Continuing the Discussion About Faculty Research: A Response to Barbara Rider

I welcome Barbara Rider’s comments in the January 1987 Foundation column (“Faculty Research: A Reply to Deborah Labovitz,” pp. 55-56) on my March 1986 Foundation column (“Faculty Research: A Pluralistic Approach,” pp. 207-209). The critical and central importance of research to occupational therapy is certainly not a point of dispute between us, nor can the point be made too forcefully or too often.

However, Ms. Rider and I differ on two basic points: (a) I define research activities very broadly (pluralistically) as she correctly states in her article, whereas she appears to define research in the traditional sense, namely, as a study that is publishable; and (b) she appears to single out the academic faculty as the group that should carry the primary responsibility for the profession’s research, whereas I maintain that according to the broad definition of research, the academic faculty is carrying its share of the research task but that according to the narrow definition of research, the academic faculty cannot carry out its share of the research task because faculty members have neither the time nor a job description that allows them to be the primary research arm of the profession. Furthermore, I submit that if the profession wishes to define its academic faculties’ research activities in the traditional sense, it will have to create another group to carry out the job currently assigned to and performed by the academic faculty.

Obviously, on issues such as this one, individuals tend to speak from personal experience. At New York University (NYU), a major research university with a basic professional program, several advanced master’s degree programs, and a doctoral program in occupational therapy, I and my faculty participate extensively in all eight of the research activities I identified in my original article. We have chosen this route individually and collectively, both in response to the external realities of professional and university demands and our personal conviction that contributing to research in this manner is both vital and ultimately farther reaching.

For example, the AJOT issue in which Ms. Rider’s reply appeared included an article by Jill Howlett Mays, a doctoral student at NYU. According to NYU publication policy, the article did not have my name on it as author or the names of any of the instructors of the NYU graduate faculty who worked closely with Ms. Howlett on her research. Yet we all spent many hours recruiting and enrolling Ms. Mays, advising her on her graduate studies, teaching her, mentoring her as a Teaching Fellow, helping her apply for the AOTA Scholars-in-Residence Award, which supported some of her research, and supervising her research from design to implementation and to writing the final paper. At the same time, we were spending countless hours doing the same for 25 other doctoral students, many of whom have also begun publishing their research. This is not to mention the efforts applied to the education of the 50 advanced master’s students over the past 3 years and the 200 basic professional students who were at NYU during that same time.

I could have spent that same time on my own research projects. In my view, that use of my time would have been equally valid, but not better, more appropriate, more worthwhile, more necessary, or a greater contribution. My faculty and I chose to launch 50 research projects and 50 research careers rather than making our contributions via individual research. This is not to suggest that faculty research is not conducted at NYU. Quite to the contrary, most faculty members at NYU are spending a considerable amount of time doing research. But again I submit that performance of many or all of the eight roles I outlined in my article legitimately fall under the category of “doing research.”

Occupational therapy faculties all over the country are under a double mandate: not imposed on most of our university colleagues, alongside whom we are evaluated for tenure, promotion, and university rewards. In addition to our roles of teaching, doing research, and providing university service, we must produce, in ever increasing numbers, qualified entry level practitioners who meet stringent certification standards.

We must also produce occupational therapists who are educated at the doctoral level so that they can assume leadership roles and assist the minuscule number of occupational therapists currently holding doctorates. I view this task as analogous not merely to having to patch the holes in the boat while trying to stay afloat, but to actually building the boat while trying to keep afloat.

It’s quite a task, and I am convinced that I am not “copping out” when I say that OT faculties are doing a fine job in fulfilling their research responsibilities.

Deborah R. Labovitz
PHD, OTR/L, FAOTA
New York City, New York