

Stepping into the Fieldwork Educator Role

Benefits and Valued Supports

Debra Hanson

Fieldwork educators provide a vital contribution to the education of future occupational therapy practitioners. Their perspectives on the value of working with Level II fieldwork students can encourage those who have not yet stepped into the fieldwork educator role. Research documenting the motivations and perspectives of Level II fieldwork educators can inform the efforts of academic programs as they partner with fieldwork sites to provide quality learning experiences to students.

Thomas et al. conducted an online survey of 132 individuals in Australia who were either previous, current, or prospective fieldwork supervisors for Level II occupational therapy students.¹ Participants were employed in community settings (54%), community health (23%), mental health (13%), and acute care hospitals (8%). Seventy two percent had previous or current involvement in fieldwork supervision. When asked to rate the benefits associated with providing fieldwork placements, 70% to 74% of respondents rated assessing students for future employment and developing staff supervision and clinical reasoning skills as moderately or very beneficial. Fifty four percent said students played a key role in the employment of occupational therapists at their site, and 56% reported employing former fieldwork students. Asked in an open-ended question to name the top three benefits to working with students, respondents most frequently noted



that students completed projects and developed resources for the site; provided respondents with a sense that they were contributing to the occupational therapy profession; and developed employee assets at the site such as supervision, clinical reasoning, and time-management skills. Other reported benefits included student modeling of evidence-based practice, quality improvement and in-service activities, reduced employee workloads, promotion of the occupational therapist role, and opportunities for expanding client programs. Study results demonstrated the "win-win" nature of fieldwork placements, which simultaneously benefit stu-

dents and provide value to the host organization.

Kirke, Layton, and Sim conducted focus groups with 47 therapists practicing in Australia to explore the elements influencing quality in fieldwork education.² Five focus groups were held with fieldwork educators representing medical and community health settings in rural and metropolitan areas. Participants indicated that good university and educator partnerships were enhanced by regular visits to students on fieldwork placement and the provision of support for students with difficulties. Participants said providing free fieldwork educator development was crucial for those who were new to the fieldwork educator role. Regular and clear communication regarding the curriculum and fieldwork program and clear guidelines regarding student and educator expectations were desired to enhance the quality of the students' learning experience. Fieldwork educators preferred working collaboratively with the academic program to design student learning experiences. Tokens of acknowledgment from the academic programs, such as professional development vouchers or other recognition for student work, were appreciated and considered essential to offsetting productivity lost during the student education process.

Using an electronic focus group format, Hanson explored the range of factors considered by fieldwork educators when working with students and academic institutions in the United

States.³ Ten subjects were chosen to participate in two separate focus groups representing pediatric and adult rehabilitation settings. Subjects were located in five different states and represented diverse geographic regions of the country. Results demonstrated that therapists consider the learning experiences available at the facility, staffing patterns, time available to support student supervision, and their relationship with the academic institution when considering Level II student placement requests. Working with students helped therapists stay informed of changes to the profession and provided motivation and an "energy boost" for continued professional development. Therapists appreciated the opportunity to shape the values and skills of potential employees. Study respondents wanted time-efficient support from the academic institution, including periodic updates regarding program expectations, training for the educator role, and continued contact from the academic fieldwork coordinator over the time period of the Level II fieldwork experience. Ongoing communication was identified as essential to the development of reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships between academic and fieldwork settings. ■

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