BRIEF OR NEW

Use of the Interview in Selecting Students for Occupational Therapy Programs

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The increase in the number of applicants for admission to occupational therapy education programs has created a special challenge for committees charged with the responsibility of selecting qualified applicants who will complete the program and make a contribution to the occupational therapy profession. Admission committees must also ensure that the selection process is fair and objective.

The interview is frequently used by occupational therapy programs to screen applicants for admission (Isenburg & Hearer, 1994; Johnson, Arbes, & Thompson, 1974; Mann, 1979; Posthuma & Noh, 1990; Posthuma & Sommerfreund, 1985; Scott et al., 1995; Swinehart & Wittman, 1993), but there has been little research on how the interview is used or how effective it is. We report a study that examined the extent of and primary reasons for the use of interviews in the admission process by accredited occupational therapy education programs.

Method

The target population consisted of all 73 accredited baccalaureate occupational therapy programs (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1995). The questionnaire was based on that used by Puryear and Lewis (1981) and on a review of the interview and admission practices described in the medical school and allied health school admission literature (Elam & Andrykowski, 1991; Fruen, 1980; Gough, 1967; Johnson & Edwards, 1991; Levine, Knecht, & Eisen, 1986; Puryear & Lewis, 1981; Scott et al., 1995). The questionnaire addressed five areas: (a) the extent to which the interview is used as a selection tool, (b) the purpose of the admission interview, (c) the interview process and structure, (d) reasons why the interview is not used or was discontinued, and (e) perceptions regarding the effectiveness of interviews. The questionnaire was submitted to three occupational therapy education program directors and two faculty members at our university to assess the content coverage and appropriateness of the response options and formats. Their comments and suggestions were used to revise the questionnaire. The final 36-item questionnaire was composed of multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions.

The questionnaire was mailed to the 73 program directors with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and soliciting their voluntary participation. After 2 weeks, a follow-up letter was sent to those who had not responded.

Results

Of 73 questionnaires mailed, 50 were returned, for a 68% response rate. Thirty-one (62%) respondents represented public universities, and 19 (38%) represented private universities. Most (66%) were located in urban settings, 20% were located in rural settings, and 14% were located in...
inner-city settings. The average university student enrollment was between 10,000 and 15,000, and the number of students enrolled in the occupational therapy programs ranged from 50 to 100. Thirty-five (70%) programs were housed in a college or school of allied health sciences, 5 (8%) in medicine, 2 (4%) in human services, 2 (4%) in a college of arts and sciences, and 2 (4%) in pharmacy; 5 programs (10%) did not provide this information.

Extent of Use of the Interview

Twenty-four (48%) respondents reported using the interview as a selection tool (users), whereas 26 (52%) reported that they did not (nonusers). When asked to rank a list of 14 admission criteria, the users ranked the interview as the sixth most important factor considered in their admission decision. Factors ranked more important, in order of importance, were overall grade point average (GPA), GPA in foundation courses, evidence of volunteer work in a field setting, letters of recommendation, and personal goal statement.

To assess why the nonuser programs did not use the interview and to assess perceived differences of the use of interviewing between those who did and those who did not interview, respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with each of five statements on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (see Table 1). The seven respondents who had discontinued the practice of interviewing reported that the process was too time consuming, there was no advantage to using the interview, and faculty and community support were lacking.

Purpose of Interview

When asked to indicate on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" the extent to which they agreed with each of seven statements about why the interview was being used (see Table 2), a high proportion of the 24 users viewed interviewing as an effective strategy for clarifying information written on an application, assessing an applicant's noncognitive skills, assessing an applicant's "fit" with the mission of their program, and communicating the expectations of their program to the applicant.

Table 1
Differences in Perceived Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>% Strongly Agree/Agree Among Interview Users</th>
<th>% Strongly Agree/Agree Among Interview Nonusers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The interviewing process is too time consuming</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing introduces an element of subjectivity</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing is an unnecessary step</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing places too much burden on students</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewing places too much burden on faculty members</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 24 for users; n = 26 for nonusers.

