

1997

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### Recommended Citation

Tiwald, Catherine G. R.N., B.S.N. (1997) "Student Benefits of Health Occupation Education Programs," *Journal of Health Occupations Education*: Vol. 12 : No. 1 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jhoe/vol12/iss1/7>

Journal of Health Occupations Education  
Fall 1997, Volume 12, Number 1

## STUDENT BENEFITS OF HEALTH OCCUPATION EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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**Abstract:** Across the United States new and expanding programs are affording young people the opportunity to make realistic career decisions while in high school. These programs add relevance to the students' learning and are improving their academic test scores. In the health careers, the benefits of vocational Health Occupations Education include assets accrued: to the community, the colleges, the health care professions, the students and the students' parents. The student benefits can be appropriately relegated to three main categories: financial, academic, and character development. Financial benefits include income from good paying entry-level jobs, career experience and scholarship opportunities. Students also have the opportunity to discover if this is the correct career for them, before spending precious college time and countless dollars pursuing an education they will not use. Academic benefits stem from the integration of academic curriculum with a career based focus. This integration adds relevance to

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learning. Character development benefits are found in students being better prepared for the work place and more disciplined to solve difficult problems. By teaching a curriculum relevant to real life, problem solving skills are developed and strengthened in the student. The health occupation students gain confidence in themselves and they enhance their self-esteem, through mastery of specific competencies and skills.

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### Student Benefits of Health Occupation Education Programs

Across the United States new and expanding programs are affording young people the opportunity to make realistic career decisions while in high school. These programs add relevance to the students' learning and are improving their academic test scores (Stem, Ruby, & Dayton, 1992). The educational benchmarks that have been set by Germany, Japan and Switzerland incorporate the integration of vocational and academic curriculums (Jarvis, 1994). Current changes in American education are creating programs that strive to meet the benchmarks set by these foreign countries. The health occupations are not to be denied their rightful place in this innovative trend in vocational education. In the health careers, the benefits of vocational Health Occupations Education (HOE) include assets accrued to the community, the colleges, the health care professions, the students and the students' parents. The student benefits can be appropriately relegated to three main categories: financial; academic; and character development.

### Financial Benefits

The financial remunerations from student participation in HOE programs is the first

benefit. This includes income from good paying entry-level jobs, career experience, and opportunities to qualify for a variety of scholarships. By the year 2000, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 70% of jobs will require less than a baccalaureate degree (Bottoms, Presson & Johnson, 1992). For non college bound students, the HOE program will enable them to start in a good-paying entry-level job with the solid foundation of basic technological skills. The students can then obtain advanced skills on the job or through a post secondary technical school. These entry-level jobs transport graduating high school students into the world of working tax paying citizens.

Experience required is a frequent statement on an employment advertisement. Upon reading this requirement, many new graduates respond, "How will I get experience if no one will give me a job?" The clinical component of HOE programs provides the students a beginning experience. Yet more importantly for many employers, it gives the employers the opportunity to observe the students during the clinical time as a type of free evaluation period. Many employers are then willing to hire students into an entry-level job, based on their association with the students during the clinical experience. The students then have a job in their career field of interest that is giving them experience and can function as a stepping-stone to future jobs with substantive salary increases and increased levels of responsibility and authority (Stem, et al. 1992).

For the college-bound students, the financial benefits come from an entry-level job that enable the students to finance some of their education by working in their field of interest. It will also provide opportunities, where the students can gain valuable academic and work experiences

(Aring, 1993). Often, high school graduates begin college in a specific field only to discover as they progress through the course of study that this field is not as they expected. These graduates have then spent precious time and countless dollars pursuing an education they will not use.

Relevance is an issue for most high school students. They feel that what they do in school today bears little resemblance to what they will be expected to do in the workplace in the future (United States Department of Labor, Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills [SCANS], 1992 ). Students explore and focus on their own abilities and interests in an HOE program. They have the opportunity to observe the course of study and the workplace in their career of interest. From these experiences some students make the decision that a health care profession is not the career for them. For others, the experiences from an HOE program further fuel their desire to succeed in their chosen career and solidify their course of study in college. This decision is going to help the students realize a true savings in their college time and money (Hofacker, 1991).

With the increasing costs of obtaining a college education, students are having to compete for available scholarships. There are a variety of scholarship funds available for students. These scholarships each have specific requirements and I or are designed for a specific group of students. Many health occupation professions have **scholarships** available for the students wishing to pursue a health career. Listing participation in an HOE program demonstrates the students' commitment to the pursuit of a health career, which increases their standing in the competition for the scholarship. Non-medically related **scholarship** sources frequently fund HOE students because they meet the requirement of entering a career field which is high in demand.

