Cooperative Education: An Alternative Level I Fieldwork

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Cooperative education is an educational concept that was developed in engineering and business education during the early 1900s and was later expanded to a wide variety of fields, including the social sciences and the humanities. Grounded in John Dewey's educational philosophies of pragmatism, it connects classroom learning and paid work experience for the purpose of enhancing the educational experience of a student (Fitt & Heverly, 1990; Heinemann & De Falco, 1992; Ryder, 1987). Through cooperative education, best described as *experiential learning*, the student is able to reach understandings and make conclusions that could not be achieved through classroom instruction alone. Cooperative education puts occupational therapy students "directly in touch with the realities being studied" (Kecston & Tate, 1978, p. 2). The academic institution is responsible for building opportunities into the curriculum that make it possible for a student to leave campus and engage in productive, paid work that supports the student's career goals.

Program Description

The Cooperative Education Program at the University of North Dakota (student population: 12,000) began in 1985 and currently has 34 participating academic departments. The program served 465 students in the academic year 1991-1992 (Van Tour, 1992). Funding for the program is both institutional and federal (Title VIII of the Higher Education Act of 1965, U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Since 1988, the occupational therapy department has placed 10 to 12 students in the Cooperative Education Program annually—a total of 48 to date.

Cooperative education placement sites are varied and include inpatient and long-term care hospitals, nursing homes, development centers, and summer camps for special populations. Staff members from the Cooperative Education Program began the program by requesting placement site suggestions from therapists in hospitals that were already providing Level II fieldwork. This contact was advantageous because the therapists were familiar with the university's occupational therapy program and recognized the recruitment advantage that cooperative educations afforded them. As the program has grown, contacts have been made regularly through professional networks as well as through the annual Health Recruitment Fair conducted on campus. Organizations that typically hire temporary summer employees are targeted as prime candidates. Placements are made for both part-time and full-time employment. Under cooperative education, contracts with organizations differ from those used in Level II fieldwork in that they specify the salary and benefits that will be provided to the student.

The occupational therapy student who chooses to participate in cooperative education most often falls into one of two categories: (a) a preoccupational therapy stu-
dent who has completed all prerequisite courses but has not been accepted to the professional program, or (b) an occupational therapy student who is between the junior and senior year in the program and desires summer employment in an occupational therapy or related setting.

A student who has met the minimum requirements (40 hr of academic credit, including courses in introductory occupational therapy and medical terminology, and a minimum 2.7 of a possible 4.0 grade point average) receives an orientation to cooperative education from the program's staff members. These staff members prepare the student for the interview process and direct development of an application packet, which includes a résumé, application forms, and letters of reference. The occupational therapy professor-coordinator then meets with the student to discuss available work sites and student preferences in order to match the student's needs with the employer’s needs. Once the student has identified preferred sites, the application is mailed—a process that closely simulates the real-world experience of job seeking. After being approved for fieldwork at a desired site, the student enrolls in an elective course (OT 337: Cooperative Education in Occupational Therapy) for academic credit. The student then begins the work experience as a paid employee, most often as an occupational therapy aide. In this position, the student is placed under the direct supervision of an occupational therapist to eliminate licensure-related difficulties. Program participants are encouraged to consider placing students in the occupational therapy aide position to broaden the students’ exposure to the occupational therapy profession.

Student objectives as well as midterm and final evaluation reports documenting student performance are completed by the on-site supervisor and provided to both the Cooperative Education Program and to the departmental professor responsible for the student.

Course Objectives

The course objectives for cooperative education in occupational therapy are similar to those of Level I fieldwork; the student is directed toward “observation and participation in selected aspects of the therapy process” (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1991, p. 7). Through this experience, the student is able to: (a) develop an appreciation for the value of the occupational therapist’s role in the health care setting, (b) apply and integrate (to the best of his or her educational level) basic occupational therapy knowledge and understanding in a real-world setting, and (c) develop and apply professional behavior as a member of a treatment team.

In addition to participating in day-to-day clinical experiences, the student is asked to complete a minimum of one special project. Special projects are developed as a collaborative effort between the on-site supervisor and the student to generate products that are of mutual interest and benefit (e.g., annotated bibliographies, research papers, in-service presentations, home program packets, patient case studies).

After completing the program, the student participates in a panel presentation, sharing personal perspectives on the cooperative education experience with peers. Follow-up discussions of this sort are believed to be part of an educational process encouraging student evaluation of learning. Cooperative education students in other fields have been reported to gain “self-understanding, self-direction and the self-confidence to manage their own education and career development” (Dawson, 1989, p. 11).

Benefits

The benefits of cooperative education programs have been experienced by all parties involved, including sponsors, students, and the university. Several studies have supported the use of cooperative education placements as a way to increase productivity, principally because of the release of professional employees from clerical duties but also because of the generally high motivational level and sense of purpose on the part of the cooperative education student (Fitt & Heverly, 1992; Little, 1974; Wiseman & Page, 1983).

Another benefit involves the relationships established through cooperative education programs. Relationships between students and faculty members are strengthened. Sponsors find that their relations with colleges and universities are enhanced by the exchange of ideas among students, supervisors, and faculty members (Fitt & Heverly, 1992; Little, 1974). The benefits most often cited by participating sponsors is the opportunity to assess future graduates before hiring them for full-time employment (Fitt & Heverly, 1992; Weinstein & Wilson, 1983).

Although it may appear that the value of cooperative education is monetary, Wilson (1987) found that the most frequently cited reasons for a student’s participation were related to educational gains, rather than financial or postgraduate employment. Students expressed a desire for skills, information, and insights necessary for their future careers. The issue of payment is, however, a vital part of this perception. Wilson reported that because employers are willing to pay for the work, they are more likely to have higher expectations of responsibility and performance from the student. These expectations make the work experience more realistic, challenging, and meaningful, and they encourage maturity in the student.

Fitt and Heverly (1992) described specific benefits that higher education stands to gain from cooperative education programs. These benefits included providing opportunities for students to function in the professional arena, keeping educators abreast of changing needs within the profession, and offering access to employees who
may be interested in serving as adjunct faculty members. In addition, the establishment of long-term working relationships with corporate sponsors can lead to grants, scholarship monies, equipment donations, and joint research and development ventures.

Summary

The cooperative education program offered at the University of North Dakota is based on programs offered at other universities across the nation. Rewards of cooperative education programs are many, and they benefit students, universities, and sponsors alike. In addition to easing the costs of a university education, planning cooperative education experiences as part of the curriculum allows students to develop, practice, and receive feedback on the necessary professional skills vital to their success as occupational therapists. Universities and sponsors benefit from enhanced relationships and lay the foundation for joint ventures as educators and researchers.

Further research is needed to evaluate specific outcomes related to the use of cooperative education in the training of occupational therapists. This research should address issues that include evaluation tools, students’ perspectives, and employers’ satisfaction with the program.

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References


