The Liberal Arts Connection

career education, career skills, professional competence

Edward R. Pierce

The study of liberal arts has, from the beginning of higher education in this country, prepared professionals for their practice. Liberal arts studies are essential for defining a career, making a career choice, and developing career skills. Also, liberal arts studies are necessary for occupational therapists to make the appropriate interconnections needed to develop a perspective that allows the therapist to be professionally competent. This perspective equips the therapist with the ability to move appropriately from the individual self-interest level to the occupational therapy community self-welfare level of functioning and behavior. The author believes that the conjoining of occupational theory, occupational practice, and liberal arts studies will ensure continued survival and viability of occupational therapy by preparing future responsive educated practitioners.

There is much ado today in higher education about the increased emphasis on vocation-alism, careerism, and jobism. Although the professional schools are viewed in academe as jaundiced modern phenomena, liberal education has a long history in preparing students for the professions. For example, Harvard University was founded to ensure a supply of clerics and teachers. Yet professional schools and curricula view liberal arts studies as something sterile and unconnected to real education and the work-world. The humanities are hurdles, the arts are artifacts, and the social sciences superfluous. Such studies are the dues that students must pay to receive a degree. Occupational therapy and other professional curricula vary in the measure and mix of the liberal arts component, and frequently professional school faculty attitudes about liberal arts studies convey to the students a lesser valued component of their education. The usual arrangement is what Warren Martin (1) calls the layer cake model—general education at the lower division, capped by upper division specialization—a conventional two-layer cake.

Liberal, general education will serve occupational therapy best as an integral part of the curriculum fabric from start to finish during all four years of a baccalaureate and both years of an associate degree education, because it gives the student, who is the professional-to-be, a perspective of knowing and appreciating the interrelationships in the complex web of life in which the professional will profess. Chambers (2) defines the liberal arts perspective as a context or point of view, an ability of an educated individual to evaluate the relative significance of things and events in relation to other things and events. This perspective offers a vista that should be broadening, should be given to the student as soon as possible, and should be reinforced continually. It must be understood both as a curricular tool and a state of mind because it must be encompassing enough to leap over the boundaries of discrete disciplinary requirements and concerns in the curriculum. The discipline also develops a perspective, but the perspective is, by contrast and necessity, narrow and deep. This marks the traditional goal of American colleges and universities, namely to produce graduates who have attained an education in both depth and breadth. The former is the primary task of the traditional major, while the latter has been largely the purview of general and liberal education components of the curriculum. This perspective is an essence of professional life; it encompasses the big picture built on values and interconnectedness of events and things.

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Liberal education is indispensable to the occupational therapy student at many stages in career development, from initial career choice through the transition to professional. As academe faces the 1980s, we need to think of liberal studies and learning in new ways that recognize liberal study as the means to prepare the student for the future and for effective citizenship in the profession and in society. Liberal studies can provide transferrable skills that will enable the career occupational therapist to confront the humanistic, quantitative, economic, moral, and computer-based issues we live and work with now and in the future. We must capitalize on the foundations students bring to their professional programs from their liberal education in earlier years in the home, the church, and the community. Also, we need to interconnect this liberal education with the formal liberal studies in the collegiate setting to ensure appropriate preparation for future citizenship.

Career Education Comes from Liberal Arts

Today's students want an education program that leads to "a career." They are being taught that a career is a lifelong succession of jobs, and success is just promotion and more income. This promotes the idea that liberal arts courses are less important in preparing for a career in occupational therapy than specific occupational therapy courses.

I believe that only liberal studies can provide an opportunity to learn what an occupational therapy career is, the difference between an occupational therapy career and having an income derived from employment as a therapist, and the difference between a professional and nonprofessional. Unless occupational therapy students are liberally educated, they are not learning the assessment, integrative, and synthesis skills they need for personal and professional growth and development. This may have serious implications for the profession.

With liberal learning, students learn that a career is the work that they invest their lives in, that a career is the course of a working life that is dedicated to advance specific ends, and that a career is work and not just employment and wage earning. Occupational therapy students who fail to appreciate these distinctions are likely to think that career men and women are simply employed men and women. For example, these students will fail to realize that a person whose chosen work is raising children toward responsible adulthood has a career, while many persons with a job have only labor and income, no work to which they are committed and in which they are investing their lives. Equating a job and a career inhibits aspirations and discourages thought about what is worthy for investing a life. By implication this demeans certain careers. Students are not likely to learn how to determine the degree of success of a career (3). Instead, they will probably think of success in terms of self-interest rather than the extent to which the goals of the work are achieved and the controllable obstacles to their achievement are overcome.

