Benefits for Fieldwork Educators in Working With Students

Debra Hanson

As the demands of working in a health care environment increase, potential fieldwork educators may be tempted to decline extra duties, including supervising students. But clinicians should keep in mind the many benefits that partnering with area educational facilities provide for fieldwork educators and their health care settings.

Fieldwork educators say that fieldwork students prompt occupational therapy staff to stay current with treatment techniques and research related to client care, infuse staff with new energy and enthusiasm for their work, and provide a potential future source for quality employees, among other benefits. J Jensen and Daniel conducted focus groups with occupational therapists in four urban hospitals in Nebraska regarding their reasons for working with students. Fieldwork educators reported that teaching clinical skills to others improved their own clinical reasoning skills. They also reported learning from students’ alternative perspectives and skills that were not common at the facility. Participants acknowledged how easy it is to get into a rut with clients and use the same repertoire of assessments and interventions.

Study results suggest that students may assist fieldwork educators in considering new assessments or interventions that might be of benefit to clients. For example, student assignments might include writing up a description of an assessment tool or a review of research evidence to support an intervention commonly used or being considered for use by a fieldwork site. In addition, the academic fieldwork coordinator is a ready resource to discuss ideas that would fit both the expectations of the fieldwork course and the needs of the health care facility.

A survey by Thomas et al. of 132 fieldwork educators in Australia found that the leading benefit identified in working with students was the potential for future recruitment of quality employees. Fieldwork offered the opportunity for the site to evaluate students for future employment. In addition, through working with students, the supervisors had the opportunity to contribute to developing employee skills such as clinical reasoning and time management. Students’ contributions to the workplace were also highlighted in this study, including providing quality improvement and in-service activities, extending opportunities for program development, and applying research evidence to practice (evidence-based practice). Study participants indicated that students commonly conducted activities such as updating and developing site resources, developing brochures and other materials, searching literature, preparing education sessions, and conducting specific workplace projects.

These benefits can readily be available to fieldwork sites, particularly if potential learning opportunities are identified in advance of a student’s arrival. The academic fieldwork coordinator can assist in tailoring learning opportunities to the appropriate educational level of the student and the learning objectives of the Level I or Level II fieldwork experience.

Another aspect to consider is the influence that working with students has on the professional growth of the fieldwork educator. Participants (n=10) in an electronic focus group representing pediatric and adult rehabilitation practice settings throughout the United States indicated that working with students provided an opportunity to give back to the educational community that supported them and to build relationships with individuals in the academic setting. Study respondents said that involvement in research projects, support for evidence-based practice, and access to the library of the academic setting helped their professional development and ultimately their practice.

Are you ready to take advantage of the benefits provided to you through your work with students? Contact your local school today to see how you can give back to your profession, promote the quality of care provided at your work site, and benefit your own professional development through working with students.

References

Debra Hanson, PhD, OTR/L, is the academic fieldwork coordinator at the University of North Dakota, which has campuses in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Casper, Wyoming. Hanson has more than 20 years of experience working with fieldwork educators and students. She is the academic fieldwork coordinator representative for AOTA’s Commission on Education.