The Issue Is

Academic Credentials versus Academic Commercialism: Scholarship for Sale

Kenneth Ottenbacher, Julia Van Deusen, Paul Petersen

Whatever is almost true is quite false,
And among the most dangerous of
tales is the one that comes nearest to
its topic and is most likely to deceive.
—Henry Ward Beecher

Recently a letter appeared in Physical Therapy authored by the American Physical Therapy Association’s (APTA’s) Committee on Research (1). The letter condemned the use of the initials PhC following an individual’s name. It seems the initials are being used to designate a candidate for the PhD.

The committee correctly observed that it was a misleading practice and urged members to stop using the PhC designation. The concern was raised that colleagues in “other professions and disciplines may seize upon the use of ‘PhC’ . . . as an attempt by members of our profession to misrepresent themselves. We can ill afford even the accusation of such an attempt at this time in our professional development” (1, p 574).

We concur with the Committee’s recommendation regarding the PhC designation. However, we believe a more serious threat to the professional integrity of occupational therapy exists. This threat involves the apparent increase in graduate degrees held by OTRs, particularly the PhD, that are procured from so-called alternative universities. These degrees are euphemistically referred to as “nontraditional” and may be found advertised in the classified columns of Psychology Today, The Saturday Evening Post, and other popular press tabloids.

The ads suggest that the recipients can receive “credit” for their life experiences. The promoters of these ersatz degrees operate behind a slick facade of nonexistent campuses, fictitious faculty, exaggerated claims of academic legitimacy, and pseudo-accrediting agencies. Their motivation is monetary, not scholarly.

Any serious student interested in pursuing an advanced graduate degree knows that there is no shortcut in developing the empirical skills associated with a legitimate research doctorate. Most PhD programs affiliated with accredited universities require at least one academic year of residency involving full-time graduate study. There is a reason for this requirement. Beyond the acquisition of the prerequisite empirical and analytical skills required for a PhD, there is a process of socialization into the research role that can be achieved only in a scholarly environment with the guidance and tutelage of appropriate role models and mentors (2). This socialization process is an integral part of the researcher’s professional development and cannot be obtained through “life experiences.”

As a developing profession we must be extremely careful to maintain standards of scholarship commensurate with those demanded by other disciplines in the behavioral and social sciences. If our academic programs and professional association do not severely question the credibility of these diploma mill degrees, our progress toward true professional status will be markedly delayed. The tacit recognition of these degrees will certainly signal other disciplines that we are not genuinely concerned with scientific legitimacy and will set up occupational therapy as a “straw man” in the rehabilitation professions.

A potential employer can confirm the legitimacy of an academic credential by checking with the U.S. Department of Education and/or the American Council on Education. These agencies publish lists of institutions that meet their standards and provide information on accrediting mechanisms. The failure of educational programs to demand that occupational therapy faculty possess valid credentials suggests that we are more concerned with academic affectations than scholastic and scientific credibility. This is an impression that occupational therapy cannot afford at this sensitive stage in its professional development.

REFERENCES

2. Brogan DR: Professional socialization to a research role: interest in research among graduate students in nursing. Research in Nursing and Health 5:113-122, 1982.

Kenneth Ottenbacher, PhD, OTR; Julia Van Deusen, PhD, OTR; and Paul Petersen, PhD, OTR, are all Assistant Professors, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706.