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## Fieldwork Educators' Perceptions of the Revised Fieldwork Performance Evaluation

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## Fieldwork Educators' Perceptions of the Revised Fieldwork Performance Evaluation

### Abstract

The American Occupational Therapy Association's Fieldwork Performance Evaluation plays a vital role in occupational therapy education by guiding students and fieldwork educators in determining students' entry-level competence. This evaluation tool dates to 1953 and has undergone numerous revisions as the profession evolved and changes were made to the practice framework. Revisions have included changes to the stated purpose of the evaluation tool, items to be scored, scoring scale, and number of items on the tool. The purpose of this study was to survey Academic Fieldwork Coordinators (AFCs) to examine their perceptions of the 2020 revision of the evaluation. We surveyed 68 AFCs in occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs. The majority had positive perceptions of the changes to the tool. The American Occupational Therapy Association, academic programs, and fieldwork sites should consider the findings of this study to help ensure effective and accurate evaluation of future students.

### Keywords

Occupational therapy, occupational therapy assistant, educational fieldwork

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## Fieldwork Educators' Perceptions of the Revised Fieldwork Performance Evaluation

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### ABSTRACT

The American Occupational Therapy Association's Fieldwork Performance Evaluation plays a vital role in occupational therapy education by guiding students and fieldwork educators in determining students' entry-level competence. This evaluation tool dates to 1953 and has undergone numerous revisions as the profession evolved and changes were made to the practice framework. Revisions have included changes to the stated purpose of the evaluation tool, items to be scored, scoring scale, and number of items on the tool. The purpose of this study was to survey Academic Fieldwork Coordinators (AFWCs) to examine their perceptions of the 2020 revision of the evaluation. We surveyed 68 AFWCs in occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs. The majority had positive perceptions of the changes to the tool. The American Occupational Therapy Association, academic programs, and fieldwork sites should consider the findings of this study to help ensure effective and accurate evaluation of future students.

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Level II fieldwork in occupational therapy (OT) education has long been a cornerstone of the academic experience. Fieldwork allows students to apply and evaluate knowledge and skills in real life situations. Proper evaluation of students in their Level II fieldwork is necessary to ensure that a student meets the standards of an entry level practitioner. Improper or inaccurate feedback and evaluation may leave a student unsure of how they are doing and unaware of performance areas that need to be improved. It may also lead to a false sense of accomplishment, with a student believing they are mastering entry level skills when, in reality, they are not.

The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) requires that programs have a mechanism by which formal evaluation of Level II fieldwork is carried out (ACOTE, 2018). Although equivalent evaluation tools can be used, most programs in the United States utilize the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTA) Fieldwork Performance Evaluation (FWPE) for this purpose. The FWPE is now in its second, or revised, edition and is organized into the following areas of practice: Fundamentals of practice, basic tenets of OT, screening and evaluation, intervention, management of OT services, communication, and professional behaviors (AOTA, 2020a, 2020b).

### **Literature Review**

AOTA has used a standardized evaluation tool for the assessment of student performance on clinical rotations, or fieldwork, since the 1950s. The Report of Performance in Student Affiliation appears to be the very first fieldwork evaluation tool, which was released in 1953 and used until 1974. In 1973, the Fieldwork Performance Report was released and was widely used until 1987. In 1987, AOTA released the Fieldwork Evaluation Form for the Occupational Therapist, a 51-item evaluation with a five-point rating scale (Crist & Cooper, 1988). This evaluation tool was used for 15 years until the first version of the FWPE was released in 2002. The FWPE consisted of two versions, one for the OT student (OTS) and another for the OT assistant student (OTAS; AOTA, 2002a, 2002b). In 2020, the FWPE was updated. This version contained some significant changes from the previous edition and was also the first fieldwork evaluation tool to be released as an electronic document using an online platform.

Updates to the evaluation tool have been necessary due to changes in practice, education standards, and expectations of practitioners. Other goals for the changes to the tool have been to aid in the scoring and interpretation of the tool and to update wording to facilitate clarity and understanding, reducing the number of items on the evaluation, and reducing the length of items to decrease time spent on the evaluation tool (Cooper, 1985; Cooper & Crist, 1988; Preissner et al., 2020).

