



Resources for students  
from The American  
Occupational Therapy Association

# Your career in Occupational Therapy

## Why I Chose Occupational Therapy

### Current Students Share What Attracted Them to the Profession

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#### ■ Finding “a perfect fit” in health care

Melanie Barber, Occupational Therapy Student

*Columbia University, New York, New York*

When I was 16, my grandfather suffered a severe stroke and was sent to a rehabilitation center. At that time I had never heard of a profession called occupational therapy. Upon visiting my grandfather, I witnessed several health care professionals working to rehabilitate him. I have always wanted to pursue a profession in which I could help people, and I thought physical therapy would best complement my natural abilities. But then I met the occupational therapist. To this day I don't remember her name, but as I watched her work with my grandfather I realized that I had found what I was looking for. What I found was that occupational therapy addressed the vital importance of people's psychological and emotional well-being, as well as their physical needs. I was a psychology major in college, and I wanted to continue to use this knowledge. I wanted to be in a health care profession where I could spend quality time with my patients, and help them to improve their quality of life in all aspects. Occupational therapy was a perfect fit. I have found that occupational therapy is one of the most holistic health care professions, and I am proud to have chosen this as my career path. It is a profession that requires sensitivity, understanding, and compassion; all of the characteristics that I value tremendously. Occupational therapy is a career that is certain to contribute much to society and bring enormous self-fulfillment. A quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson expresses this perfectly: “To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived; this is to have succeeded.”

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## ■ Bridging education and medicine

### Brandi Buchanan, Occupational Therapy Student

*University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California*

Although my first desired occupation was to become a librarian, I was quite young when I changed my mind and realized that I really wanted to be a teacher. And with a mother working in the medical field, I was also fascinated by medicine and opportunities to help others achieve optimum health. So through my mom, who was familiar with the profession of occupational therapy, I found a career that bridged education with medicine; a profession that could teach and educate others about the body as well as how to achieve health and wellness.

While completing several hundred volunteer hours in a variety of occupational therapy settings, including a leprosy hospital in South America, I came to the realization that becoming an occupational therapist was my calling.

Now, while nearing the completion of my clinical occupational therapy doctorate (OTD) in public policy and advocacy, and also working in a private pediatric clinic, the most difficult part of becoming a practicing occupational therapist is deciding which of the many avenues of occupational therapy that I want to pursue. I have already found the profession of occupational therapy to be fascinating, rewarding, and challenging, and filled with countless opportunities to serve one's community, one's country, and one's world.

## ■ Finding a path to a career along a friend's path to recovery

### Erin Cokeh, Occupational Therapy Student

*University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California*

It seemed like any other regular day. I had come home from my part-time job as a physical therapist aide, and my teenage sister, Evadne, just came home from school. The phone rang, and I answered it. "Hello?" I said. The voice on the other side seemed to be a mixture of emotions—frightened, scared, disturbed. It was our next door neighbor, who went to the same high school as my sister. "Jennifer was hit by a car after school. We don't know if she's even alive. I just saw it happen and the ambulance took her away." Jennifer was Evadne's best friend, and a girl that I had been mentoring throughout her high school years. They were just about to finish their junior year. Because I am 5 years older than them, they often came to me for advice for just about everything. And now, Jennifer's life was held by just a string of hope.

Jennifer had been an honors student, pushed hard by her parents who wanted only the best for her. She was also a talented dancer who had taken classes since she was very young, and in high school, she was teaching younger children at a local dance studio. As I looked at her from the window of the intensive care unit, it was hard to believe that it was the same girl, now fighting for her life. Jennifer was in a very deep coma, and no one knew if she would ever come out of it. Her parents, relatives, and friends took turns around the clock, keeping watch over her in case she woke up. It was a miracle that she survived the accident at all; she had been walking across the street after school when a car did not stop for her at the crosswalk. At the impact Jennifer bounced off the windshield head first, but instead of landing on her head she landed on her backpack, which helped cushion her fall. Her hit to the head was from the secondary impact. Her parents had always wanted her to go to a good college and get a good job. Now, all they wanted for her was to survive and, if possible, have a normal life.

As an answer to many prayers, Jennifer woke up. She could barely talk or move because of an upper motor neuron injury as a result of her hitting her head against the pavement. Due to her brain surgery, the surgeons had to shave a portion of her long hair. What really impressed me was her family's determination for Jennifer to have as normal a life as possible, even if it meant bringing her trendy clothes for her to wear in the hospital, fixing her hair to make it look as though it was not shaved, and painting her fingernails, things that she would typically do before her accident.

I visited Jennifer often at the Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, and watched as the occupational therapist worked with her. They did such fun things to help her regain her motor skills, such as baking cookies, trying to walk her dog, who came to visit her at the hospital one day—things that she enjoyed. Working as a physical therapist's aide, I noticed a vast difference in motivation between the patients who had only physical therapy, who rarely did their exercises when told, and Jennifer, who enjoyed the activities that the occupational therapist planned for her. And Jennifer got better. Slowly, she regained her ability to walk and move in a functional way—initially not as well as she used to, but she was able to get around.