Students are exposed to misuse of language about careers and professionalism in schools, colleges, and by most contemporary media. They have learned that a professional is distinguished from an amateur by pay, but they do not learn that a professional, an occupational therapist for example, is a person who is responsible for the well-being of another person. Many are not learning that responsibility generates a special relationship and series of obligations. This ignorance does little to encourage intelligent career choice or professionalism.

Career education from the liberal arts has a direct impact on the profession and the professional society. Specific or disciplinary professional society membership rolls contain only about 10 percent of the professionals in those fields (4). How much of this is due to the lack of a liberal arts basis for career education and decisions? Occupational therapy does better than most other allied health disciplines in exposing students to liberal arts studies. However, can occupational therapy improve in this area in the 1980s?

Students must not merely be exposed to liberal learning, but they must be able to use liberal arts studies in meeting their needs in professional and societal citizenship. If students do not commit to an occupational therapy career, they cannot and will not move the profession in achieving the goals and objectives of occupational therapy because they will not know where they are going or where occupational therapy should be going. These concerns were reflected in a recent Dataline in the Occupational Therapy Newspaper, where the postprofessional graduate programs in occupational therapy survey were summarized (5). The major concerns of program directors were listed in
order; number 3 was: “Lack of understanding among occupational therapists of the roles and objectives of graduate education.”

**Career Skills Come from Liberal Arts**

Linwood Orange (6) has cited studies showing the limitations of a restricted business degree in which business majors concentrate more than half their studies in the field of business. Graduates became “floaters,” people able to secure the same job in different firms, but who were unable to progress up the corporate ladder. Orange has pointed out that companies seek employees who have the competencies to advance, and the competencies sought are basic skills taught in the liberal arts education. Beyond the basic skills, the liberally educated student needed to bring along a sense of values to the job.

The ten competencies that Orange delineates are (a) speaking well in public; (b) handling office paperwork with grammatical accuracy, conciseness, and clarity; (c) editing or rewriting material that has been prepared by technical personnel; (d) analyzing, interpreting, reorganizing, and rephrasing material; (e) using general and specialized reference materials in preparing well-documented reports; (f) analyzing and interpreting unpublished data of various kinds in preparing well-documented reports; (g) using research materials with creativity and originality; (h) speaking and writing a foreign language fluently; (i) becoming reasonably knowledgeable in areas in which there has been no previous training; and (j) presenting an argument or debating logically, succinctly, and clearly. As one executive stated, young people coming on board need a sound foundation in history, sociology, philosophy, mathematics, literature, comparative religion, and so on, so that they can develop a mature personal philosophy. In other words, they need knowledge and appreciation of the interconnectedness of things and values in the context of self-interest and self-welfare. The proliferation of executive development programs, including executive masters in business administration (MBA) programs, indicates that the professional business schools have not been paying appropriate attention to this kind of development, although the resources for it are readily available in liberal studies on the same campuses where the business schools are located.

The Career Related Skills Project, a national research project, was undertaken to determine the career related skills taught in liberal arts courses (7). More than 2,400 liberal arts faculty members from more than 220 institutions of higher education completed and returned the study questionnaire. The project results demonstrate two practical perspectives on liberal arts studies.

Figure 1 shows some of the career related skills that liberal arts
faculty members teach in the classroom and the remarkable correspondence between those skills and the skills found in the Directory of Occupational Titles (DOT). Each occupation in the DOT is broken down in terms of the level of involvement with people, data, and things, since they are necessary to accomplish the job identified successfully. Since each level requires a variety of skills, it is possible to use the data/people/things category to identify transferability of academic skills to occupational demands. Figure 1 lists more than 20 skills identified in the DOT as applicable and required for jobs listed in the people/data/things category.

