Level II fieldwork is a demanding, exciting, and integral part of the educational experience for the occupational therapy assistant student. Readying students for Level II fieldwork goes far beyond attempting to satisfy academic requirements. Attitudes and interpersonal behaviors demonstrated in regular day-to-day interactions with faculty members and students provide a valuable barometer with which the educator can judge and anticipate potential problems and successes that students will experience during their fieldwork activities. Addressing both positive and negative behaviors and attitudes early in the education continuum encourages self-evaluation and promotes readiness among students.

Mitchell and Kampfe (1990) concluded that curriculum directors, faculty members, and academic fieldwork coordinators can facilitate transition from an academic to a clinical status, as well as make the fieldwork setting a positive experience, by creating an environment conducive to the student's personal and professional growth. Educators have a responsibility to prepare students academically and humanistically for their careers in occupational therapy. To the extent that educators are skillful in the use of reflection, confrontation, and empathy during discussions with students, they can provide an atmosphere in which students can learn and grow (Mitchell & Kampfe, 1993). The occupational therapy assistant program at Orange County Community College, Middletown, New York, holds individualized student conferences using the Personal and Academic Performance Summary (PAPS) (Occupational Therapy Assistant Department, Orange County Community College, 1988) to encourage student awareness and assessment of interpersonal skills in preparation for successful participation in Level II fieldwork experiences. The format, process, and outcome of these conferences are discussed in this article.

Student Conference Model

Observational learning occurs when an organism’s responses are influenced by the observations of others (Weiten & Lloyd, 1994). Sabari (1985) noted that many courses in occupational therapy curricula encourage students to openly express their feelings to their peers, whereas other courses require that students complete assignments with partners or within small groups. The personal and collaborative design of student interactions in our occupational therapy assistant courses provide faculty members with many chances for observing students as they interact with each other and with faculty members. These observations are shared with the students at the end of the freshman year of our 2-year program with the PAPS format. The individualized student conferences are done at the completion of the first year for two reasons: (a) the faculty members have had time to get to know the students, and (b) the students will have time to digest and act on the feedback before starting Level II
fieldwork in the fourth semester. Each item on the PAPS form is discussed with regard to the effect of the observed behaviors or attitudes on the student’s ability to handle interactions in a practice setting (see Appendix). For example, effective time management is viewed in light of the ability to develop and adhere to a treatment schedule that considers patient needs and nontreatment responsibilities. Likewise, an attitude of indifference and poor motivation is correlated with ineffective patient interaction and weak therapeutic rapport. Conference content is based on recurring behaviors and attitudes that faculty members as a whole agree represent a student’s overall demeanor and performance.

The small size of our department (two full-time and two part-time professors) and our student body (24 freshmen and 24 sophomores) and the design of our program—which emphasizes self-awareness as a prerequisite to effective problem solving—allow each instructor to spend a great amount of time with students in classroom and co-curricula (club and intramural) activities. As a result, all faculty members participate in the preparation of the PAPS for each student. At the end of the academic year, faculty members meet two or three times in 2- to 3-hr time blocks and prepare a consensus PAPS for each freshman student. Concrete examples that support and clarify statements made on the PAPS are provided whenever possible.

The individualized student conference is described in our department’s Student Handbook (Occupational Therapy Assistant Department, Orange County Community College, 1994), and the purpose and process are introduced to new students at a freshman orientation. Although PAPS is not voluntary, and each student must schedule a PAPS conference at the completion of the first year, students are told that the information discussed in the conference will not affect a student’s academic standing in the program and is provided for the sole purpose of increasing self-awareness. The following is a general introductory statement made at the beginning of an individualized student conference: “The feedback we will give you represents the faculty’s perceptions of your attitudes and behaviors. You may agree or disagree, and how you use the information is a personal choice.” The individualized student conference is attended by the student and two faculty members. The give-and-take format is informal, and students have reported that, despite some initial anxiety, they are comfortable with the physical setup.

