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Occupational Therapy Students' and Graduates' Perspectives of Traditional and Nontraditional Level I Fieldwork Experiences

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Background

The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) regulates American occupational therapy education, setting standards for didactic coursework and fieldwork (FW)¹. The ACOTE 2018 standards expanded the acceptable nontraditional forms of Level I FW to include simulated environments, standardized patients, faculty practice, and faculty-led site visits, in addition to previously accepted forms of traditional FW^{1,5}. Traditional FW involves student supervision by occupational therapy practitioners in typical professional settings, offering firsthand patient experience, guidance, structure, and clear expectations^{5,11,15,17,18,21}. However, recent challenges have made traditional FW less feasible, including increased student-to-practitioner ratios and productivity demands^{4,6,10,16,19,21}.

These factors have led to the rise of nontraditional FW, encompassing various modalities, even in role-emerging practice areas. Nontraditional FW provides students with opportunities for professional development, increased independence, and a better understanding of client-centered practice^{14,17}. Simulated environments create clinical experiences safely, improving student competencies^{3,7,9,12}. Standardized patients offer realistic practice and instant feedback^{1,20,23}, while faculty practice integrates students into faculty members' clinical work^{1,8,22}. Faculty-led site visits involve faculty supervision without clinical practice¹. These alternatives aim to address the challenges of traditional FW while offering unique benefits and challenges of their own. However, the ACOTE standards for Level I FW fail to provide specific guidelines, with FW experiences remaining ambiguous and varied across occupational therapy education. As a result, identifying student perceptions of the various types of level I FW experiences is necessary for curricular and fieldwork experience development.

Research Question

Among occupational therapy students and recently graduated practitioners, what are the perceptions of Level I fieldwork in understanding the role of an occupational therapist, application to didactic coursework, and impact on overall skills?

Methods

Design: Quantitative approach using a cross-sectional descriptive survey design

Participants: Individuals 18 years or older, enrolled in or recently graduated from U.S. occupational therapy programs who completed at least one Level I FW experience. After rigorous data cleanup, 569 individuals participated in the study

Instrument: The survey instrument included Likert-scale, open-ended, and multi-select questions. Questions in the survey included researcher-created questions and modified versions of questions from a survey developed by Bergstresser-Simpson et al. in 2017.

Procedures: Recruitment utilized snowball and convenience sampling through social media platforms

Data Analysis: Researchers analyzed the quantitative data using both descriptive and inferential statistics, including percentages, frequencies, and analysis of variance. The open-ended questions were reviewed by multiple researchers using content analysis to identify themes, patterns, and relationships within the data.

Results

Table 1. Mean scores amongst the five types of FW based on Likert scale.

Statement	T	SE	SP	FP	FLSV
Through this Level I FW experience, the level of my clinical reasoning skills improved.	3.16	2.86	2.77	2.66	2.98
I was able to make connections between this Level I FW experience and what I had learned in the classroom.	3.23	2.86	2.87	2.70	3.22
My understanding of the role of OT increased as a result of this Level I FW experience.	3.27	2.78	3.02	2.71	3.02
My understanding of occupations increased as a result of this Level I FW experience.	3.12	2.79	2.93	2.70	2.90
Through this Level I FW experience, my professionalism improved.	3.25	2.82	2.83	2.70	3.26
My ability to communicate with individuals improved as a result of this Level I FW experience.	3.18	2.70	2.85	2.78	3.18
My ability to collaborate with other professionals improved as a result of this Level I FW experience.	3.15	2.75	2.86	2.76	3.16
My ability to understand the needs of clients improved as a result of this Level I FW experience.	3.16	2.82	2.83	2.63	2.97
My ability to recognize potential safety hazards improved as a result of this Level I fieldwork experience.	3.17	2.91	2.91	2.81	3.01
I would opt to take this type of Level I FW again if given the chance.	3.08	2.61	2.84	2.68	2.91
Did this type of Level I FW prepare you for Level II FW?	3.04	2.68	2.70	2.61	2.84
Did this type of Level I FW prepare you for clinical practice post-graduation?	3.10	2.67	2.79	2.60	2.69

Note: Likert scale rating used: (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, (4) Strongly Agree.

Table 3. Statistically significant differences of FLSV compared to other nontraditional FW experiences.

Statement	SE	SP	FP
I was able to make connections between this Level I FW experience and what I had learned in the classroom.	0.002	0.006	0.001
Through this Level I FW experience, my professionalism improved.	<.001	0.001	<.001
My ability to communicate with individuals improved as a result of this Level I FW experience.	<.001	0.035	0.019
My ability to collaborate with other professionals improved as a result of this Level I FW experience.	0.001	0.059	0.010

Note: $p < 0.05$. For all statistically significant comparisons with the above statements, FLSV was rated higher than the other nontraditional FW.

