Student Outcomes in a Postprofessional Online Master's–Degree Program

Pamela K. Richardson, Anne MacRae, Kathleen Schwartz, Luriza Bankston, Carolyn Kosten

The outcomes of five cohorts of occupational therapists who completed an online postprofessional master's degree program were evaluated. Data on graduates' satisfaction with professional skills and status, contribution of the program to their satisfaction, and engagement in professional activities since graduation were collected using an online survey. Forty-nine of 65 surveys distributed were returned (75% response rate). Respondents indicated high levels of satisfaction with professional skills and status and high levels of contribution of the program to their satisfaction. Respondents also reported participation in a variety of professional leadership activities. Results suggest that postprofessional graduate-level education is effective in developing advanced critical reasoning, reflection, and leadership skills in occupational therapists and in facilitating a variety of professional contributions. The online mode was effective in delivering the program content. The value of postprofessional education to individuals and the profession is discussed.


Because the occupational therapy profession in the United States adopted a master's degree requirement for entry, postbaccalaureate education has become the standard for all occupational therapy entry-level degree programs. At the same time, some occupational therapists with baccalaureate-level training are electing to return to school to pursue a postprofessional master's degree. The professional contributions of these individuals with postprofessional master's degrees in occupational therapy and the value they attach to their postprofessional education have not been well researched. We investigated the postgraduation professional engagement of a group of occupational therapists who had recently completed a postprofessional master's degree program and their perceptions of the value of their postprofessional education.

Literature Review

Postprofessional Graduate Education

For many years, occupational therapy leaders have advocated for postbaccalaureate education as a necessity for the advancement of the profession (Allen, Strong, & Polatajko, 2001; Alsop & Lloyd, 2002; Commission on Education, 1979; Maxfield, 1975; Parham, 1987; Reilly, 1969; Yerxa & Sharrott, 1986). Graduate-level education provides a forum for engaging in critical analysis and reflection, skills essential to development of professional identity and autonomy (Esdaille & Roth, 2000; Parham, 1987; Wood, 2004). The body of literature on how occupational therapy clinicians with graduate-level education enact their professional identities in practice is very small. Past studies demonstrate that occupational therapists with master's-level...
education (both entry level and postprofessional) have higher levels of professional involvement and professional contributions and place a higher value on theory and theory development than therapists with baccalaureate-level preparation (Clark, Sharrott, Hill, & Campbell, 1985; Fleming & Piedmont, 1989; Rogers, Brayley, & Cox, 1988; Rogers, Hill, Holm, & Wasser, 1992; Rogers & Mann, 1980; Van Deusen, 1985, 1986). More recent studies of graduates of postprofessional programs in occupational therapy report increased confidence in personal and professional roles, renewed enthusiasm for the profession, and increased critical thinking and analytical skills (Conneeley, 2005; Dawkins & May, 2002; Richardson, 2004). However, data on specific activities and contributions of postprofessional graduates are lacking.

Research in a variety of professions reveals the personal and professional benefits associated with the completion of a postprofessional education (Currie, 2004; Davis, Sollecito, Shay, & Williamson, 2004; Swisher & Mandich, 2002). Key benefits include enhancement of knowledge and skills, improved research abilities, achievement of new positions and duties, and an increase in earning potential (Davis et al., 2004; Maxfield, 1975). Postprofessional graduates more effectively engage in evidence-based practice; they are more confident in developing clinical questions and more informed about how to access and evaluate information (McCluskey, 2003). The ability to frame interventions within a theoretical context, a deeper understanding of their profession, and growth in personal confidence facilitate professionals’ pursuit of professional challenges and improve their marketability (Davis et al., 2004; Swisher & Mandich, 2002).

