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Fieldwork Challenge 2012

Michael E. Roberts

Rebecca L. Simon

We have an OT Month challenge for all eligible occupational therapy practitioners: Remind yourselves, your colleagues, and facility managers about the benefits students bring to the workplace. Consider the positive impact that you can have on a student who enters the field as excited to learn and grow as you once were.

Here's some background on why your help is needed. In a 2005 editorial in the *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, two occupational therapists asked the question, "A chronic shortage of practice placements: Whose responsibility?"¹ Authors Christine Craik and Annie Turner estimated that no more than half of the 25,000 registered occupational therapists in Britain were eligible to accept a student for fieldwork, and that of the 5,000 then current occupational therapy students, approximately one third were on fieldwork at any one time. This led them to the conclusion that there were

approximately 10 potential supervisors for each student.

The United States appears to face a similar occupational therapy practitioner-to-student ratio that could explain what is anecdotally reported among academic fieldwork coordinators as a shortage of choices for placing fieldwork students. Based on several sources at AOTA, we examined the number of occupational therapy (OT) and occupational therapy assistant (OTA) programs nationally, the number of OT and OTA students nationally, and the number of licenses/registrations held nationally and state-by-state to gain a better sense of the possible practitioner-to-student ratio (see Figure 1).

Based on state regulator entity surveys, there were an estimated 123,751 OT licenses/registrations held in 2011.² AOTA's State Affairs Department estimates that those licenses were held by 102,466 OTs, with some undetermined number holding more than one license. Total entry-level enrollment in OT programs stood at 14,825 in 2011. Based on those figures, the number of licensed OTs per entry-level OT student is about 6.91. An estimated 34,754 OTAs accounted for the 41,756 OTA state licenses held in 2011. Based on a total enrollment in OTA programs in 2011 of 7,122, the number of licensed OTAs per entry-level OTA students is about 4.88. (Note: Several factors about the nature of licensing and fieldwork mean any ratios calculated aren't perfectly representative of the true nature of fieldwork placement today. The OT and OTA student numbers include all students, not just those eligible for fieldwork,

for example. Additionally, OTs can supervise OTAs.)

As many practitioners as possible must be available to ensure that students, regardless of their location or chosen practice area, are able to do the fieldwork they need. Fieldwork is the gateway to our profession, and our students are the future. Without enough practitioners who are willing to accept fieldwork students, our future is at risk. The same academic fieldwork coordinators who ensured you had a high-quality and valuable fieldwork experience are under increasing pressure due to higher workloads and smaller available placement pools.

Please do your part for the future of our profession by saying "Yes!" next time you are asked for a fieldwork placement. Even better, don't wait to be asked. Call your favorite school today and ask, "What can I do to help?" ■

References

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2. American Occupational Therapy Association. (2011, May). *2011 state regulatory entity survey results: Number of licensed/regulated OTs/OTAs*. State policy update, 13(2), 3. Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/pubs/enews/statequarterly/april-2011.aspx?ft=.pdf>
3. Harvison, N. (2011). *Academic programs annual data report: Academic year 2010-2011*. Retrieved from <http://www.aota.org/Educate/EdRes/OTEdData/42026/2010-2011-Annual-Data-Report.aspx?FT=.pdf>
4. American Occupational Therapy Association. (2012). December 2011 accreditation actions. *OT Practice*, 17(1), 3.

Figure 1.

Estimating the Practitioner-to-Student Ratio

- Total number of occupational therapy (OT) licenses held nationally has increased from 97,367 in 2003 to 123,751 in 2011, and the total number of occupational therapy assistant (OTA) licenses held nationally has increased from 30,648 in 2003 to 41,756 in 2011.²
- Total entry-level enrollment in OT programs has risen from 10,501 since 2003 to 14,825 in 2011, and total OTA enrollment has risen from 3,451 in 2003 to 7,122 in 2011.³
- As of December 21, 2011, accredited OT doctoral programs totaled 4, OT master's programs totaled 144, and OTA programs totaled 152, for a total of 300, with another 30 (3 doctoral, 3 master's, and 24 OTA) programs with developing program status.⁴

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