Clinical Preceptor 101: Investing in Future Colleagues

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Program officials rely on clinical staff to provide the clinical experience necessary to reinforce theory introduced in the classroom or laboratory. Designated clinical preceptors, whether employed by the institution sponsoring the program or in the clinical setting, have a crucial role in quality patient care by providing a bridge between student's didactic and laboratory learning. Supervised clinical experiences enable students to learn how to adapt textbook protocols to real-world circumstances in which every patient's situation is unique.

Clinical education exemplifies problem-based learning. Students must apply cognitive learning to perform psychomotor skills. Meyer describes the challenge for students:

> *Instead of the academic ideal in which they have so much invested, they face a contrasting clinical reality they do not understand and cannot avoid…Instead of rules and exceptions being mutually exclusive—black and white—there is a complex interplay between them—shades of grey. Instead of congruence "or else," there is congruence "maybe, it depends." The students now begin to question what to believe, the academic ideal or the clinical reality.*[1]

Clinical preceptors are likely chosen based on expertise and experience. Even the most skilled clinical staff members typically require some coaching in the areas of instruction and evaluation. Designated clinical preceptors strengthen the educational journey. Having set ground rules and specific facilitators enhances the clinical process.[2] Program officials can assist in the professional development of clinical preceptors and staff.

Clinical Preceptor Requirements

Joint Review Committee on Education in Radiologic Technology Standard 3, Objective 3.1, requires accredited programs to designate at least 1 clinical preceptor for each recognized clinical setting. The same clinical preceptor might be identified at more than 1 site as long as a ratio of 1 full-time equivalent clinical preceptor for every 10 students is maintained. The program director and clinical coordinator can perform clinical instruction; however, they might not be identified as clinical preceptors. Furthermore, Standard 3, Objective 3.2, identifies requirements for clinical preceptors, including[3]:

- be proficient in supervision, instruction, and evaluation
- documented 2 years' experience in the professional discipline
- hold current certification and registration by the American Registry of Radiologic Technologists, Medical Dosimetry Certification Board for medical dosimetrists, or an equivalent certifying agency in the designated field

Program officials from sponsoring institutions are accountable for ensuring clinical preceptors maintain knowledge of the program's mission and goals, understand clinical objectives and evaluation systems, provide appropriate student instruction and supervision, and enforce program policies and procedures.

Identifying Clinical Preceptors

The path to becoming a clinical preceptor can vary from program to program. Program officials might directly observe someone in the clinical setting who produces great images, provides exceptional patient care, and seems to enjoy working with students. Students, current preceptors, or department leadership

might suggest or recommend technologists as potential preceptors. Staff from the clinical setting also can volunteer to become recognized clinical preceptors.

Service as a clinical preceptor can involve additional duties, often with little or no monetary compensation; however, there might be additional avenues to recognize the invaluable contribution of clinical preceptors. Program officials can develop nonmonetary methods to recognize clinical preceptors such as praise, written thank you notes, public acknowledgement, and annual awards. Offering free professional development on topics, such as assessment of student learning outcomes, supervision of students, or evaluation methods, benefits the preceptors, students, and educational program. A technologist considering academia might wish to become a clinical preceptor. Many preceptors are driven by an internal motivation to give back to their profession.

When trying to develop new clinical preceptors, a position description or list of responsibilities that lends clarity to expectations is important. Clinical preceptors ensure program information and updates are communicated to clinical staff. Professional development and mentoring set newly recognized clinical preceptors up to create positive experiences and enjoy the opportunity to directly affect student learning. Open lines of communication with program faculty offer encouragement and support to clinical preceptors.[4]

Students' Experience With Successful Clinical Preceptors

Students provide many insights into the traits of an exceptional clinical preceptor. A brief, small sample survey explored students' perceptions of preceptors. This survey tool included a combination of open-ended questions as well as a ranking of various attributes (see **Figure**). Survey attribute options were determined by characteristics that program personnel perceived as important. Several themes emerged in reviewing responses of 45 students from 2 community college programs. Students and program faculty seem to appreciate the same preceptor soft skills employers generally expect from program graduates.

When asked for a 1-word, open text response to the most valued clinical preceptor trait, the number one response was compassion. There was a 3-way tie for second place between the traits encouraging, kind, and patient.

