

Title: Examining the Impact of Physical Therapist Students' Disabilities during Clinical Experiences: Perspectives from Clinical Instructors

Author(s): Carol Beckel, PT, MA; Rina M. Chittooran, Ph.D

Institution(s): Saint Louis University

Purpose: The purposes for this qualitative study were to: describe the role of the clinical instructors (CIs) in providing accommodations for physical therapist (PT) students with disabilities; identify factors that facilitated and/or impeded the provision of accommodations for PT students with disabilities during clinical experiences; and describe the opinions of CIs with regard to PT students who required accommodations for a disability during clinical experiences.

Subjects: The participants were six physical therapists licensed in Missouri and/or Illinois who acted as the primary CIs for PT students with disabilities requesting accommodations during a clinical experience from January 1, 2002 to December 31, 2006.

Methods and Materials: The qualitative methodology of a semi-structured interview was performed in-person with each participant for this study. A copy of the interview transcript was mailed to each participant for verification of the interview content. Themes were developed inductive analysis and primary themes were identified. The primary themes resulted from similar responses by participants to interview questions. Transcripts were further reviewed and sub-themes were identified from similar concepts in the participants' responses across questions. A colleague of the principle investigator reviewed the transcripts, primary themes, and sub-themes to identify possible biases in the identification these themes.

Results: Two primary themes were identified: the process utilized by academic programs to inform CIs about a student's need for accommodations during a clinical experience; and how accommodations were provided and the impact participants perceived the accommodations to

have on the students' overall experiences. Regarding the process, the participants believed the request for accommodations by the academic faculty prior to the start of the student's clinical experience to be an important component in the process. Participants identified whether or not requested accommodations were "reasonable" for their particular setting by reviewing the academic program's objectives for the experience, assessing the flexibility of the clinical environment, and discussing the accommodations with other staff members and/or with the student. In terms of the second theme, participants received support for the provision of accommodations from other staff members at their facilities, faculty at the academic programs, and the student who requested the accommodations during the clinical experience. Participants did not identify significant barriers in the provision of the accommodations for the students with disabilities. Some participants commented that in the end, the incorporation of the accommodations did not greatly impact the overall clinical experience. Participants felt productivity requirements and increasing expectations on overall performance could present challenges for PT students with disabilities on future clinical experiences.

Conclusions: CIs in this study found the provision of accommodations for PT students with disabilities presented limited challenges. The support from the academic faculty and from the students themselves was essential for the successful completion of the clinical experiences.

Funding Sources: N/A

Author Contact Information:

Carol Beckel, PT, MA, (314) 541-6021, beckelcl@slu.edu