Reflecting upon how little we knew at the outset of our careers as graduate students, we felt it was important for fellow occupational therapists to understand the process for applying to post-entry level graduate school and the ways that your application can help position you for a favourable graduate school experience.

To pursue a graduate degree or not to pursue a graduate degree? To answer this query there are many issues to consider. The more obvious ones include: Why do I want to go into graduate school? What are my options for graduate education? What does the application process involve?

Why go to graduate school?
While the answer to this question is personal and situation specific, pursuing a graduate degree can lead to personal growth and give you access to a number of exciting opportunities. If you are seeking a new career within the profession, a graduate degree can open doors to not only faculty positions in occupational therapy programs, but also to leadership and research positions within various organizations.

Figure 1 summarizes the potential benefits of a graduate degree.

If you are passionate about a particular area of practice, completing a graduate degree may assist you in creating a multidisciplinary network of researchers and clinicians who share your interests. Through your coursework and research you will have the opportunity to participate in the production of evidence that may support, challenge or change current practices.

What are your options for graduate education?
By 2008, the majority of the 12 Canadian universities with occupational therapy programs will also offer post entry-level graduate programs in occupational therapy or rehabilitation science. While completing a graduate degree within a rehabilitation program may be the logical choice for some occupational therapists, it is not the only option available. Other alternatives for graduate education include the following: business and administration, education, epidemiology, health promotion, human movement science, psy-
chology, public health, medical sciences or social sciences. For those considering a Master’s degree, there is also the option of taking a professional leadership degree or a research degree. The former allows students to develop expertise in critical thinking and in particular practice areas without the requirement of completing a thesis; the latter allows students to hone their research skills and to generate new knowledge within the profession. Finally, there is the choice of enrolling in an on-site program or a distance (online) program. On-site programs tend to offer more supportive environments to complete a degree; online programs have the advantage of being flexible, allowing students to juggle the competing demands of family, work and school life (McCruden, 2002).

What are the nuts and bolts of applying for graduate education?

When you are starting to get your application ready, there are several tips which you may find helpful. These suggestions will be most relevant to occupational therapists considering research degrees. However, most of the tips are also applicable to people considering professional leadership degrees; instead of developing a research question, these individuals will need to identify an area of professional interest in which they wish to develop their knowledge and skill. The following are tips for you to consider when applying to graduate school.

1. **Research the program**
   Check websites for all programs in which you are considering. Ensure you have done online research before directly contacting programs. You can look at the credentials of individuals in programs which interest you to get ideas of the wide variety of possible options.

2. **Start well in advance**
   Deadlines of programs and scholarships are often earlier than anticipated and you may need to apply for scholarships in the fall prior to your year of entry. When you are requesting references from former faculty members and employers, these individuals need time to read your curriculum vitae (CV) and write a pertinent letter that demonstrates your strengths for the program. Plan on taking three times longer than anticipated to update your curriculum vitae and write your letter of intent.

3. **Choose your advisor wisely**
   The relationship that you will have with your advisor is arguably the most important factor in the outcome of your graduate experience (Bair & Haworth, 2004), more so than the choices made regarding which university, program or classes. Seek recommendations. Consider asking occupational therapists (i.e. clinicians, faculty members and members of professional organizations) for their opinion about potential advisors. The authors discovered that they could gain important information even across provinces regarding potential supervisors. Set up a meeting, preferably in person whenever possible. Bring to this meeting or send ahead of time your CV, a rough outline of research interests and written questions. Trust your intuition upon meeting with them. Students in professional leadership degrees do not have thesis advisors. However, they may be assigned a graduate advisor to assist them with decisions and issues that arise during their graduate experience.

4. **Meet with students enrolled in the program of interest**
   Questions to ask can include: What have their experiences been in the program? What is the environment like (e.g. university, city and student life)? What did they do that helped to make their graduate experience positive? What would they do differently? Who would they recommend and not recommend for advisors? How long did or will it take for them to finish their program? What courses are offered and any comments on courses taken?

5. **Write a strong letter of intent**
   A letter of intent is a one-page statement of your research interest, skills and argument for the need to research a particular area. Remember that you are not obligated to complete the project which you initially outlined. It is a proposal, not a contract. Once you have entered the program and your knowledge broadens in your research area, your research question may change. A key reason for the requirement of a letter of intent is for reviewers to see that you have the skills necessary to complete a graduate degree. Your letter of intent should demonstrate your ability to think critically, write coherently and succinctly, develop an argument and demonstrate knowledge in
the proposed area. It is important to take some time to consider this letter.

You will need to choose an area of research. To do this you should consider what area needs further research development and more importantly, what makes you passionate? A significant determinant to keeping you motivated to degree completion is your passion to explore your research question. You can ask another graduate student to read your letter of intent. He/she can provide valuable feedback on the clarity and train of thought. If you are using a letter of intent for a scholarship application, be careful about the use of technical language. The letter of intent needs to be understood by panel members with disparate backgrounds.

Choose a research project suited to your needs and preferences

There are two options when selecting a research topic with your advisor. For the first option you can decide to work on a project that your advisor has already designed. The benefits to this option are that there can be a faster starting time from writing the proposal to gathering data, as well as potentially more security and guidance. Funding is usually already approved. The second option is to develop your own research project. This option provides more freedom to manage and determine what happens within your research, however, you may also have less guidance and it can bring uncertainty.

Do not worry about being a mature student

If you have been away from the academic setting for a long time, it is important not to be intimidated by the technological advances since your schooling years. Mature students often do better academically than their younger peers (Hoskins, Newstead & Dennis, 1997). A study of mature students’ experiences in health care programs noted a theme that support net-

work were important to their success (Shanahan, 2000). Make sure to find out how to access these resources in the first few weeks of beginning your program. One of the authors made sure to sign up for workshops (that were often free of charge!) and requested technical assistance from fellow students and information technology support personnel.

Acknowledgement and celebrate the number of years you have of clinical experience. These clinical years enabled you to become an expert in certain areas, helped develop your research priorities and interests, as well as demonstrated your commitment to the research outcome.

For the authors, the perceived barriers in pursuing graduate studies were not as great as first appeared. It is our hope that these lessons are useful and encourage other occupational therapists to pursue graduate studies. Our experiences have not only enhanced our professional experiences, but they have also enriched our personal lives.

References


