Agency Practices in Assigning Fieldwork Experiences to Occupational Therapy Students

(fieldwork education, fieldwork patterns, agency costs)

Practices by agencies in assigning Level II fieldwork experiences to occupational therapy students were examined. Time-specific logs were collected from students and from agency personnel during a 3-month period. The data generated were used to answer questions about how effectively student time was used in meeting the stated purposes of the assignment. The focus was on "average" student fieldwork activities. The study suggests that more careful and systematic development and design of Level II fieldwork programs are needed to meet the established educational goals and to maximize educational opportunities during the allotted time.

The premise that the educational process to prepare entry-level practitioners in occupational therapy should include a required component of practice is widely accepted. According to the Commission on Education of The American Occupational Therapy Association, "The purpose of fieldwork experience is to provide occupational therapy students with the opportunity to integrate academic knowledge with application skills and attitudes at progressively higher levels of performance requirements and responsibility." (1, p 1) In light of that purpose, a series of questions regarding the use of student time for Level II fieldwork may be raised: How meaningfully do the students spend their time at assigned agencies? Do students receive various fieldwork tasks in an optimal manner and chronological order to gain the needed experience?

To date, no adequate information has been collected, organized, and analyzed about the use of student time in Level II fieldwork activity. A few exploratory research studies about fieldwork programs in the health care disciplines focus on their costs, while treating the question of effectiveness only incidentally or tangentially. Halonen, Fitzgerald, and Simmon formulated a "general mathematical model" for measuring the costs of clinical education in a number of allied health departments in a hospital (2). Porter and Kincaid examined the financial aspects of clinical education for physical therapy students related to facilities offering clinical affiliations (3), whereas Smith concentrated on allied health program costing in a medical center related to physical therapy, dental hygiene, and medical technology (4). Pobojewski (5) and Carney and Keim (6) were concerned with the cost-benefit relationship of clinical education in radiologic technology to a hospi-
tual, whereas Freymann and Springer were interested in estimating the cost of hospital-based education programs in allied health, nursing, and medicine (7). Spencer indirectly raised the question about the use of student time in fieldwork by asking who is responsible and who is to pay for the program (8). The most exhaustive and comprehensive study about fieldwork programs is the Texas study (9), which examined the cost and benefit of fieldwork programs in a number of health care fields and touched upon student use of fieldwork time according to agency practices. The study included medical technologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, physician assistants, radiologic technologists, respiratory therapists, and social workers.

This paper examines how effectively student time is spent at assigned agencies during one 3-month period of the required 6 months of Level II fieldwork experience. By scrutinizing the use of student time for different fieldwork activities in a variety of programs in some of the agencies affiliated with one university, an attempt is made in this study to ascertain how the purposes of the fieldwork education programs are fulfilled. Whether or not student time is optimally used will have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the educational preparation of professional occupational therapists. The methodology followed in this study should be useful for evaluating fieldwork practices at many affiliated agencies in occupational therapy and in other health education programs with a fieldwork component. An earlier paper from this study dealt with overall costs and benefits to the affiliated agencies in providing Level II fieldwork education to occupational therapy students (10).

### Average Student Fieldwork Activities

To collect the data, 100 sets of log sheets were sent to 50 students and their supervisors at 35 agencies for the 12-week fieldwork period between October 3 and December 23, 1977. Although 44 log sheets were returned, this study incorporates only 29 completed sheets consisting of 16 paired agency and student copies (8 each), 4 other student copies, and 9 other agency copies. On the log sheets, students and fieldwork supervisors independently recorded on a daily basis the number of hours spent in various facets of activities related to fieldwork education at the agency. These data became the basis of estimating average student fieldwork activities.

**Weekly Activity Hours.** The weekly activity hours of most fieldwork students averaged about 35 hours, with a range of 25 to 36 hours. Activity was considerably less during the first week, during Thanksgiving week, and during the final 11th and 12th weeks (see Table 1).