Table 2. Statistically significant differences between traditional and nontraditional fieldwork.

Statement	SE	SP	FP	FLSV
Through this Level I FW experience, the level of my clinical reasoning skills improved.	0.002	<.001	<.001	0.466
I was able to make connections between this Level I FW experience and what I had learned in the classroom.	<.001	<.001	<.001	1.000
My understanding of the role of OT increased as a result of this Level I FW experience.	<.001	0.030	<.001	0.107
My understanding of occupations increased as a result of this Level I FW experience.	<.001	0.174	<.001	0.497
Through this Level I FW experience, my professionalism improved.	<.001	<.001	<.001	1.000
My ability to communicate with individuals improved as a result of this Level I FW experience.	<.001	0.002	0.002	1.000
My ability to collaborate with other professionals improved as a result of this Level I FW experience.	<.001	0.009	0.001	1.000
My ability to understand the needs of clients improved as a result of this Level I FW experience.	<.001	0.001	<.001	0.373
My ability to recognize potential safety hazards improved as a result of this Level I fieldwork experience.	0.010	0.029	0.007	0.603
I would opt to take this type of Level I FW again if given the chance.	<.001	0.083	0.004	0.582
Did this type of Level I FW prepare you for Level II FW?	<.001	0.003	0.001	0.427
Did this type of Level I FW prepare you for clinical practice post-graduation?	<.001	0.014	<.001	0.005

Note: $p < 0.05$. For all statistically significant comparisons, traditional FW was rated higher than nontraditional FW experiences.

Abbreviations:
FW: Fieldwork
T: Traditional Fieldwork
SE: Simulated Environment
SP: Standardized Patient
FP: Faculty Practice
FLSV: Faculty-led site visits

Qualitative Analysis

Open-ended Questions

- Do you have any specific suggestions going forward for making Level I FW experiences more successful?
 - Please share any additional comments about your Level I FW experience(s).

Three Common Themes

- Level I Fieldwork alongside occupational therapy professionals is preferred.
 - More hands-on experience with patients is desired.
 - Vary and provide a choice of Level I fieldwork setting.

Details

- Desire for an OT practitioner to be available at all Level I fieldwork settings.
- Prefer to be paired with an OT practitioner to better understand the role of OT.
- More hands-on experience during Level I fieldwork rather than solely observing.
 - Want a variety of Level I FW settings and a choice in their setting.
- Appreciate the opportunity to explore varied populations within Level I FW.

Limitations

- Despite the use of published methods and expert statistician opinions to assist in data cleanup, this survey was overrun with a large amount of invalid and bot submissions.
 - Responses may have a strong bias one way or the other based on their FW experience.
- Selecting "other" as an option for the type of fieldwork experience was not able to be analyzed due to lack of consistency and, therefore, may have impacted the results.

Discussion

- Findings provide insight into the effectiveness of expanded Level I FW settings following ACOTE 2018 stated goals via students' perceptions.
- Answering the research question:
 - Understanding the role of occupational therapy was rated the highest within traditional FW settings, predictably, since within traditional FW, students are within a setting where OTs already work.^{11,15,17,21}
 - Application to didactic coursework was rated highest within traditional FW and FLSV without a statistically significant difference between the two. It is predicted that this occurred because of the students' access to OTs and OT faculty in those settings.^{2,5,13,18}
 - Overall skills were rated highest with traditional FW, followed by FLSV, assumedly again considering the increased amount of time in a setting typical of OTs and increased time with OT faculty.^{2,5,13,18}
- The highest-rated type of FW for Level II FW preparedness and practice post-graduation was traditional FW, with a statistically significant difference compared to most other types of FW, likely given its similarity to most FW and work placements.^{5,11}
- Standardized practice was noted for increasing occupational understanding while also being highly rated by students to opt to take it again, contradicting prior ratings.^{20,23}

Conclusion

Quantitative findings suggest that students and graduates perceived traditional Level I FW settings to be the most effective for understanding the role of an OT, application to didactic coursework, and impact on overall skills in comparison to respondents who experienced non-traditional Level I fieldwork settings. Qualitative data supports this finding as the most common theme reported was participants' desire to work alongside an OT during fieldwork, as required in traditional fieldwork settings. Additionally, participants found FW to be most effective when given the opportunity to be hands-on with clients. These findings can help inform OT to meet ACOTE standards. Future research should focus on investigating FW educator and coordinator perspectives on traditional and nontraditional FW and compare the difference in perspectives between students and educators. This will help determine if there is a disconnect or misunderstanding between stakeholder groups in OT FW education.

References



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