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Fee-for-Placement in Level II Fieldwork: Prevalence and Context

Abstract

Occupational therapy (OT) education has utilized fieldwork experiences to develop professional identity and clinical competency of entry-level OT practitioners since 1923. Level II OT fieldwork is viewed as a necessary and valuable experience by students, clinicians, and academicians. Despite the significant role fieldwork has in the formation of the future workforce, some educational programs report a shortage of OT fieldwork placement sites and the emergence of fee-for-placement fieldwork sites. The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence and context of fee-for-placement for Level II OT fieldwork in the United States. Investigators surveyed master's and doctoral level OT programs to examine their experience with requests for fee-for-placement fieldwork sites. The response rate was 32% (58 of 128 programs). Approximately two-thirds (67%, n=38) of respondents reported a decrease in number of Level II placement reservations. Eighty-two percent of programs reported encountering sites who requested fee-for-placement and almost half (43%, n=25) anticipated this trend to increase in the future. The majority of programs (89%, n=52) indicated they avoid placing students at fieldwork sites who charge for placement. The observed trend in fee-for-placement fieldwork may affect OT education by yielding significant implications related to finances, selection and placement processes, and compliance with professional values and ethics for programs and students. The concerns raised by the respondents may warrant a profession-wide consensus and direction toward addressing fieldwork shortages and fee-for-placements.

Keywords

Fieldwork, clinical education, academic fieldwork

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Fee-for-Placement in Level II Fieldwork: Prevalence and Context

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ABSTRACT

Occupational therapy (OT) education has utilized fieldwork experiences to develop professional identity and clinical competency of entry-level OT practitioners since 1923. Level II OT fieldwork is viewed as a necessary and valuable experience by students, clinicians, and academicians. Despite the significant role fieldwork has in the formation of the future workforce, some educational programs report a shortage of OT fieldwork placement sites and the emergence of fee-for-placement fieldwork sites. The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence and context of fee-for-placement for Level II OT fieldwork in the United States. Investigators surveyed master's and doctoral level OT programs to examine their experience with requests for fee-for-placement fieldwork sites. The response rate was 32% (58 of 128 programs). Approximately two-thirds (67%, n=38) of respondents reported a decrease in number of Level II placement reservations. Eighty-two percent of programs reported encountering sites who requested fee-for-placement and almost half (43%, n=25) anticipated this trend to increase in the future. The majority of programs (89%, n=52) indicated they avoid placing students at fieldwork sites who charge for placement. The observed trend in fee-for-placement fieldwork may affect OT education by yielding significant implications related to finances, selection and placement processes, and compliance with professional values and ethics for programs and students. The concerns raised by the respondents may warrant a profession-wide consensus and direction toward addressing fieldwork shortages and fee-for-placements.

Introduction

Structured and guided clinical learning experiences have been an important aspect in the education of health professional students for more than a century, utilizing hands-on learning environments to tie theory to practice. From medical students completing clerkships and residencies to occupational therapy (OT) students completing fieldwork, hands-on learning has been a vital part of preparing novice health professionals to enter their respective workforces to care for the health needs of the public. The three-month fieldwork has been a part of OT education since 1923 (Presseller, 1983). As the profession of OT evolved over the past 96 years, the length of fieldwork requirements changed. Since 1973, the length of Level II fieldwork has been six months (Presseller, 1983).

Beyond being integral to the development of technical skills, fieldwork is a time when OT students develop their professional identity, are exposed to different practice settings, and learn about the leadership, advocacy, and management aspects of practice (Brzykcy et al., 2016). The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) Commission on Education (Brzykcy et al., 2016) defined the purpose of fieldwork as a time "...to propel each generation of occupational therapy practitioners from the role of student to that of practitioner" (p. 1). While academicians and clinicians agree that fieldwork is an important clinical 'rite of passage' within the profession, there is a chronic and ever-growing concern about the shortage of fieldwork site availability. Shortages of fieldwork placements have been studied in the past. Shortages have been attributed to trends such as growth in the number of OT educational programs, changes in healthcare reimbursement, and practitioners' increased productivity demands (Casares et al., 2003; Missiuna et al., 1992; Ozelie et al., 2015; Ozelie et al., 2018). Occupational therapy program enrollment has increased - growing from approximately 4,000 students enrolled in 37 programs in 1970 to approximately 21,000 students enrolled in 188 OT programs in 2018 (AOTA, 2018; Casares et al., 2003).