**Instruction.** An accepted practice in fieldwork is that the students progress through certain phases, routines, and schedules of experiences. Common assumptions are that: 1. an orientation phase should be the first activity; 2. a great deal of time must be spent to provide instruction during the initial days; and 3. orientation thereafter should be a continuous but diminishing process throughout in order to provide additional information as the need arises. The data support this general understanding—the amount of time spent for instruction and supervision is fairly substantial during the initial weeks, followed by a rapid decrease. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the average number of hours of instruction received by students during the 12-week period followed a negative exponential function over time, decreasing from the initial level of about 16 hours per week to about 2.6 hours by the 12th week.

**Observation.** Another common form of student learning in fieldwork is observing how the staff performs tasks under normal and ordinary working situations. The data show that, similar to instruction, the typical student spent more hours for observation in the initial weeks (about 7.5 hours during the first week) but fewer hours (about 2) during the middle 6- to 7-week period. The time spent for observation then declined even more sharply during the last 2 weeks (Table 1 and Figure 1). This practice confirms the expectation that, as students acquire more skill and experience, they participate less in passive involvement in observation and more in the active mode of the learning process—actual clinical work.

The time spent for instruction is about twice as much as the time spent for observation, but both show negative exponential functions and maintain a constant relative position between them throughout the entire 12-week period (Figure 1).

**Student Agency Work.** The nature of fieldwork experience requires that students perform work for the agencies. In doing so, a learning opportunity is provided to the students, and a revenue-producing service is rendered to the agencies. This dual function produces a unique consequence and requires a two-pronged interpretation.

Logically, the work performed by students for the agencies would be relatively small during the initial days of fieldwork and would increase thereafter, before the end of the rotations, to a point approaching the output level of qualified therapists. According to one study,
student service contributions to the agency, on the average, rose from about one-fifth that of regular full-time occupational therapists at the initial period of the fieldwork, to four-fifths toward the end of the training period (9, pp 71-72).

The findings from this project differ somewhat from the general pattern of agency work experience found in that study. The student service contributions to the agencies during the 12-week period followed a pattern resembling the shape of an "M" (Figure 1): the number of hours devoted to agency work increased rapidly during the first 3-week period, and then plateaued for about 8 weeks with an apparent decrease during the 8th week (the Thanksgiving holidays), followed by a speedy decline during the last week of assignment. Should the first 2 weeks be eliminated from the regression analysis, the students' service contributions oscillated around the mean value of 23 hours.
Table 2
Weekly Average Student Agency Work During 12-Week Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Joint Clinical Work</th>
<th>Independent Clinical Work</th>
<th>Other Agency Work</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hrs. (%)</td>
<td>Hrs. (%)</td>
<td>Hrs. (%)</td>
<td>Hrs. (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.2 (53.8)</td>
<td>1.2 (20.0)</td>
<td>1.5 (26.2)</td>
<td>5.9 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.0 (34.7)</td>
<td>4.6 (27.9)</td>
<td>6.4 (37.5)</td>
<td>17.2 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.8 (28.9)</td>
<td>6.6 (36.5)</td>
<td>8.1 (34.5)</td>
<td>23.6 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.1 (21.9)</td>
<td>8.9 (38.5)</td>
<td>9.2 (39.6)</td>
<td>23.2 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.2 (26.4)</td>
<td>9.0 (38.6)</td>
<td>8.2 (35.0)</td>
<td>23.3 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.5 (18.4)</td>
<td>10.3 (41.9)</td>
<td>9.7 (39.7)</td>
<td>24.5 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.8 (26.8)</td>
<td>8.3 (38.5)</td>
<td>7.5 (34.7)</td>
<td>21.6 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.7 (17.0)</td>
<td>7.0 (44.4)</td>
<td>6.1 (38.6)</td>
<td>15.8 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.9 (22.4)</td>
<td>2.8 (33.7)</td>
<td>11.5 (43.9)</td>
<td>26.2 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.5 (22.6)</td>
<td>6.9 (36.4)</td>
<td>10.1 (41.1)</td>
<td>24.5 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.3 (18.7)</td>
<td>11.0 (47.9)</td>
<td>7.7 (33.5)</td>
<td>23.1 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.3 (17.2)</td>
<td>9.2 (48.5)</td>
<td>6.5 (34.2)</td>
<td>19.0 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>247.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
<td>4.9 (25.7)</td>
<td>8.0 (37.7)</td>
<td>7.7 (36.5)</td>
<td>20.7 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It thus appears that the length of experience had virtually no impact on the amount of student service contributions to the agencies.