Eleven (46%) users agreed that successful performance on an interview is not a predictor of success in school, and 7 agreed that interviewing is an effective means of assessing an applicant's cognitive ability. In contrast, a lower proportion of the nonusers agreed with all statements about the interview except one: More nonusers than users agreed that interviewing could be used to "sell" students on their programs.

Interview Structure and Process

Forty-four percent of the users reported that their interviews were held on campus, whereas only 2% indicated that applicants were interviewed at both on-campus and off-campus sites in order to accommodate out-of-state applicants. Most (95%) of the 24 users used the personal (face-to-face) interview format; 1 (5%) used the telephone interview format. Six (25%) indicated that they used a one-on-one format (i.e., one interviewer to one interviewee), 9 (38%) used two interviewers and one interviewee, 4 (17%) used three interviewers to one interviewee, 3 (13%) used four interviewers to one interviewee, and 2 (8%) used five interviewers to one interviewee.

Forty percent of interview users indicated that faculty members within the program were involved in the interview process, and 8% indicated that students participated. Fourteen percent indicated that they used faculty members from other programs, 10% used alumni, 28% used practitioners, and 6% used other invited members of the community. When asked whether all interviewers were members of the admissions committee, 18% indicated that they were; 4% indicated that no interviewers were members of the admissions committee; and 24% indicated that some interviewers were members of the admissions committee. Eighteen percent of the users indicated that they had a system that assured that each interviewee would be interviewed by at least one member of the admission committee.

Interview Structure, Format, and Evaluation

In response to the questions designed to obtain a description of the interview questioning and report format, 36% of the users replied that interviewers were provided a standard set of questions to ask during the interviewing process, and 32% required the interviewers to write an outcome report to be included in the applicant's file. Of those who indicated that they required interviewers to write outcome reports, 16% required a narrative report but left the nature of the report entirely to the discretion of the interviewer, 18% required a narrative report but specified areas to be covered, and 12% required completion of a rating scale on several questions.

Only 38% of the users reported that they had trained or briefed their interviewers. In-service workshop was the training method commonly used. During the in-service workshop, interviewers were provided with information...
sessions were held to teach basic interviewing skills and to help experienced interviewers to improve their skills. Some programs conducted training sessions, using videotapes that size the importance of interviewing in the selection process. Only 22% of the users conducted a follow-up study to evaluate the effectiveness of the interview in their selection programs.

Discussion

The interview was one of the admission selection tools used by 24 of the 50 occupational therapy programs that participated in this study, which resulted in these major findings: (a) The interview processes were loosely to moderately structured; (b) interviewers received minimal training; (c) programs did not examine the effectiveness of the interview; and (d) there was a difference between those who used the interview and those who did not in their perception of the effectiveness of interviewing. These findings are consistent with those obtained by other researchers (Elam & Andrykowski, 1991; Fruen, 1980; Gough, 1967; Johnson & Edwards, 1993; Levine et al., 1986; Puryear & Lewis, 1981) who examined the use of the interview as a selection tool for admission to medical schools.

The review of the methods used for selecting occupational therapy students continues. We believe that if the interview is weighted heavily compared to other selection factors, interviewers must be provided with training, and a quantitative method should be used to collect and integrate interview data into admissions decisions. Furthermore, given the variation in the process, format, and structure of the admissions interview, applicants for admission to occupational therapy programs should be encouraged to make direct inquiries about the interview process used by the program of their choice and about what to expect and how to prepare for it. Further research examining (a) the relations between students' performance during interview and their clinical fieldwork performance; (b) the extent to which preadmission data can be used to predict how well students will perform in the classroom; (c) students' evaluation of the interview process and their views of the impact the process had on their overall attitude toward the program and the profession; and (d) the differences between programs using the interview and those not using the interview in terms of the quality of students attracted, the performance of students during fieldwork, and students' performance on national certification examination would make a major contribution to the occupational therapy education literature.

References


