

The American Occupational Therapy Association
An Advisory Opinion for the AOTA Ethics Commission

Promoting Ethically Sound Practices in Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Education

Occupational therapy education at both the professional and the technical level helps shape and ensure the future of the profession. Toward this end, occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants may assume roles in academic settings as faculty or academic fieldwork coordinators (AFWCs) or fieldwork educators (FWEs), sometimes also known as *clinical instructors (CIs)*. Practitioners in these roles aim to provide students with an educational experience culminating in their graduation as competent and ethical practitioners.

This dynamic triad (i.e., faculty/AFWCs, FWEs, students) works together to produce the next generation of occupational therapy practitioners. Faculty design and implement curricular-based programs to facilitate student development of knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors necessary for entry-level practice. FWEs complement the academic portion of students' education by providing them with an opportunity to observe, apply, and practice academic-based knowledge and skills in a "real life" clinical setting.

During fieldwork, students develop and must demonstrate knowledge, skills, and professional behaviors at progressively higher levels of responsibility (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2009). Throughout the educational process, faculty, AFWCs, FWEs, and students are responsible for maintaining high standards of ethical conduct.

Academic Fieldwork Coordinator and Fieldwork Educator Responsibilities

The *AFWC* is an individual employed by educational institutions to implement the fieldwork education program. This individual is responsible for the program's compliance with Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®) standards related to fieldwork education. A *FWE* is a clinician who agrees to supervise students' fieldwork experiences. AFWCs collaborate with FWEs to develop fieldwork education objectives and experiences and to make sure that student supervision is effective and ensures the safety and well-being of all stakeholders (ACOTE, 2012).

Ethical Issues in Academic Fieldwork Coordinator and Fieldwork Educator Roles

AFWCs and FWEs meet professional responsibilities related to their multiple roles while at the same time negotiating demands stemming from current societal trends and health care delivery environments. Cost containment measures, diminishing reimbursement, and expectations for higher staff productivity levels are

pressuring clinicians to do more with fewer resources (Hanson, 2011; Weinstein & Nesbitt, 2007). Contemporary business-oriented health care practice environments can affect the development and implementation of fieldwork education programs in various ways (; Barton et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2007; see Case Scenario 1).

Case Scenario 1. Fieldwork Educator and Coordinator Ethical Considerations: Sara, Julie, and Michael

Sara is an occupational therapist and fieldwork educator (FWE) who works on a well-known orthopedic unit of a large medical center. Julie, an academic fieldwork coordinator (AFWC) at a local university, contacted Sara at the last minute and asked her to accept a Level II student whose fieldwork site had canceled his rotation. Sara, who was very busy, hurriedly agreed to supervise the student with the stipulation that he successfully completed course requirements related to physical agent modalities (PAMs), as student use of PAMs is legal in this state, and PAMs are widely used on the unit. Julie quickly assured Sara that Michael did meet course objectives related to PAMs.

During the first weeks of his rotation, Michael quickly adapted to the demands of the facility. At a meeting to discuss his progress, Sara gave Michael positive feedback about his performance and told him she felt he was ready to assume his own caseload. Michael told Sara that he was enjoying this rotation and hoped to work at this facility. As they were leaving the meeting, Sara casually said to Michael, “Julie told me that you successfully met course objectives related to PAMs; this is good, because as you know, we do a lot of PAMs here,” Michael smiled and nodded his head as Sara walked away.

However, Michael failed to inform Sara that he did not actually have any training in applying hot packs because the equipment used by his academic program was broken the semester they covered PAMs. He decided not to tell Sara because he was afraid of appearing incompetent.

The next week, Michael received a physician’s referral to treat Mrs. Brown, an elderly woman who had had rotator cuff surgery. The referral directed the occupational therapist to increase shoulder range of motion using hot packs as indicated in preparation for occupation-based activities involving shoulder motion. After completing an initial evaluation, Michael placed hot packs on Mrs. Brown’s shoulder and proceeded to document his evaluation findings. After a while, Mrs. Brown began to cry and told Michael that the hot packs were hurting her. When he removed the packs, Michael saw a red burn on Mrs. Brown’s shoulder.

