Letter to the Editor

A Curricular Renaissance: Related to Practice?

I was impressed by the volume of work accomplished by members of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) faculty as described in their article “A Curricular Renaissance: Graduate Education Centered on Occupation” (AJOT, 54[6], 586–597). Our academic programs must reflect the current state of the theoretical “roots” of occupational therapy in order to graduate clinicians of the future who will be able to fill traditional as well as nontraditional roles. Our graduates must possess a strong grounding in what their profession is and can be as well as what it has been. I am concerned that the changing theoretical foundations of occupational therapy are presented in academic programs, such as UNC-CH’s, but not at the expense of emphasis on the essentials of occupational therapy practice.

In the physical disabilities setting in which I work, how to take a client’s blood pressure, understand readings on a pulse oximeter, measure joint range of motion, and perform a joint mobilization are all essential tasks performed in conjunction with functional activities that are relevant to the client’s anticipated life roles. These are among the critical activities for occupational therapists in traditional venues in today’s workplace. Discarding the teaching and emphasis on performance components, as the authors suggest the UNC-CH program has done with only a few citations, should not be done until we have fully researched the bearing that specific performance components have on specific skills. If the assumption is that students will learn and process requisite clinical skills and assessment of performance components independently, then we must be sure that they are doing so. Personally, many of the Level II students I have supervised need skill review upon beginning internship, something that supervisors in today’s demanding workplace have little time for. The Level II interns with whom I work often say that they do not understand why they spend so much time in school learning all the “theory” behind occupational therapy in their academic programs. (Although, admittedly, I have yet to have a UNC-CH intern, and master’s-level interns are unfortunately still in the minority where I work.) Academic and clinical educators must work together to emphasize the correlations between the two for both students and peers, especially given the multiple challenges in today’s workplace that are equally as important.

In addition to teaching, academics must devote their time to clinical research as well as to the theoretical raison d’être of occupational therapy and its application. Both academic and clinical researchers are responsible for providing the evidence on which to base the practice of our profession. We must research and teach practices that presently are in use by clinicians. I would challenge the UNC-CH faculty, now in possession of a revamped curriculum on which to base some wonderful research, to advance the state of evidence-based practice, the critical state of which was elucidated so well by Margo Holm, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, ARDA, in her Eleanor Clarke Slagle lecture on the same issue.

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Authors’ Response

The core concern raised by Wendy Avery-Smith regarding the graduate curriculum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) strikes us as this: that innovations in education not come at the cost of ill-preparing graduates to work within traditional settings. Ms. Avery-Smith uses her own experiences in a physical disabilities setting to convey this concern as it relates both to preserving the “essentials of occupational therapy practice” and to working with students on fieldwork. Moreover, in expressing her concern, it is clear that Ms. Avery-Smith also values close communication between clinical and academic educators, wishes to promote practices that reflect sound theory and evidence, and endorses the need for today’s educators to produce graduates capable of filling both traditional and nontraditional roles. We fully endorse all of these ideals.

So why the concern? It seems to us that, despite strongly shared visions, Ms. Avery-Smith’s worries lie in the details of three issues: (a) teaching of “components,” (b) teaching of clinical skills, and (c) our faculty’s commitment to clinically useful research.

With respect to the first issue, Ms. Avery-Smith misconstrued our curriculum in her conclusion that content about components had been discarded. It seems too that she believes that greater quantity of academic content on components directly leads to superior clinical practices; given our understandings of current theory and research in occupational therapy, as well as best educational practices, we would not agree. Rather, we think that what is most conducive to clinical excellence is not quantity of content, per se, but how students are taught to think about components. Today’s graduates must be able to evaluate the constantly varying and contextually dependent linkages, or their absences, among components residing “inside” a person and that person’s capacities to perform desired activities, participate in the social arena, and experience a decent quality of life. Our teaching of components is directed toward progressive development of this very sophisticated skill.

With respect to the second issue, we disagree with Ms. Avery-Smith that clinical supervisors should not be expected to engage students in “skill review.” Furthermore, though we appreciate the difficulties that supervisors often encounter managing their practices and their students simultaneously, we do not think that workplace demands ethically justify this expectation. It is during fieldwork, after all, that students have their first opportunities to review, practice, and refine skills appropriate to specific settings and, of course, with “real” people in “real” situations—circumstances that cannot be provided with sufficient regularity in the classroom. Concurrently, we strongly believe that when academic and clinical educators develop collaborative partnerships, not only students stand the most to gain, but also, and most impor-