Effectiveness of Recruitment and Information Techniques in Occupational Therapy

(public awareness, careers, student orientation to profession)

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A national survey was conducted to determine how occupational therapists became interested in the field. Results from the study demonstrated that personal contact was the most effective technique for creating an interest in occupational therapy. However, books, magazines, aide and volunteer jobs, guidance counselors, and career days were adjuncts to the recruitment process. This study provides data concerning previous productive means that have been used in recruitment and suggests specific actions for future recruitment.

Each year occupational therapy (OT) curricula and clinics, as well as The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), spend dollars and time recruiting students into the profession. Yet, the demand for occupational therapists (OTs) continues. There is little factual information about the most fruitful and cost-effective means for recruitment of students.

The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (1), projected in 1980 that there would be a greater increase in the work force for OTs than in any other profession or occupation studied. A 100 percent increase in the work force by 1990 was projected. The AOTA Future Manpower Needs report (2) stressed the need for more OTs. The occupational therapy educational system adds 1,700 OTs to the work force each year, but that number is 800 short of the projected 2,500 needed annually to fill available jobs. The annual shortage, which is just under 50 percent of the need, signifies a substantial demand for OTs.

With the growing demands for OTs, there is a need for the AOTA, OT curricula, and clinics to explore means to resolve this manpower shortage. This paper will focus on just one means—the recruitment process. A study was done to determine the most effective techniques in student recruitment over the past
Review of the Literature

The Nature of Recruitment. The goal of recruitment, as defined in the business literature, is to provide a steady supply of qualified personnel to fill immediate and future needs (3). The effectiveness of recruitment is determined not only by the increase in number of applicants, but also by the quality of the selected students and the attrition rates (4). Personal contact, whether for the purpose of selling or through client-service, has been reported to create a distinct impression on people and is an effective public relations and recruitment medium (5-7).

The Nature of Recruitment in Allied Health Professions. Surveys to determine the most influential people in the career choices made by medical laboratory science students and medical technology students found that students were influenced more by professionals in the field, parents, and friends (8, 9) than by any other means. Survey results also indicated that high school guidance counselors were unable to furnish current and accurate information about careers to the students (8). The survey of medical technology students found that adequate knowledge of careers was lacking in college students pursuing pre-professional courses, and was almost nonexistent in high school students. The authors of the survey felt that the selection of a profession before the end of the sophomore year in college will probably produce a majority of students who are unaware of the profession’s major responsibilities, which may be a contributing factor to high attrition rates.

A survey to evaluate means of recruitment for physical therapists (PTs) that would serve as a guide for recruitment efforts was conducted in 1954 (6). Two hundred and twenty-seven PT students from 12 schools in the Northern Midwest region of the country were included in the survey. By a ratio of 3 to 1, personal contact—usually with a PT or a parent—was the most frequent means of recruitment. Data showed that the majority of the respondents had been considering PT for longer than 2 years, with most of them becoming interested during high school or in junior college.

AOTA has had no systematic recruitment plan for some time but is presently initiating plans (10). From 1963 to 1969, the AOTA was the recipient of a grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (11), and the purposes of the grant were to design and direct a public information campaign, to develop more effective educational counseling skills, to develop school-agency liaisons, and to develop materials to achieve these objectives. This grant also permitted development of a curriculum brochure, updating of several other brochures, and a Summer Experience in Occupational Therapy for interested students. Implications of the project included the following points: support for information for a variety of audience levels, need for repeated personal contact, and direct involvement of students in pre-entry experiences in OT. No recent reports regarding recruitment have appeared in the OT literature, but contacts with the AOTA staff confirmed the plans and commitments to make recruitment a priority.

Current public information materials, including brochures and calendars that explain aspects of OT, are used simultaneously as recruiting materials. A recent survey of 68 education programs showed that 45 percent of the schools surveyed did not fill their classes, and that 33 percent of the schools experienced a drop in qualified applicants (12). Results of a Career Choice Survey showed that most OT students had not heard of the field until they were almost 17 years of age (13). Personal history data from OT students at 19 universities throughout the United States indicated that an average of 2 years elapsed between first hearing of OT and a decision to major in the field.

Method

Subjects. Seventy OTs and OT students who attended a state OT Association meeting participated in a pilot study as a means to evaluate the clarity of the study and of the instrument. The national survey included 500 OTRs throughout the United States who had obtained a degree or certificate in OT since 1970. The sample was selected from the AOTA mailing list through a systematic sampling technique.

