Directions for the Future: Opportunities for Leadership

In January 1990, a distinguished group of 200 occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants gathered in San Diego to contemplate and plan our future directions. These leaders, representing education, practice, and official American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) bodies, considered future scenarios for occupational therapy and developed models for 21st century occupational therapy education and practice. The Directions for the Future (OFF) Symposium was a milestone in a process undertaken by the profession. This process for gazing into the future was designed not only to identify future occupational therapy environments but also to plan and act on models of education and practice that could lead service provision into the next century.

Future gazing is an ongoing process but is productive only when actions are taken that invent rather than respond to future events or changes. The process will periodically culminate in actions taken by AOTA and by individuals willing to take leadership for creating change in both our education and practice environments.

This article and subsequent Nationally Speaking columns will report information from the OFF Symposium. Additional information from the symposium is available from symposium participants and state association leaders, in articles in OT Week, in 1991 Annual Conference presentations, and from staff in the National Office. Responsibility for our future rests with each of us, whether we are currently in official positions influencing official Association actions or individuals making a difference in our own practices or organizations.

Inventing the future creates visions of real possibilities, particularly if we strive to turn those visions into realities. Imagine ourselves in the year 2020, living in an environment that looks like this:

- The United States has placed a priority on the care and education of its children and the dignity and value of its older population.
- Thanks to parents and collaborating professionals, all children are being educated in the mainstream regardless of physical or mental challenges or economic or cultural disadvantages.
- Families of children at risk can choose from an array of early intervention services and integrated day-care and preschool programs.
- Adolescents move into transition programs providing vocational or higher education exploration, access to supported employment, and independent living situations.
- The sound of a communication device voice or the sight of someone using a computer with a switch is commonplace in school and work environments.
- Older persons retire into satisfying life-styles while they are still able and find options for care at home or in centers when necessary, depending on their choice.
- The culture of work has changed along with the nature of work. Corporations and scholars work together to examine occupation as a phenomenon.
- From the newly established science of occupation comes information that applies to work satisfaction, participation, and equal opportunities in the workplace as well as ways all

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persons can enjoy other occupational activities, such as leisure.

Looking back from the year 2020 scenario, we can see that occupational therapists have played key roles in the changes. The profession's knowledge base, including extensive research into the nature and components of occupation, and the continuum along which occupational therapy knowledge has been applied has made a difference in many areas of productive living. This future scenario was created because leaders at the end of the 20th century recognized relationships between the decrease in persons choosing health- and education-related fields, problems with recognition and funding, need for research and focus on core practice of occupational therapy around which to develop innovative service provision, and potential for development of a hierarchy of education and practice that would satisfy persons pursuing lifelong learning and career goals. How did the leaders in our profession recognize the potential effect of their changing environment and see it as an opportunity to direct the change?

As always, we learn from our history. A brief review of some events in the 20th century that led to the DFF symposium will help set the stage for our consideration of new action possibilities (Strickland, 1989). In 1952, Ruth Wiener recommended that occupational therapy return to its 1919 postbaccalaureate training model with entry for occupational therapy at the master's level of education (Strickland, 1989). Similar recommendations were made in 1965 at a workshop on graduate education, in 1976 by the Mental Health Task Force, and in 1978 by an ad hoc committee on education (Strickland, 1989). In 1978, at OT 2001, a resolution was prepared and forwarded to the Representative Assembly requesting consideration for master's level entry. The Assembly created a committee that reviewed all routes of entry into the profession and recommended no change. But in 1984, another resolution came forth asking the Assembly to resolve the question of educational entry level for occupational therapists (Strickland, 1989). The Assembly charged the Executive Board to manage a study examining multiple issues relating to education and practice and to provide recommendations by 1986. The study addressed not only technical and professional education but also concerns of past, present, and future practice; the effects of technology on health and educational environments; and the research needs of the profession. The desired characteristics of future practitioners and researchers were also considered.

The entry-level study (AOTA, 1987) was extensive and required preliminary identification of those characteristics of the occupational therapist and the occupational therapy assistant necessary for viable participation in future health and educational environments. Throughout the 2-year study, an intrinsic element of the process was communication with membership along with the solicitation of input and advice from persons both within and outside the profession. I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Entry-Level Study Committee, chaired by Dr. Maureen Fleming, for their courage in viewing entry level into the profession as part of a greater concern for development and sustenance of our discipline. The committee was willing to create and deal with the kind of conflict that always accompanies significant proposals for change. As a result of the breadth and depth of the study and the extensive dialogue created, what began as an entry-level study became the centerpiece for our view toward the future.

