III. A. OVERVIEW OF THE INITIAL ACCREDITATION PROCESS

DEVELOPING A NEW PROGRAM

Information and guidance regarding the accreditation process and accreditation standards are available from the staff of the AOTA Accreditation Department. Any questions regarding the accreditation standards or policies and procedures described in the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®) Accreditation Manual should be referred to that office. Formal contact with the AOTA Accreditation Department would occur when the institution is ready to apply for accreditation for the new program (prior to the admission of the first class of students). **Note that ACOTE will accept and review a maximum of 6 Candidacy Applications during a given cycle. The acceptance of Candidacy Applications will be based on the receipt date of the Letter of Intent (if signed by the program director) or date of notification that a program director has been hired. Information on available slots is available on ACOTE's Web page at http://www.aota.org/en/Education-Careers/Accreditation/Policies.aspx under "III. Accreditation Process for New Programs".**

Cooperative and Consortium Programs

Sponsoring institutions may apply for initial accreditation for a new occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program as a single higher education institution, as two administrative entities having a cooperative agreement (at least one of which must hold degree-granting authority), or a consortium comprised of two or more higher education institutions having a formal agreement to share resources for the operation of an educational program.

For programs to be offered by more than one institution, the Letter of Intent must include information regarding the institutional accreditation status, the role of each institution in the cooperative or consortium arrangement, how the administration of the program will be managed, how the program will operate, and which institution(s) will grant the degree.

Sponsoring institutions wishing to offer an occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program at more than one of the institution's locations/campuses must apply for accreditation using ACOTE Policy IV.B.2. Additional Locations.

ACCREDITATION PROCESS FOR NEW PROGRAMS

To ensure commitment to the development of quality programs and to review the potential viability of an applicant occupational therapy educational program prior to the admission of the first class of students, all new programs seeking accreditation by ACOTE are required to apply for Candidacy Status as the first step in the three-step accreditation process for new programs.

The following are the three steps of the accreditation process for new programs.

- **STEP 1: APPLICATION REVIEW**

  For new programs, the process begins with submission of a Letter of Intent and Eligibility Data. Once eligibility is confirmed and a program director is hired, the program may submit a Candidacy Application according to the approved timeline. Upon review of that Application, ACOTE grants, defers action on, or denies Candidacy Status. Although the designation "Candidacy Status" is not a guarantee of accreditation, it does indicate that the resource allocation and plan for development of the proposed program appear to demonstrate the ability to meet the ACOTE Standards for a Doctoral-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist, a Master's-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist, or an Associate-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapy Assistant if fully implemented as planned. Candidacy Status

must be granted before students may be admitted or notified of admission to the program and is required in order for the program to proceed to Step 2.

- **STEP 2: PREACCREDITATION REVIEW**

  If Candidacy Status is granted, the program may admit its first class of students and proceed to the second step of the process, the preaccreditation review. In this step, the program assesses its compliance with the ACOTE Standards and submits an initial Report of Self-Study. Upon review of this report, ACOTE grants, defers action on, or denies Preaccreditation Status. The granting of Preaccreditation Status indicates that on the basis of the paper review of the submitted materials, ACOTE has determined that the program is likely to meet the applicable ACOTE Standards if fully implemented in accordance with its plans. The granting of Preaccreditation Status is not a guarantee of accreditation status.

- **STEP 3: THE INITIAL ON-SITE EVALUATION**

  The third step of the process is an initial on-site evaluation conducted by a two-member team. The team prepares a Report of On-Site Evaluation, upon which ACOTE bases its decision to either grant or withhold accreditation.

OVERVIEW OF TIMELINE DEADLINES AND PROGRAM STARTING DATES

Because graduation from an accredited educational program is a requirement of eligibility for certification by the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy and for licensure in most states, every effort is made to assure that the three-step accreditation process is complete prior to the graduation of the first class of students. The following information provides a general framework for the accreditation process for new occupational therapy educational programs in institutions that follow a September through May academic pattern. It is expected that the proposed curriculum will be approved by the appropriate state and institutional bodies before the application review is conducted by ACOTE.

