The Value of Postprofessional Education

This commentary is in response to Dickerson and Wittman’s article “Perceptions of Occupational Therapists Regarding Postprofessional Education” (AJOT, September/October 1999, 454-458). We are currently in the process of completing our master’s degree in occupational therapy via San Jose State University’s on line program. Our class represents 20 occupational therapists with diverse backgrounds employed in a variety of settings. Geographically, we span the country from the east coast to the west coast.

We were disheartened to read the authors’ results of the study they conducted to ascertain occupational therapists’ perceptions on postprofessional education. The surprising results of 314 OTRs indicated that 78% had no interest in continuing their academic education, and if they did decide to go back to school, 41% indicated that it would be for a degree in another field. We find the perceptions of respondents in the study who feel that a postprofessional degree in occupational therapy would not advance their careers or be of any worth to them to be very disturbing. In the article, the authors state that the findings suggest that undergraduate educators have not educated students about the difference between postprofessional and undergraduate education in occupational therapy and its crucial importance for the advancement of the profession” (Dickerson & Wittman, 1999, p. 456).

We feel fortunate not to be of the mindset of the majority of the respondents in this particular study. Based on our discussions with one another, we are confident that we can inspire other therapists who are entertaining the idea of returning to school to earn a master’s degree in occupational therapy.

The majority of us feel that it is professionally limiting to have lower academic requirements than physical therapists, speech pathologists, and social workers; therefore, we decided to return to school. Initially, many of us considered obtaining a master’s degree in a field other than occupational therapy. Reasons for these considerations included lack of an occupational therapy program that was in proximity and potential opportunities for enhancing our skills in such areas as business, education, and administration.

Opportunely, San Jose State University offers a master’s level distance learning program, which started in the fall of 1999. We chose to pursue a master’s degree in occupational therapy for intellectual challenge, ability to improve our theory and practice applications, opportunities to pursue teaching, personal satisfaction, and renewed interest in providing the best and most up-to-date services for the people we serve. In addition, we have the opportunity to network with occupational therapists from all over the United States. We feel that this master’s program offers the kind of growth that one cannot obtain at seminars, conferences, or through available literature.

A master’s degree in occupational therapy brings one back to the original “roots” of the 1900s and takes us through to where we are now—the millennium. We are making an investment into our individual futures and the future of the profession. In addition, this year AOTA decided that the profession will advance to an entry-level post baccalaureate degree within a few years. We strongly encourage our colleagues to consider pursuing a master’s degree in occupational therapy.

For more information regarding the distance learning master’s degree for occupational therapy at San Jose State University call (408) 924-3070 or gvbarton@email.sjsu.edu.

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Authors’ Response

We can only agree wholeheartedly with the seven post-professional master’s students from San Jose State University. As authors of the study, we too were disheartened by the results and realization that such a small percentage of occupational therapists are interested in pursuing further education in occupational therapy. So while we applaud these and all other students who are currently enrolled in graduate occupational therapy programs, we also stand by our results which are confirmed by poor enrollments in many of the post-professional programs across the country. On the positive side, distance education was not addressed in this study; it is our hope that distance education will create educational opportunities for those therapists for whom proximity to a program, work, or family is an issue. However, our results indicate that the major reason for not pursuing a graduate degree is therapists not wanting to return to intensive course work and the perception that a graduate degree will not help advance their career (Dickerson & Wittman, 1999).

Distance education will not help advance their career (Dickerson & Wittman, 1999).