Improvement in critical thinking and clinical skills also fosters the development of expertise (Currie, 2004), which increases credibility among colleagues (Whyte, Lugton, & Fawcett, 2000). Postprofessional education provides therapists an opportunity to engage in deeper examination and reflection on theories and concepts initially presented in entry-level education within the context of their accumulated clinical experience (Parham, 1987; Wood, 2004). This reflection and examination distinguish it from continuing clinical education, where the focus is on training in specific techniques. Although competence in assessment and intervention techniques are highly valued in clinical practice, the increasing demands for productivity and efficiency in the workplace require practitioners who are able to think flexibly and creatively to solve existing problems as well as effectively address new problems and develop emerging areas of practice (Esdaile & Roth, 2000; Gilfoyle, 1984; Wood, 2004; Yerxa & Sharrott, 1986). High-quality postprofessional graduate programs can advance the professionalism of the field by providing an educational environment where occupational therapists develop skills in advanced clinical reasoning and analysis, as well as an understanding of how to enact these skills effectively in their practice.

**Educational Philosophy**

For adult professionals who reengage in a formal educational program, their prior knowledge and experiences are central to the learning process and must be incorporated into the pedagogical design. These nontraditional students are self-directed and intrinsically motivated people (Huang, 2002; Maehl, 2004). Motivation is significantly increased when the educational curriculum creates opportunities for applying problem-solving methods to real-life contexts (Huang, 2002). Therefore, the use of course activities, discussions, and assignments that require students to reflect on their professional practice in the context of the theories and constructs being addressed in their course work facilitates active engagement and construction of meaning (Barab, Thomas, & Merrill, 2001). This practice is consistent with the constructivist approach to education.

Constructivism is based on the concept that knowledge is constructed by learners through reasoning, critical thinking, application of information, cognitive flexibility, and reflection (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004). Learners must be self-directed because they assume primary responsibility for their own learning (Simons, Baron, Knicely, & Richardson, 2001). In this context, the traditional role of the teacher evolves into that of a facilitator for student-directed dialogue (Boekaerts & Minnaert, 2006; Cravener, 1999; Huang, 2002; Kearsley, Lynch, & Wizer, 1995; Twomey, 2004). Active participation of all students is essential to the success of the constructivist learning experience (Lally & Barrett, 1999) as ideas exchanged among students result in the construction of new insights and perspectives (Lauzon, 1992). Instructors build on existing knowledge by providing new information and offer opportunities for students to share experiences (Farquharson, 1995). Occupational therapists who elect to pursue postprofessional education are motivated by factors such as personal development, skill enhancement, knowledge development, and career advancement opportunities (Allen et al., 2001; Alsop & Lloyd, 2002; Dickerson & Wittman, 1999; Richardson, 2004). The constructivist learning approach is highly compatible with the postprofessional learning needs of these individuals as well as with the characteristics of the online learning environment.

**Online Education**

Online programs provide an alternative method to the traditional educational format because the flexibility provided by the online medium provides educational opportunities for those who would not otherwise pursue postprofessional degrees because of work, family, or geographical reasons.
(Barab et al., 2001; Davis et al., 2004; Kearsley et al., 1995). The positive outcomes of postprofessional online programs have been documented in several disciplines, reflecting high levels of student satisfaction with programs, student success, and professional engagement after graduation (Allen et al., 2004; Anderson & Mercer, 2004; Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, & Cassey, 2001; Davis et al., 2004; Gwele, 2000; Halter, Kleiner, & Hess, 2005; McAlpine, Lockerbie, Ramsay, & Beaman, 2002; Richardson, 2004; Rose, Frisyb, Hamlin, & Jones, 2000; Swisher & Mandich, 2002). Graduates reported that they were more reflective, analytical, confident, and self-assured (Richardson, 2004). Changes in duties and positions were common as the graduates reported an increased willingness to seek out leadership opportunities. In addition, the distance learning experience led to a deeper understanding of the need to engage in lifelong learning (Davis et al., 2004; Edwards, 2005; Kearsley et al., 1995; Richardson, 2004).

Within occupational therapy, research has focused primarily on application of online teaching techniques in individual courses (Ali et al., 2004; Ikiugu & Rosso, 2003; Jedlicka, Brown, Bunch, & Jaffe, 2002; Rodger & Brown, 2000; Simons et al., 2001; Stanton, 2001; Thomas & Storr, 2005; Weiss, 2004). Findings of these studies indicate that student satisfaction and learning in online courses was comparable to that of traditional courses, and online education has been endorsed as meeting the higher order learning needs of students in occupational therapy programs (Hollis & Madill, 2006; Roberts, Strong, MacRae, Stadnyk, & Kinebanian, 2003).