Despite the growth trend of enrolled OT students over the past 10 years (AOTA, 2018), it is perplexing to hypothesize why there is a shortage of fieldwork site availability, considering the increase in number of OT practitioners in the workforce. Casares et al. (2003) surveyed fieldwork educators (FWEs) and academic fieldwork coordinators (AFWCs) to understand their perceptions about fieldwork placement opportunities. While both groups unanimously agreed that fieldwork education is valuable to the profession of OT, there was concern from both educators and coordinators related to a decrease in available fieldwork placements (Casares et al., 2003). Although the researchers found agreement among AFWCs and FWEs recognizing a reduction of placements, the groups differed in their reasoning for the reduction (Casares et al., 2003). The AFWCs believed that: (1) the sheer number of clients treated keep practitioners too busy with little to no time for supervision of fieldwork students and (2) lack of reimbursement for student services were primary factors that reduced placement availability. The FWEs attributed the reduction to increased demands and expectations placed on clinicians, and they were linked to a lower quality of the fieldwork experience for students (Casares et al., 2003).

Barton et al. (2013) studied the role strain of OT fieldwork educators. They found that role overload was the most frequently cited factor contributing to role strain. Barton et al. (2013) defined role overload as, "...when there is not enough time for an individual to meet all of the requirements of a specific role" (p. 326). Their study suggested that role strain is most common when there is a feeling of dissonance with having enough time to provide quality patient care and simultaneously providing the quality supervision to students on fieldwork. Varland et al. (2017) identified work stress, role strain, fear of having a difficult student, and limited resources and support from academic institutions as contributing factors for deciding whether or not to accept a fieldwork student. All of role strain is further complicated by clinicians filling multiple administrative, leadership and personal roles, leading to additional role strain and overload (Barton et al., 2013; Varland et al., 2017).

A paucity of literature exists in the health professions regarding fee-for-placement of students during required clinical experiences. Nurse practitioners (NPs) are compensated for patient care, but typically they neither receive pay nor adjustments in their productivity expectations for the time spent teaching nursing students on clinicals (Gardenier et al., 2019). One study of community preceptors in medicine indicated that preceptors were either directly paid (i.e., financial rewards to preceptors) or indirectly paid (i.e., payment awarded to the health system/clinic; Christner et al., 2018). Fee-for-placement structures included a fixed amount per student, a fixed amount for a specific period and a periodic stipend. Cited unintentional consequences of financial remuneration for clinical educators include: the debut of companies that broker student clinical placements without external oversight, bidding wars among schools to obtain clinical education sites, and placement costs passed onto students that increase student debt and potential decreases in the diversity of students enrolling in such programs (Gardenier et al., 2019). Medical educators in community practices indicated that payment for teaching students on clinicals was perceived positively and associated with recruiting and retaining clinical educators. Additionally, the paid community educators noted that payment for their clinical education efforts demonstrated the importance of clinical education and that schools were able to choose high quality sites for students (Christner et al., 2018). No literature was identified that addressed fee-for-placement of occupational therapy students.

The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence and context of fee-for-placement in OT Level II fieldwork and its impact on academic programs in the US.

Method

Research Design

A survey design was selected for this study because it allowed for data collection from a broad sample in an efficient manner (Dillman et al., 2009). The study was approved and conducted in accordance with the university's institutional review board. Participants consented to their participation in the study by completing and submitting an online survey.

Participants

An email including a cover letter and the survey's URL link was sent to the program directors of entry-level master's and doctoral OT programs as listed on the AOTA's webpage. Program directors were asked to forward the invitation to participate in the study to the person who was primarily responsible for placing students in Level II fieldwork.

Data Collection Procedures

The survey questionnaire was used to collect data from faculty members who were responsible for placing students on Level II fieldwork in entry-level master's and doctoral OT programs. Participants received an email cover letter describing the purpose of the study and the URL to the survey that was powered by Qualtrics. The survey was open for six weeks. Three reminders were sent to participants who did not respond to the initial survey.

The survey was developed by the authors based on a literature review. The 21-item questionnaire collected data about program demographics and context, prevalence and location of fee-for-placement fieldwork sites, and perceptions of two-year trends in fieldwork placement.