Figure 2 shows that 13 of these skills are taught by more than 30 percent of the liberal arts faculty members responding, and about ⅓ of these are taught by all of the faculty responding. Forty percent of the faculty instruct these skills at some level, either extremely, moderately, or minimally, and require demonstration of the skill. This also indicates that students taking these courses must learn the skill or receive a low or failing grade. Figure 2 clusters skills into the five categories shown and demonstrates that liberal arts institutions tend to emphasize certain packages of skills more than others. Communication and research skills, for example, are more heavily represented than the other three categories, which are administration, application and classification, and instruction. The communication category is important in the short-term, self-interest level, and the research category has significant implications for the profession at the self-welfare and long-term perspective.

Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, differentiates vocational education as learning to do something, and liberal and humanistic education as learning how to be someone, particularly someone human (8). He goes on to say that liberal education liberates a person to be human, and the unique attribute of being human is freedom. Freedom intelligently and responsibly used and enjoyed helps achieve a balance between our individual and common good, our particular and communal well-being, and our happiness as humans and as a human society. This kind of education pays attention to ends rather than means, to substance rather than fads, to being human first and foremost, and then “doing” humanely. This definition and characterization applies to professionals, professions, and academic degree programs. I believe the liberally and generally educated individual is capable of rising above individual self-interest and operating at the level of communal self-welfare.

Figure 3 depicts the interconnectedness of several spheres of influence encompassing individual faculty members, occupational
therapy programs, the institutional setting for such programs, along with state and national spheres including professional organizations. The diagram aids in viewing various kinds of academic and professional behavior at both self-interest and self-welfare levels. At times the self-interest of the individual faculty member or program are complementary, supplementary, or antithetical to the self-welfare of the faculty member or the program. The perspective gained from a liberal education and the freedom to put into perspective an end that is for the common good results in operation at the self-welfare level.

New faculty members and programs must operate primarily in the self-interest level. As programs and faculty members mature, however, the situation should be more balanced with the end result being a mature, promoted, and tenured faculty member believing in his or her responsibility to help younger faculty members grow and develop along the self-interest spectrum so that they too are able to function at the self-welfare level.

Figure 3
External environments/constituencies

The following is an example of self-interest and self-welfare at the program level: The occupational therapy program’s stated goal is to educate entry level practitioners. This self-interest statement is fine, but suppose the program has a capacity of 20 students, and the faculty is only able to recruit 10 students each year. In this day and age, questions about a program at half capacity are raised at the various levels on campus, as well as at state higher education commissions and legislative bodies. Perhaps faculty members on an individual self-interest level have been active in conducting continuing education courses at the state or national level. The self-welfare of the education program and the profession would dictate strategies to keep the program afloat; otherwise, the faculty may find themselves without a job offering continuing education on an individual ad hoc basis. Perhaps one strategy might be to put the outside activities on a programmatic, institutional basis with the appropriate titles to indicate that this is an institutional effort. Having done this throughout the state, perhaps a cadre of occupational therapists might be organized who now think that the program is providing them a valuable service that keeps them up-to-date, and they cannot remain professionally competent without the program offerings. Having made the appropriate connections, the program and the faculty may now have a network of recruiters throughout the state who are happy to do whatever they can to help with program visibility, and student recruitment because they know the program goes, so goes a valuable service they need. Here we are dealing with faculty self-interest and the welfare of the program.

The individual self-interest and group or community focused self-welfare levels are continually involved in therapists’ everyday activities including their professional lives. In fact, the job of a leader of any group having any purpose is to get individual members to par-
ticipate a certain amount at the self-welfare level. Compare the self-interest statement noted by an AOTA president, "I am a psychiatrist," which was made by an occupational therapist, with the self-welfare statement, "I am an occupational therapist, and I limit my practice to patients with psychiatric disorders." The choice of a self-interest or self-welfare statement may have repercussions far beyond what we can imagine. In Indiana, for example, high schools are mandated to provide occupational therapy services to students who have been evaluated and have a documented need. A local school board balked at expenditures to provide these services because the therapist was billed as a sensory integrationist providing sensory integration services. This self-interest statement relates only to the person and what the person does. This statement and the board's reaction to it led to legal proceedings. Perhaps the self-welfare statement, "I am an occupational therapist who specializes in sensory integration," might have precluded the difficulties. Liberal studies develops a perspective that facilitates movement to and from the self-interest and self-welfare level.