Specific attributes of the online environment that contribute to student success have been identified. First, students have access to course material within their own environment at a pace that is conducive to their learning style (Weiss, 2004). Asynchronous methods, such as discussion areas and e-mail, allow the student more time to process information, reflect, and critically analyze material before responding (Lally & Barrett, 1999; McAlpine et al., 2002; Tiene, 2000; Weiss, 2004). Online learners have the opportunity to view the work of other learners through threaded discussions, enabling them to compare ideas and learn from one another (Halter et al., 2005; Kearsley et al., 1995; Smith, 2004). In online discussions, the competition to verbalize thoughts is removed, and as a result, individuals who may not verbally contribute in a classroom discussion are able to participate equally (Kearsley et al., 1995). In addition, written thoughts are more carefully articulated than spoken views, because there is time to revise and refine ideas before expressing them (Tiene, 2000). The online environment offers the opportunity for students from diverse geographic areas to study together, to share international perspectives, and to provide opportunities to collaborate nationally and internationally (Roberts et al., 2003; Steward, 2001).

Disadvantages of the online environment include lack of face-to-face interaction, which prohibits the interpretation of visual and auditory cues and can increase anxiety, decrease motivation (Fox, 2005; Tiene, 2000), and lead to ineffective communication where depth of meaning is lost (Doran, 2002; Halter et al., 2005; Kearsley et al., 1995; Simons et al., 2001). Students have also perceived the online environment as lacking a general emotionality (Halter et al., 2005; Kearsley et al., 1995; Simons et al., 2001; Smith, 2004; Tiene, 2000), which contributes to feelings of frustration, isolation, and disconnection from the classroom environment (Doran, 2002). However, if the facilitator encourages communication and social support, then sharing of information, social presence, and a sense of belonging can develop (Francescato et al., 2005). Regular interactions as well as timely responses from the faculty improve students’ satisfaction level with the program (Halter et al., 2005; Kearsley et al., 1995), and students are able to build strong social–emotional bonds and support networks through online classrooms (Richardson, 2004).

Several characteristics of successful online programs have been identified. These include providing appropriate initial and ongoing training for students in the Web-based platform, providing accessible tech support, designing courses that facilitates student-directed learning, and providing timely and efficient communication between instructor and students (Hollis & Madill, 2006). A face-to-face component of the course or program has also been identified as important in establishing a learning community between instructor and students (“Good Practices,” n.d.; Richardson, 2004; Roberts et al., 2003).

The literature suggests that postprofessional education produces both tangible and intangible benefits to participants and that graduates of postprofessional programs go on to expand their professional engagements and contributions, thereby benefiting their profession. In addition, literature on online programs suggests that they can be effective in providing appropriate educational challenges and higher level learning opportunities for adult learners. Online postprofessional master’s–degree programs can be a viable educational option for occupational therapists balancing work and family responsibilities.

A prior qualitative study of the first cohort of students in our postprofessional master’s–degree program (Richardson, 2004) documented student perceptions of the personal and professional transformations they experienced in the program. However, we had no data on whether these perceptions translated into professional engagement and contributions to the field. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the professional activities and perceptions of program benefits of occupational therapists who had obtained a masters of science (MS) degree in our postprofessional online program.
In addition, feedback was sought from the graduates regarding areas of the program that needed improvement, thus providing evaluation data that could contribute to ongoing program development. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the personal and professional outcomes of obtaining a postprofessional distance master’s degree in occupational therapy?
2. What contribution do the graduates perceive that the program had in facilitating their personal and professional outcomes?
3. What modifications do graduates recommend to improve the online master’s program?
4. Is an online, Web-based format an effective method for providing postprofessional occupational therapy graduate education?