Results

Fifty-eight of 182 programs were represented in the responses for a response rate of 32% (see Table 1). Of the programs that responded to the survey, 72.5% (n=42) offered a master's degree and 27.5% (n=16) offered an entry-level doctorate degree in OT. Reported enrollment in the programs ranged from 25 to 260 students. Participant programs were located in 28 different states.

Table 1

Program Demographics (N=58)

Degree Level	Master's degree n=42 (72.5%) Doctoral degree n=16 (27.5%)
States Represented	Midwest (IL, IN, IA, MI, MN, MO, OH, SD, WI) n=16 (27.6%) Northeast (MA, ME, NJ, NY, PA) n=19 (32.8%) South (AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, TN, AZ, OK, TX) n=18 (31%) West (CO, CA, WA) n=5 (8.6%)

Current level of difficulty in placing students in Level II fieldwork sites was reported as: extremely difficult (8%, n=4), somewhat difficult (51%, n=26), neither easy nor difficult (16%, n=8), somewhat easy (23%, n=11), and extremely easy (4%, n=2). More than half (56%, n=32) of the programs reported being a member of a fieldwork consortium. Respondents reported a range from 6 to over 1000 active Level II fieldwork affiliation agreements. Of programs' active agreements, most sites were located within a 25-mile radius of the educational institution. International placements comprised the fewest active contracts for Level II fieldwork sites.

In the past two years, respondents reported the average Level II fieldwork placements in a calendar year to range from 2 to 334. Respondents indicated that the trend in the past two years regarding their respective institution's agreements with fee-for-placement level II fieldwork as increasing (43%, n=24), no change (53%, n=30) and decreasing (4%, n=2). Most programs have encountered sites or corporations that charge for level II fieldwork student placement (82%, n=46). Similarly, most programs avoided placement at sites who charged a fee (89%, n=52). Respondents indicated that all states have sites that charged for level II placements except for North Dakota and South Dakota. Corporate owned health entities were cited as the general context of sites that charged for placement (92%, n=44).

When students are placed in Level II fieldwork sites that charged for placement, fees were paid by the student (28%, n=9), from the respective academic program budget (16%, n=5) or included in the student's tuition (3%, n=1). The reported fee for a Level II fieldwork payment ranged from \$250 to \$1,500.

Participants were asked about the past two-year trend and Level II fieldwork placement. The majority (67%, n=33) reported their respective program had experienced a decrease in reservations for Level II fieldwork placements. Approximately a third of the respondents indicated their placement slots had been affected by sites that charged (31%, n=15). Respondents were asked to speculate about the prevalence of sites charging for Level II fieldwork placement in the next 10 years. The majority of respondents (67%, n=33) believed there will be an increase in the number of sites charging for student placement. The majority (68%, n=40) of respondents indicated that OT programs should not expect sites to charge for Level II placement.

Participants were given the opportunity to provide comments, concerns and thoughts in relation to sites that charge for Level II placement. Similar comments were grouped together, and four categories emerged (see Table 2). Respondents indicated many programs and consortiums have agreed not to place students in fee-for-placement sites. Fee-for-placement sites may experience vacant positions without the presence of students who are often prospective employees. Practitioners should advocate against fee-for-placement fieldworks. Participants also responded that some sites charge an administrative fee to place students.

Table 2*Comments about Sites that Charge for Level II Fieldwork Placement*

- Many academic programs and consortiums have made an agreement not to place any students in sites that charge for placement.
- Charging for student placement can potentially have a negative effect on recruiting for vacant positions.
- Occupational therapy practitioners should advocate to their employers not to charge for placement. Practitioners should view mentoring as a professional duty.
- Some sites are charging a small administrative fee (e.g., \$100) to place students.

Discussion

Overall, more than half of OT programs who participated in the survey reported difficulty placing Level II students while experiencing a decrease in the number of slot reservations and an increase in the number of fee-for-placement requests. As the profession is anticipating growth in the number of OT programs and students in the United States, the percentage of existing OT programs that report challenges in placing Level II students is alarming. Most programs rely on clinical sites for Level II placements within 25 miles of their respective geographic region. Educational programs that are close in proximity to one another may face additional challenges in securing enough fieldwork sites for their students.

The majority of respondents reported encountering sites or corporations that charge for Level II student placement; a pattern respondents anticipated to increase in the future. While the sentiment against fee-for-placement sites from the respondents is clear, the perceived shortage of Level II placements may pose some OT programs to be more susceptible to placing students at fee-for-placements sites. The profession of OT is encouraged to consider the implications related to finances, policies and procedures, and issues of conflict-of-interest that may emerge in anticipation of this trend.

