

11-15-2019

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Recommended Citation

Patterson, Angela and Bracciano, Alfred G. (2019) "Developing an Ignatian Pedagogy for Occupational Therapy Education in China: The Lived Experience of the First Two Entry Level OTD, Jesuit Trained Clinicians," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*. Vol. 9 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol9/iss1/6>

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Developing an Ignatian Pedagogy for Occupational Therapy Education in China: The Lived Experience of the First Two Entry-Level OTD, Jesuit-Trained Clinicians

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Abstract

This paper explores the lived experience of the initial two Chinese professionals, competitively selected by a Traditional Chinese Medicine university, to attend and graduate from the Creighton University entry-level Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) program. The process and challenges facing implementation of an international, inter-institutional collaborative relationship between a Jesuit institution and a public higher education institution in China is discussed as well as the challenges facing international students immersed in Jesuit health care education. A review of Jesuit education in China provides a historical background to identify the differences between Eastern and Western higher education. The Chinese professionals' experiential perspective as students is iterated based on interviews focused on learning styles, learning environment, spirituality and academic support. The graduates' perceptions of the value of their Jesuit education and experience in occupational therapy, a developing profession in China, and their reflection, integration and impact of incorporating the Ignatian values into their current professional employment as occupational therapists is also discussed.

Background

Creighton University has a long history of leadership, creativity, and outreach in the School of Pharmacy and Health Professions (SPAHP). Creighton University pioneered the development of the first Doctor of Pharmacy degree in the United States in 1976 and offered it exclusively to entering students beginning in 1994. The physical therapy program developed and instituted the first Doctor of Physical Therapy degree, and the occupational therapy program developed one of the first post-professional Doctor of Occupational Therapy degrees which was followed by the first entry-level Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree program. Creighton University and the SPAHP have also been at the forefront of distance education and outreach with the establishment of the first distance-based pharmacy doctoral degree program followed by implementation of a distance-based entry-level occupational therapy doctoral degree program in

collaboration with the University of Alaska Anchorage, a public university, to meet the rehabilitation needs of Alaska. International outreach and collaboration were a logical extension and interest of the occupational therapy department and the SPAHP.

With globalization, expansion of international travel and commerce, and student desire for cross-cultural learning and immersion, interest in collaborative international partnerships between academic institutions has grown significantly in the last few years. Exploring possible collaborations with academic institutions in China was an outgrowth of individual SPAHP faculty relationships and exchanges with professional organizations and institutions in China. A more intentional and sustainable approach to meet the needs of stakeholders in China and the exigencies of the university led to a needs assessment and development of a proposal for an academic

program of study for international students in occupational therapy and physical therapy.

The need for rehabilitation services in China has increased at an unprecedented rate due to improved identification of individuals with physical and mental disabilities as well as the expansion of the aging population.¹

Approximately eighty-five million individuals have been identified as having a disability in China, with less than ten percent of them receiving rehabilitation services due to a lack of awareness and education.² The most recent statistics available, from 2009, indicated that of the total number of rehabilitation professionals and technical personnel only 2,400 were identified as occupational therapists.³ The government in China has focused efforts on education and training in occupational therapy and physical therapy to more adequately meet the need for rehabilitation services.⁴ Currently, there are six occupational therapy education programs in China which are World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOI) certified, but the need for skilled clinicians with advanced research and teaching ability to develop new programs and increase graduates exceeds demand.

This article focuses on the lived experience of two Chinese Doctor of Occupational Therapy graduates. Creighton University accepted two students from a Traditional Chinese Medicine university, to participate in the on-campus, entry-level occupational therapy doctorate program to assist with the growth of occupational therapy in China and to prepare clinicians with advanced practice and academic leadership skills. Their first-hand experiences of being Chinese students completing a Jesuit occupational therapy education is described through appreciation of the history of Jesuit education in China and their perspectives on teaching and learning Ignatian pedagogy. International development of occupational therapy education is an inspiration to all involved countries. Progressive educational outreach has culminated in Creighton University alumni practicing health care in China.

