In the final decade of the 20th century, occupational therapy faces one of its greatest challenges: What is our appropriate role and status within the academic environment? The way in which we respond to that challenge has far-reaching implications for our profession and its future. Yet many occupational therapists, focused on their day-to-day practice, are only vaguely aware that something is going on in universities affecting their profession. Events in the ivory tower seem remote from “important” issues such as reimbursement, personnel needs, and the adequacy of the department’s budget. Most of us stop thinking about our schools once we enter the exciting and demanding world of clinical reality.

My view of the academic world comes from the perspective of one who has been a clinician, a professor, and department chair at a major research university. However, I am foremost an occupational therapist who believes deeply in what our profession has to offer and who wants us to be empowered to offer it.

Assumptions

I need to make some of my assumptions explicit. First, if occupational therapy fails to survive and prosper in our best universities, not only our profession but also society as a whole will suffer. Second, occupational therapy is based on such an important idea—occupation—that it will certainly be resurrected by some other discipline should it disappear. This new discipline, however, might lack our humanistic values and service orientation. Third, the importance of the contribution of academic programs to the vitality and strength of a field, including its practice, is not well understood in occupational therapy because most of us have not been socialized to understand it. Our clinical and academic worlds in some respects represent cultures with conflicting ideologies. Fourth, many of the issues that frustrate and discourage the achievement of our potential have their roots in our academic status, but we often search elsewhere for short-term fixes. Fifth, as is true of the rest of society, the academic milieu operates on two levels simultaneously—the conceptual level of ideas and the political level of personalities, power, and money. I shall address both levels. Finally, in 1991, we are at a critical point in our growth as a discipline, because our ideas are just beginning to achieve the stage of development that could bring occupational therapy recognition as a vital area of inquiry. These ideas are in their infancy, and we need to nurture them to maturity.

Academic Scenarios

Below are some examples of what is going on in academia:

• A new dean is appointed to an academic unit that includes a department of occupational therapy. He needs additional space to expand his favorite research programs. A few weeks later, the department chair receives a letter informing her that the occupational therapy department must find another home or it will be closed.

• A provost wants to consolidate the university so that its resources can be used to enhance its finest programs. He establishes a blue-ribbon committee to decide which programs should be eliminated. The entire school of allied health, including occupational therapy, is eliminated. The committee reports that faculty members have not been productive as scholars, that the entry-level degree for practice is the baccalaureate, and that the major objective of the curriculum is the preparation of practitioners.

• A major research university conducts a survey of other research universities to find out how many have occupational therapy departments. It is found that only a few of the surveyed schools have

Elizabeth J. Yerxa, PhD, LHO (Hon.), OTR, FAOTA, is Distinguished Professor Emerita, Department of Occupational Therapy, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California. (Mailing address: Route 1, 195 Columbine, Bishop, California 93514)
Internal Issues

The model of an integrated profession, which involves practice, ideas, research, and education, enables us to visualize how other disciplines, such as psychology or anthropology, function as a whole. Beginning with practice, or the real world, the questions and puzzles of the discipline arise, which are relevant to its overall goals. For example, a major question emanating from occupational therapy practice is, “How can we reduce incapacity and develop the capacity of people to engage in their activities of daily living?” Such questions guide scholarly detective work, which defines the relevant disciplines from which our ideas and knowledge, compatible with our ethics and philosophy, will be generated. This brings us to knowledge and ideas as a second component of an integrated discipline, that is, the theories and frames of reference that address the puzzles. A third facet is research, by which our knowledge and ideas are tested, refined, rejected, or elaborated. The fourth component is education, which transmits the tools of knowledge and new ideas to the next generation of occupational therapists and to practice. Let us remember that students enrolled in our schools today will still be practicing in the year 2050.

For most disciplines, the three components of new ideas, research, and education are primarily contributed by their academic programs. Faculty members and graduate students do the detective work, generate and test ideas, and transmit these ideas to the world through publications and the education of other scholars and practitioners. In this way, the discipline becomes known, advances, and is continually refreshed by new ways of thinking. Students in the discipline have contact throughout their education with faculty members who serve as role models and who teach them the importance of ideas. Students enroll in a particular school because they want to study with a specific faculty mentor.