Method

Participants

All graduates of the online postprofessional MS program in occupational therapy from a California university were eligible to participate. The program was initiated in 1999, with the first cohort of students graduating in 2001. Current e-mail addresses were obtained for 65 of the 73 students who had graduated from the program between 2001 and 2005. Forty-nine of the surveys were returned, yielding a 75% response rate. Mean age of the participants was 39.7 years (range = 28–69; SD = 8.43). Ninety percent were female, 61% resided in California, 20% resided in other states, 8% resided outside the United States, and 10% did not state their residence. Ethnicity of the participants was 4% African American, 12% Asian, 71% White, 6% Latino, and 6% other.

MS Program

The postprofessional MS program is part time (two courses per semester) and designed for clinicians working full time; from 1999 to 2004 it consisted of a five-semester curriculum, which has subsequently been consolidated into a four-semester-plus summer program. Students enter the program as a member of a cohort and take all course work with the same group of students. Courses are delivered asynchronously through a Web-based platform that provides a format for presenting lecture material, discussion groups, e-mail, and links to Web sites. First-year courses focus on exploration of clinical problems and grounding one’s practice in historical and theoretical contexts and include information literacy (taught by the reference librarian), historical foundations of occupational therapy, advanced theory and clinical practice, management, and organizational change. The second year coursework examines influences on practice and extends students’ analytical skills to critique the professional literature while developing a focus for their inquiry. Courses include research methodology, education, cultural diversity, and a research practicum. The final semester consists of a research seminar leading to completion of the master’s thesis. All material is presented in a modular format with discussion questions and assignments associated with each module. Discussion questions address areas of controversy related to theory and clinical practice and require integration of course material and generation of ideas, solutions, or opinions supported by scholarly citations. Student learning is evaluated through written assignments and quality of discussion participation. Students can contact the reference librarian and university online technology consultants at any time for assistance. The university library Web site and electronic databases are accessed remotely, and students can obtain articles and books from the library or through interlibrary loan.

In addition to in-class discussions, a “Town Square” is accessible to all students and faculty in the program where information and discussions of general interest are posted. Each cohort also has a “café,” with access limited to students from the cohort. These cafés provide a site for social interaction and a place for students to discuss course work outside of class (Lauzon, 1992).

Students are required to attend three onsite retreats of 2 to 3 days in length. The initial retreat focuses on orientation to the program and support services. The second retreat, at the end of the first year, consists of orientation to the second year course work and the research component of the program. The final retreat occurs at the end of the program, where students present their thesis research and participate in graduation.

Instrumentation and Procedure

The instrument used in this study was a survey created by faculty of the occupational therapy postprofessional distance MS program and was based on program goals. It consisted of four sections:

1. Participant demographics
2. Questions evaluating level of satisfaction with 23 professional skills and 5 indicators of professional status, how much the program contributed to their satisfaction with these skills and indicators, and interest in further postgraduate education, all using 5-point Likert-type scales
3. Professional involvement since graduation, where respondents indicated which of the following activities they had participated in and a description of their participation or product: lobbying; advocacy; mentorship; testimony; fieldwork supervision; membership in professional organizations; committee positions and offices held; programs developed; presentations at local, state,
national, and international occupational therapy and other professional conferences, workshops and continuing education courses or in-services taught; invited presentations, guest lectures, and courses taught in academic programs; publications in peer-reviewed journals, other professional publications, consumer-oriented publications, book chapters, and other published products.

Four open-ended questions addressing respondents’ proudest accomplishment since graduation, greatest professional benefits of the program, greatest personal benefit of the program, and suggestions for program improvement.

The instrument was pilot tested on currently enrolled master’s students for clarity and reviewed by additional faculty for organization and content. The university’s Department of Institutional Research created an electronic version of the survey for e-mail distribution using SurveyMonkey software (www.surveymonkey.com). Faculty and students reviewed the electronic version for clarity and ease of completion.