Jesuit Tradition of Academic Outreach

In the tradition of the first Jesuits to arrive in China in 1582, Creighton University's SPAHP

established a method of give-and-take between partner Chinese health science education programs and Creighton University. Through mission work and education, European Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610)⁵ exchanged knowledge between Europe and China. Ricci, educated in the Jesuit liberal education, had studied the sciences, mathematics, and astronomy and was well established when he journeyed to China, being the first European to enter the Forbidden City in Beijing, and served at the Imperial Court. Recognizing the significance of the intelligentsia and class society in China, Ricci attempted to better understand and enculturate himself in Chinese society in order to effect change.

Following this historical path, Creighton University's innovative approach has led to a modern-day exchange of health care knowledge with China through faculty, staff, and student participation in scholarly activities and student exchange programs for over ten years. These intercultural exchanges and interactions facilitated the Departments of Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy acceptance of international students into their entry-level and post-professional clinical doctorate programs.

Historically, Jesuit education has been divided into three eras, all of which have had an influence and presence in China. The *Age of Discovery* (1548-1763)⁶ encompassed Ricci's work to evangelize based on a policy of cultural accommodation. Ricci was a master of Chinese language and tradition as well as an intellect in science and instruments. His missionary approach garnered the respect of the Chinese people. However, by 1724 Christianity and missionaries were banned from China. A minimal number of Jesuits remained as scientific advisors in the emperor's court. The last Jesuit arrived in China in 1773⁵ followed by a nearly seventy-year gap.

The *Restoration of the Society of Jesus* (1814-1960),⁷ facilitated the return of the Jesuits into China. Pope Pius VII restored the Society of Jesus in 1814 at the time when the last remaining Jesuit advisor in Beijing was on his death bed. The Chinese Catholics and Bishop sent multiple letters to the Holy See for the return of Jesuit missionaries to China, but it was not until 1841

that the Jesuits returned to China with a renewed spirit to serve that incorporated but also differed in approach from their predecessors. The Jesuits focused on scientific research and academic teaching with the intent to develop schools for multiple levels of education. One of the universities established was Aurore, symbolically known as Zhendan. Aurore (Zhendan) was known for law, science, engineering, medicine, dentistry, and literature. Upon the Communist takeover of the government, Aurore closed in July 1951. Although no longer a presence, the Jesuit university had produced graduates with high professional and scholarly standards that continued to contribute significantly to China's modernization:⁸ "Even today alumni of the last graduating classes, in spite of their advanced age, still play an influential role as educators and professionals in Taiwan and on the mainland."⁹

The third era of Jesuit education, the *Age of Globalization* (after 1960),¹⁰ reflects the multinational trend of foreign academic institutions working with local institutions to offer programs and degrees. The Jesuit focus on social justice and unique charisms encompasses the value of bringing knowledge where it is currently unavailable, such as to students in China.

Creighton University's SPAHP is fulfilling this intent and mission collaboratively with Chinese institutions by offering visiting scholar programs, student and faculty exchanges, and academic degree programs for international students. The desire for an advanced degree in occupational therapy attracted multiple Chinese universities to Creighton University. The Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree is not currently awarded by any Chinese university, and entry-level preparation is at a baccalaureate level. To foster higher levels of academic and clinical preparation, a Traditional Chinese Medicine university signed an agreement with Creighton University to send students to the entry-level Doctor of Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy degree programs in Omaha, Nebraska. The agreement had roots in the historical perspective of Jesuit education to produce scholars that could provide leadership roles from within and outside Christian faith.¹¹

The implementation of the international, inter-institutional collaboration between a Jesuit

institution and a public Chinese institution of higher education was forged by closing the gap in distance and cultures. Creighton University administration, including a leader from the Department of Occupational Therapy, were able to take on a servant leadership role and collaborate with the Traditional Chinese Medicine university in China on the basis of mission and a strategic plan to foster a culturally accommodating collaboration. Multiple visits to China were undertaken, utilizing the local language and following local cultural traditions. A needs assessment of the Traditional Chinese Medicine university played a significant part in developing a partnership that focused on essential resources shaped by Jesuit tradition. Challenges inherent in costs and benefits were negotiated by producing a multi-year contract that included multiple students. The international support at Creighton University through involvement of the Global Engagement Office, helped to overcome unforeseen challenges to the collaboration. The process of bringing Chinese health care students to Creighton University was an echo of early Jesuit education and outreach to the educated Chinese elite, but with a more representative socioeconomic focus.

