THE ISSUE IS

How Can Professional Activity at the Student Level Be Increased?

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For some of us, professional activity is part of who we are as an occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant. It is respected in the milieu of academia, clinical practice, and administration. However, the type and amount of professional activity we are involved in is and has been an issue for discussion and debate for decades along with the establishment of minimal standards of expectations.

Perhaps increasing professional activity at the student level will motivate new graduates to continue such activity, bringing it to higher levels as their expertise and interests become more focused and advanced. Educators are to be commended for their research and the evolution of academic preparation of occupational therapy students. But, can we do more? What are we doing to promote professional activity to students? Does successful completion of an academic program assure contribution to the profession? Gillette's (1998) dedication to Wilma L. West identifies the significance of professional activity for students:

Long before most others, Wilma West recognized that only by developing a sense of professional responsibility in each student can we insure that members will support their professional organizations financially and through their memberships and contribute to the research and publication processes that give the world its perspective on occupational therapy. (p. 318)

We all are role models for occupational therapy students whether we are currently employed as an educator, practitioner, administrator, scholar, or researcher. Students in occupational therapy programs and occupational therapy assistant programs have opportunities to interact with numerous occupational therapy practitioners throughout their academic preparation. Volunteer experience, the academic classroom, and fieldwork experience provide opportunities for students to observe us in our professional lives. Each of us is responsible for serving as a role model for these individuals in terms of knowledge, clinical reasoning, professional behavior, and professional activity.

Before we can increase professional activity at the student level, we must consider our own. Professional activity at the entry, intermediate, or advanced level of professional performance can be enhanced and extended (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1993). Maintaining professional competence has been addressed (AOTA, 1995). Some states require continuing education; others encourage it; and most of us have bought into the prospect of life-long learning: “Overall, our colleagues are committed professionals engaged in activities that support their ongoing competence. They are dedicated to updating their knowledge and skills in their roles as practitioners, administrators, educators, researchers, and scholars” (Hinojosa & Blount, 1998, p. 700). The primary purpose of continuing education, whether mandated or voluntary, is for the betterment of the individual. Professional activity involves leadership; membership; and involvement at the local, state, and national levels and is for the betterment of the profession. It involves being proactive in local communities, supporting colleagues, conducting research, maintaining high ethical standards, lobbying, presenting workshops and conferences, and publishing. Professional competence and professional activity will complement each other in our roles as occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants.

Educators in academic programs are positioned to address this important issue; perhaps we can do a better job. Traditionally, academic educators strive for better teaching strategies. Emery and Kalscheur (2000) discussed the application of the Student-Oriented Learning Outline to facilitate student learning of research. Acknowledgment of changes in the health care delivery system has led educators to prepare students for roles as consultants (Dudgeon & Greenberg, 1998). Hammel et al. (1999), along with numerous other educators, continue the quest for ideal education through the application of problem-based learning. We are conscientious in our efforts to prepare our students to become qualified practitioners. Let's not forget the issue of professional activity.

In addition, researchers have attempted to assess the personality traits of occupational therapy students (Tickle-Degnen, 1998; Wise & Page, 1980) as a predictor of clinical performance. Occupational therapy programs have developed admission criteria and interviews in attempt to select “qualified applicants who will complete the program and make a contribution to the occupational therapy profession” (Agho, Mosley, & Smith-Paul, 1998, p. 592).

How can professional activity at the student level be increased? It is essential that we reevaluate our own activity in the pro-
fession of occupational therapy. Membership in professional organizations is imperative as an occupational therapist, occupational therapy assistant, and student. Consider the following suggestions:

- Attend a lobby day. Bring a student. Each year in New York State, “lobby day” is held in Albany where professionals are encouraged to meet with their representatives to discuss issues of importance. Educators in New York State are bringing students to lobby day.
- Write a letter to your congressperson, senator, or assemblyperson about what you do as an occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant. On occasion, the leaders of our profession have asked us to write such letters or to make calls in support of legislation that is critical to our profession. We can cosign with a student or encourage students to write their own letters and make their own phone calls.
- Present in-service education within your facility. Involve a student. The Central District of the New York State Occupational Therapy Association (NYSOTA) hosted its 2001 conference in Syracuse. A full-day session in which students learn about emerging practice areas, inter-professional collaboration, and role-modeling professional activity were included in the session. A student who is doing fieldwork at your facility.
- Attend a conference or workshop. Bring a student. The Planning Committee for the 2001 NYSOTA conference included Samantha Noti who was an occupational therapy student at Utica College of Syracuse University at the time. Her role was crucial in the development of the full-day session for students.
- Give back to our profession. Do not wait for the next person. Be that person. Help a student be the next person.

These suggestions can be implemented through class assignments, fieldwork activities, collaboration among occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant academic programs, and mentoring both within and outside of the classroom. Creativity and motivation are essential; the ideas are meant to “jump start” students into the world of professional activity. This professional activity can only help to promote the integrity and merit of the profession.

The importance of this issue regarding professional activity could not be more timely with the fall 2001 Report to the Profession by the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) outlines in phase II, the proposed plan for continuing competence. The plan calls for self-assessment, maintenance of a portfolio of professional development activities, the accumulation of 50 professional development points over 5 years (15 of which are directly related to occupational therapy), random audits, self-maintenance of documentation, application, and fee (NBCOT, 2001).

Professional activity no longer will be the product of self-efficacy but, in fact, a requirement to maintain our current certification, which entitles us to use the marks OTR or COTA (NBCOT, 2001). What better time to promote professional activity at the student level. The NBCOT plan also guides activities that will translate into professional development points, which is much more than continuing education activities that students may assume is the primary method of accumulating points because they are most accustomed to the student role.

Recently, I created a 1-credit special topics course at Utica College of Syracuse University called OCT 400: Current Issues in Occupational Therapy. It seemed to go well; the students participated in topics that included emerging practice areas, interviewing Karen Walters, Chairperson of the Central District of the NYSOTA, locating online sources for most current information, interviewing occupational therapy assistant students and faculty members at Herkimer County Community College about role delineation, media issues relating to ethics and health care, the NBCOT proposed plan, and numerous other issues brought into class by the students themselves for discussion. We talked at length about professional activity, in particular the proposed NBCOT plan, and we completed the comment form and submitted it with our feedback. The final course project was a paper, which each student designed independently according to his or her interests.

The rewards of teaching, mentoring, and role-modeling professional activity were never more clear to me as I read the final paper prepared by senior Amy Thurling. She began her paper with, “The class has guided me in controlling my future role in the profession of occupational therapy. I regard OCT 400 as the ignition to my future form of transportation, continuing education, and professional development.” Thank you, Amy, I am confident about your future professional activity.

References


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