Although a great deal of growth is occurring, the model of an integrated discipline is not well developed in occupational therapy. As practical, action-oriented people, we tend to view practice as the totality. Academic faculty members may be perceived as second-class clinicians with the unenviable job of training students to become occupational therapists who can emulate any technique they encounter in practice. The approaches used might range from computer technology or range of motion to group process or neurodevelopmental therapy (see Hopkins & Smith, 1988, for evidence of the range of techniques). The curriculum, rather than transmitting new ideas and tools of thought, continues to add more and more content, much of it incompatible. The students, feeling overwhelmed, seek relief when they enter practice through means of oversimplification and reductionism, some with a profound sense of loss and disillusionment. Our best and brightest students might decide to leave the profession and instead become psychologists or physicians. Students who might have become our next leaders, akin to Mary Reilly or Jean Ayres, never enroll at all because they do not see a future in occupational therapy, which they perceive as a technical field that requires study only at the baccalaureate level. When technique is valued over ideas, intelligent people look elsewhere.

Thus, what we have rather than an integrated discipline is practice and education linked in a closed loop, that is, a short circuit robbing occupational therapy of the power needed to do our best for patients. We lack the detective work, freshness, and inspiration that in other disciplines arise from academia. Just as short circuits blow fuses, practitioners who look for better techniques rather than better ideas become frustrated when occupational therapy is not valued in the health care system. Educators who try to prepare students for an increasingly diverse mosaic of practice become increasingly discouraged because occupational therapy is not well understood nor appreciated in the academic environment. Patients suffer because occupational therapy is too limited to address their major life issues of survival and adaptation. Internally, then, occupational therapy has not yet achieved its potential as an integrated discipline.

External Issues

What is going on in academia? Occupational therapists know that patients must develop the skills and knowledge to adapt to the challenges of their environments. What skills and knowledge do our faculty members need in order to survive and prosper in the academic environment? As Harry Truman said, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” In 1991, a great deal of heat is being generated in universities, both conceptual and political.

Conceptual Issues

Occupational therapy cannot adapt to the challenges of the academic environment unless its educators and practitioners understand and observe the appropriate rules of what constitutes an academic discipline. An academic discipline has the following characteristics:

1. It makes a legitimate contribution to the universe of knowledge (i.e., the university).
2. It provides a substantive foundation for a research program.
3. It represents an area of inquiry worthy of serious study.
4. The directions of its inquiry are freely chosen, not constrained by preconceived outcomes.
5. Its sphere of inquiry cannot be reduced to or explained by any other discipline.
6. Its curriculum is founded on liberal arts at the baccalaureate level and on disciplinary knowledge at the graduate level.
7. Its faculty members are scholars who have pursued a doctoral degree in the discipline.

How does occupational therapy stack up against these criteria? Currently, our academic programs contribute minimally to the universe of knowledge. Rather than looking to our academic programs for ideas, occupational therapists are more likely to convene professional symposia attempting to arrive at truth by consensus. Many academic programs lack a substantive research plan, focus on applied rather than basic knowledge, and fail to communicate their sphere of inquiry through an integrated, independent curriculum that establishes its own criteria for relevance. The curriculum leads to a so-called “professional” degree at the baccalaureate level with little agreement on the appropriate contribution of graduate education. (The word professional is a synonym for technical in most universities.) Our faculty members possess a variety of degrees ranging from baccalaureate to master’s to doctoral, many of which are in applied fields such as education or allied health.

Academic programs that do not meet the criteria for an academic discipline are endangered species, especially in the great research universities of the 1990s. They will also be endangered in the state-funded universities of the 21st century as these institutions also strive for academic excellence (Austin, 1986). The goal of preparing students for practice will no longer be acceptable to any university.

Mosey (1989) argued that occupational therapy faculty members should not spend their time developing theory or basic knowledge. I believe, however, that occupational therapy academic programs urgently need to meet the criteria for an academic discipline in order to survive and prosper in the university and to provide practice with fresh ideas. Our faculty members must contribute basic knowledge to the university. Other disciplines cannot or will not provide the unique synthesis of knowledge required to understand occupation. Other disciplines are too specialized, reductionistic, and positivistic in their thinking to address such complexity in the humanistic spirit of occupational therapy. No other discipline exists today that can explain occupation, an area of inquiry of the greatest significance to the university, to human life, and to the major social challenge of the 21st century—chronic disability (Yerxa et al., 1989). Academic programs in occupational therapy can become legitimate contributors to an academic discipline concerned with occupation, but this will take great energy and commitment.

In summary, in 1991, academic programs of occupational therapy are endangered species in major research universities because they do not meet the criteria for an academic discipline. Almost all occupational therapy programs will be endangered in the 21st century unless we understand the rules of the academic environment and develop the skills to achieve its standards.

Political Conditions

It is a truism that status in an organization can be predicted according to the location of one’s parking space. Other equally revealing indicators are the amount of space a program occupies, the control it exercises over that space, and its ambience. In most university settings, occupational therapy is lacking in these indicators.

