for the first time.

Specific educational programs would appear best served through the marketing of materials that emphasize the university or college as a whole as well as the reputation of program faculty and instructional methods. Costs should be addressed, as should students' potential access to financial aid, scholarships, work-study programs, and other training compensations.

Isolating Targeted Groups

The absence of applicants from ethnic minorities points to a clear need for development of recruitment programs directed at such groups within the Northwest region. Recruitment of minority, economically disadvantaged, and geographically distributed students can be accomplished through dedicated programs at both the high school and college levels (Baker & Lyons, 1989; Philips, Mahan, & Perry, 1981; Redman & Cassells, 1985). Such programs have required early outreach education, career guidance, peer support, and tutorial assistance. Dedicated funds and multiyear processes have been necessary (Davis & Davidson, 1982).

Geographic maldistribution of therapists poses interesting challenges for occupational therapy educational programs. Because Northwest schools draw most of their students from the local area and capitalize on clinical facilities nearby, an interest in exploring underserved areas needs to be nurtured. Such interest can be incorporated into core curricula, specialty course offerings (i.e., cross-cultural differences, rural health care), independent study, and Level II fieldwork training in geographically remote areas. Outreach programs for recruitment can also be developed as part of state and national recruitment campaigns, with schools facilitating opportunities to explore occupational therapy in practice settings distant from schools, perhaps through existing and new Level II fieldwork programs.

Applicants pursuing a second degree to begin an occupational therapy career did not seem to differ from those pursuing their first degree in terms of need for career or educational information. Recruitment materials for programs offering an entry-level master's degree might specify differences between and relative advantages of master's versus baccalaureate programs.

Occupational therapy programs in the Northwest as well as in other geographic regions might also pool the resources of occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs in conjunction with practitioners and state associations in the region. Networks between programs could focus on recruitment of targeted groups, such as ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, males, or persons living in underserved geographic areas.

The effectiveness of new recruitment activities will require ongoing assessment. Collaboration between AOTA, state associations, and educational programs will continue to progress. Results and potential benefits may not be detected immediately but will be seen first in the characteristics of new applicants. Educational programs can analyze their applicant pool to set direction for changes in recruitment activities that are tailored for regional personnel needs and sensitive to minority and other population characteristics.

Acknowledgments

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