Currently, the health occupations include 11 of the 30 fastest growing occupations from 1992-2005, as recorded by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (Brennan, 1995).

Phoenix Baptist Hospital is just one of several Arizona hospitals that yearly awards a scholarship to a Health Occupations Education student. Allied Signal of Arizona's Employee Health Services department offers a student, in an HOE Program, a job at a salary just above minimum wage. The company works with the school district to have the on-the-job time count as school credit. Allied Signal then goes a step further. Those students who stay and work for Allied Signal can qualify for tuition reimbursement for continuing their post secondary studies. Many individual physicians' offices and group health maintenance organizations (HMOs) have not only offered scholarships but have offered internships to the students of HOE programs,.

#### Academic Benefits

The second benefit from HOE programs is an increased importance is placed on academic achievement. Students need to understand that employers will expect them to be able to write clearly, solve multi-step math problems, use science technology and explain why things work (Bottoms, et al. 1992). Using career-related examples to illustrate a lesson improves class participation and encourages students to use thinking skills. For the student unmotivated by traditional academic curricula, real-life learning helps education have more meaning. A study of students from the Oakland Health Academy during 1985 through 1988, demonstrated that the students outperformed their comparison group counterparts on 21 of 25 statistical tests, 15 of which were statistically significant. These students had better attendance, higher credit loads and higher grade point averages than their traditional academic counterparts (Stem, et al. 1992).

Vocational education programs may improve **school** performance and graduation rates of a broader range of students instead of just **the top 25%** of students who are college bound.

Community College Faculty member, Cecil **Phillips**, as quoted in Parnell (1991) stated that the transition from one level of instruction to the next level is easier for students who are taught their academics in their content field, and it also provides a coordinated comprehensive curriculum built upon business and industry ideas ( **Parnell**, 1991). The HOE programs across the United States work to articulate their curriculum with the **community** colleges or Tech Prep programs. This articulation of the curriculum allows a student to move into a post **secondary** educational program without having to repeat much of the course work completed in the last two years of high school (Hull & **Parnell**, 1991).

The U.S. Department of Labor, SCANS (1992) report states, "Teaching should be offered 'in context', that is, **students** should learn content while solving realistic problems. 'Learning in order to know' should not be separated from 'learning in order to do'" (p.40). Students frequently ask a teacher, Is this going to be on the test? If the answer is no, the students will not study the material and ask why they must then learn it. When employers and schools pay attention to the skills and workplace competencies, students will work to acquire those **competencies** because they now are occupationally **relevant**, not just something on the final exam (U.S. Department of Labor SCANS, 1992).

**In** HOE programs, teaching lessons based on real-life experiences accomplish integration of academics. Language and communication skills are stressed in the written, verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Written reports focus on careers or disease processes.

Traditional verbal reports allow the student to practice verbal communications skills. Students learn the importance of nonverbal language as it relates to legal and ethical implications such as patient confidentiality. In the **clinical** setting the student must be **able** to communicate effectively and professionally using **all** forms of communication.

Students are required to learn medical terminology, giving them added language skills. This base of medical terminology enables the student to communicate effectively with health care professionals. The utilization of more than one standard practice of measurement in the United States (U. S.) presents challenging calculation skills. Students learn both the US standard and the metric standards of measurement. They learn to use math skills to calculate ratios and conversions that are relevant to medical situations. Medicine itself is considered a science. Thus, the study of the sciences becomes relevant. HOE programs effectively integrate academic education with vocational education.

#### Character Development

The third area of benefit from HOE is in the area of character development. Frequently, employers give positive feedback on student behavior in the workplace. These employers report that HOE graduates are more disciplined and better prepared to solve difficult problems (Bottoms, 1992). By teaching a curriculum relevant to real life, problem solving skills are developed and **strengthened** in the student. They are given realistic work-place problems in which they need to decide a course of action. The rationale to support the decision must also be given. Educators recognize problem-solving skills as upper-level thinking skills. The HOE students gain confidence in themselves and this enhances their self-esteem, through mastery of



specific competencies and skills. For example it is a simple procedure for an experienced nurse to perform abed bath, it is a major achievement when the HOE student completes the task successfully without supervision. Through the interaction with professionals in the workplace, the student gains maturity and insight into the realities of the working world.

Through HOE programs, future health care professionals are given a solid foundation upon which to start building their advanced education and careers. Educators that focus on teaching integration of academics with career skills, demonstrate that these concepts and competencies are necessary to achieve excellence in health care professions (U.S. Department of Labor SCANS, 1992). Whether the students continue into a health career or discover that this is not the field for them, they will have gained valuable skills for a lifetime. The health care professions should create a partnership with HOE programs to mentor today's eager students. These students will become the future health care professionals.

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