The survey link was sent to the 65 graduates for whom the occupational therapy department had current e-mail contacts. It was accompanied by a cover letter e-mail; reminder e-mails were sent after 2 weeks; the original e-mail with the survey link was re-sent after 4 weeks. Completed surveys were sent anonymously to Institutional Research, where the results were recorded and descriptive analyses were conducted on all quantitative data. Responses to open-ended questions were collated by Institutional Research and sent to the occupational therapy department, where graduate research assistants and faculty independently coded and categorized the narrative responses into descriptive categories. Initial descriptive categories were similar across raters; differences were discussed, and final descriptive categories were determined.

Results

Satisfaction With Professional Skills and Status and Contribution of Program to Satisfaction

Respondents’ satisfaction with professional skills and perceptions of how much the online MS program contributed to their satisfaction are summarized in Table 1. For 16 of 23 professional skills listed, 90% or more of respondents agreed with their satisfaction level.

Table 1. Satisfaction With Professional Skills and Perceived Contribution of Program to Satisfaction With Skill (% of Respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Satisfaction With Professional Skill</th>
<th>Contribution of Program to Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Represent/explain occupational therapy to clients and families</td>
<td>VS 71  S 24  SS 4  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 61  H 35  M 4  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Represent/explain occupational therapy to other professionals</td>
<td>VS 63  S 35  SS 2  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 65  H 31  M 4  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose appropriate evaluations</td>
<td>VS 52  S 40  SS 8  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 39  H 37  M 18  L/N 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret evaluation results</td>
<td>VS 54  S 38  SS 8  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 35  H 49  M 14  L/N 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in clinical reasoning</td>
<td>VS 65  S 31  SS 2  U/UV 2</td>
<td>VH 69  H 27  M 4  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose appropriate intervention strategies</td>
<td>VS 55  S 41  SS 4  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 45  H 33  M 18  L/N 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically evaluate literature for relevance</td>
<td>VS 47  S 41  SS 6  U/UV 6</td>
<td>VH 78  H 18  M 2  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct database searches for information</td>
<td>VS 39  S 41  SS 14  U/UV 6</td>
<td>VH 71  H 24  M 4  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand client/family’s culture/contexts</td>
<td>VS 67  S 22  SS 6  U/UV 4</td>
<td>VH 71  H 27  M 2  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand and apply learning theory to occupational therapy</td>
<td>VS 51  S 35  SS 10  U/UV 4</td>
<td>VH 61  H 35  M 4  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide effective client and family education</td>
<td>VS 67  S 31  SS 2  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 53  H 39  M 8  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand/apply practice models and theories</td>
<td>VS 45  S 45  SS 6  U/UV 4</td>
<td>VH 57  H 39  M 4  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand client-centered theory</td>
<td>VS 82  S 12  SS 2  U/UV 4</td>
<td>VH 69  H 27  M 4  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in client-centered practice</td>
<td>VS 71  S 24  SS 2  U/UV 2</td>
<td>VH 67  H 25  M 6  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand relevance of occupational therapy history to practice</td>
<td>VS 69  S 18  SS 6  U/UV 6</td>
<td>VH 86  H 14  M 0  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively negotiate health care systems</td>
<td>VS 27  S 45  SS 22  U/UV 6</td>
<td>VH 33  H 37  M 24  L/N 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for clients</td>
<td>VS 65  S 33  SS 2  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 45  H 45  M 8  L/N 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate effectively with clients</td>
<td>VS 78  S 20  SS 2  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 47  H 41  M 8  L/N 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively communicate in writing</td>
<td>VS 63  S 31  SS 4  U/UV 2</td>
<td>VH 55  H 37  M 8  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide effective mentorship</td>
<td>VS 57  S 39  SS 0  U/UV 2</td>
<td>VH 59  H 31  M 8  L/N 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take a leadership role</td>
<td>VS 59  S 37  SS 4  U/UV 0</td>
<td>VH 69  H 29  M 0  L/N 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to the knowledge base of occupational therapy</td>
<td>VS 45  S 33  SS 18  U/UV 4</td>
<td>VH 71  H 20  M 6  L/N 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make an effective professional presentation</td>
<td>VS 57  S 35  SS 4  U/UV 4</td>
<td>VH 69  H 27  M 2  L/N 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 49. Satisfaction level: VS = very satisfied; S = satisfied; SS = somewhat satisfied; U/UV = unsatisfied/very unsatisfied. Contribution of program to satisfaction level: VH = very high; H = high; M = moderate; L/N = little/no contribution.
reported that they were highly satisfied or satisfied with their skills; for 4 skills, 80% or more reported they were highly satisfied or satisfied. The 2 skills with lowest levels of satisfaction were “Effectively negotiate health care systems” and “Contribute to the knowledge base of occupational therapy,” with 72% and 78%, respectively, reporting they were highly satisfied or satisfied.