Two of the Traditional Chinese Medicine university's professionals were chosen to be the first to study in the Creighton University Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree program. (The professionals will be referred to as Graduate A and Graduate B in order to keep their identity anonymous.) Prior to coming to Creighton University, they did not have knowledge of Jesuit values and pedagogy or the occupational therapy curriculum but held respectable degrees in food science and nursing. Their abilities to adapt, learn, and become leaders were assets to their applications. They trusted that the collaboration established between Creighton University and their home university was foundational in the quality of education and unique level of knowledge and training not currently available in China. The partnership also confirmed that their background was a fit for their institution and its goal to meet the need for occupational therapy education in China. Upon arriving at Creighton University, they were immersed into the dynamic and interactive Jesuit education environment which provided a two-way learning and reciprocal

adaptation format as opposed to a purely didactic, traditional approach common in the graduates' Chinese education.¹²

Comparison of Chinese and United States Learning Styles and Education Environment

A review of the available literature indicates that international students face many challenges when learning abroad. Identified challenges include assimilation to their host country, issues related to English language proficiency, cultural barriers encountered, social problems, varied learning styles and academic demands and expectations.¹³ In addition, international students often face difficulty and stress of financial issues. Chinese students also bring a unique perspective to the learning environment and the teaching and learning relationship based on their cultural and personal experiences.

Characteristically, Chinese culture has been described as collectivistic, in which students learn by cooperation and supporting each other with a sense of responsibility for each other's success. Research also indicates that international students from China are often perceived by American academic instructors as being more passive, quiet, and non-participative in class, appearing less assertive and asking fewer questions. Researchers have proposed that a collectivist culture may contribute to this perception, as teaching methods in China often focus on large group instruction with minimal one-on-one activities and tutorials which may impact their ability to express their own personal opinions.

Learning styles of Chinese students have been molded by Confucian philosophy and Chinese cultural values. The impact of collectivism in Chinese culture, and individualism in Western culture, contribute to this international difference in learning.¹⁴ In individualistic Western culture academic settings, students are expected to work independently and take active responsibility for learning. Research has indicated that the dichotomy between collective-based behaviors with a focus on harmony, learning as a group and supporting others may cause dissonance when immersed into an individualistic culture due to the perceived disparity between the ideals and expectations of the host institution and the

cultural and life experiences of the international student.

Although international students face and experience stress and pressure related to acculturation and reduced access to familiar support systems, institutional awareness of these issues and addressing them through creative planning, pedagogy, support, and preparation can decrease the potential negative impact of these factors. More importantly, research has found that a caring student-educator relationship can play a major role in contextualizing the educational experiences for both students and educators.¹⁵

Lived Experience of Chinese Students at a Jesuit Institution

To determine the impact of the international experience on the first two Chinese students academically trained in Creighton University's Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree program, we undertook formative and summative assessment of the two students to identify their thoughts, feelings, and impressions of their lived experiences. Feedback was obtained voluntarily, through written reflection and interviews during each academic semester. The intent was to obtain information related to their experiences, difficulties encountered, extracurricular activities, or assistance which may have helped them in their learning and identify what could be done differently as they progressed through the program of study. The students voluntarily completed written assessments at approximately six months and twelve months' post-graduation, reflecting on their transition and return to China and their professional roles, and whether they were incorporating Ignatian values into their practices.

