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Community Partnerships: Opportunities for Exploration and Participation in Meaningful Context

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The domain of occupational therapy is based on “supporting health and participation in life through engagement in occupation” (AOTA, 2008). The profession maintains that individuals should be active decision makers in their intervention process. In recent decades, social changes and civil rights legislation promoted equal rights in housing, employment, education, and public access as well as the right to respect and dignity. Now the direction of many services has shifted from institutional to full inclusion and integrated lifestyles, resulting in the development of transitional services into community-based living, work, and leisure. Many states offer funding for this type of occupational therapy through federal and state waivers as well as transitional services through public school systems. This article discusses community and integrated programming.

According to Cummins and Lau (2003), little literature explores the communities in which persons with disabilities desire membership, how frequently they want to participate, and the satisfaction they derive from the experience. Because a diagnosis of developmental disability often involves cognitive challenges, persons with this condition may have difficulty setting limitations, expressing desires, and sharing their perceptions of experiences.

There is evidence that adults with developmental disabilities have difficulty integrating into volunteer and employment positions within community settings secondary to deficits in activities of daily living, job etiquette and readiness, and psychosocial skills. Additionally, supervisors and colleagues report that they do not know how to determine individual cognitive and physical abilities and the use of modifications or accommodations that can improve participation and performance (Gupta, 2006; Riches & Green, 2003; Vogtle & Brooks, 2005). Either way, the obstacles for volunteer and vocational training can be overcome, with occupational therapy in the position of moderator. The challenge is for occupational therapists to determine client capabilities, train and make modifications within a meaningful context, and educate community businesses about offering skilled and integrated positions to adults with developmental disabilities. This requires building community partnerships.

I began by approaching community businesses about using their space for skills training. I have been given access to employee manuals (dress codes, expectations, training materials, etc.), business forms (inventory, ordering, etc.), use of the physical space, some equipment, and a variety of other real-life training aids in context so that my clients can gain the skills and experience and a legitimate résumé entry, to obtain their dream positions. This type of programming is community education at its best because business supervisors and potential coworkers witness the simple modifications that make adults with developmental disabilities successful. The amount of interaction and participation of supervisors and colleagues varies but typically increases over time. They become more willing to spontaneously teach a skill, offer social exchanges, and provide leads to similar volunteer and paid positions. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (Public Law 99-239) ensures compensation to anyone performing labor that provides direct economic benefit for a business. It is important that occupational therapy clients and the business understand that the position is for skills development and not for pay; therefore, the activities performed by the trainee (e.g., inventory counts) are not actually used for business operations, and goods and services produced may not be profitable. Following are descriptions of some successful community partnerships.

Assistance Dogs of the West (ADW)

Jesse is a dog who was professionally trained for social therapy and physical disability by ADW. This organization was to become my first community partnership and the springboard for more advanced program development. The “ah-ha” moment happened when I observed Michelle, an adolescent with developmental disabilities, participate in animal-assisted therapy with Jesse. Initially, Michelle had to work hard on her goals of voice volume, voice clarity, eye contact, and body language to engage Jesse. He motivated her enough that she never gave up, and she gained a variety of cognitive, sensory, neuromusculoskeletal, and social skills. Jesse also gained new skills and the ability to understand how to work with Michelle and her unique challenges.

I spoke with ADW about the outcome, and we began to develop assistance dog training programs that included my clients

Animal Supply Store

The owners of a local specialty pet supply store and I began to develop programming which resulted in their store being used for vocationally based occupational therapy services one morning a week. Skill sets for this setting include learning policy and procedures, inventory, stock rotation, specific animal identification and care, merchandising and displays, communication with other staff members, and some customer service. This establishment also offers regular weekend community events, such as bird watching, wildlife seminars, and animal adoption sites, each a community membership opportunity in a meaningful context.

We have been given permission to use the grooming facilities so that occupational therapy clients can gain basic grooming skills. Melissa decided to practice her bathing and brushing skills by offering free or donation-based grooming to persons who have assistance dogs but are not physically able to groom them. Melissa saw the value in gaining learning experiences while maintaining relationships. We are both confident that these skills will result in a stronger résumé and more employment opportunities, whether it be working for someone else or getting a business license and offering dog walking, pet sitting, and bathing and brushing services.