Contributions of the MS program to satisfaction received similar ratings. For 18 of the 23 professional skills, 90% or more of respondents reported high or very high contribution of the program to satisfaction; for 2 skills, 80% or more reported high or very high contribution to satisfaction. The 3 skills with lowest ratings of the program’s contribution to satisfaction were “Choose appropriate evaluations,” “Choose appropriate intervention strategies,” and “Effectively negotiate health care systems” with 76%, 78%, and 70%, respectively, indicating high or very high contributions to satisfaction.

Satisfaction with professional status is summarized in Table 2. Respondents were most satisfied with their understanding of occupational therapy and choice of occupational therapy as a career, with 100% reporting high or very high satisfaction and 96% reporting high or very high contribution of the program to satisfaction. “Opportunities for advancement and growth in occupational therapy” was the lowest ranked, with 86% reporting high or very high satisfaction and contribution of program to satisfaction.

**Engagement in Professional Activities**

Interest in further education was surveyed as an indicator of professional engagement. Seventy-one percent of the graduates reported that they were interested or very interested in obtaining specialty clinical certification; 43% expressed similar levels of interest in pursuing a PhD; 8% were interested in obtaining a second master’s degree, and 6% expressed interest in pursing an occupational therapy doctoral degree. Two graduates were currently enrolled in PhD programs, and six reported that they were currently pursuing specialty clinical certifications.

More than half of the graduates reported that they were involved in advocacy for issues such as improved client benefits, development of programs, increased presence of occupational therapy in emerging practice areas, and state licensure. A similar number reported an increase in professional responsibilities, acceptance of fieldwork supervisor positions, promotions to leadership positions, and changes in job position. Involvement in state regulatory legislative issues and testifying at public hearings, state boards, and health commissions was reported by 20% of respondents. Mentorship of students, interns, aides, entry-level clinicians, and colleagues was the most commonly reported professional activity, with 72% of respondents taking on this role since graduation.

A high percentage of the participants reported involvement in professional organizations. Eighty-two percent belonged to at least one professional organization, and 74% belonged to two or more organizations. These included state or provincial occupational therapy associations (37; 76%), the American Occupational Therapy Association (33; 67%), various local associations and clinical specialty organizations (22; 45%), and the World Federation of Occupational Therapy (9; 18%).

The data in Table 3 reflect engagement in specific professional activities since graduation. Leadership roles taken on over and above assigned job responsibilities included activities such as service on hospital boards, offices in professional organizations and conference committees, membership on state policymaking teams, advisory committees, and task forces. In the area of program development, the graduates reported launching community programs in a variety of practice settings as well as developing hospital and clinic programs, private practices, and mentorship programs. The graduates made a total of 177 presentations in a variety of venues and produced a total of 41 published materials. These included manuals, brochures, educational videos, and publications in trade magazines, newsletters, newspapers, and letters to the editor. In addition, six program development grants written by graduates received funding. They also