This self-interest/self-welfare dichotomy keeps a dean busy. The dean should promote the programmatic and individual faculty self-interest for each education program in the allied health unit, and integrate the appropriate balance and participation of each in the self-welfare activities of the allied health unit designation, which comprises several individual disciplines, each having their own self-interests. A liberal, general education expands the vision and enhances the activities of all in the academe and enables the self-welfare aspect of survival to be attended properly.

The self-interest/self-welfare dichotomy is evident in the AOTA's strategic planning objectives of August 12, 1982, and its environmental impact statement, "Trends and Analysis for Strategic Planning," in June 1982. Obviously, it is in the profession's self-interest to meet demands for staffing that these documents indicate the profession has not been able to do in the past. It is also in the profession's self-interest to expand the length of professional education. However, realizing the constraints of the environment in which the profession now functions, moves in this direction must be tempered until the economy improves, the political climate improves, and the general climate stabilizes. A reflective review of the two documents just mentioned should give added value to the need for a profession that is dedicated to careers, has perspective, and is capable of making interconnections necessary to balancing self-interest and self-welfare properly.

A liberal education moves a person from clinical/professional practice to professional competency. Clinical/professional practice too often is used synonymously with professional competency. Clinical practice narrowly defines. Professional competency goes beyond clinical practice and the skills required for the delivery of health care to individuals, preparation of future practitioners, and the conduct of systematic inquiry. For example, this competency via liberal education meets the needs of the professional for social understanding of sufficient breadth to place the practice and the profession in the context of society. This is necessary for the survival and viability of the profession.

The United States faces deep problems today, and in the years ahead the problems will be more severe. The liberally educated professional must be more creative, more productive, and a better problem solver. This is professional education's forte. The perspective is important: Schools of architecture should be educating professionals to solve building and space problems; schools of allied health should be educating professionals to solve health related problems; and schools of education should be educating professionals to solve technological problems.

Liberal education has been perennially important, but it must be of high quality and more fully integrated in the future for meeting the needs of a more problem-oriented professional arena. I believe health students sense this and feel the need to prepare themselves for tomorrow's problems, which at present include unbundling hospital services and occupational therapy practice settings outside the hospital where therapists do not have all the hospital resources at their fingertips. Today's students are sensing the desirability and need of what the professional organization is attempting to promote, namely, a future focused education that provides professionals with a perspective, standards, courage, political awareness, and a healthy intellectual curiosity. I believe this can be attained only by the proper conjoining of occupational theory, occupational practice, and liberalizing education. This triad will lead students to
professional competency, not merely professional practice, and it will lead faculty to interact more appropriately with their clinical colleagues in health care facilities and their liberal arts colleagues on campus.

**Liberal Arts May Strengthen Occupational Therapy and the Allied Health Position in the Campus Setting**

Spelbring and Teske (10), addressing the predicted effects of changes in higher education on occupational therapy, listed four major items of concern: (a) the diminishing pool of qualified applicants; (b) the different type of student being admitted to occupational therapy programs; (c) the decreased funding for higher education in general; and (d) the institution stance relating to expensive occupational therapy programs, the greying of all faculty, and the lack of innovative approaches to the first three concerns listed.

Changes a and b are topics for another presentation, but items c and d, when viewed from the liberal arts educational component and resources on campus, may provide opportunities to strengthen occupational therapy and other allied health programs in the education setting.

Two volumes in the American Association of Colleges series The Forum for Liberal Education are of interest: Graduate Liberal Studies (11) and Liberal Learning and Professional Program (12). The latter consists of a number of projects undertaken at various colleges and universities by their professional schools and their liberal arts and sciences faculty. The following titles might be instructive because they represent self-welfare initiatives: “Liberal Learning and the Business Students: What Are We Doing, What Should We Be Doing” at Bentley College; “Liberal Learning and Engineering Education” at Princeton University; and “Business and the Humanities” at the University of Kansas.

In the University of Kansas project, the business faculty recognized that the liberal arts faculty has a comparative advantage in teaching certain analytical skills, qualities of mind, and personal orientations that are preconditions for the study of management. They chose as their goal to apply these subjects to basic business topics rather than duplicate them in separate courses. Would it benefit occupational therapy programs to do the same? Decreasing duplication means doing better with what you have and doing more with less. More important, eliminating inappropriate, duplicative teaching might give faculty more time to put previously collected data into final form for publication, to investigate an original idea, or to pursue other creative scholarly endeavors.