In 2015, an AOTA task force submitted recommended changes to the 2002 version of the FWPE, which was aligned with the 1998 ACOTE standards and the first edition of the OTPF (AOTA, 2002a, 2002b). Recommendations from the task force were then passed to a research team to validate the changes and make further recommendations. The research team used cognitive interviewing methods with a sample of fieldwork educators (FWE) and Academic Fieldwork Coordinators (AFWCs) to identify any problematic items that were included in the proposed changes. The research team identified areas of refinement which included changes to the rating scale as well as updated items on both the OT and OTA forms (Preissner et al., 2020). The previous rating scale was a four-point scale with the top score listed as "exceeds standards," and specified that this should only include the "top 5% of students." AFWCs reported that this rating was overused and therefore contradicted the top 5% designation. Based on recommendations from the task force, the research team redesigned the rating scale with "Exemplary," as the top score followed by "Proficient," "Emerging," and "Unsatisfactory." The research team summarized all their refinements to the evaluation

tool into seven categories: wording and features of the proposed rating scale, improving relevance to diverse settings, elimination of redundant items, reduction of long item statements, elimination of multiple barreled item statements, better alignment between the OTS and OTAS items, and better alignment with current practice documents (Preissner et al., 2020).

Participants in the cognitive interviews reported that some items on the proposed FWPE were not relevant to the specific setting in which they practiced. Because of this report, some items on the revised version were updated to include additional examples that were more relevant to a broad range of practice areas (Preissner et al., 2020). For example, the revised version added client needs, concerns about occupational performance, practice context, funding sources and cultural relevance as client factors to consider during screening and evaluation. The addition of these examples was intended to assist FWEs in a broad range of practice areas to connect a student's clinical skills to the items on the FWPE. The research team also identified items that overlapped, or were redundant, and eliminated these to reduce the amount of time it takes to complete the evaluation, as well as decrease an overemphasis on a particular skill or set of skills (Preissner et al., 2020).

To reduce the number of words in some of the item statements, examples were removed from the item statements. Examples were then listed in parentheses after the item statement. Another strategy utilized to reduce long statements was the elimination of multiple behaviors that were closely related in the same item statement (Preissner et al., 2020).

Aligning the OTS and OTAS versions was also prioritized for this revision. This allowed for consistency between the two versions, with the hope that it will be easier for FWEs who supervise both OT and OTA students. Finally, the task force found it to be important that the revised FWPE be consistent with current practice and education documents at the time of development, specifically the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (OTPF-3) and the latest ACOTE standards (Preissner et al., 2020).

### **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to survey AFWCs about their perceptions of the 2020 revision of the evaluation tool. All study procedures were approved by a university institutional review board. Participants first provided their consent to take part in the survey study.

### **Survey**

A short survey was produced using Qualtrics XM consisting of four sections and eight total questions. To develop the survey, we reviewed both the 2020 FWPE and the 2002 FWPE, as well as documents published by AOTA that outlined the changes. The first section of the survey consisted of four questions specifically related to the changes in the 2020 FWPE rating scale, scoring, and items, as well as overall changes. Scoring for these items ranged from 1 ("very poor") to 4 ("very good"). The second section consisted of two questions related to scoring trends at midterm and at final. Scoring for

these items ranged from 1 (“much lower”) to 5 (“much higher”). The third section consisted of one item asking if AFWCs thought there should be a suggested midterm score. Scoring for this item ranged from 1 (“definitely not”) to 5 (“definitely yes”). The final section contained one item that asked AFWCs to compare how accurately the revised evaluation reflected student performance as compared to the previous version. Scoring for this item ranged from 1 (“definitely not”) to 5 (“definitely yes”). The survey was distributed to participants via the AFWC listserv. The survey was anonymous and demographic items asked participants about their time in the AFWC role and if they were from an OTA or OT program (see Table 1 for survey questions).

### Results

We surveyed 68 AFWCs in OT ( $n = 34$ , 50%) and OTA ( $n = 34$ , 50%) programs (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Most of the sample had been in the AFWC role for less than five years ( $n = 45$ , 66%). Most participants rated the overall changes to the FWPE as “good” ( $n = 41$ , 60%) or “very good” ( $n = 20$ , 29%), with few rating the changes as “poor” ( $n = 7$ , 10%). Most participants also thought the new version of the FWPE accurately reflected students' Level II fieldwork performance ( $n = 41$ , 60%).