The PAPS form (see Appendix) requires students’ input regarding their perceptions of their performance. For example, one student attributed some of her academic performance difficulties to a disabling condition that was not always given proper consideration by faculty members. Faculty members stated their observation that she used her disability to manipulate and control situations, and she confirmed that this tendency had been brought to her attention in other settings. The faculty members recommended that she recognize when she thought she was being manipulative and work on developing more productive ways of interacting at those times. The next year she successfully altered her behavior in the classroom and in her fieldwork experiences, where she avoided unnecessary confrontations and used compromise and collaboration appropriately to deal with difficult situations.

Outcome
We have used the PAPS format for 5 years with more than 100 students and have found that making a connection between students’ behaviors and attitudes and their potential performance in a therapeutic environment has given students an incentive to engage in a realistic form of self-evaluation that has produced beneficial results. Faculty members provide continued input at appropriate intervals that strengthens students’ awareness and facilitates the self-assessment process. Although the use of the individualized conference has helped faculty members pinpoint potential problems and develop ways to work with students that address the need for change, a major advantage of the process is that positive behaviors are also identified and reinforced. The true value of the PAPS is the personalized learning it affords the student. The insights discussed at PAPS is not new information; the student usually acknowledges that he or she has been made aware of the behavior in question before. We have found the PAPS format to be successful in encouraging students to listen to and accept feedback.

A fact that we share with other technical education programs is that a majority of our students are mature adults. The average age of our student population is approximately 32 years. Many have had years of experience in interpersonal interactions and attitude development. The success we have had in encouraging students to look at their methods of communicating and interacting is, we believe, directly related to their changing self-images as they are socialized into the profession. Butler (1972) stated that a basic aspect of professionalization is learning to fill a role through imitation of and identification with role models. Because our program requires three Level I fieldwork experiences in the third semester, the student has many chances to observe and assess distinct professional behaviors in different therapeutic settings under a variety of circumstances. Invigorated by an evolving sense of self-awareness, the student may, as Rogers (1986) has expressed, select clinical role models that possess the qualities that he or she admires and desires to emulate.

Not all students respond to the feedback given. It has been our experience that these students, in general, have more difficulty in Level II fieldwork. We have found strong correlations between students’ PAPS results and comments made on the fieldwork evaluation form (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1983) regarding the
student’s difficulties in relating to patients and coworkers in the practice environment. We have more telephone contact with field supervisors and receive requests for earlier clinical visits for students who do not respond to feedback than for those who do. Although some students do not respond to the feedback, a strong component of the process is that students elect to engage in self-evaluation.

Summary

Being prepared for Level II fieldwork—and ultimately for clinical practice—requires a mastery of scientific, technical, and interpersonal knowledge and skills. Personal preparedness starts at the beginning of the occupational therapy assistant student’s educational journey and can be facilitated and monitored by educators who agree that personal insight and the chance to learn and grow in this area are legitimate goals of occupational therapy education. ▲

Appendix

Orange County Community College
Middletown, New York 10940
Occupational Therapy Assistant Department

Personal and Academic Performance Summary
(PAPS)

Student: __________________ Date: ___

PAPS is a faculty prepared summary of the personal and academic status of the student at the end of the freshman year of study. Information is drawn from observations of in-class performance, interpersonal interactions with faculty and students, and involvement in extracurricular activities.

1. Attitude
   - Response to constructive criticism
   - Preprofessional commitment

2. Interpersonal Skills:
   - Ability to relate to others
     - Fellow students
     - Faculty members

3. Time Management Skills:

4. Handling of Personal/Academic Responsibilities:

5. Problem-Solving Skills:

6. Initiative:

7. Reliability:

8. Student’s Perception of His/Her Overall Progress to Date:

9. Faculty Recommendations:

Signatures: Faculty __________________ Student ____________

Reprinted with permission from Orange County Community College, Occupational Therapy Assistant Department, Middletown, New York.

References


