

Fieldwork: A Road to Employment

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ABSTRACT. While the goal of occupational therapy fieldwork education is to prepare entry level practitioners, over time, it has been linked to various professional concerns including: the graduate's selection of practice area; recruitment practices; and the job market.

In light of these issues and the current changes in the health care arena, the authors explored the relationship between fieldwork and employment of an OT program's graduates. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of fieldwork education for occupational therapists is to prepare the student to be a competent entry-level practitioner through development of practical knowledge and interpersonal skills (Hays, 1996). Several potential benefits of fieldwork education have

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been identified. These include the economic benefit generated from the student providing patient treatment (Shalik, 1987), the sharing of knowledge between the academic and the clinical community, and the mentoring of a potential employee.

While fieldwork students focus on meeting their fieldwork educational objectives, they work towards their long-term goal: employment. Having a natural opportunity to observe management, staff, and client interactions, students become aware of their fieldwork placement as a work environment, and may view the setting as a potential place of employment. This article examines the relationship between fieldwork placement and employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recognizing the importance of fieldwork in the profession, many academicians, clinicians and students have studied the relationship between fieldwork and employment. Christie, Joyce and Moeller (1985) found that the Level 2 fieldwork experience is very influential in a student's choice of practice area with the supervisor having the greatest impact. Motivated by the concern for a decline in occupational therapists practicing in mental health, Wittman, Swinehart, Cahill and St. Michel (1989) studied occupational therapist's choice of specialty area. While their results indicated that the Level 1 fieldwork experience had a negative influence and Level 2 fieldwork experience had a positive influence on specialty choice, students identified volunteer work experience, specifically supervisors and patient caseload, as having the most influence on specialty choice. In a similar study, Ezersky, Havazelet, Scott, and Zettler (1989) found that the fieldwork experience strongly influenced student's attraction to all four specialty areas (geriatrics, physical dysfunction; mental health and pediatrics). The authors concluded that the most influential factors determining specialty choice were: a positive fieldwork experience, the sense of effectiveness in the specialty area, and the perception of employment opportunities.

The factors that influence specialty choice, i.e., a good relationship with the supervisor, effectiveness in caseload, and availability of a job, may also influence a student's decision to apply for a job at an assigned fieldwork site. Tickle-Degnen (1998) found that the development of positive collegial relationships contributed to success on fieldwork: It follows that a student-supervisor relationship based on mutual respect; professional development; and a commitment to occupational therapy

provides a basis for continuing the relationship when the student's rotation ends—and ultimately may prompt a job offer from the fieldwork site.

With the manpower shortage in the mid-80s to late 90s, many cried out for more occupational therapy programs to be developed and for present programs to increase enrollment. Employers quickly recognized students as a recruitment source to fill open positions. Student fieldwork programs and scholarships were identified as effective methods of recruitment. A survey on recruitment strategies found that 82.8% of occupational therapy directors responding to the survey use student internships as a means of recruitment (Smith, Schiller, Grant, & Sachs, 1995). Demonstrating this potential benefit of fieldwork, with associated benefit of reduced orientation and training costs, Okerlund, Jackson, Parsons, and Comsa (1995) found that 23% of respondents to a survey on recruitment and retention stated they obtained employment at the site where they completed their fieldwork.

Stokebrand, Blackman, Madigan, and Cash (1996) and Whitworth (1994) advocated scholarship programs, with tuition and stipends, to attract occupational therapists to work in a specific area of practice. As part of their recruitment strategies, many employers even offered students preemployment agreements which gave students financial support in return for the student's agreement to work for the employer upon graduation. With the intensity and competition of these recruitment strategies, to recognizing various professional, legal, and ethical issues involved in student-employer negotiations of pre-employment agreements, Perry and Crist (1994) offered strategies to ensure responsible interactions among facilities, occupational therapy students, and academic settings.

What a difference a few years makes! During the turbulent years of health care reform, occupational therapists had to adapt to changes both in practice settings and the job market. As terms such as the Perspective Payment System (PPS), Health Maintenance Organization (HMO), and Minimal Data Set (MDS) became integrated into our vocabulary, registered occupational therapists and certified occupational therapy assistants became increasingly concerned about the quality of patient care as well as their own jobs. These issues were soon intertwined with others including Medicare fraud and controversial recruitment patterns. With the increased number of occupational therapy educational programs and students and the need for "line of sight" supervision in some practice settings, occupational therapy educators incorporated another term into our vocabulary: "fieldwork crisis."

The fieldwork crisis challenged administrators and fieldwork educators to weigh the pros and cons of a fieldwork program. The potential benefits of a fieldwork program (i.e., the mentoring of a potential employee, the students' contribution of enthusiasm, new knowledge and skill to the affiliation site, and the relationship between the school and the fieldwork site) had to be weighed against the potential disadvantages (i.e., additional efforts needed to ensure the students and student program complied with the onslaught of local, state and national regulations, a possible decline in the facility's productivity standards, and liability issues).