**Table 1**

#### *OT and OTA Combined Survey Results*

Survey Results – OT and OTA Combined					
<i>Survey Item</i>	<i>Very Poor</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Very Good</i>	
How would you describe the changes in the rating scale?	0.00%	5.88%	52.04%	41.18%	
How would you describe the changes in the FWPE scoring?	0.00%	26.74%	42.65%	30.88%	
How would you describe the changes in the FWPE items?	0.00%	7.35%	58.82%	33.82%	
Overall, how would you rate the changes in the FWPE?	0.00%	10.29%	60.29%	29.41%	
	<i>Much Lower</i>	<i>Slightly Lower</i>	<i>About the Same</i>	<i>Slightly Higher</i>	<i>Much Higher</i>
Compared to the previous version of the FWPE, how do you believe that fieldwork educators are scoring students at midterm?	4.41%	13.24%	38.24%	26.74%	17.65%

	<i>Much Lower</i>	<i>Slightly Lower</i>	<i>About the Same</i>	<i>Slightly Higher</i>	<i>Much Higher</i>
Compared to the previous version of the FWPE, how do you believe that fieldwork educators are scoring students at final?	1.47%	8.82%	47.06%	30.88%	22.76%
	<i>Definitely Not</i>	<i>Probably Not</i>	<i>Might or Might Not</i>	<i>Probably Yes</i>	<i>Definitely Yes</i>
Do you believe there should be a suggested midterm score?	4.41%	7.35%	13.24%	26.47%	48.53%
Compared to the previous version of the FWPE, do you believe that student's scores accurately reflect their performance during Level II Fieldwork?	0.00%	4.41%	35.29%	54.41%	5.88%

After examining the trends in responses, we conducted more substantive analyses to explore differences in perceptions of the FWPE. We first compared the differences between OT and OTA AFWCs. OTA AFWCs ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) were significantly more likely than OT AFWCs ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) to report that they perceived fieldwork educators were scoring students higher at midterm,  $t(66) = 1.85$ ,  $p < .05$ . OTA AFWCs ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) were also significantly more likely than OT AFWCs ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) to report that they perceived fieldwork educators to be scoring students higher overall,  $t(66) = 1.76$ ,  $p < .05$ . Next, we compared differences between AFWCs based on the length of time they had served in the role, categorizing "less experienced" as 5 years (or fewer) in the role, and "more experienced" as 6+ years in the role. More experienced AFWCs ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = .69$ ) were more likely to positively describe the changes in FWPE scoring than less experienced AFWCs ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = .77$ ),  $t(67) = 1.71$ ,  $p < .05$ . More experienced AFWCs ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = .63$ ) were more likely to believe that the updated FWPE more accurately reflected students' Level II fieldwork performance than less experienced AFWCs ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = .66$ ),  $t(65) = 2.34$ ,  $p = .01$ .

### Discussion

Several participants reported they perceived midterm and final scores to be higher on this version of the FWPE. There are multiple factors that might contribute to higher scoring on the evaluation tool. FWEs may lack the necessary training needed to complete the FWPE appropriately. Although resources exist through the AOTA website in the form of self-evaluations and readings, there is no requirement for FWEs to access

and complete these resources unless OT and OTA schools require it prior to taking students. Occupational therapy and OTA practitioners may not be ready for the role of a FWE. Individual fieldwork sites and settings can play a part in preparing their employees for the role of educator, however, FWEs have reported that “accessible fieldwork educator tools, education, and organizational support for the role of fieldwork educator often remain elusive and incongruent across fieldwork settings and facilities” (Karp et al., 2022, p.11). Results also revealed that OTA AFWCs were more likely to perceive higher scores at midterm and at final, but this could simply be because the number of items increased in the revised OTA evaluation, whereas it decreased in the OT evaluation.

Most participants in the survey reported that they would prefer a midterm suggested score. A suggested midterm score, or midterm score rating scale, has appeared and disappeared on the various versions of fieldwork evaluation tools throughout the years. This score guideline was on the 2002 version of the tool and served to rate students as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory at the halfway point of their fieldwork rotation. Although the suggested score is not on the revised tool, FWEs still score students at midterm to help determine what skills or knowledge a student needs to reach entry level competence. It is suggested that FWEs review specific site objectives at midterm rather than relying solely on the midterm score of the FWPE (AOTA, 2002; AOTA, 2020). Not only were final scores perceived to be higher on this version of the FWPE, but midterm scores were also perceived to be higher as well. With no suggested midterm score, FWEs may be lacking a guide, or measuring stick, for their students’ skills and behaviors at this point in the evaluation process. Higher scores at midterm leave little room for growth and improvement by the student, which could potentially cause the student to put forth less effort in the final weeks. However, one reason for eliminating a midterm score that indicated a pass/fail on previous fieldwork evaluations was the increase in the halo effect (Cooper & Crist, 1988).