### Table 2. Satisfaction With Professional Status and Perceived Effect of the Program on Satisfaction With Status (% of Respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Status</th>
<th>Satisfaction With Professional Status</th>
<th>Effect of Program on Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VS S SS U/UV</td>
<td>VH H M L/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of the profession</td>
<td>80 20 0 0</td>
<td>76 20 4 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational therapy colleagues’ respect for you</td>
<td>76 22 2 0</td>
<td>61 35 4 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as an occupational therapist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-occupational therapy colleagues’ respect for you</td>
<td>61 27 10 2</td>
<td>57 35 8 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as an occupational therapist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for advancement and growth in occupational</td>
<td>63 23 12 2</td>
<td>61 25 12 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>therapy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your choice of occupational therapy as a career</td>
<td>88 12 0 0</td>
<td>67 29 0 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 49. Satisfaction with professional status: VS = very satisfied; S = satisfied; SS = somewhat satisfied; U/UV = unsatisfied/very unsatisfied. Effect of program on satisfaction: VH = very high; H = high; M = moderate; L/N = little/no effect.*

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contributed to 10 textbook chapters and published five articles in peer-reviewed journals.

**Professional and Personal Benefits**

Tables 4, 5, and 6 present the coded and categorized open-ended responses to the questions addressing graduates’ perceptions of their proudest accomplishments and the personal and professional benefits of the program. Improvement of professional image and confidence was a theme strongly reflected in all three questions. In addition, knowledge and appreciation of the profession of occupational therapy as well as increased critical analysis and research skills were benefits cited by several respondents. Advocacy and sharing of knowledge through presentations or publications were also strongly endorsed as both benefits and accomplishments.

**Suggestions for Program Improvement**

Graduates’ suggestions for program improvement are summarized in Table 7. Although nearly half of those responding to this question had no suggestions, others provided specific suggestions relative to the quality and timeliness of instructor communication with students, timing of the research and thesis course work within the program, and administrative efficiency.

**Discussion**

Graduates of the online postprofessional master’s program in occupational therapy reported a high level of satisfaction with personal and professional skills and thought the online master’s program contributed substantially to their professional growth. Their high levels of engagement in a variety of professional leadership activities and interest in pursuing further educational opportunities substantiate their perceptions that the program gave them increased confidence and skills as occupational therapy professionals and inspired them to expand their contributions to the field.

Graduates’ highest levels of satisfaction with program contributions to their practice were in the areas of understanding the effects of occupational therapy history on current practice, critically evaluating literature, conducting database searches, understanding clients’ unique contexts, and contributing to the occupational therapy knowledge base, topics that were the key areas of focus of this program.
In addition, more than half of the respondents indicated that the ability to understand research and use critical analysis and evidence-based practice skills were the most significant professional benefit. These skills have been identified as critically important for occupational therapy leaders and are indicators of a high level of professionalism (Allen et al., 2001; Gilfoyle, 1984; Wood, 2004; Yerxa & Sharrott, 1986). The apparent discrepancy between the high ratings on contribution of the program to respondents’ satisfaction with their ability to contribute to the occupational therapy knowledge base and the relatively lower ratings of satisfaction with their skill in this area are probably caused by respondents’ perception that contributing to the knowledge base is primarily accomplished by conducting research, a skill that was substantially developed but not mastered through participation in the program.

Graduates acknowledged the transformational nature of the educational experience that resulted in both personal and professional growth (Richardson, 2004). They expressed feelings of professional renewal and increased pride: “I gained an increased and deeper understanding of our profession as well as a renewed respect for the power of occupation”; “The year prior to entering the program, I felt disillusioned with the field of occupational therapy. I did not feel I was practicing occupational therapy. While attending and since graduation, I no longer have those feelings”; “I lost my ‘origins’ or meaning of what being an occupational therapist was . . . I regained that knowledge and pride while attending the master’s program.”

Several benefits were cited in both personal and professional categories. This finding suggests that the graduates perceived that benefits such as improved confidence, increased professional opportunities, and a stronger professional identity affected both their personal and professional lives. “[The program] enabled me to see different perspectives that opened up my mind to more alternatives and options in both my personal life and my work in the occupational therapy field.”

Several students in the program have reported being questioned about the value of obtaining an advanced degree in occupational therapy rather than in another discipline. This study provides some answers as to why postgraduate education is so important within the field of occupational therapy. Graduates of this program developed a deeper connection to the profession and its historical and conceptual roots, along with a more sophisticated understanding of current theories and practice frameworks. This connection empowered them to be stronger advocates for occupational therapy and for the clients they served. They also developed skills in evidence-based practice, critical analysis of research, program development, and leadership. The specific outcomes of their growth can be observed in the number and variety of professional leadership activities they engaged in after graduation.