Because student use of PAMs is not legal in all states, AFWCs, FWEs, and students should always be knowledgeable about state licensure regulations to ensure that duties assigned to students are in compliance with state law. As previously noted, Sara was able to have Michael apply the hot packs, as it was aligned with regulations in that state's licensure law. However, violation of several ethical principles led to Mrs. Brown's highly preventable burn injury.

First, Sara was ultimately responsible for protecting Mrs. Brown from harm (Principle 2A, Nonmaleficence). Michael was neither trained nor competent in administering thermal agent modalities (Principle 1E, Beneficence), and it was Sara's responsibility to provide appropriate supervision and personally verify his level of competency before allowing him to apply the hot packs (Principles 5G and 5H, Procedural Justice). In keeping with client safety as her primary duty, Sara should have administered the hot packs to Mrs. Brown. Furthermore, the parties involved should have openly and honestly represented Michael's lack of training in PAMs. Julie violated Principle 6B (Veracity) by misrepresenting Michael's training and competency. Michael violated the same principle when his failure to communicate his lack of training misled Sara into believing that he was competent. Open, honest communication along with meeting ethical responsibilities related to protecting client safety and effective student supervision could have prevented Mrs. Brown's painful injury and the potential liability that resulted from it.

AFWCs. ACOTE (2012) accreditation standards direct AFWCs to develop and place fieldwork students at clinical sites that will provide them with an appropriate fieldwork experience. These standards include, but are not limited to, ensuring that

- Settings meet curricular goals and provide experiences related to the academic program,
- Supervisors are adequately prepared and can effectively meet students' learning needs,
- Fieldwork experiences promote ethical practice and develop professionalism, and
- Supervision processes protect consumers and provide for appropriate role modeling.

However, AFWCs are increasingly challenged to meet these expectations. Multiple demands on their time lead to FWEs taking fewer students (Vogl, Grice, Hill, & Moody, 2004), thus diminishing the availability of fieldwork clinical sites.

Dilemmas can arise for AFWCs who are ethically obligated to meet these standards yet may be tempted to place students in suboptimal clinical settings in order to provide enough sites for everyone in the class. Applying sound critical reasoning and professional judgment will determine whether a clinical site can provide

appropriate and positive fieldwork experiences that meet ACOTE standards. In situations in which this is not the case, AFWCs must demonstrate moral courage by refraining from placing students at such clinical sites or by removing them when it becomes evident that the site no longer is providing appropriate educational experiences or meeting the learning needs of students.

FWEs. FWEs are ethically obligated to provide appropriate supervision despite challenges created by current practice demands, including having less time allocated to this responsibility (Casares et al., 2003). With a primary duty to their clients, FWEs must simultaneously balance their own daily clinical work demands with responsibilities for student supervision. Of utmost importance is FWEs' responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of their clients. Doing so requires FWEs to honestly appraise students' capabilities to be certain they are competent to provide safe and effective interventions.

Honest appraisals may lead to the determination that some students do not meet competency standards and thus should fail their fieldwork rotation. FWEs may struggle with the decision as to whether to fail a student. FWEs may believe that a student who successfully completes the academic portion of his or her education should be able to demonstrate the competency level needed to pass fieldwork. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. It is possible for a student to successfully meet academic standards yet not be able to competently apply his or her academic knowledge in a real-life practice setting. When this occurs, FWEs have an ethical obligation to accurately and objectively appraise a student's abilities and draw on their moral courage in making a determination that a student should fail his or her fieldwork rotation.

Ethical fieldwork student supervision requires transparent, clear, and open verbal and written communication. FWEs should provide ongoing and objective feedback to students to keep them informed of their progress or of areas that require improvement. In addition, precise documentation related to supervisory activities will enable the supervisor to more fairly evaluate student performance and ultimately support the final evaluation. These strategies should prevent student misunderstanding related to the performance evaluation and ultimately to the evaluation grade. In situations in which a student is struggling to meet fieldwork expectations, the FWE should initiate prompt communication with the AFWC. FWEs and AFWCs should maintain ongoing, clear, and open communication about student performance issues. Doing so will keep a student who is struggling informed of his or her progress toward passing the fieldwork rotation and minimize feelings that he or she has been treated unfairly.