At the same time, the fieldwork crisis challenged academicians to find appropriate fieldwork placements under the supervision of competent clinicians. Creative academicians, clinicians and students have begun to meet the challenge: Hubbard (2000) developed fieldwork experiences involving remote supervision at non-OT sites in rural and medically underserved areas of South Texas. Diffendal (1999) described a unique program which allowed a student to work in an administrative capacity three days per week and in a psychiatric hospital twice per week. Finally, Kramer, Martin and Knis (2000) provided a student's perspective on an innovative split-level II psychosocial fieldwork experience. Since 1996, Nova Southeastern University's Occupational Therapy Program has worked closely with the traditional and innovative fieldwork sites to develop strategies to meet the fieldwork crisis. Overall, our strategies were successful with a few students reporting jobs being created for them. This generated interest in a study of the relationship between fieldwork and employment. We wanted to track our graduates' employment status to find out how many graduates obtained employment where they had completed level one and or level two fieldwork.

STUDY

A study was completed at Nova Southeastern University (NSU) in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida to determine if there is a relationship between students' fieldwork placements and their employment upon graduation. The study included the alumni from the five graduated classes of NSU's entry-level master's degree program in occupational therapy (i.e., all graduates from NSU master's program since its inception in 1994).

Fieldwork is an integral part of NSU's two and one-half year program with students required to complete 10 months of fieldwork ex-

perience. NSU students complete four, 3½ weeks Level 1 rotations (full-time) and two, Level 2 affiliations. This amount of time provides ample opportunity for students to gain practical skills and develop professional relationships which may ultimately lead to employment at an assigned fieldwork site.

During the two and one-half years of the program, the academic fieldwork coordinator tracks the students' fieldwork placements. After students graduated, attempts were made to contact them to find out if they obtained employment, including per diem, part-time, or full-time. If they obtained employment, graduates were asked to indicate if the employment was obtained at the same site where they completed either a Level 1 and/or Level 2 affiliation. Graduates from the first four classes were surveyed by phone, e-mail, U.S. mail, personal contact, fellow students and employers. Information was obtained from April 1997 through November 2000.

Table 1 shows the percentage of NSU graduates who obtained employment at their fieldwork sites. The percentage ranged from 11.7% to 36% for an average of 21.5% for all four graduating classes.

DISCUSSION

Fieldwork sites have employed an average of 21.5% of NSU graduates from the four surveyed graduating classes. In spite of a decrease in the number of jobs available in recent years, this percentage is consistent with the study by Okerlund et al. (1995), completed during a time of manpower shortage. This suggests that fieldwork continues to foster collegial relationships and develop opportunities for employment.

In order to maintain this positive relationship, occupational therapists must continue to monitor fieldwork students placed in innovative fieldwork settings, and provide educational workshops to meet the needs of fieldwork educators (Westfall & Splinter, 1999). Clearly, we are already headed in this direction. Recent publications reflect the profession's interest in innovative fieldwork settings which provide opportunities to create new practice arenas for occupational therapists and new jobs (Sullivan & Finlayson, 2000).

In summary, fieldwork placements, both traditional practice and innovative, have the potential to provide employment opportunities. Whether this situation is created by the employer's recruitment efforts or the potential employee's ability to demonstrate his or her skills and develop collegial relationships, or both, the bottom line is the same. Al-

TABLE 1. Percentage of Graduates Obtaining Employment at Fieldwork Site

Employment Status	Class of 1997 (N = 43)	Class of 1998 (N = 68)	Class of 1999 (N = 36)	Class of 2000 (N = 72)	Total (N = 219)
Employed at Level 1 and/or Level 2 site	23.3% (n = 10)	11.7% (n = 8)	36% (n = 13)	22.2% (n = 16)	21.5% (n = 47)
Employed at other than Level 1 or Level 2 site	67.4% (n = 29)	67.6% (n = 46)	36% (n = 13)	29.2% (n = 21)	49.8% (n = 109)
Unemployed or Status/ Place of Employment Unknown	9.3% (n = 4)	20.7% (n = 14)	28% (n = 10)	48.6% (n = 35)	28.7% (n = 63)

though in recent years the pendulum has swung from a seller's (employee) market to a buyer's (employer) market, the U.S. Department of Labor (2001) continues to predict the need for qualified occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants, with employment increasing somewhere between 21% to 35% in the next eight years. This prediction coupled with new jobs being created by emerging areas of practice suggests the pendulum has the potential to swing back quickly. Preliminary reports from NSU's graduating class of 2001 suggests that the prediction will come true. Let us be prepared!

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