Details regarding each step are provided below. Since the dates listed below may not apply universally, an individual schedule is prepared by AOTA Accreditation Department staff for each program entering the accreditation process.

The deadlines for receipt of the Letter of Intent and Candidacy Application are determined by the planned student enrollment date. Official action by ACOTE is taken at its spring, summer, and fall meetings (generally in April, August, and December). **ACOTE will accept and review a maximum of 6 Candidacy Applications during a given cycle. Only institutions with occupational therapy/occupational therapy assistant program directors hired will be assigned to a Candidacy Application submission slot. The acceptance of Candidacy Applications will be based on the receipt date of the Letter of Intent (if signed by the program director) or date of notification that a program director has been hired. After the 6-program cap is reached, programs will be placed on a waiting list and may be subject to the next available review cycle. The planned student admission must be delayed accordingly.**

It is suggested that the Letter of Intent be submitted and program director be hired well in advance of the deadline to increase the chances of entering the desired review cycle and to allow adequate time to prepare the Candidacy Application.

It is the responsibility of the program seeking Candidacy Status to ensure that the Application is properly signed, the balance of the Candidacy Application Fee is paid, and received by AOTA no later than 5:00 p.m. on the due date, as there are no exceptions for late receipt of the Candidacy Application and Candidacy Application Fee. All dates refer to business days. Therefore, if a deadline falls on a weekend or national holiday, the next full work day becomes the effective due date for receipt of materials.

Letter of Intent and Deposit Due NO LATER THAN 5:00 P.M. EASTERN ON:	November 1 (prior to fall start)	March 1 (prior to winter start)	July 1 (prior to spring/ summer start)
Completed Candidacy Application and Application Fee Due NO LATER THAN 5:00 P.M. EASTERN ON:	December 15	April 15	August 15
Application Review and ACOTE Action on Candidacy Status (ACOTE meeting)	April	August	December
<u>IF CANDIDACY STATUS IS AWARDED</u>, THE SCHEDULE WOULD CONTINUE APPROXIMATELY AS FOLLOWS:			
Students May be Notified of Acceptance Into the Program	April/May	August	December
First Class May be Enrolled	Fall (August/September)	Winter (December/January)	Spring/Summer (May/June)
Initial Report of Self-Study Due	March 1	July 1	November 1
Preaccreditation Review (ACOTE Meeting)	August	December	April
On-Site Evaluation	Late Winter/Early Spring	Late Spring/Early Summer	Fall
Accreditation Action (ACOTE Meeting)	April	August	December

SAMPLE TIMELINE FOR FALL CLASS ENROLLMENT

The following example is a <u>minimal</u> timeline in anticipation of a fall class enrollment.

- **<u>ON OR BEFORE NOVEMBER 1</u>**
  A Letter of Intent, Letter of Intent Data Form, and check for a non-refundable deposit of $500 (applied toward the Application Fee) must be submitted to the Director, Accreditation Department, AOTA. The deadline for receipt of this letter and deposit is 5:00 p.m. Eastern on November 1 for an anticipated fall class start. Programs are strongly encouraged to submit the Letter of Intent before the deadline to allow adequate time to complete preparation of the Candidacy Application due December 15. This letter must be signed by (1) the chief executive officer of the sponsoring institution(s) <u>and</u> (2) the program director **AND/OR** the dean overseeing the proposed program. The Letter of Intent: (1) declares the intention of the institution(s) to develop and seek accreditation for the occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program; (2) requests entry into the first step of the accreditation process for new programs; (3) provides information regarding the type and timelines of the proposed program; (4) states that the institution(s) agree not to admit students until Candidacy Status has been obtained; and (5) if offered by more than one institution (e.g., cooperative or consortium program), includes information regarding the institutional accreditation status, the role of each institution in the cooperative or consortium arrangement, how the administration of the program will be managed, how the program will operate, and which institution(s) will grant the degree. (See "Step One: The Application Review" for specific requirements for the Letter of Intent).