FWEs, as supervisors, are also responsible for ensuring that students are provided with an appropriate and effective educational experience. As part of the educational experience, FWEs should serve as exemplary role models by adhering to high standards of ethical and professional behaviors. In addition, FWEs must ensure that students function according to their role expectations. For example, students should not be expected to perform

as if they are substitutes for regular employees in order to address staff shortages or demands for high productivity. Similarly, occupational therapy assistants who are completing fieldwork as part of their educational requirements to become occupational therapists should function in the role of an occupational therapy–level fieldwork student and not be expected to perform assistant-level job responsibilities. With an increase in the number of laddering programs for occupational therapy assistants, it may be tempting to meet staffing needs by having an occupational therapist Level II fieldwork student who is an occupational therapy assistant provide assistant-level intervention services. Doing so, however, denies the occupational therapy student his or her rights to an appropriate fieldwork education experience.

Another area of ethical concern relates to billing and reimbursement for services provided by fieldwork students. FWEs are responsible for ensuring that billing for such services meets local, state, federal, and payer standards and regulations. Furthermore, billing for services provided by fieldwork students must accurately reflect who provided the services and the actual services provided. Doing otherwise constitutes insurance fraud.

Application of Ethical Principles

Principle 1. Beneficence. Several principles of the *Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics and Ethics Standards* (2010) (Code and Ethics Standards; AOTA, 2010) guide the ethical conduct of AFWCs and FWEs. Principle 1, Beneficence, requires taking action toward the good of others (AOTA, 2010). For AFWCs and FWEs, doing this good could mean educating students about the Code and Ethics Standards, including procedures for reporting unresolved issues (Principle 1K). Furthermore, AFWCs and FWEs whose conduct is consistent with high standards of ethical behavior serve as role models and provide a valuable influence on students' professional socialization.

Principle 1 also directs those providing occupational therapy education and training to do so within their area of expertise and level of competency (Principle 1J). Through ongoing professional development activities, AFWCs and FWEs develop knowledge and skills related to best practice in fieldwork education. For example, a FWE could develop and document expertise by participating in continuing education such as an AOTA-sponsored Fieldwork Educator's Certificate Workshop.

Principle 2. Nonmaleficence. A primary responsibility related to Principle 2, Nonmaleficence (AOTA, 2010) requires protecting service recipients and students (among others) from harm (Principle 2A). AFWCs and FWEs have a duty to make sure students are competent in providing safe and effective interventions to ensure both client and student safety. Principle 2 also directs those working with students to establish and maintain professional boundaries to avoid harming or exploiting them. Students may be vulnerable to exploitation due to the inherent power imbalance created by AFWCs' and FWEs' advanced experience and evaluative responsibilities (Estes & Brandt, 2011; Pettifor, McCarron, Schoepp, Stark, & Stewart, 2011). AFWCs and

FWEs should avoid conflicts of interest with students by refraining from forming friendships with them via online social networking sites (Estes & Brandt, 2010).

Principle 3. Autonomy and Confidentiality. Principle 3, Autonomy and Confidentiality (AOTA, 2010), promotes transparent and meaningful communication with students. AFWCs and FWEs should fully inform students about both programmatic and facility or organizational policies and procedures related to their progression through and retention in fieldwork (Principle 3D). According to Principle 3G, AFWCs and FWEs are ethically bound to “ensure that confidentiality and the right to privacy are respected and maintained regarding all information obtained about...students.... Laws and regulations may require disclosure to appropriate authorities without consent” (AOTA, 2010, p. S21).

Two federal statutes provide boundaries for the sharing of information from students’ academic records-- the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA; 1996) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA; 1974). Specifically, the HIPAA privacy rule requires that an individual provide written permission for others to share his or her protected health information. Thus, to comply with HIPAA regulations, an AFWC may not share information about a student’s health or disability status with a fieldwork site without the student’s written permission.