Creighton University SPAHP focuses on incorporating the following Ignatian values into their clinical doctorate programs for professional formation of health care professionals. Magis encompasses the Latin phrase, "For the Greater Glory of God,"¹⁶ which is the motto of the Jesuits. It personifies reflection and discernment to act on the best choice that is "God centered." "Men and Women for and with Others" is the value of serving those in need holistically, body, mind, and spirit. As educators and health care

professionals, Jesuit education teaches people to provide selfless competent, conscientious, and compassionate care. “Cura Personalis” means to care for the person. It describes the ability to give of oneself as an educator or health care professional to provide personal care no matter the person’s spiritual background.¹⁷

The two professionals arrived at Creighton University as new students with their own, unique cultural and interpersonal values refined through their unique contextual life experiences and interactions. Graduate A stated she implicitly followed her personal values prior to coming to Creighton University, but Creighton University named and defined them as “Ignatian values,” making them more discernible.¹⁸

To Graduate A, these values became clearer and stronger. She reported that she exhibits the value of *Magis*, or doing more or greater, through her professional career. Upon her return to China, she teaches in the occupational therapy program at the Traditional Chinese Medicine university. She reports being more intentional in her effort to not only facilitate student learning, but to foster students’ personal and professional growth through self-awareness and reflection. She remarked that her professional identity grew in service for her students, clients, colleagues, the profession, and the larger society exemplifying the Jesuit charism of *Men and Women for and with Others*. She commented, “I don’t just complete the work. I reflect how to provide better education to students and make both my students and myself progress.” Reflection, a key component of Ignatian pedagogy and inherent in Creighton University’s occupational therapy curriculum, was a consistent theme in her accounts of the value of Jesuit education.

Graduate A commented that she reflects on the Ignatian values and service to others in an attempt to integrate them more fully into her life and encounters with others. She has embarked on a quest to become more self-reflective and identifies that component of Jesuit education and activity as “steps in the right direction.” One of her primary accomplishments since returning to practice occupational therapy in China was the identification of the need and establishment of a clinical outreach program into the community. Historically, rehabilitation in China has been

hospital or medical center based. As part of her clinical reasoning, professional growth, and leadership, she reflects on the perceived needs of her clients, meeting their rehabilitation needs contextually, within their community and home environment rather than in the traditional health care institution. Graduate A’s vision is to provide a supportive and unrestricted environment for her clients as she experienced and then put into practice during her clinical education at Creighton University. In her new role with academic responsibilities, she incorporates personal reflection on the content, teaching style, and integration as a central component of her teaching pedagogy and curriculum. Incorporating reflection into her students’ learning allows them to identify values they innately hold in their hearts, but which they may be hesitant to articulate. Jesuit education provided her the opportunity to learn, integrate, and act on Ignatian values in her personal and professional life. Her teaching and approach to the profession and community serve as an exemplar for her students in China to emulate as they develop their professional careers.

Graduate B also commented on holding her values in “her heart” prior to coming to Creighton University, but admitted that she did not really understand or reflect on their true meaning or integrate them actively in her life.¹⁹ Now, she reports, “I know [Ignatian values] from a deeper level and I could literally share them with my friends in writing.” As an educator in China, she explained her focus on *Cura Personalis* with her students. Noting her own experience of the differences in teaching and learning styles between China and the United States, she reports that she attempts to model what she saw in Creighton faculty through a willingness to allow her students an opportunity to demonstrate their talents and skills. She provides encouragement and understanding in knowing her students at a more personal level. Through reflection and consideration of her personal goals, she also integrates the Jesuit charism of *Magis* by actively applying the knowledge and skills she gained at Creighton University in her work and through engagement with the Chinese community with disabilities. Her experience at Creighton University provided a framework through which she can reflect on and identify the needs of the population and communities she serves,

incorporating those needs into future goals and ambition to develop and refine sustainable rehabilitation services in China.

Graduate B continues to utilize the deliberative self-reflection learned during her Jesuit education. She stated she had developed a comprehensive ability to reflect through repetition. A constant practice of reflective listening, reading, and writing engages her with students and clients in academic and health care settings. She feels that the Jesuit education focus on reflection provided her a greater ability to communicate, essential to her service. Jesuit education prepared her to recognize cultural practices which help her build rapport with clients. Graduate B stated, “[by] learning Ignatian, I was able to understand my patients better.” Reflective thinking during her Jesuit education has helped her better understand herself and her values which she models for her students.