Note that the program must allow sufficient time in its timeline for development to permit submission of the initial Report of Self-Study to occur after students have completed some coursework in the occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant curriculum component.

- **PRIOR TO DECEMBER 15**
  If not already identified in the Letter of Intent, institutions must notify Accreditation staff that an occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program director has been hired and provide contact information for the new director. Accreditation staff will then confirm an initial accreditation timeline for the program.

- **BY DECEMBER 15**
  The Candidacy Application and check for the balance of the Application Fee must be received no later than 5:00 p.m. on December 15. The Application must be signed by the **occupational therapy program director,** the dean or administrator overseeing the proposed program, and the chief executive officer of the sponsoring institution.

  Note: A program director meeting ACOTE requirements must be hired by the institution at the time the Candidacy Application is submitted and must be present throughout the time the program is engaged in the initial accreditation process, including the start of the first class of students, the preaccreditation review, and the initial on-site evaluation. If the program does not have a qualified program director during the initial accreditation process for new programs, the program must agree to delay the program progression to the next step in the program development process until the accreditation requirement of having a qualified program director hired and on staff can be met. Specifically, students may not begin occupational therapy coursework in a program having Candidacy Status unless there is a qualified occupational therapy program director on staff.

  The Candidacy Application is made available to AOTA Accreditation Department staff and the designated reviewers. The reviewers assess all materials submitted and present recommendations to ACOTE for consideration at its next scheduled meeting.

- **APRIL**
  At the ACOTE meeting, a subcommittee examines the findings of the application review team and prepares a motion regarding action on Candidacy Status and a Report of Candidacy Review. After discussion, ACOTE takes action to grant, defer action on, or deny Candidacy Status.

  A statement of the action taken by ACOTE is forwarded to the chief executive officer of the sponsoring institution, the dean or administrator to whom the program director reports, and the program director. A Report of Candidacy Review that lists the strengths of the program and details the concerns of ACOTE accompanies the letter. If Candidacy Status has been granted, AOTA Accreditation Department staff confirm the timeline for the preaccreditation review process, including a submission date for the initial Report of Self-Study. If action on a Candidacy Status is deferred, the program receives, along with the notification of deferral, a list of concerns identified by ACOTE in reaching their decision and a due date for submission of supplementary information that addresses the concerns.

  NOTE: Should the director of a program holding Candidacy Status leave after the program has admitted students, but has not completed the initial on-site evaluation, the program must submit a request to proceed to the initial on-site visit. In considering the program's request, ACOTE reviewers will determine if the program has demonstrated that it (1) has implemented steps to ensure that adequate qualified faculty have been hired to deliver the program as approved (either permanent or on an interim basis) and; (2) has made an immediate, ongoing, and reasonable good faith effort to hire a qualified program director.

- **MARCH**
  The program director submits the initial Report of Self-Study for review by the assigned reviewers. The preaccreditation review team reviews all materials submitted and presents recommendations to ACOTE for consideration at its next scheduled meeting.

- **AUGUST**
  At the ACOTE meeting, a subcommittee examines the findings of the preaccreditation review team and prepares a motion regarding action on Preaccreditation Status and a Report of Preaccreditation Review. ACOTE then takes action to grant, defer action on, or deny Preaccreditation Status.