The rising cost of education is a prevalent concern for all healthcare professions including the profession of OT (Bai, 2017; Cain et al., 2014; Jette, 2016). Incurring charges up to \$1,500 from fee-for-placement requests in addition to tuition and fees may lead to higher debt loads for OT students. As observed from medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy professions, mounting student debt can lead to negative consequences including jeopardized financial health, career decisions, and recruitment and enrollment of prospective students (Bai, 2017; Brown, 2013; Jette, 2016; Tepper, 2014). Also, placing only a selected number of students in clinical sites that charge fees may lead to discrepancies in student experience as related to financial burden and benefits.

While many OT programs and consortiums avoid clinical sites that charge for student placement, there are no formal policies and guidelines established to advise students, programs, and clinical sites in the existing OT fieldwork education policies (Amini & Gupta, 2018; Brayman et al., 2014). Further reflection, evaluation, and discussion on the topics of financial liabilities, student selection and placement processes, and compliance with professional values and standards are recommended to assist all

stakeholders to effectively and collaboratively navigate on the changing landscape of OT fieldwork education. Specifically, the concerns raised by OT programs in the current study may warrant profession-wide consensus and direction toward addressing fieldwork shortages and fee-for-placement practice; developing strategies to curtail this emerging trend. The profession's pronounced stance and commitment to fulfilling the professional duty of nurturing OT fieldwork students may positively contribute to addressing the alarming shortage of slot reservations and increasing fee-for-placement requests.

Such a call for action is timely and appropriate since fee-for-placement practice may manifest in issues of conflict-of-interest. According to Estes (2016), OT programs must ethically resist the temptation to place students in suboptimal settings based on convenience, availability, and pressure to meet requirements. If site reservations can be secured from simply making payments, especially during challenging periods of low supply of available sites, efforts to secure best fieldwork placement and experience for OT students may be compromised for convenience. For clinical sites that charge for placement, significant ethical concerns emerge as related to providing accurate appraisal of student performance and managing special circumstances of student withdrawal or failure; clinical sites may perceive the continued supply of fieldwork students as desirable for financial benefits. Finally, there may be perceived discrepancies in fieldwork experience and performance evaluation outcomes when OT students and their peers are placed for paid fieldwork experience in comparison to non-paid fieldwork experience. Overall, there is a compelling need for the profession of OT to take a clear stance and action to address the emerging practice of paid fieldwork placements.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study had three primary limitations. First, the survey was not piloted on any programs. It was developed and reviewed by the research team. Second, the survey results indicate a snapshot in time and the state of payment for fieldwork may be different since the study's conclusion. The third limitation is related to the response rate. The majority of occupational therapy programs are not represented in the respondents; thus, the results are only generalizable to the programs who responded to the survey.

Future research should be focused on a longitudinal tracking of the status of payment for fieldwork. Longitudinal reports would identify trends and inform action that may be warranted by OT programs. Research that focuses on the direct and indirect costs of fieldwork from the perspectives of academic programs and students would be valuable to conduct. Such results would help inform current and prospective students on the true cost of fieldwork components in their education.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

The results of this study have implications on OT education. With the increase in OT programs and the reported difficulty in obtaining Level II Fieldwork placements, it is suggested that the profession as a whole discuss best practices in placing students in

quality fieldwork sites. As part of the discussion, it is imperative to understand the context of both fieldwork educators and academic programs when attempting to select sites and place students in Level II experiences.

The opportunities to increase Level II fieldwork capacity may be improved by developing strategies to overcome contextual barriers and constraints faced by practitioners. Likewise, training opportunities for future fieldwork educators should be evaluated for their accessibility and affordability to practitioners and managers. In the training, the benefits of being a fieldwork educator should be emphasized and strategies should be offered to counteract employment sites that do not want fieldwork students or want to charge for placement.

Conclusion

This study examined the prevalence and context of fee-for-placement for Level II OT fieldwork in the United States. Respondents (67%, n=39) reported a decrease in the number of reservations for Level II fieldwork. They also reported encountering sites that requested a fee-for-placement (82%, n=47). While 43% (n=25) anticipated the fee-for-placement trend to increase, the majority (89%, n=52) stated they avoid placing students at fieldwork sites that request a placement fee. The fee-for-placement context may warrant the profession to further address fieldwork shortages and fee-for-placements.

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