

Ensuring a Diverse Workforce

Fieldwork Success for Occupational Therapy Students With Disabilities

Jayne Taguchi Meyer

Ensuring that occupational therapy has a diverse workforce is part of the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA's; 2007) Centennial Vision. This diversity includes practitioners with a broad range of abilities and disabilities. Increasing numbers of students with disabilities are entering and graduating from occupational therapy educational programs. Students, fieldwork educators, academic fieldwork coordinators (AFWCs), and other faculty members each have a role in fostering the success of all occupational therapy students. What does each need to know to make this happen? Let's break it down!

STUDENTS

Students needing accommodations to foster successful learning with a disability must seek out support and advocate for themselves at the college and university levels. Support from offices for students with disabilities, as well as by academic faculty, including AFWCs, is available. For a student to receive accommodations, the academic institution's office for students with disabilities—which provides academic advisement and assistance, assistive technology to maximize learning, testing for learning disabilities, and more—must verify the student's disability and approve the requested accommodations.

Discussing learning needs with the AFWC and ways in which accommodations may or may not be needed for fieldwork can be helpful. "Students are experts on their needs; faculty are the experts on clinical expectations



Open communication, knowledge, and creative problem solving will go a long way toward facilitating the success of fieldwork students with disabilities.

and requirements for safe practice" (Dupler, Allen, Maheady, Fleming, & Allen, 2012, p. 143). AFWCs are knowledgeable about various fieldwork opportunities, and they can advise students about the performance requirements of specific sites. Having this information can help students determine what, if any, accommodations may be helpful. Well in advance of fieldwork, students are advised to discuss whether or not to disclose a disability to the fieldwork educator(s), and how and when to do so. Open communication with the AFWC and faculty prior to, during, and after fieldwork experiences increases suc-

cess. Unless they have given written permission to the AFWC to disclose disability and accommodation needs to the fieldwork educator, students are responsible for disclosing this information themselves.

FIELDWORK EDUCATORS

Fieldwork educators facilitate learning and performance proficiency in the delivery of occupational therapy services in clinical practice environments. Providing safe and supportive learning environments is an important role of fieldwork educators. Learning about and developing an understanding of the student's experience as a

learner with a disability may support the student's efforts to be successful in fieldwork. Fieldwork educators should also examine their own possible assumptions and biases about a student with a disability, including what things he or she can do and how.

Open communication with the student and AFWC are important after a student discloses a disability and requests accommodations. Using the facility or organization's essential functions and/or technical standards for entry-level practitioners helps determine and refine reasonable accommodations. Entry-level job descriptions may also help. The fieldwork educator and the academic institution are responsible for implementing the student's accommodations. A student's disability and accommodation needs are to be shared with clinical site staff on a "need-to-know" basis, as protected by HIPAA and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, which protects the student's educational record and information related to academic performance.

AFWCS AND FACULTY

Sharby and Roush (2009) outlined an evidence-based model using an analytical decision-making approach to address the needs of allied health students with disabilities. The first component included providing a positive climate, including supportive faculty. Supportive faculty members seek knowledge about institution-specific policies and procedures, and they offer a safe environment for students to discuss learning needs. Faculty may also facilitate a student's disability verification and accommodations.

The AFWC's role is to communicate with and support both students and fieldwork educators. Working with the campus office for students with disabilities assists with problem-solving, creative accommodations for the variable and unpredictable practice environments of occupational therapy practitioners, and advisement about any legal concerns. The Job Accommodation Network (<http://askjan.org/soar/>) is a helpful resource. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, amended in 2008, mandated that

students receive equal access to educational opportunities, including fieldwork experiences. AFWCs and faculty must also check their assumptions about a student with a disability, including what is possible for the student to achieve, and how it may be possible. Care must be taken to avoid limiting fieldwork opportunities, given information about a student's disability. Having essential functions and/or technical standards documents from a variety of practice settings will help inform and assist AFWCs in recommending potential accommodations for specific environments.

SUMMARY

AOTA's Centennial Vision foresees a profession with a diverse workforce, embracing and including practitioners and students with disabilities. A collaborative approach with open communication, knowledge, and creative problem solving are hallmarks of occupational therapy practice, and they will go a long way toward facilitating the success of fieldwork students with disabilities who will soon become successful practitioners. ■

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