FERPA protects the privacy of information contained in students’ academic records. Generally, students ages 18 years or older must give permission for academic personnel to share information contained in the students’ academic records.

However, FERPA does allow sharing of information without students’ permission between academic officials with legitimate educational interests. According to FERPA,

An educational agency or institution may disclose personally identifiable information from an academic record of a student without the consent required...if the disclosure meets one or more of the following conditions: (1) (i) (A) The disclosure is to other school officials, including teachers, within the agency or institution whom the agency or institution has determined to have legitimate educational interests. (B) A contractor, consultant, volunteer, or other party to whom an agency or institution has outsourced institutional services or functions may be considered a school official. (FERPA, 1974)

Thus, AFWCs and FWEs may legally share information contained in students’ academic records (without students’ permission) with those who have legitimate educational interests, including those under contractual agreement with a university (Additional information about FERPA can be accessed at www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa).

AFWCs and FWEs must balance the legal boundaries afforded by FERPA with their ethical responsibilities. Before sharing information from a student’s academic records without the student’s permission, AFWCs and FWEs should determine that sharing the information will be in the student’s best interest. That is, the goal of

sharing information should be to support a student's success in fieldwork. It is unethical to share information not relevant to a student's fieldwork experience that could negatively bias relevant parties toward that student. It is ethical to share only information that is relevant to promoting a student's successful completion of his or her fieldwork experience. For example, an AFWC may choose to share with a FWE that, on the basis of a particular student's academic performance, he or she may need initial support in developing strategies to successfully manage multiple demands of a fast-paced environment in a timely manner. On the other hand, it would be unethical for an AFWC to share with a student's FWE that the student had to repeat several courses in order to attain the minimum GPA required for retention in the occupational therapy program. Doing so could send the message that the student's academic performance was poor, leading the FWE to expect that the student will perform poorly in fieldwork.

AFWCs and FWEs who are unsure as to whether sharing students' academic information is within legal or ethical boundaries should seek university or facility legal counsel. In the event that legal counsel is not available, they should err on the side of caution and not share the information.

Principle 5. Procedural Justice. Complying with the broad spectrum of laws, institutional policies, and AOTA documents applicable to occupational therapy practice is mandated by Principle 5, Procedural Justice (AOTA, 2010). AFWCs and FWEs should model professional and ethical behavior for students by adhering to the Code and Ethics Standards (Principle 5A), resolving conflicts between institutional policies and ethical practice (Principle 5B), holding appropriate state or national credentials (Principle 5E), maintaining continuing competence (Principle 5F), advocating for employees with disabilities (Principle 5M), and assisting in facility policy development to promote ethical compliance (Principle 5N) (AOTA, 2010). Specifically related to student supervision, FWEs are ethically bound to provide appropriate and effective supervision to students, consistent with all sources of laws, rules, regulations, policies, standards, and guidelines (Principles 5G and 5H), especially those related to billing and reimbursement (Principle 5O) (AOTA, 2010).

Principle 6. Veracity. AFWCs and FWEs are ethically bound to be truthful in fulfilling all aspects of their professional duties. Principle 6, Veracity (AOTA, 2010), provides the means for establishing trusting relationships. Related to fieldwork education, this translates to accurately representing student competencies (Principle 6A); avoiding any form of communication that is false, fraudulent, or unfair (Principle 6B); accurately recording and reporting information in a timely manner (Principle 6C); and being accurate, honest, fair, and respectful when reporting information about student performance (Principle 6H) (AOTA, 2010). To these ends, AFWCs and FWEs should maintain accurate and timely documentation of activities and interactions related to student fieldwork performance and supervision.

Student Responsibilities

Students are expected to work under the direction of their supervisors to meet fieldwork expectations at progressively increasing levels of responsibility. They are to adhere to the same legal and ethical standards expected of occupational therapy practitioners in meeting client intervention duties and other responsibilities while on fieldwork (see Case Scenario 2).