Involving liberal arts faculty members in these kinds of endeavors gives them an opportunity to apply their perspective to the world of occupational therapy and our perspective to theirs. The faculty-to-faculty interaction is important on at least two levels: (a) These endeavors may break down the “we/they” situation that exists on many campuses between liberal arts faculty and professional school faculty, they would permit us to learn more about each other, and they would foster closer cooperation between each other as constituents in the campus setting; and (b) Given the nature of occupational therapy and the need for further research and development of theory, research activities can be enhanced with this kind of an educational endeavor. Many liberal arts and sciences departments have research space and equipment, for which we will not see funding in this time of constraint. Fiscal constraints will push us to do more with what we have. Teaming up with colleagues in the liberal arts and sciences on research projects needs to occur for the allied health disciplines. The advantage, I believe, is obvious.

At the student level, having our students with other students, particularly those in many other kinds of nonhealth majors, will be beneficial in populating a work world that knows what occupational therapy is and what occupational therapists do. It is difficult to get occupational therapy students and other allied health students together in a class, but I believe it is in our self-welfare to develop these relationships and activities, and we will be better off doing so, directly, indirectly, now, and in the future. Having our future professionals learn the other perspective and having other future professionals learn about us can do nothing but help us in an environment such as the one we live in today. The spin-off to occupational therapy students becomes obvious when we expose them to a wide array of ethical, legal, political, and economic issues vis-a-vis the AOTA’s environmental impact documents.

The liberal arts appropriately integrated and used in occupational therapy will allow students and professionals to slip outside themselves and view themselves and the profession from the view of others and other disciplines. In
this way, we all learn the importance of interconnections, and real meaning of self-interest and self-welfare, the interrelatedness of what we do, and the fact that we are not isolated from other disciplines and other viewpoints.

In the Kansas experiment, the students were provided with a broader aim of knowledge, business was served by providing them with well-educated managers and executives capable of solving the most difficult problems, and society-at-large was served by bringing into the business world individuals who have an appreciation of the cultural and aesthetic values, in addition to a sound professional education. These general education objectives are what is needed in all the allied health professions, rather than specific career-related goals.

This will be more important in the future as the emphasis in health care changes. We will see the ascendency of health promotion and disease prevention. We will also see the ascendency of gerontology in the health arena. Our local hospitals are flooding the city with flyers and advertisements depicting the unbundling of their services and the emphasis on wellness and fitness, and I believe that occupational therapy and other allied health disciplines need to stake a claim in these two areas and work with all of the appropriate constituencies to take a leadership role in meeting these societal needs. Not to do this is to miss a golden opportunity. Health promotion/disease prevention and gerontology are not disciplines, but multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary endeavors. By working in an integrated and interconnected way with our colleagues in all segments of the academy and in health care settings, we can take the initiative and ensure our survival and viability by being efficient and effective in these areas.

Summary

Occupational therapists need to be critical of who teaches, what is taught, how it is taught, how it is applied, and to whom it is taught in the entire education program of prospective occupational therapists. Further, I recommend that occupational therapy educators on campus take the lead in initiating meetings and discussions that facilitate a functional conjoining of occupational therapy practice, occupational therapy theory, and liberal arts studies.

An initial effort in this regard might be for the three mutually interdependent and equal partners in the education of occupational therapy students to read and discuss Ernest L. Boyer’s work entitled, A Quest for Common Learning—The Aims of General Education (13). I believe that all occupational therapists would benefit from reading this text, individually and collectively, and the profession and our community would benefit. The question is not whether or not this subject should be incorporated into an occupational therapy student’s curriculum. The question for discussion should be at what point in the student’s education—the student’s intellectual growth and development and professionalization—would this topic and this treatment be best applied? Perhaps from this beginning the three partners—practice, theory, and liberal arts—would recognize and respond to their mutually interdependent and equally important role and responsibility in the design and implementation of the entire occupational therapy educational program, which is future responsive and ensures the highest probability that graduates will be professionally competent.

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REFERENCES

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