Community Program Proposals for 2009

One of our 2009 pilot community partnerships includes a proposal to join efforts with the food rescue collecting pet food as our contribution to the mission for families that need to feed their pets as well as themselves. Another community partnership involves social play groups for small children who are homeschooled, whose parents desire more social interaction for them, and kids who are receiving occupational therapy and whose treatment goals lend themselves to this type of group. The other participants in this group will be adult clients with developmental disabilities who are receiving occupational therapy for vocational skills, helping them to gain work experience in the child care industry.

Conclusion

Community-based occupational therapy has been a rewarding experience for myself, for the clients, and for the greater community. I began building programs and community partnerships by using my own interests and experiences from previous work in management, grooming shops, pet supply stores, boarding facilities, and veterinary clinics. I then approached community establishments with clear proposals and established comfortable boundaries. The outcomes include clients learning skills and gaining experience to procure their dream jobs and community membership. Community businesses have learned about the *abilities* of adults with developmental disabilities and frequently introduce the concept to other business owners, which results in more opportunities for more of these adults. Together, we have met the expectations of community integration and community membership.

I am grateful to all the community businesses and groups that make these opportunities possible. We hope that our experiences inspire occupational therapy practitioners all over the country to collaborate, educate, and advocate for the partnerships that truly integrate our communities. ■

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as student trainers. A year and a half later, we proposed a community-based day program to a larger organization in which a dog trainer, an occupational therapist, and eight adults with developmental disabilities as student trainers would work together to train puppies to be skilled assistance dogs. Student trainers learned and worked in individual and group modules in day-program and public settings. The student trainers' disabilities were seen as strengths because the dogs would grow up with persons with actual disabilities. They learned to engage the dogs and in the process, gained eye contact and attention and learned daily grooming skills and basic dog behavior. Soon the student trainers began doing demonstrations and teaching others about the program. During these demonstrations, they knew more than anyone else in the room, and it clearly was empowering. They took part in presenting the trained dogs to persons with physical disabilities and by doing so, not only gained community membership, but also changed lives by giving others more independence. A year later, our student trainers were featured on the *Today Show*. As student trainers became ready for more skills, I again turned to the community to create more partnerships.

Southwest Veterinary Medical Center

As our relationship with the veterinary staff grew, we used the clinic to teach veterinary aide and kennel aide skills. The skill sets included basic animal care, such as feeding, walking, and monitoring the animals for in-clinic health-related changes. The veterinary aides-in-training learned basic procedural handling skills for boarding animals, routine examinations, and some medical-related procedures with specific animals. The site provided ample opportunities to master skills in inventory, ordering, and stocking of treatment supplies and food. A variety of low- and high-technology equipment is used in a veterinary practice, all of which needs regular maintenance. The job required participating in shift turnover with other staff members and keeping a daily log of the tasks completed.

Our first participant, Melissa, completed the 9-week pilot program (once a week for 1.5-hour sessions) and was hired to work independently in the same clinic where she learned the skills. Regular check-ins and team training still occur when the occasion arises. Melissa says she likes working with animals and that it is a "dream come true." She explains that before working with animals, she worked in a job that had nothing to do with her dreams. Upon completion of the veterinary program, Melissa asked what else she could learn about working with animals and meeting new friends. She continues to work part-time at the clinic while piloting the next program that takes place in an animal supply store.

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An Innovative Approach to Fieldwork With Adults With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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For occupational therapy to realize the Centennial Vision of a profession as a diverse workforce meeting society's occupational needs, fieldwork education must create opportunities to prepare practitioners of the future. This article describes an innovative fieldwork experience in a community-based day program for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Evidence indicates that adults with I/DD benefit from occupational therapy services (Alguire, 2007; Baer, 2005; Epstein, 2004), and as this population increases in size and visibility, it is important to prepare practitioners who are ready to provide the services it needs.

Advance Lane Training and Employment Corporation (ALTEC) is a day program located in suburban Philadelphia. Established in 1995, ALTEC currently provides a variety of services to adults 21 to 84 years of age with I/DD. Its mission is to deliver services that can be tailored to the individual's interests and priorities and support his or her participation in work, volunteerism, and other aspects of community life (ALTEC, 2007). Occupational therapy services provided in this community-based program focus on community integration, social participation, and vocational training and support.