The influence of immersion into Jesuit learning was not initially evident to the two graduates from China. As students they needed to be open and flexible as they adjusted their Chinese learning style to the American learning style in which they were being taught. Transitioning to Jesuit education took effort and a willingness to reflect on and accept new approaches to learning and teaching. Learning to label values they intrinsically held and then connecting their meaning and value to the greater good were the first small steps of reflection. The evident differences in their earlier Eastern higher education and Western higher education was a daily awareness of incongruence. Both graduates commented that the biggest challenges of learning at Creighton University were culture, language barrier, and teaching style. Through reflection on their ability to recognize and assimilate to challenges, they reached an enlightened awareness and integration of Ignatian values underpinning teaching and learning at Creighton University.

Language and communication proficiency are a requirement to be a successful international student. Graduate A felt that it took her much longer to learn the lecture materials compared to her American counterparts, which often made it difficult for her to participate in class. She stated she needed to focus on listening intently and did not have time to quickly formulate questions about the course content, therefore appearing to

be a passive participant in the classroom.

Graduate B reported it took her almost a full semester to get used to learning and understanding the content presented in English. She stated she would listen to the lectures in class, translate the content to Mandarin for the purpose of studying, and then translate what she learned back into English for tests and practicums. Academic support also provided the students with additional assistance to improve their language which facilitated their success. Creighton University’s Global Engagement Office provided social opportunities to practice English, the academic success consultant guided study skills, and academic advisors were always available to answer questions and provide emotional support. Additionally, the learning management system of the university housed all course materials including recordings of lectures and resources which could be reviewed outside of class.

Graduate A found that the amount of required group assignments completed in multiple classes each semester of the program was more difficult compared to the independent assignments she had in China. Group projects and activities forced her to be more verbal and social with her peers. She had to adapt to group members’ unique and dynamic learning styles while navigating the intricacies and culture of group membership. She described her past as a student in China as being more of a passive learner sitting quietly among a large group and listening, as there was a greater amount of lecture content with fewer lab and active learning experiences. Graduate B commented that the group discussions and problem-solving components of the Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree program required additional preparation outside of class which during her schooling in China was not usual for her course of study.

Language and cultural differences were also evident in the learning environment outside of the classroom. It is a requirement of the Creighton University Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree program that students spend approximately forty weeks in experiential learning in clinical settings. Graduate B mentioned that although she had overcome the challenges of the language barrier in the classroom, there were new challenges in the clinic. She had to learn how to

initiate conversations with clients. Often the conversations were geared towards cultural perspectives into which she lacked insight, such as American food, sports, and family activities. Graduate A stated the clients in clinic were very open to her working with them, but she felt it took longer to express herself and understand their contextual needs and living situations. Both graduates ultimately attributed their success in clinical settings to clinical educators going above and beyond expectations in order to understand and accommodate their learning styles, meeting them where they were in any situation.

The professors' care and acceptance of the students stood out as a value to both graduates. *Cura Personalis*, or care for the entire person, provided the foundation for faculty awareness and success in accommodating their learning styles and needs. They found Creighton University professors to be passionate and creative within a dynamic and engaging interactive learning environment. Graduate B felt that Creighton University faculty were more than simply teachers but facilitators of learning. In Graduate B's undergraduate education, Chinese faculty tended to use a more directive and proscriptive role. She appreciated the freedom to make choices about her learning, which required self-initiation and responsibility for her studies. Graduate A recognized and appreciated the relationships of faculty outside of the classroom. Both were struck by the role that Creighton University has in the metropolitan Omaha community, as evidenced by the willingness of individuals and past clients with disabilities or various clinical conditions to volunteer as "patients" in the lab so that students could work directly with them. The support and involvement of the faculty provided learning opportunities which were not commonly available in China.