Deans and vice presidents of universities evaluate enrollment statistics as sources of revenue. Occupational therapy departments with decreasing numbers of students are vulnerable to budget cuts, which can mitigate the department’s ability to meet academic standards through decreased faculty time and energy and increased teaching and administrative loads. This leaves minimal time for reflection and scholarship. The teaching of practice techniques within an unorganized, fragmented curriculum is extremely time-consuming. Thus, a vicious downward cycle is generated. The occupational therapy program cannot meet academic standards, which, in turn, decreases its security and attractiveness to good students, which further decreases enrollment. We should note that other departments considered by university leaders to be essential to the university, for example, sociology or the performing arts, do not have to respond to such enrollment pressures. Thus, economics can be a rationalization justifying the demise of a program when the real reasons are status, power, and visibility.

Most universities, despite their liberal studies and erudite faculty, are essentially male-oriented institutions. For example, 80% of my university’s faculty are men, and most of the powerful positions are held by men. In contrast, the majority of occupational therapy faculty members in the United States are women, which reflects the demographics of the profession. Although it is not often openly discussed, this situation affects the political power and influence of many occupational therapy departments. We have to try harder to have our needs recognized or even taken seriously. Sometimes a powerful male advocate such as a dean provides protection and support. This may be a tenuous solution, however, because the department is then vulnerable if its protector leaves or develops other priorities.

Politics also requires an examination of alliances. In international relations, power may be increased through the establishment of communities like the European Common Market, which possesses greater strength than individuals could generate. Similarly, academic programs may strengthen their power with alliances. What kinds of alliances do academic occupational therapy departments have and how much strength do they create? Many occupational therapy departments are affiliated with schools of allied health. Such groupings are conceptually irrational—They are the result of a government decision led by medicine in the 1930s (Yerxa & Baum, 1986). Programs such as medical records or laboratory technology have little in common with occupational therapy; consider the failures in attempts to create a core curriculum for such schools. More importantly, because most of these programs are applied technical fields, they fall far short of meeting the standards for an academic discipline. Occupational therapy is much more advanced in its knowledge and venerable in its traditions than most allied health programs.

Groupings with physical therapy are also irrational, because our knowl-
Knowledge emanates from the biological and social sciences and humanities, whereas theirs is rooted in physical or natural science. Alliances with physical therapy often confuse other faculty members. The similarity in names makes it more difficult to distinguish between the two disciplines, which are really so different. Physical therapy is also struggling to find its place within the university.

Alliances with education do not strengthen our academic programs. Education lacks recognition as an academic discipline and often serves as a punching bag for university presidents who like to demonstrate their high academic standards by lashing out at or eliminating schools of education.

Alliances with medicine are a double-edged scalpel. We might gain in resources but lose in autonomy, because medicine often does not understand the complexity of occupational therapy and tends to group us with paramedical services. In summary, many of our current alliances do not empower occupational therapy in the academic milieu. Our power is often reduced through illogical association, confusion, and oversimplification.

A significant political reality of academic life is the ability to attract outside funding, specifically, research grants. Faculty members who attract a lot of money enjoy the highest status. Not only is their scholarship recognized by their peers, but also, their research grants generate a bonanza of overhead dollars. Universities may receive 60% to 80% of the research grant budget as overhead, a substantial contribution.

Deans and vice presidents often use these dollars as a major source of discretionary funding. Research universities publish their rankings in relation to amounts of research dollars generated from outside funding because these rankings are viewed as a major indicator of their excellence in research.

How well did our 66 academic programs do in generating research funding in 1989? Although some were successful in obtaining outside support, 87% of such funding came from training grants. These grants are valuable to the individual department, but they do not convey scholarly prestige or produce the overhead dollars that research grants do. Training grants may actually cost the university money, because overhead is limited to only 8% of the budget. Only $392,000 was generated nationally for research funding for occupational therapy, and most of this went to one program for research traineeships (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1989). In other disciplines, a single faculty member may generate more research funding than all of the outside funding generated by all occupational therapy faculty members in 1989.

Because a university is a social institution, a final political question deals with people and their relationships. With whom do faculty members associate? In what other programs do they teach? What committees do they chair? With whom do they do collaborative research? With whom do they have lunch at the faculty club? Faculty members contribute to the visibility and prestige of the occupational therapy program and its ideas through their participation in such time-consuming but essential social interactions. A quick assessment of an occupational therapy program's strength can be based on the number of joint appointments (i.e., appointments funded by two departments) of its faculty along with the accessibility of the occupational therapy department chair to the offices of the deans, provosts, and presidents. These interrelationships increase the understanding and valuing of the academic program and make it an essential component of the university.