The statements made by some respondents indicated that they may have been at risk of leaving the profession before entry into this program. The turnaround in thinking expressed by these respondents and the unanimously high levels of satisfaction reported about the choice of occupational therapy as a career suggest that postprofessional education can help to retain bright, ambitious occupational therapists in the profession by providing opportunities to critically reflect on their practice, to develop advanced skills in clinical reasoning and leadership, and to identify areas to which they wish to direct their professional energies.

The online format was effective in delivering postprofessional graduate education to practicing occupational therapists and facilitating substantial personal and professional growth. The suggestions for program improvement had little to do with the technology or the online format. The one exception may have been in the area of communication between faculty and students. The suggestions for more prompt responses by faculty likely reflect students’ occasional frustration with the asynchronous communication model used in the program, with classroom postings or individual e-mails being the main form of communication. The lack of opportunities to speak to instructors face to face and obtain immediate feedback is one of the disadvantages of the online medium (Doran, 2002; Kearsley et al., 1995). Telephone meetings were a satisfactory substitute for most students, offering the opportunity for real-time communication. Instructors scheduled phone meetings with individual

### Table 7. Graduates’ Suggestions for Program Improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestions</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address administrative procedures</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce inefficiency of university processes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce cost for international students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjust program/curriculum</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin thesis earlier in program</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce class size</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide mentors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve communication with students</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase frequency of communication/provide immediate feedback</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide clearer expectations/timelines</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support alumni after graduation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide specific training</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer online database orientation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present specific interventions for practice settings</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruct in presenting/researching after graduation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No suggestions</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Number of respondents to this question = 37. Some respondents provided more than one suggestion.*
students at the students’ request or when they thought it would be the optimal communication mode for the question. New discussion threads also were added to courses when necessary to address specific concerns, and students were encouraged to use each other as resources and to access the online cafes for support. In addition, the onsite retreats provided an essential opportunity for relationship building and face-to-face interaction for both faculty and students. This flexibility in communication modes helped to allay student anxieties about instructor availability and offered a variety of options to meet individual communication preferences, a practice that has been shown to facilitate student success and satisfaction in online study (Francescato et al., 2005; Halter et al., 2005; Richardson, 2004).

Other concerns stated by students related to the organization of the curriculum were shared by faculty, and program changes have been made in response to student suggestions, specifically situating the research methods course earlier in the program and providing ongoing support and advisement for development of thesis projects by means of independent study credits and individual and group advising. The concerns about faculty–student communication have also prompted development of a program policy related to communication and clearer instructions to students about what to expect from faculty and how to initiate communication. Thus, the suggestions provided by students helped to direct ongoing program development.

Limitations

Participants were a self-selected, highly motivated group of independent learners. These personal characteristics were likely partly responsible for their success and satisfaction with online postprofessional learning (Lally & Barrett, 1999). Although the response rate was high, it is not known whether the nonresponders differed from the participants in their level of postgraduation accomplishments and satisfaction with the program. Because no pretesting was done, it is not known how much student satisfaction and engagement changed over the course of the program, although responses relative to program benefits and the effects of the program on knowledge and attitudes suggest a positive program effect. The results are specific to one program and cannot be generalized to other courses or programs.

Summary

The results of this study suggest that postprofessional education in occupational therapy is effective in helping occupational therapists develop skills in critical thinking and leadership that contribute to increased professional engagement. It also provides therapists with confidence in themselves and in occupational therapy and a commitment to higher levels of participation in the profession. These are precisely the skills and attitudes that occupational therapy needs in its leaders, and therefore makes postprofessional graduate education desirable from the profession’s perspective as well as that of the individual occupational therapist. Therefore, therapists desiring professional growth should be encouraged to pursue postprofessional graduate education.

Acknowledgments

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