The inherent ability of Creighton University faculty to integrate and teach from a Jesuit perspective and to model and actively live the Jesuit charisms stimulated both graduates to continue to refine and develop themselves professionally after graduation. Upon returning to China, both were awarded academic faculty appointments and began to utilize active learning methods that go beyond classroom walls and boundaries. Graduate A stated she approaches her

path to career success as a confident leader and change agent, utilizing the skills, education, and personal growth her Creighton University education afforded her. Graduate B reiterated the comment, stating that learning at Creighton University was a great help to career development through advanced knowledge, leadership skills, and a greater self-awareness. Both felt that they are now more competitive in their ability to get promotions and welcome the opportunity to instill value into others in the occupational therapy profession. As alumni, they are proud of their Jesuit education and grateful to the faculty for teaching them to be better professionals, intellectually and morally.

Both graduates' knowledge of occupational therapy and professional growth allow them to advocate for a unique, contextual, and dynamic approach to understanding the expansion of occupational therapy in China. Both graduates teach that occupational therapy focuses on clients' social and functional activities of daily living and integration into their communities, not just on disease and disability. This is a challenge and paradigm shift for rehabilitation and occupational therapists in China to meet the unique intrinsic needs of the country. The graduates' training, education, and experiences have provided them with a dynamic and interactive vision of education and rehabilitation, which will pose challenges, but may facilitate transformational change over time. They have faith that their Doctor of Occupational Therapy education will contribute to China's understanding of occupational therapy to serve and to advocate for justice for all in need of therapy services. The graduates are examples of how Jesuit outreach and influence continues to impact the education and people of China.

Conclusion

The outreach of Creighton University's SPAHP to provide Jesuit education to individuals from China has deep historical roots. The strength of those roots and the vision of both institutions nourished two professionals from China to complete a Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree in the United States. Throughout their education, occupational therapy faculty had to integrate and model the unique Ignatian values of *Cura Personalis*, *Magis*, *Faith That Does Justice*, *Men*

and Women for and with Others, and Finding God in All Things, when educating, advising, and challenging the graduates. Cultural accommodation was evidenced in the ability of the faculty to exhibit Magis and Men and Women for and with Others in additional time spent answering the graduates' questions, through a deeply felt personal concern and outreach to the graduates to ensure they were comfortable, supported and successful in their learning and social environment. Graduate advisors and clinicians modeled Cura Personalis, Finding God in All Things, and Faith That Does Justice, during frequent conversations focused on restoring the graduates' confidence to excel in a foreign environment and to reassure them they would be able to translate and apply their knowledge when they returned to China. The Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree program challenged the graduates to strive for knowledge and understanding where it was not evident in order to translate their learning to their future professional practice and roles. The support for them to practice and integrate the Ignatian values in classroom and clinical settings set the foundation for the graduates to intrinsically recognize and address social justice needs within their communities.

Faculty also learned from the graduates, clinically, professionally, and personally. The experience made faculty more aware that international students may require more resources, especially for English skills, but their innate nature and desire to succeed kept the international students grounded and focused on their education. Faculty also learned to look beyond health care borders and to consider global health perspectives, which were incorporated into several courses. The ability to help international students connect with the familiar allowed faculty to explore cultural relevance and expand the diversity of personal interactions. Faculty fostered interactions between the graduates and fellow United States classmates by being sensitive to and reflecting on feedback after group assignments. Bringing in two students with an Eastern education to a Western, Jesuit education reinforced the academic path the Jesuits had established in China centuries earlier. The experience of establishing an inter-institutional academic program in occupational therapy, benefits both institutions, both cultures, and the potential recipients of rehabilitation services. Inculcating professional and personal growth and development, grounded in reflection and Ignatian values, provides a unique foundation and model for future graduates to impact health care in their respective communities and institutions. 

Notes

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¹⁸ The following section has comments from Graduate A, Email message to author, May 8, 2019.

¹⁹ The following section has comments from Graduate B, Email message to author, May 9, 2019.