Case Scenario 2. Fieldwork Student Ethical Considerations: Abby, Maxine, and Gail

Abby is in the 8th week of her second occupational therapy Level II fieldwork rotation at a large, university-based hospital. She did so well at her first rotation that they offered her a position. She has also done well on this rotation, receiving a glowing midterm evaluation from Gail, her supervisor. Abby, however, does not share the same positive assessment about the supervision she is receiving from Gail. It seems that Gail is rarely around when Abby has questions about her clients, and Abby has the impression that Gail leaves early, especially on Fridays.

On a particularly busy Friday afternoon, Gail approached Abby, asking her to pick up 3 clients that Gail could not treat that day. Gail shared that she was going out of town for the weekend with her boyfriend and wanted to leave early to get ready. On her way out the door, Gail added, “And, can you please document treatment notes in the charts of the 3 clients I saw this morning? I jotted down what I did with each one; just write them as if you did the treatments, sign your name, and I will co-sign on Monday when I return. Have a great weekend!” Abby, shocked by what Gail asked her to do, immediately called Maxine, her academic fieldwork coordinator, and asked her what she should do.

Abby is right to be concerned about what Gail asked her to do and to seek advice from Maxine. In doing this, Abby is adhering to Principle 2I (Nonmaleficence) of the Code and Ethics Standards in that she exercised professional judgment in response to an administrative directive that could cause harm to clients. In general, Gail is not meeting her ethical responsibility to provide appropriate supervision to Abby, thus violating Principle 5H (Procedural Justice) of the Code and Ethics Standards. Specifically, Gail’s directive asked Abby to violate not only ethical but legal standards.

Of major concern is that Gail asked Abby to produce fraudulent documentation that the facility will submit to a third party for reimbursement and thus constitutes insurance fraud. Doing so would violate several ethical principles, particularly those under Principle 6 (Veracity) of the Code and Ethics Standards. Specifically, Abby’s documentation of Gail’s intervention sessions is in violation of Principles 6B (participating in written communication that contains false and fraudulent statements) and 6D (submitting fraudulent documentation). Abby’s course of action deems her to be well on her way to becoming an ethical occupational therapist.

In addition, some principles of the Code and Ethics Standards are particularly pertinent to the student role. Like clinicians, students have a primary duty to protect the safety and well-being of their clients. Doing so requires students to be transparent in communicating with their clients and supervisors. Specifically, students have a duty to divulge their status as students to their clients.

Protecting the safety and well-being of clients also might require students to share concerns about their own levels of competence and confidence with their supervisors. This is especially important for students who are asked to provide interventions for which they may not feel adequately prepared or have the competence to provide. Finally, students can promote clients' well-being and update therapists at the facility by sharing evidence-based practice resources related to clinical interventions they have learned about in their recent academic studies.

Students also need to protect clients' privacy and confidentiality. They may find themselves in a position of sharing their fieldwork experiences with faculty or classmates in the context of teaching-learning environments. This sharing could be in the form of classroom discussions, written assignments, or virtual discussion boards. In all of these situations, students must discern what, if any, information they can communicate about clients, and how to do that to maintain compliance with HIPAA regulations. Students must protect client privacy and confidentiality and be respectful in the information they share about their supervisor and the clinical site and its employees (Estes & Brandt, 2011). Students should not share information related to their fieldwork experiences through online social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn).

Students also have duties related to promoting ethical practice during their fieldwork experiences. This requires that they be knowledgeable about the Code and Ethics Standards as well as policies and procedures for handling concerns about situations or issues that may challenge those Principles. Like practitioners, students are expected to "discourage, prevent, expose, and correct any breaches of the Code and Ethics Standards, and report any breaches of the former to appropriate authorities" (Principle 7C; AOTA, 2010, p. S25). Students who find themselves in this difficult situation should promptly discuss their concerns with their AFWC to minimize the chance of unpleasant consequences later in the fieldwork rotation. The AFWC can assist the student by helping him or her analyze the situation to define the issues, explore potential strategies, and determine the most appropriate course of action.

The AFWC and student should maintain an ongoing communication throughout the situation so that the AFWC can continue to advise and support the student. While communicating concerns about a possible breach of the Code and Ethics Standards, students must represent the situation in an honest, fair, objective, and respectful manner.