In 1999, through a partnership with the Department of Occupational Therapy at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, ALTEC began accepting Level II fieldwork students. Working in pairs, students complete 12-week rotations, with four rotations per year. A faculty member provides on-site clinical supervision for an average of 10 hours per week. Off-site supervision is provided through regular telephone contact and e-mail.

Faculty and ALTEC staff recognized that the lack of full-time traditional supervision of the fieldwork students may present unique challenges to the students, facility staff, and the university-based fieldwork educator. Because of the strong commitment to making this experience valuable to all the stakeholders, they developed several strategies to take advantage of learning opportunities.

First, ALTEC identified one staff member to serve as an on-site preceptor. This staff member is the students' "go to" person. She provides orientation for each rotation, establishes schedules for their initial days at the site, and answers administrative questions about day-to-day issues. She has become skilled in managing the fieldwork experience and supporting the students. Frequent communication

between the preceptor and the university-based fieldwork educator makes it possible to address issues in a timely manner.

Another strategy was to convene a series of meetings between the students and the Academic Fieldwork Coordinator. The university wanted to assure students of its support while learning in this nontraditional fieldwork setting. Over the years, the university reduced the frequency of the meetings from every other week to twice during the 12-week rotation, and over time, students seem to be more comfortable with and less anxious about the supervision model at ALTEC.

This partnership has yielded a "win-win" outcome for all the stakeholders. ALTEC management and staff are pleased with the quality of the students' performance. Students report a high level of satisfaction with the experience in terms of knowledge and skills gained. They especially feel positive about the opportunity to work autonomously in a community-based setting.

Student Fieldwork Activities

Occupational therapy students at ALTEC are essential members of the intervention team. They work collaboratively with staff in all phases of client service delivery from basic care to intervention planning and implementation. ALTEC staff members become co-instructors of the students, providing valuable information about clients' strengths, needs, interests, communication styles, and behaviors.

Everyone benefits from the partnership. ALTEC clients benefit not only from direct occupational therapy services, but also from the collaboration between the students and ALTEC staff. ALTEC staff members have learned new ways to engage clients in activities; thus, the overall quality of the program has been enhanced. Since the beginning of this partnership, ALTEC clients have demonstrated visible increases in activities of daily living, instrumental activities of daily living, leisure, work, and social interaction skills.

One Student's Experience

When I (the second author) first learned that I was going to be at ALTEC for my second Level II placement, I was nervous about the fact that I would only have on-site occupational therapist supervision 1 or 2 days a week. I quickly discovered, though, that this level of supervision was not a problem; in fact, it challenged me to be independent, to use my clinical reasoning, to apply the skills I had learned in school, and to take the initiative in providing services to the clients on my caseload. From the first day of this placement, I had to hit the ground running. I had a full caseload of clients with a variety of abilities, interests, and special needs. The staff members were incredibly supportive of me and the other occupational therapy student from the start. Because of the long history of the collaboration between departments, the ALTEC staff members were aware of the role that occupational therapists played within the organization and the services we could provide. Although my fieldwork educator was on-site only a few days a week, she was always accessible by phone or e-mail. Because of all of the experience she has with ALTEC, she knew so much about all the clients, which made collaboration with her effective for me as well as for my clients.

This experience taught me about practicing occupational therapy in a community setting, where rich opportunities abound to interface with several different professionals within the community. The placement at ALTEC allowed me to apply the skills I learned in school to real-life situations. My experience at ALTEC also helped me to realize how passionate I am about working with persons with developmental disabilities; occupational therapy plays an important role in promoting participation and engagement in occupations with this population, especially in the community. I have accepted a job at a community-based facility that serves children and adults with developmental disabilities, and I am very excited about this opportunity.

Summary

This article presents one fieldwork program that prepares occupational therapy students of today for practice tomorrow. To date, this program has provided fieldwork education for more than 60 students, many of whom have expressed interest in working in the community or with persons with I/DD. This experience continues to prepare a diverse workforce ready to meet the practice challenges of the future. ■

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