To mature as an academic discipline requires that occupational therapy faculty members understand and participate in the political and economic dimensions of university life, find empowering alliances, contribute to the scholarly and economic well-being of the university, and integrate each faculty member into the fabric of the university's tapestry so that each is viewed as essential to the total pattern.

Proposals for Securing Occupational Therapy's Place in Academia

What strategies can be proposed to secure the place of occupational therapy programs in the academic environment? Our profession needs to take the necessary steps to strengthen our academic programs so that they can contribute to the evolution of occupational therapy as an integrated discipline (i.e., internally) and to the universe of knowledge that constitutes the university (i.e., externally).

Internal Issues

To contribute ideas, research, and future-oriented education to an integrated profession, changes in several areas will be needed, as described below.

Faculty. Faculty members will need to be qualified as scholars, the primary criterion of which is the attainment of a doctoral degree, most appropriately in the discipline itself. We must identify and support our best thinkers and provide doctoral programs in our discipline. Considering the shortage of qualified faculty, some have suggested that we import persons with doctoral degrees from other disciplines to serve as faculty members. This is a good approach if we require these imported faculty members to become certified as occupational therapists so that they are endowed with our unique perspective on occupation and are socialized in our humanistic values. This is particularly important at this stage of our development. It is easy to misunderstand and misinterpret occupational therapy or, worse, to reduce it to another science, such as behaviorism or neuroscience. Our faculty members, all of whom have been socialized as occupational therapists and who have scholarly degrees, will develop their own research programs in an aspect of occupation that commands their interest.

Curriculum. The curriculum for entry-level programs needs to be conceptual, future oriented, and organized. Its concepts need to be identifiable, relevant, and consistent with our ethics and view of the person. Students need to be at home with ideas, intrigued by our issues, and eager to do the lifelong detective work necessary to understand occupation.

Research. The research performed by our faculty and graduate students needs to be related to the needs of practice to understand human capacity, adaptation, and competence development as well as to the needs of society. Research must welcome complexity and ensure that our methods of knowing are scholarly, appropriate to our problems, and humane. Our contribution as an academic discipline can be to further...
the university's understanding of occupation and how it relates to health.

**Course of study** The course of study needs to be organized as an academic sequence that is an open, multi-leveled system or continuum. Bachelor's-level students will obtain the broad perspective and ethical foundation generated by a liberal arts education. Master's-level students will learn what we know well in order to practice. The master's curriculum will be organized into a conceptual framework and will plant the seeds of scholarship. The doctoral level of study will focus on and nurture new ideas regarding occupation and the development of the rules, habits, and skills of scholarship for our discipline.

All occupational therapists will need to view academic programs in a new way. To do so, all available means of communication must be used to demonstrate the significance of an academic discipline of occupational therapy to the growth and recognition of the occupational therapy profession in the world. We will need to construct new bridges between our practitioners and our academicians, emphasizing the significance of the contribution of academic faculty and graduate students to the problems and frustrations confronting practitioners. We will need to hold national conferences, where representatives from both groups can confront these issues and take them to the grass roots. Perhaps the model of an integrated discipline will provide a starting point for this dialogue. Once our academic faculty have matured into their appropriate roles as scholars, occupational therapy students will be socialized during their education to understand and appreciate the contributions of academic programs to the quality of practice and the generation of ideas.

**Terminology** I believe that we should drop the word *professional* from our academic programs and substitute the word *academic.* In the parlance of the university, the word *professional* is often synonymous with the word technical, which implies a program that does not belong in a university. If our programs belong in the university, they should be called *academic,* which conveys the idea of learning and scholarship.

**Summary** The occupational therapy profession has some particular qualities that add to our intraprofessional challenges. Our knowledge base is interdisciplinary and pluralistic in a specialized world; occupation is complex, involving multiple levels of the living human system in interaction with an array of environments, as opposed to the popular American scientific model of reductionism. Our research deals with multifaceted and ethical issues, in comparison to the simplification required for experimental method, and although we often practice in medical settings, we are complementary to, rather than isomorphic with, medicine. Although these facts mean that we have to work more diligently to be understood, they should not be used as an argument to relieve us of having to meet academic standards by considering our programs as exceptions. We are excitingly, refreshingly, and creatively different. We can and should affect the world of ideas, providing that we understand its rules and support its standards by striving for quality scholarship within our own programs.