Ethical Issues for Students

Meeting these ethical responsibilities may not always be easy for students. Fieldwork can be a stressful experience for many students as they transition from academic learning to real-life application of theory and techniques in clinical settings. Findings of a study exploring ethical tensions encountered by occupational therapy fieldwork students indicated that students' experiences were generally ethical in nature but also described four areas of concern (Kinsella, Park, Appiagyei, Chang, & Chow, 2008). Students struggled with systemic restraints (e.g., lack of time or appropriate assessment tools), conflicting values (e.g., among practitioners, clients, team members, other students), witnessing questionable behaviors by practitioners (e.g., disrespectful attitudes, inappropriate language, breach of confidentiality), and experiences related to students themselves failing to speak up (e.g., advocating for clients, responding assertively when witnessing unethical behavior).

The power differential between students and AFWCs, FWEs, or clinicians may dissuade students from meeting their ethical obligations. This issue may create fear of repercussions such as not being taken seriously, retribution in the form of delaying completion of or failing their fieldwork rotation, being labeled a trouble-maker, or limiting future job opportunities.

A final issue some students face relates to whether or not they should disclose to AFWCs or FWEs that they have a nonevident disability (Estes & Brandt, 2011). Statutory law (e.g., ADA, 1990; FERPA, 1976; HIPAA, 1996) protects the confidentiality of students' disability status, leaving to students the decision of whether to share this information with fieldwork sites (Estes & Brandt, 2011). Students who would like to receive accommodations for a qualified disability are responsible for initiating a request for the accommodations and providing supporting documentation. Students who choose not to share this information must understand that they will not receive accommodations for which they may otherwise be qualified for under the ADA. More importantly, though, students who choose not to share this information must ensure that they are able to provide safe and effective client interventions without accommodations (Estes & Brandt, 2011).

Strategies for Meeting Ethical Responsibilities

Several strategies may help students meet their ethical responsibilities when dealing with difficult fieldwork situations. Students must first pay attention to situations in which their moral sensitivity (Kirsch, 2009) produces feelings of discomfort in reaction to events that may have ethical ramifications. For example, a student who witnesses a supervisor complaining about his or her patients to a colleague in a crowded elevator will likely have a "gut feeling" that the supervisor's behavior is inappropriate. When feelings such as this occur, students should discuss the situation with their AFWC, who can help them analyze the situation, define inherent issues, and develop strategies for effectively dealing with it. Such strategies may include a student discussing

the situation with his or her supervisor (or other relevant players such as another team member), either alone or with the AFWC present.

Students should approach such discussions in a professional manner, being sure to communicate their concerns in an honest, objective, and respectful manner. Citing relevant policies, guidelines, regulations, or statutes in support of his or her concerns can strengthen a student's position. With ongoing guidance from the AFWC, a student can better navigate difficult situations in ways that minimize the chance of negative consequences while maintaining ethical obligations.

Summary and Conclusion

Fieldwork education is a critical component of educating competent and ethical practitioners. As such, key stakeholders (i.e., AFWCs, FWEs, students) must work to ensure the ethical development and implementation of fieldwork education programs that meet professional standards for developing knowledge and skills as well as appropriate professional, ethical conduct. The *Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics and Ethics Standards (2010)* (AOTA, 2010) provides guidance for promoting ethically sound fieldwork education experiences.

Of primary concern for all of the stakeholders is protecting the safety and well-being of clients served. Beyond this, AFWCs and FWEs are responsible for adhering to the multiple sources of guidelines, standards, regulations, and legal statutes related to fieldwork education. They are also responsible for demonstrating high standards of ethical and professional conduct in their communications and actions, especially because doing so provides positive role modeling for students. Meeting these standards may be challenging given the nature of the current health care environment.

Students, too, must be held to the same ethical standards during their fieldwork experiences. However, an inherent power imbalance in the supervisory relationship may result in student vulnerability and lead to unique ethical challenges for them. In successfully navigating these ethical challenges, AFWCs, FWEs, and students work together to generate competent and caring occupational therapy practitioners of the future.

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