Students perform three main types of agency work: 1. joint clinical work; 2. independent clinical work; and 3. other agency work. Typically, for most of the weeks (excluding the 1st, 8th, and 12th) students worked about 5 hours in the first type, 8 hours in the second, and 8 hours in the third (Table 2 and Figure 2), indicating that greater amounts of time were spent for independent clinical work and other agency work.

It seems logical to expect that fieldwork students start out clinical work jointly with agency staff members. Then, as students gain more experience and knowledge through joint clinical work, they gradually move into independent clinical work, and work up to a greater number of hours toward the end of
the assignment while reducing joint clinical work.

These expectations are only partially borne out by the data in this study. The data for joint clinical work support only tenuously this inverse relationship between the number of hours spent for joint clinical work and the number of weeks at fieldwork. Moreover, students began independent clinical work immediately with the level for the initial week at about the same time as that of the joint clinical work. There is a tendency for the hours of independent clinical work to increase over time in line with a decreasing number of hours for joint clinical work (Table 2 and Figure 2); the increase, however, is not so much as to offset the decrease in the latter. It appears that the students were assigned to clinical work, indiscriminately, between joint work and independent work, and that they were carrying out the agency’s work load, perhaps without due regard to their readiness or preparation for it through an orderly introduction. A primary consideration for agencies in assigning students to clinical work appears to have been to meet their own work needs over the fulfillment of the students’ educational requisites. In addition to clinical work, professional staff typically perform other types of work for the agency, such as administrative duties and paper work. The pattern and amount of hours spent for other nonclinical agency work by students follow those of the independent clinical work. The average number of hours devoted to this type of work was at about 8 hours per week during most of the 12-week period (Table 2 and Figure 2).

Miscellaneous Activities. The fieldwork students spent a considerable amount of time for activities not related either to learning (instruction or observation) or to revenue-generating agency work (clinical and other agency work). The types of activities grouped under this category include the work time spent with staff or other clinical students for activities unrelated to instruction, observation, or agency work; the work time unaccounted for; and the work time spent for personal use, such as reading newspapers and novels, and letter writing. There was no clear-cut pattern in miscellaneous activity hours in which the students engaged was fairly constant over time (Table 1 and Figure 1). Also, the number of miscellaneous activity hours to the number of hours of agency work was inversely related, a finding that suggests the less the agency work load the more the miscellaneous activities, or the busier the agency work, the less the miscellaneous activities. Could this tendency mean that there were certain upper limits of activities in each fieldwork education category, and that when these limits were reached the students were idle instead of performing some well-defined educational tasks, such as clinical work or observation?

Optimality of Scheduling
One can now raise the question of whether the average fieldwork routine students followed can be considered an optimal model for a typical agency to adopt in its fieldwork program. On the whole, the average schedule seems consistent with what appears to be optimal schedules for instructional and clinical experience needs of students, and it is a logical basis upon which the agency could plan its fieldwork program, with three possible exceptions.

The first and pedagogically important exception is the practice of assigning the students to clinical work without orderly introduction into the work and without logical transition from one type of work to another. In other words, instead of first being introduced into joint clinical work and then gradually and methodically being led from joint to independent clinical work, students were ushered into them simultaneously and approximately at the same levels in both types of clinical work throughout the period.