Following ACOTE action, a letter is forwarded to the chief executive officer of the sponsoring institution, with a copy to the dean and program director, indicating action taken on the Preaccreditation Status. A Report of Preaccreditation Review that lists the strengths of the program and details the concerns of ACOTE accompanies the letter. If Preaccreditation Status is granted, AOTA Accreditation Department staff arrange with the program director an appropriate date for the required on-site evaluation. If Preaccreditation Status is deferred, the program receives, along with the notification of deferral, a list of concerns identified by ACOTE in reaching their decision and a due date for submission of supplementary information that addresses the concerns. If Preaccreditation Status is denied, no further action is taken by ACOTE unless the appropriate institutional official and the program director send a Letter of Intent to proceed with the accreditation process within 30 days of receipt of notification of denial. (If Preaccreditation Status is deferred or denied, the procedures outlined in ACOTE Policy III.A.2. Step Two: Preaccreditation Review are followed).

- **NOVEMBER/DECEMBER/JANUARY**
  In preparation for the on-site evaluation, the program director supplies an update of any information previously provided for preaccreditation review. (Details regarding additional materials needed to supplement the initial Report of Self-Study are included in the Report of Preaccreditation Review). The program director will be requested to submit updated materials for review by the evaluation team and to the AOTA Accreditation Department at least 2 months prior to the date of the on-site evaluation.

- **JANUARY/FEBRUARY/MARCH**
  Two qualified evaluators conduct the 2½-day on-site evaluation. A summary report of the visit is made by the evaluators at the final on-site conference, and institution officials are given access to the Evaluators' Report of On-Site Evaluation at that time. To expedite preparation of the report for ACOTE review and action, the program director is requested to submit any corrections or comments to the AOTA Accreditation Department within 1 week after the on-site evaluation. (Additional response time is available if needed).

- **APRIL**
  At its meeting, ACOTE reviews the Report of On-Site Evaluation, makes any amendments, and votes on an accreditation status for the program. If accreditation is granted and areas of noncompliance are cited in the official Report of the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, a due date for the required Plan of Correction is established. The program will receive the letter of notification regarding the action of ACOTE within 4 weeks after the meeting.

INITIAL ACCREDITATION FEES

Fees will be charged for each step of the three-step accreditation process. The Application Fee for review of the Candidacy Application is due as follows:

- A non-refundable deposit of $500 must be submitted with the Letter of Intent. This deposit is applied toward the application fee.
- The balance of the application fee must be submitted prior to the due date for the Candidacy Application. The preaccreditation review fee is due at the time the initial Report of Self-Study is submitted, and the initial on-site evaluation fee is due upon receipt of the invoice after the initial on-site evaluation. An annual fee will not be billed until the first full academic year that the program has accreditation status. Information regarding current fees is located in the ACOTE Policy V.A. Fees, and appears in the ACOTE Accreditation section of AOTA's Web site (www.acoteonline.org).

WITHDRAWAL OF REQUEST FOR INITIAL ACCREDITATION

An institution may withdraw its request for initial accreditation of an occupational therapy educational program at any time prior to final action by ACOTE. The request for withdrawal should be in writing and signed by the program director or dean overseeing the program and the chief executive officer of the sponsoring institution and submitted to ACOTE c/o the AOTA Accreditation Department. If the program wishes to reapply for initial accreditation, applicable fees will be assessed.

INSTITUTIONAL REQUEST FOR A CHANGE IN THE INITIAL ACCREDITATION SCHEDULE

If the institution requires a revision of the schedule developed by the AOTA Accreditation Department based on the Letter of Intent, it is the responsibility of the institution to notify the AOTA Accreditation Department in writing of the request to change the schedule. Written notification is required (including the proposed new start date and graduation date for the first class of students). If there are no available slots in the desired submission cycle, the program will be placed on a waiting list for that cycle. A new schedule will be generated.

The previously submitted $500 application fee deposit will be applied toward the application fee as long as the balance of the application fee is scheduled to be paid within the next fiscal year. For example, a $500 application fee deposit paid in December 2015 (FY 2015/2016) may be applied toward an application fee due on May 15, 2017 (FY 2016/2017). Otherwise, a new $500 application fee deposit must be submitted with the request for a revision to the initial accreditation schedule.