At this point in time, I had to be out of the country for 6 months, and when I came back Jennifer was walking normally again, and had started her senior year of high school. Despite all of this she was able to get into the University of California, Irvine, and is currently a full-time college student there. Her occupational therapist still guides her in activities that she keeps active in, and

dancing, an occupation that she had before she was injured, was a major part of her therapy and rehabilitation. It was something that she was motivated to do, and it helped her look forward to experimenting with different ways that she could move.

Seeing Jennifer go through this whole process, as painful as it was for herself and her family, made me more aware of how the role of an occupational therapist could be so important in one's life. Yes, Jennifer could not have survived the accident without the help of brain surgeons and good doctors, but it was the occupational therapist who helped her have a higher quality of life than anyone ever hoped for—one that is meaningful to her. This inspires me to know that I can make a difference in the lives of others, simply by caring for my patients and being aware of their needs and what is meaningful for them in their own lives.

### ■ Creativity, imagination, and “puzzle solving”

**Stacy Landau, Occupational Therapy Student**

*Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York*

I always knew that I wanted to have a career in a health-related profession, because I was extremely interested in medicine and I wanted to work in a profession that would enable me to work with other people on a daily basis. I decided to become an occupational therapist because I wanted to help people, and that is exactly what occupational therapists do: they assist people in becoming independent.

The profession of occupational therapy appealed to me because occupational therapists can work with clients of all ages and they can work in numerous settings, such as hospitals, schools, or private clinics. Occupational therapy also interested me because occupational therapists have the opportunity to be creative and imaginative in catering their therapeutic interventions to specific clients. I like to think of occupational therapists as puzzle solvers, because they assist clients in solving how to complete tasks that they may or may not have been able to do in the past.

My experiences in the field of occupational therapy, which include my education, fieldwork, and being an active member of the American Occupational Therapy Association, have been extremely rewarding, challenging, and enlightening, and I would definitely recommend the profession to anyone.

### ■ Direct involvement offers many rewards

**Chrisha McGann, Occupational Therapy Student**

*University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center,  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

I have always been attracted to the field of occupational therapy by the wide range of opportunities it encompasses. Through my work experience with adults with developmental disabilities, I have seen that occupational therapists can improve an individual's standard of living and allow one a greater level of independence and self worth. I have also seen and been a part of occupational therapists working with children with developmental disabilities by improving strength and functioning to achieve developmental milestones and their ability to just be kids. At the same time, the therapists are teaching parents ways to enhance their child's development and supporting them in their child's occupations.

Occupational therapy can also teach a person ways of adapting and being as independent as possible after a stroke, spinal cord injury, or traumatic brain injury, to name a few medical problems. In addition, I have seen persons with mental health issues and ineffective coping skills find the help they need through occupational therapy. Occupational therapy is a field that will allow me to help others learn how to help themselves through meaningful work and activity.

I like the direct involvement occupational therapists have with their clients, and I know that occupational therapy will offer me challenging and fulfilling work on a daily basis and throughout my career.

### ■ Therapy (and a career) with a difference

**Lisa Griggs-Stapleton, Occupational Therapy Student**

*University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico*

While investigating careers in health care, I asked to observe an occupational therapy session. I was sold. I left the clinic thinking, “People get to have *fun* in therapy?!” The session wasn't like any other health care I had seen. I was used to the idea that most people don't like going to the therapist, but occupational therapy was different. People, especially children, enjoy the sessions and sometimes don't want to leave. Occupational therapists have the privilege of helping people learn or relearn how to connect with their environment and we get to have fun while we do it. I am grateful to be part of such a wonderful profession.

## ■ Family caregiving leads to professional inspiration

Jacquelyn Nichols, Occupational Therapy Assistant Student

*Erie Community College, Williamsville, New York*

Major inspiration for my becoming an occupational therapy assistant came from the interaction with many health care professionals. While caregiving for my dad, until his death, the networking of health care for daddy would leave my mouth hanging open at times. Having the knowledge of being able to affect the physical and mental well-being of a person, whether elderly or young, is truly special.

I made the choice that I wanted to have numerous opportunities to help people regain wellness and continue with a healthy and purposeful life. Occupational therapy treats the whole person and engages him or her in work, self-care, and play so that the deficit or disability can be at the best level possible. I have always liked the position of supporting and helping. The interaction of all the health care professionals that my father needed was absolutely special, and I want to be part of that network.

If you have specific questions about a career in occupational therapy, please contact [educate@aota.org](mailto:educate@aota.org).

Visit [www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org) for more information about the profession and the activities of the American Occupational Therapy Association.



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