On the basis of the entry-level study recommendations, the Assembly adopted policies in support of graduate education with emphasis on the importance of a liberal arts foundation for occupational therapy education and policies in support of research and continued development of an academic discipline and applied science of occupational therapy. In addition, an introductory statement was approved that supported multiple educational routes of entry into the profession. The statement made it clear that AOTA was not mandating entry for occupational therapists at the master's level of education only.

The Assembly also requested that issues be addressed through a mechanism developed by the Executive Board for implementation of recommendations from the study now known as Directions for the Future (AOTA, 1987). The recommendations include:

- Development of hierarchies of education and practice.
- Increased faculty and student recruitment, especially among minorities.
- Development of symposia to focus on graduate education, theory development, and research.
- Locus of control for fieldwork; additional support for graduate education.
- Development of a professional focus statement.

A coordinating committee consisting of members of existing bodies in the Association was appointed and was chaired by Randy Strickland. The goal was not only to implement the recommendations of Directions for the Future but also to use this implementation as a way to enhance the functioning of our organizational components and ability to plan for our future. Under the direction of the committee,

1. A group of scholars and therapists met in Tampa, Florida, in January 1989 and discussed the bases of occupational therapy practice from a theoretical perspective. Participants were Gail Fidler, Anne Mosey, Gary Kielhofner, Ann Grady, Ellie Gilfoyle, Diane Parham (representing A. Jean Ayres), Catherine Trombly, Lorna Jean King, Lela Llorens, and Claudia Allen, plus several observers and staff from the National Office.

2. A pilot survey of master clinicians, which focused on the core of occupational therapy practice, was completed in December 1989 and may be expanded to include wider participation.

3. The DFF Symposium, designed to explore issues facing occupational therapy in an environment of change, was held in San Diego in January...
1990. Two hundred occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants discussed issues facing occupational therapy education and practice, including the development of our academic discipline.

Other DFF activities, such as developing a hierarchical model of occupational therapy education and guidelines for graduate programs, faculty and student recruitment, and a study of fieldwork and the future of practice, have been incorporated into AOTA’s Strategic Plan through 1995.

Directions for the Future (AOTA, 1987) has created an organized way to look at the inevitable changes affecting our profession. Change can be defined as a planned or unplanned response to internal or external pressure (Dalziel & Schoonover, 1988). We are definitely in an environmental and professional transition. How we respond changes, planned or unplanned, depends on our choices and the way in which we deal with the changes that are happening around us. Change has been said to be necessary for survival (Dalziel & Schoonover, 1988). As students of growth, development, and maturation, we can agree that productive survival is based on change. We are in a position to create a planned response to the changes within and outside occupational therapy. As Rosabeth Kanter (1983) said, change involves the crystallization of new action possibilities based on reconceptualized patterns in an organization or in a profession. Change creates opportunities and vulnerabilities, and as leaders of change, we are responsible for seeing beyond the goals of change for hidden barriers and unpredicted consequences and planning for them (Dalziel & Schoonover, 1988). We are also responsible for anticipating the opportunities and being prepared for action possibilities. The DFF Symposium created an atmosphere through which we can anticipate the opportunities and generate planned change as a response to these opportunities.

A leader’s role is to organize the activities for change (Dalziel & Schoonover, 1988). Change has been in the air ever since the big apple dropped signaling the beginning of 1990. Perhaps it is the proximity of a once-in-a-lifetime change of a new century that creates an aura of closure mingled with preparation.

If change is to be successful, we must consider preparation or the process of change to be at least as important as change itself. Occupational therapists gathered in San Diego and can gather all over the country to take action on questions that have been before us for a long time. The actions taken will be significant in terms of our place in the 21st century. The professional changes under consideration cannot be legislated by AOTA or any other organization. Planned change will occur because individuals make an effort in such areas as developing an academic discipline, conducting and communicating research, and focusing on the core of practice related to innovative programs. AOTA can support efforts, coordinate activities, sponsor opportunities, and take official action whenever indicated, but the leadership for directing professional change is a collaborative process with individuals and organizations working together.

What can you do as an individual? If you attended the DFF Symposium, contact others in your state, practice, or university. Review the DFF materials currently appearing in OT Week and AOT. Decide what you can do as an individual or group and do it. Communicate with the DFF Coordinating Committee and let us know about your ideas or actions. If you did not attend the DFF Symposium, contact someone in your state or an adjacent state and ask for information. If you are not sure who attended the symposium, contact the DFF Coordinating Committee or the AOTA National Office for information. We have only just begun to determine the future of occupational therapy. Will you join us?

References