When reviewing results for a similar multiple-choice question, approachable and welcoming were the most important clinical preceptor attributes selected by 66.7% of respondents. An additional 22.3% of respondents ranked the attribute second or third most important. Available when needed was ranked in the top 3 attributes by 71.2% of respondents. Providing frequent feedback to students was ranked second, third, or fourth by 64.5% of

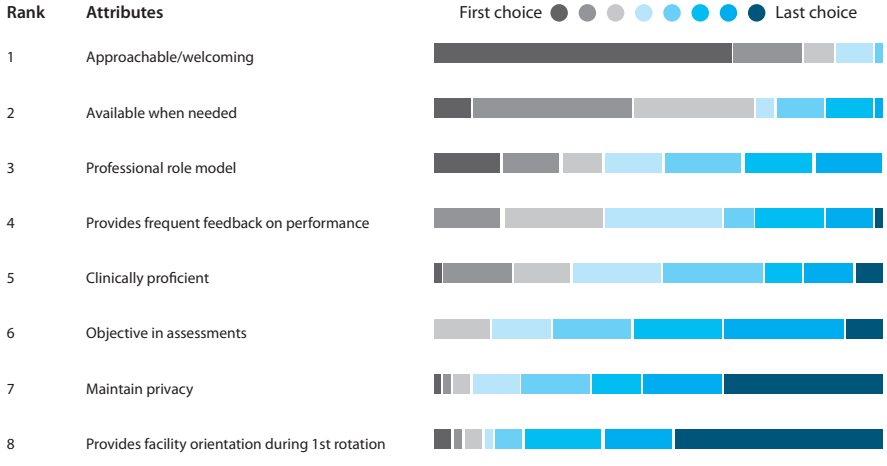

Figure. *Survey results for student ranking of clinical preceptor attributes. Figure courtesy of the author.*

respondents. Clinical proficiency was surprisingly not as important to students and was centrally positioned in the middle of the identified attributes. Providing facility orientation during the first rotation was identified as the least important attribute for 46.7% of student respondents.

When students were asked about challenges during their clinical education, responses to this open-ended question centered on rotating among clinical sites. Adjusting to different technologists, equipment, and protocols can be difficult if the duration of each clinical setting rotation is not sufficient for competency or mastery. In addition, the volume and variety of procedures available sometimes seems inadequate for the number of students assigned to a clinical site. Clinical settings shared by more than 1 program can present challenges specific to consistency and sufficiency of examination volume. Students also said that some clinical settings are physically small, and departments feel crowded. Respondents generally agree or strongly agree clinical preceptors are invested in students' growth and improvement, advocate willingly for students, understand and enforce program policies and standards, and effectively evaluate student learning and provide instruction.

Progressing Through an Educational Pathway

Students and educational program sponsors benefit directly from the support provided by clinical preceptors and staff. Programs are designed to introduce students to didactic and kinesthetic skills on campus while concurrently providing educational opportunities in a laboratory setting with no patient risk. The educational journey for future medical imaging and radiation therapy professionals is incomplete without opportunities to apply the skills introduced on campus in real-life settings.

Agreeing to be a clinical preceptor gives clinical staff an opportunity for career advancement. A glimpse at the educator role might be a launchpad to someday becoming an instructor, clinical coordinator, or program director.

Recognized clinical preceptor status is often associated with future success. Technologists who students and programs are drawn to seem to be the ones destined for leadership and advancement in a department or facility. Programs are making good choices by selecting clinical preceptors who are on a trajectory of excellence.

The White Paper from the 2024 Consensus Committee on the Future of Medical Imaging and Radiation Therapy also identified structured career advancement as an area of concern, and various pathways are currently being developed.[5] Members of the consensus committee also stressed the importance of identifying clinical staff who have the potential to become educators. Advantages of the educator pathway, such as time off and tuition benefits, must be communicated by current educators to help increase interest in pursuing the educator pathway among students and younger clinicians.[5] Additional resources might be developed to assist these new educators who are progressing through a career pathway. As noted by Lee, orientation and resources to higher education are crucial for the success of clinical staff and preceptors, which translates to student success.[4]

Why You Should Aspire to Be a Clinical Preceptor

Most technologists can easily recall clinical staff members who made a difference along the educational journey. Every technologist has a vested interest in developing great future colleagues and hopefully desire to give back to the profession. Creating positive clinical experiences also is a wonderful recruitment tool. With the current work force shortage, team members hope every student who rotates through for clinical experience will want to be considered for hire at graduation. Strong applicant pools enable facilities to select the best candidates when hiring.

Conclusion

Program officials who make designated clinical preceptors feel valued are providing a great service to students and a win for patients and the medical community. If there is an educational program nearby, volunteer to help. When students rotate through the clinical setting, identify a single habit you can practice every day to be a more positive role model. Commit to being the technologist students aspire to emulate.

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