**External Issues**

First, we need to obtain additional funding to support doctoral-level education for potential faculty members. I could not have gone to graduate school had it not been for a Vocational Rehabilitation Administration traineeship administered through AOTA (1966–1971). AOTA and the American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) together need to seek government and private resources for scholarships. Our scholars can help cast light on a major social issue of the 21st century, that is, ways by which to enhance the quality of living, participation, and productivity of persons with chronic conditions in a complex, technologically advanced society.

AOTA and AOTF could, through our contacts in high places, lobby for funding specifically designated for research in occupational therapy. The issues of independence, self-directedness, and health through occupation are major societal issues worldwide. We need greater support, both financial and conceptual, to establish new doctoral-degree programs in the science of occupation or related conceptual frameworks so that new communities of scholars can contribute to the maturation of our academic discipline. We need not be discouraged that we have so few of these programs today. The development of the academic discipline of psychology was largely the result of one scholar's (Wundt's) work at a single university (Gardner, 1985). The work that is being done in our new doctoral-degree programs needs to be disseminated not only through publication but through informal communication with the faculty of each of our academic programs. Academic councils and policymakers in graduate schools who approve the initiation of new doctoral-degree programs want to know who the leading scholars are, what these scholars are thinking, and what journals are devoted to their work, both nationally and internationally. We must be prepared to answer these questions.

In undertaking the serious business of making our departments indispensable to the university, we could use the experience of other disciplines as models, for example, sociology, anthropology, or evolutionary biology. We can profit from their successes and their mistakes. This leads to the question of alliances that empower us. Because our science is founded in the biological and social sciences and balanced by the humanities and arts, we may create mutually beneficial alliances with these disciplines, all of which have a long academic tradition. My experience has been most positive with social anthropology, psychology, political science, public administration, and evolutionary biology. Such departments offer potential for collaborative research and joint faculty appointments, thereby integrating occupational therapy faculty members into the fabric of university life.

Finally, our entire profession needs to gain a better understanding of the real challenges of the academic world, including its standards and its politics. We need to educate our new faculty members to the rules of this world and support their development as scholarly insiders who know their way around both the tenure track and the faculty club. We need a new appreciation of how important these faculty members are to the future of our profession and our ability to serve humankind. We then need to value their time and energy so that they can be used appropriately to develop ideas, test them in research,
and transmit new ways of thinking to future generations.

Benefits

The process of maturing as an academic discipline will require courage, effort, and the establishment of fresh priorities. What benefits can we expect from such a monumental investment?

First, occupational therapy will be removed from the endangered species list of academia. Our position within the university as an academic discipline will be secure. It will be as unthinkable for a major university to lack a department of occupational therapy as to lack one in physics or the performing arts.

Second, because of our integration into the total fabric of university life, occupational therapy will contribute to and benefit from the universe of knowledge within the university. Fresh ideas will continue to flow into practice, and research and scholarship will feed into occupational therapy education so that graduate-level students will have better tools of thought to face the complexities of both occupation and life in the 21st century.

Third, our discipline will contribute a much-needed understanding of human capacity and the relationship between occupation and health to society as a whole. In so doing, the public will gain a new understanding of and respect for our discipline. Occupational therapy will become a household word that is understood and appreciated.

Fourth, with new knowledge and understanding will come an improved ability to serve patients and to better help them prepare to live in a complex world, thereby enabling all people to better organize their lives and achieve satisfaction in daily living through their own efforts.

Finally, occupational therapy will have become both an academic discipline and an integrated one. It will meet its potential contribution to humanity first through practice, then through academic discourse, and then through the research and scholarship done by our best thinkers. The education offered will be coherent, relevant, and future-oriented. As a thinking, action-oriented, humanistic profession dealing with the incredible complexity of the occupational human being, occupational therapy will offer new, exciting career opportunities to the most promising students.

Conclusion

Occupational therapy is a great idea whose time has come if we can nurture its growth and maturation. It offers the promise of a better life for our patients, a much-needed scholarly contribution to the university, and insight into one of our greatest societal dilemmas: the quality of life for persons with chronic disease and disability. Our profession will achieve its rich potential by taking the necessary steps to become an integrated discipline. By so doing, we shall ensure our proper place in both the discourse of ideas and the real world of our patients and their environments.

References


Coming in September:
- Ethics across the occupational therapy curriculum
- Self-esteem of persons with cerebral palsy
- Pragmatic learning and media courses
- Motor function and activities of daily living assessments
- Occupational therapy in geriatric mental health

Turn to AJOT for the latest information on occupational therapy treatment modalities, aids and equipment, legal and social issues, education, and research.