

Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Education: Value and Purpose

The purpose of fieldwork education is to propel each generation of occupational therapy practitioners from the role of student to that of practitioner. Through the fieldwork experience, future occupational therapy practitioners achieve competence in applying the occupational therapy process and using evidence-based interventions to meet the occupational needs of a diverse client population. Fieldwork experiences may occur in a variety of practice settings, including medical, educational, research, administrative, and community-based programs. Moreover, fieldwork placements also present the opportunity to introduce occupational therapy services to new and emerging practice environments.

Fieldwork experiences constitute an integral part of the occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant education curricula. Through fieldwork education, students learn to apply theoretical and scientific principles learned from their academic programs and to address actual client needs within the context of authentic practice environments. During fieldwork experiences, each student develops competency in the occupational therapy process to ascertain clients' occupational performance needs, to identify supports or barriers affecting health and participation, and to document interventions provided. Fieldwork education also provides opportunities for the student to develop advocacy, leadership, interprofessional education, and managerial skills in a variety of practice settings while incorporating principles of evidence-based practice and client-centered care. Finally, students develop a professional identity as an occupational therapy practitioner, aligning their professional judgments and decisions with the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) Standards of Practice (AOTA, 2021) and the Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics (AOTA, 2020).

As students proceed through their fieldwork experiences, performance expectations become progressively more challenging. *Level I fieldwork* experiences occur concurrently with academic coursework, and the goal is to “introduce students to the fieldwork experience, to apply knowledge to practice, and to develop understanding of the needs of clients” (AOTA, 2018, p. 63). Moreover, Level I is designed to enrich “didactic coursework through directed observation and participation in selected aspects of the occupational therapy process” (AOTA, 2018, p. 64).

Level II fieldwork experiences occur at or near the conclusion of the didactic phase of occupational therapy curricula and are designed to “develop competent, entry-level, generalist practitioners” (AOTA, 2018, p. 65). Level II fieldwork features “in-depth experience(s) in delivering occupational therapy services to clients, focusing on the application of purposeful and meaningful occupation” (AOTA, 2018, p. 65). For the occupational therapist student, there is an additional exposure to “research, administration, and management of occupational therapy services” (AOTA, 2018, p. 65). Students should be

“exposed to a variety of clients across the lifespan and to a variety of settings” (AOTA, 2018, p. 65).

The value of fieldwork transcends the obvious benefits directed toward the student. Supervising students enhances fieldwork educators’ own professional development by providing exposure to current practice trends, evidence-based practice, and research. Moreover, the experience of fieldwork supervision is recognized by the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy and many state regulatory boards as a legitimate venue for achieving continuing competency requirements for occupational therapy practitioners.

Another benefit to fieldwork sites that sponsor a fieldwork education program is the recruitment of qualified occupational therapy personnel. Through the responsibilities expected during Level II fieldwork, occupational therapy staff and administration are given the opportunity for an in-depth view of a student’s potential as a future employee. In turn, an active fieldwork program allows the student, as a potential employee, to view firsthand the agency’s commitment to the professional growth of its occupational therapy personnel and to determine the fit of their professional goals with agency goals. The fieldwork program also creates a progressive,

state-of-the-art image to the professional community, consumers, and other external audiences through its partnership with the academic programs.

In summary, fieldwork education is an essential bridge between academic education and authentic occupational therapy practice. Through the collaboration between academic fieldwork coordinators and fieldwork educators, students are provided the opportunity to achieve the competencies necessary to meet the present and future occupational needs of individuals, groups, and, indeed, society as a whole.

References

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