The Instrument. An Interest/Recruitment survey, including a 15-item checklist of reasons for "how you first became interested in OT," was developed and mailed to the selected sample. To prevent an order bias, three forms of the survey were designed, each containing the same items, in varying order. The checklist of reasons was divided into three sections, A, B, and C, and rotated: the orders of reasons were A-B-C, B-C-A, and C-A-B. The OTRs were asked to rank the 15 reasons given in the checklist that were most applicable to them by numbering them 1, 2, or 3, in order of most influential to least influential. A limit of three reasons was specified because the pilot study indicated insufficient data to be analyzed from the fourth, fifth, and sixth choices.
section of the survey asked respondents for personal data to be used for statistical purposes only.

**Data Analysis.** Cross tabulations using percentages were used for data analysis.

**Results**

Four hundred and thirty-five, or 87 percent, of the surveys were returned, with 421, or 84 percent, usable responses. Results are presented in Table 1. A two-way statistical analysis was planned but is not reported since more than 5 percent of the cells had expected counts of less than five and chi square was an invalid test.

**First Interest in OT.** The most influential means for developing an interest in potential applicants was through personal contact. Of the 421 respondents, 228, or 54 percent, stated that their interest in OT was sparked by the recommendation of a health professional, family member, or friend. Table 1 shows the most effective and least effective means for developing an interest in OT as determined by the frequency of responses.

**Other Data.** The majority of therapists, 286, or 68 percent, first became interested in OT between the ages of 16 years and 20 years, followed by the 21 to 25 year age group. Demographic data showed that, of the 421 respondents, 397, or 94 percent, were Caucasian; 6, or 1.4 percent, were black; 17, or 4 percent, were categorized as “other” or friend. Table 1 shows the most prevalent undergraduate degree other than OT is in psychology. Of the 25 responses to this question, 10 therapists, or 40 percent, have an undergraduate degree in psychology. Other common but less frequently held degrees were in sociology and education. Other professions considered by therapists before choosing OT included physical therapy, special education, nursing, rehabilitation counseling, and recreation.

**Discussion**

Interest in OT. Personal contact was found to be the most effective and most influential recruitment mechanism in interesting students in OT. Compared with the study conducted 25 years ago in PT, the findings are similar—personal contact is the most effective means of recruitment. One difference between the PT study and the present study is that the PT survey reported a ratio of 3:1 for personal contact as most effective, whereas this study identified a margin of about 2:1. Results of the national survey in OT reiterate those of the survey of medical laboratory science students.

It appears that aide positions, books, and guidance counselors influenced approximately 25 percent of the OTs surveyed. Career days, in-class discussions, seminars, brochures, and “other” means influenced 10-15 percent of the population. Television and films seemed to have minimal effect. In analyzing these data the question arises about why films and television have not been more influential in creating an interest in OT. One reason may be that these media were not as available as brochures. The fact that career days, in-class discussions, and brochures, when influential, were most often ranked as a second or third choice supports the view of Henry and Sinkford (5) that materials such as brochures should be used as adjunctive techniques to personal contact between health professionals and students.

There appears to be some discrepancy in information regarding the effectiveness of guidance counselors. Several writers have discussed the ineffectiveness of counselors because of a lack of up-to-date information about OT (8, 13). Yet, the fourth most effective means for becoming interested in OT is through a guidance counselor. It would appear that, if supplied with more current information about the field through brochures and personal contact with OTs, the guidance counselors in high schools and junior colleges might be more effective in their roles.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation Personal Contact</td>
<td>54.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aides/Volunteer</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Days</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochure</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Received OT</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film, Television</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researching the Field</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In evaluating the sources for arousing interest in OT (see Table 1), it appears that media such as
aide positions, books, guidance counselors, and career days are used effectively for interesting students in OT.

Age of First Interest. Results of the national survey indicate that the majority of OTs, 68 percent, were between the ages of 16 and 20 when they first became interested in OT. The study by Dunteman et al. (13) indicated that the median age for first learning about OT was 17 years, whereas medical technologists and PTs had heard about their fields 2 years earlier. Seventeen years of age appears to be late to begin learning about the existence of an occupational field. The Dunteman study also indicated that there was an average span of 2 years between first hearing about OT and choosing it as a major. Some students are being accepted into OT programs at 19 years of age, and, according to Dunteman and his associates (13), the majority of these students do not have adequate knowledge of the job requirements. Thus, early receipt of information appears to be a desirable goal.