The second exception is the need for substitution of more clinical work hours for the miscellaneous activity hours. This revenue-producing modification would not only be advantageous to the agencies, but it would also give the students more clinical work experience, the main purpose of the fieldwork program. Such a modification, however, would require the agencies to carefully evaluate the program practices and make more advance planning for the fieldwork students’ schedules.

The third exception and modification suggested is devising a method to sustain the students’ interest and commitment to fulfill their scheduled hours for the entire period. It was observed that some students tend to start off sluggishly in the initial week, accelerate during the middle weeks, and then lose their zeal for the fieldwork program toward the later weeks. The agencies, instead of introducing most facets of fieldwork initially and then monotonously following the same routine repeatedly during the remaining period, might be able to make the programs more challenging, demanding, and meaningful as the students progressively gain greater experience.

Conclusion
This study examined how student time was used during the Level II
fieldwork education component in the preparation of professional occupational therapists. The "typical" patterns of student fieldwork activities during the 12-week period were shown in the average weekly activity hours and with respect to their changing patterns. Some meaningful generalizations and conclusions may be drawn from this "typical" pattern of student fieldwork activities.

First, when random variations in data were factored out from the analysis, average weekly activity of students involved approximately 32 hours during the first week and then increased slightly to approximately 37 hours during the second week. Thereafter, the activity hours decreased slowly to approximately 28 by the 12th week. This average schedule indicates that, after a short adjustment period, the students' fervor for fieldwork activity or the agency's use of student time slowly waned.

Second, of the four major categories of student fieldwork activities three followed distinctive patterns. The hours spent for instruction declined from approximately 16 hours during the first week to about 2.5 hours during the final 12th week. The student observation hours followed a similar pattern for about half of the time spent on instruction. The hours spent for miscellaneous activities remained fairly constant at approximately 5 hours per week during the 12-week period. The distribution of average student activities among the three different components appeared to be reasonable and optimal, except perhaps the amount of time spent for miscellaneous activities. The devotion of nearly one-seventh of the student time spent at the agency for activities neither well defined nor directly related to learning appears to be excessive. It is suggested that agencies alter fieldwork programs so that much of the "idle" time is allotted for clinical or other productive assignment.

Third, in contrast to the above three activities, the student agency work hours as a whole followed a pattern resembling the silhouette of a "hay stack," showing a rapid rise during the first 3 weeks, then reaching and retaining the maximum height during the middle 7 weeks, followed by a gradual decline during the last 2 weeks. Within the student agency work activity, the weekly schedules of independent clinical work, as well as administrative and other work, followed a very similar pattern resembling the "hay stack" curve, whereas the joint clinical work, excepting the first week, followed a gently declining exponential function curve over time. This mode of fieldwork assignment is not consistent with the purposes prescribed by the occupational therapy profession for the fieldwork program, which is to provide "progressively higher levels of performance requirements and responsibility." Typically, students were assigned indiscriminately between joint and independent clinical work, depending upon the availability of agency staff. This suggests that: 1. students were assigned work loads, with neither due regard to their readiness for clinical work nor through an orderly introduction to it; and 2. the fulfilling of students' educational requisites was secondary to agency needs in assigning students to a particular kind of clinical work.

It is hoped that some of these findings are useful in understanding fieldwork practices and in establishing a basis for improving programs in the future. More careful and systematic development and design of Level II fieldwork programs are needed to meet established educational goals.

Acknowledgments

Appreciation is expressed to the agency personnel and to the students who completed the time-specific logs that provided the data for this study.

This paper is based on material from a paper "Optimality in Scheduling Occupational Therapy Fieldwork by Agencies" presented at the 51st Annual Conference of The American Occupational Therapy Association, San Antonio, March 1981.

REFERENCES

1. Fieldwork experience manual for academic fieldwork coordinators, fieldwork supervisors and students. Commission on Education of the American Occupational Therapy Association, 1, 1977, p 1