Overall, changes in the FWPE were received positively. It is unclear through the available literature how the previous versions of fieldwork evaluations were created, but the latest process may serve the profession well as a blueprint for future revisions. A standardized process for revisions of fieldwork evaluations has worked well in Australia since the 1990s. The University of Queensland originally used a modified version of the Fieldwork Performance Report and then used action research methodology to develop the Student Placement Evaluation Form (SPEF) in 1998. Since then, they have used the same methodology to produce the revised SPEF (SPEF-R) and a revision of that tool, the SPEF-R2 (Allison & Turpin, 2004; Caine et al., 2021; Turpin et al., 2011;). Using a consistent methodology has allowed them to produce three evaluations in the span of 24 years. This allows the items on the evaluation to keep pace with changes in the profession and in education. Contrasting to that, AOTA has produced five versions of fieldwork evaluations in the last 70 years. The current FWPE was released with input from the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (OTPF-3), yet the fourth edition of the OTPF was released later that same year. After the development of the Fieldwork Evaluation for the Occupational Therapist, it was recommended that the



evaluation tool be reevaluated every 5 years to ensure that it stays current with clinical practice (Crist & Cooper, 1988). AOTA should consider aligning the timeline of revisions of this tool, as well as other relevant tools and documents, with revisions to the OTPF and the ACOTE standards.

### **Limitations**

This study surveyed AFWCs on their perceptions of the changes in the FWPE. Although AFWCs see and interpret the results from the FWPE, they are not the actual evaluators of the students. Including FWEs in future studies will help to substantiate the findings of this study. This study also used a short survey that targeted broader subjects related to the revision of the FWPE. Questions about more specific changes to the FWPE could yield additional results relevant to this topic. Another limitation to the study is that most participants were new to their role as AFWC. AFWCs with more years of experience may have a different perspective on the changes and a greater sample of them may have yielded different results. The survey was also not piloted before being sent out to participants. Although the survey was vetted by one former and one current AFWC, piloting the survey would help to ensure validity and reliability. Finally, the sample size only included 68 AFWCs out of a possible 460 at the time the survey was distributed.

### **Future Research**

Future research including FWEs in a similar survey would help to further confirm the findings of this study. More research should be completed on the effectiveness of specific fieldwork educator training tools to determine their impact on the evaluation of students. Physical therapy, like OT, has an optional clinical instructor credential course provided through APTA. Studies have determined there to be a positive correlation between the effectiveness of PT instructors and the completion of the course (Dunn et al., 2020). Currently, no such literature exists for the fieldwork educators certificate program provided through AOTA. This version of the FWPE is also the first to be released exclusively in an online platform, Formstack. Future studies should explore if this change in delivery of the evaluation has had any impact on FWEs as they complete the evaluation.

### **Implications for Occupational Therapy Education**

To ensure accurate results on the FWPE, OT and OTA programs should consider providing additional resources to FWEs, especially those who are new. Assessing students and providing accurate feedback can be a challenge to practitioners who are not used to working with students on a regular basis (Hunt & Kennedy-Jones, 2010). FWEs often have a hard time assuming the role of educator and mentor, which makes evaluation of a student more difficult. Although many free resources exist, FWEs have reported a lack of knowledge about their availability (Karp et al., 2022). Because of this, AFWCs have an important role to fill in the preparedness of FWEs to supervise students. Studies have indicated that AFWC communication and availability is one of the most important factors that FWEs have reported as vital to their success in supervising students (Evenson et al., 2015; Karp et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2023; Stutz-Tanenbaum et al., 2015). AFWCs can help FWEs identify training resources through consistent communication prior to fieldwork rotations. Chycinski et al. (2023) found that

implementation of an online learning module helped to improve FWEs' ability to use fieldwork evaluation tools more accurately. Occupational therapy and OTA programs may also consider implementing their own training tools or courses for FWEs that will be supervising students. The FWPE itself states that FWEs should not solely rely on the evaluation tool to determine entry level competence of a student, but that site objectives should also be developed to make this determination (AOTA, 2002a, 2002b, 2020a, 2020b). Likewise, OT consortiums could have an impact on this process by providing training opportunities for its members in fieldwork education.

### Conclusion

AFWCs had positive perceptions of the revisions in the FWPE. Most reported a preference for a suggested midterm score to be added, and many reported that they perceived scores were higher at midterm and final. AOTA, as well as individual programs, should consider trainings for FWEs each time a revision is released to help ensure effective and accurate scoring. Student programs at fieldwork sites should also consider alternate, more objective forms of supervision to reduce issues such as the halo effect. From these findings, it appears that the task force that produced this revision was successful in changing items on the tool that reflect current practice and aligned with other documents. The process by which these revisions were made may serve as a guide for future revisions of the tool to keep it up to date.

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