Demographic Data. Since the respondents of this survey represent a random sample of the AOTA membership, it is assumed that the profile matches that of the AOTA membership. This profile reinforces the need for more recruitment efforts to attract minority and male populations. The fact that OT is characterized by many as a feminine field may detract from gaining the interest of potential male students. It is possible that, for males, the roles of OT in relation to other professionals—job security, job variety, supervision, and departmental directorships—are areas to stress in recruitment, since these may be factors that influence the choice of a profession.

Degree in OT. As indicated by the national survey, most OTs have a B.S. or a B.A. degree in OT. Of concern here, as stressed by Youse and Clark (9), is that students who have selected a career (i.e., have been accepted into a professional program) before the end of their sophomore year in college will probably be unaware of the major responsibilities of that career. Thus, the need for contact with potential students at college entry is important in order to share complete and accurate information.

Undergraduate Degree. Since the most common undergraduate degrees for OTs with a Master’s Degree or Certificate in OT have been in psychology, education, and sociology, these fields may be future target areas for student recruitment. Physical therapy, special education, and nursing were the three professions most commonly considered by OTs. Again, these may be target areas for future recruitment efforts.

Other Analyses. In reviewing the data obtained from the male OTs in the sample, interest in OT was attributed to the same factors as those in the larger selected sample. Male and female OTs are influenced by those around them. Thus, if males are to become interested in OT, members of the profession need to improve the image of OT as a male profession in the eyes of family members, friends, and other professionals.

Personal contact and aide positions were also found effective when analyzing the data from the therapists with a Certificate in OT, B.A./B.S. Degree in OT, and those with a Master’s Degree in OT. Data from the minority therapists, however, indicate that 8 of the 23 OTs sampled, or 35 percent, were influenced by a guidance counselor, whereas this medium was ranked low for the other samples. Although the sample size is small, the effect of the guidance counselor on minority recruitment should not be overlooked.

When considering the age of first interest by therapists, some differences in the age ranges appear. Minority students first became interested in the field between the ages of 15 and 19 years, the same as the national range, whereas males and OTs with certificate or master’s degrees became interested in the field between the ages of 20 and 24 years. This could be valuable information when determining target populations for recruitment efforts.

In comparing the data from OTs with a Certificate and those with a Master’s Degree in OT, more males obtain a Master’s Degree than a Certificate. Of the 23 OTs with a Certificate in OT, 1, or 4.3 percent, was a male; of the OTs with a Master’s Degree in OT, 5 of 26, or 19 percent, were males.

Effectiveness of Recruitment Techniques. The five most influential recruitment techniques, as determined by the number of respondents who chose the media as being influential in developing an interest in OT, are analyzed in terms of cost, feasibility, and time. The recruitment techniques include:

1. personal contact; aide and volunteer jobs; books, magazines, newspapers; guidance counselors; and career days.

Personal Contact. Personal contact is the most time-consuming technique of all recruitment efforts, but it has proved to be the most effective. All therapists "recruit," in a sense, through their service-oriented work. Extra efforts, such as speaking to local high school classes or community organizations, with individual follow-up, and giving tours of the OT department, are costly in extra time required.
Aide Positions and Volunteer Positions. Having an aide or a volunteer is feasible if there is enough work to do. The cost of having a volunteer is time for training and time for supervision, whereas an aide must be paid at least the minimum wage. Volunteers and aides, once trained, can be of great assistance in patient transportation, preparing patients for different activities, typing, and filing. Exposure to OT and personal contact with therapists are crucial factors in recruitment.

Books, Magazines, Newspapers. Books are available for recruitment efforts; it is the therapist's responsibility to make these more accessible. Books on health professions and career opportunities should be in OT departments, guidance counselor's offices, or at least in a therapist's short-term memory so that she/he can recommend the books to health profession-oriented students. For high school and junior high schools these books are an asset to the library; guidance counselors may purchase these through the school system as reference materials. These books take little time for counselors other than to read and critique the books, purchase them if necessary, and recommend them to students.

Articles in popular magazines and newspapers are often free and offer information to a wide audience. Time is a costly factor for these media; the OT is responsible, usually, for developing the story (finding a story), locating an interested source, and working with the reporter to complete the article. Thus, expenditure of time in developing such articles must be considered. Recruitment advertisements in journals are expensive. One allied health program spends $500 a year on this medium alone (Robert Bartlett, Director of Physical and Occupational Therapy, Duke University, personal communication, 1981).

Guidance Counselors. Because the literature varies on the effectiveness of the guidance counselor in the recruitment of students, it may fall to the OTs to provide more information to the counselor. As discussed earlier, personal contact is very effective. The increased rapport may alert the counselor to potential applicants in the health careers more so than when the counselor is only sent a packet of brochures and posters.

