

## **Ideas When a Student Has Difficulty: Understanding the Failing or Weak Student**

### **Why Fail a Student?**

- If the student has not met the required objectives, or criteria established by the OT program, it is important to recognize and identify this on the evaluation as this is our professional & ethical responsibility.
- Book smarts/classroom work differs significantly from the actual application in a facility or clinic. An OT student must be able to bridge that gap between classroom and practical application. Both faculty and FW educators will help the OT student to do this, but in the end, it is the student's responsibility to make sure they have met objectives, criteria etc successfully.

Note: If a student has not successfully completed a placement, many academic programs provide opportunities for students to complete a remedial placement that allows them to learn the required knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes

### **Why Do Students Fail?**

#### **Academic Reasons**

- Student struggles with content of practice area of placement
- Poor learning strategies
- Practice is limited

#### **Personal Reasons**

- Stress, depression, physical illness, learning disability
- Having second thoughts about their career choice
- Unprofessional behavior or unsafe with clients
- Difficulty working with other people
- Poor insight (student may blame you or others for failing)
- Motivation or commitment to the learning process is lacking

#### **Poor Teaching**

- Fieldwork educator unclear about objectives or teaching strategies
- No orientation or needs assessment provided
- No feedback/assistance provided when problems identified (or feedback and assistance provided too late)

## **How to Assist the Student to Help Prevent Failure and Ensure Successful Completion**

Be prepared with site specific learning objectives that will objectify the expectations of the student, what will be accomplished during the FW placement and how the student's performance will be evaluated.

Learning Objectives- Ideas:

- Objectives from the OT program should be reviewed at the beginning of the student's placement.
  - Have the student compile objectives and agree upon them in writing.
- At the beginning of the placement generic objectives should be clarified and operationalized to match the specifics of the facility
  - Depending on the student's strengths, objectives can be added during the placement as new goals arise.
- Review and revise objectives at midterm for remainder of placement
- Use SMART objectives (specific, measurable, acceptable, realistic, time limited)

How to do this:

1. Orient and establish clear goals with the student at beginning of placement
2. Early identification is key - diagnose the problem - why is s/he failing and what can be done about it?
3. Observe and provide feedback early and often about areas where performance is inadequate. Don't procrastinate (e.g.-"I'll give them the benefit of the doubt"; "No time today, I'll discuss it later")
4. Discuss issues with the student directly and privately

5. Discuss with the student about the possibility of failure (use the "f" word). A student at risk for failing needs to know when s/he is in trouble and how to remediate or prevent this from happening.
6. Consult and get advice early regarding your concerns about your student (student coordinator, Academic Clinical Education Coordinator). Getting a second opinion is good as there could be personality issues between student and fieldwork educator. Consult other team members who work directly with the student for feedback.
7. Confront additional learning needs quickly. Set learning objectives and a learning contract or plan with your student to address these learning needs with specific timelines and follow-up provided (Do not have to go through this alone---contact site student coordinator, colleague, Academic Clinical Education Coordinator about how to address your students learning issues)

## **Know Your Rights if Unable to Prevent Failure**

### **Fieldwork educator's rights**

- Set expectations for student's performance
- Determine required level of supervision
- Make professional judgments about student performance
- Assess your student's application of theory to practice
- Remove your student from clinical experience (e.g. if unsafe or unruly, disrespectful)

### **Student's Rights**

- Feedback about performance
- Right to question evaluation reports
- Right to discuss a failing evaluation in detail and the opportunity to ask questions
- Right to appeal

## When a Student has Failed - Further Suggestions

- Document, document, document (clear)
- Student and school need to be aware at midterm or before that there are issues and specific concerns need to be well documented (concerns and clear instructions about what must improve)
- Be careful about being kind to the student at the expense of professional practice and the responsibility to accurately assess practice readiness
- Don't feel "bad" if a student does poorly or fails a placement with you.
  - Academic programs are not always sure a student will succeed in the program; difficulties in coursework and fieldwork can be objective ways of counseling a student to re-consider their choice of the OT profession
- **Never** give a passing grade to a learner who has not earned it – (you do not have to deal with failing a student alone)
- The student can appeal back to the program (will possibly repeat placement or be placed on academic suspension or be dismissed)

The preceding information has been adapted/modified from: Orchard, C., & Weston, W. (2006). *Confronting and Assisting the Failing Clinical Learner*. London, ON.