Many OT curricula plan and print their own brochures, spending several hundred dollars each year, and send them to persons requesting information about OT. Supplying guidance counselors with current brochures and other media would be useful in keeping the counselors abreast of current events in OT as well as giving them a better understanding of the function of OT.

Career Days. Most high schools and colleges plan career days. Since occupational therapy is not always recognized, therapists can take the initiative in contacting appropriate individuals on campuses. Displays that involve active participation by the students are useful. Contacts made during such events that are followed by mail or telephone calls may result in successful recruitment. Such efforts, however, become costly in terms of time and manpower.

Recommendations. Considering the results of this study and current AOTA recruitment activity, the authors suggest the following plan and specific recommendations. These recommendations are not appropriate for all groups, and many of them are already operational.

AOTA Plan: To guide, develop, and maintain public relations (PR) and recruitment efforts for the profession and the Association, the AOTA might:

1. Continue to conduct PR workshops for therapists, providing techniques and tips for interpersonal interaction and development of new media.
2. Encourage therapists to participate in career days, health fairs, OT week, etc., and stress the importance of personal contact in PR and recruitment.
3. Develop a mechanism whereby requests for information are made known to a local OT who can then contact the individual requesting the information.
4. Use a clip-out coupon in the Occupational Therapy Newspaper to encourage OTs to submit names of individuals to the AOTA, particularly minority or male students, to whom free literature should be sent.
5. Continue the development of printed materials; begin to print materials for target populations (i.e., more males, minorities, or older students pictured); stress qualities of the field other than that of a "helping profession," such as job guarantee, responsibility, and job variety.

OT Curricula. In order to conduct the plan suggested, OT faculty might:

1. Have OT representatives meet with guidance counselors and teachers to provide them with up-to-date information about OT services and planned events.
2. Designate a faculty member to be responsible for developing and carrying out a recruitment plan for that particular curriculum.
3. Recruit minority, male, and older student populations by emphasizing the variety of employment opportunities (i.e., OTs work...
within the school system, home health agencies, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, psychiatric settings, in businesses for stress management and pre-retirement opportunities (i.e., OTs work market).

4. Solicit financial aid/scholarships from interested nonprofit organizations who benefit from OT services (i.e., some business clubs offer scholarships to students in some type of rehabilitation field); areas to consider include women's clubs, clubs for the elderly, the Multiple Sclerosis or Muscular Dystrophy Associations, foundations, and associations concerned with children.

5. Use personal contact and participation in educating the “public” or in recruiting students. Have students observe OTs at work, wear a splint, test each other's pinch and grip, try out some pieces of adaptive equipment, or try to get around in a wheelchair.

**OT Clinics.** In order to conduct the suggested plan OT clinicians might:

1. Allow volunteers to work in the department and encourage work as an aide or volunteer after school or during the summer. This exposure and personal contact is valuable in developing an interest in OT.

2. Contact local high schools about Distributive Education Courses (DEC) that allow students to work part-time while they are in school as part of their school credit.

3. Participate in annual “open house” days and health fairs, with the opportunity for follow-up visits for interested students. Send personal invitations to facilitate the personal contact.

4. Be involved in school career days and Occupational Health Programs.

5. Target recruitment explorations to the interests of the person or group (i.e., If the group is involved or interested in geriatrics, what services does OT offer the elderly?).


**Conclusions**

The results of this study indicate that personal contact was the most effective means of creating an interest in OT for the OTs included in the sample, and that books, magazines, and aide positions are adjuncts to the recruitment process. It is proposed that recruitment and public relations programs are a means for meeting the increasing manpower demands for OTs by creating interest in and fostering learning about the field. Increased public awareness of OT may also result in more public understanding and use of OT services. Recruitment efforts aimed at the students in their junior high school through early college years may result in their being more knowledgeable about the field before making their career choices. In some instances, informed decision making could result in lower attrition rates. At the same time, the interests, background information, and experience of students with baccalaureate degrees in other fields add a richness and diversity to the profession, which suggests that recruitment efforts directed toward this group may be desirable.

Recruitment into the profession is one way to assure an adequate number of graduates but it does not necessarily resolve the manpower issue. The high attrition rate for OTs and the number and size of OT curricula also influence the available work force. As the demand for OTs continues, perhaps more therapists including clinicians and faculty members will become interested in participating in the recruitment process thereby providing the personal contact that is so important to successful recruitment.

**Acknowledgment**

Financial assistance for this study was provided through a Smith Fund grant from the Division of Research Administration, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

**REFERENCES**


