Resources for students from The American Occupational Therapy Association

Your career in
Occupational Therapy

Frequently Asked Questions About Occupational Therapy Education

What is the difference between an entry-level master's and an entry-level doctoral degree?

Both degree levels are currently routes of entry to the profession and are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®). Both degree levels prepare graduates to be entry-level practitioners; however, students must hold a baccalaureate degree for admission into the doctoral program. The doctoral degree offers additional semesters of study focusing on clinical practice skills, research skills, administration, leadership, program and policy development, advocacy, education, and theory development. Both degree levels require Level I and Level II fieldwork experiences. In addition, doctoral students must complete an experiential component (16 weeks) and culminating project.

What is the difference between an MOT, MA, or MS degree that is awarded at the completion of my master's degree program?

These are all appropriate degrees to award at the completion of an entry-level occupational therapy educational program. The degree awarded is an institutional prerogative based on consistency with the mission and structure of the college/university. All are considered entry-level degrees, although the MOT designation is more commonly used to designate an entry-level degree.

What should I major in at the undergraduate level if I apply to an entry-level master's or an entry-level doctoral program?

Examples of what other students have majored in at the undergraduate level include biology, kinesiology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, liberal arts, and anatomy. It is important that you contact the educational programs to which you are interested in applying and make sure you have taken the necessary prerequisites for admission into their programs.

I want to specialize in a certain area of practice (e.g., environmental modifications, pediatrics). How do I find a program with this specialty?

All entry-level educational programs prepare you to be a generalist. Specializing in one area of practice would be something you would pursue after you graduate and successfully pass the national certification examination. Many practitioners do select a specialty area of practice. Others change their area of practice throughout their careers. Occupational therapy provides a great deal of career flexibility.

What is fieldwork education?

Fieldwork education is a crucial part of your preparation to become an occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant. It provides you with an opportunity to carry out practice and other professional responsibilities under supervision and role modeling by an experienced practitioner.

What is a combined entry-level bachelor's/master's degree program?

A combined bachelor's/master's program is an accredited program that accepts students without a bachelor's degree; awards a baccalaureate degree; then, on completion of the master's-level academic coursework and fieldwork, awards an entry-level master's degree in occupational therapy. Successful completion of the master's degree portion of the program would be required for eligibility to sit for the national certification examination administered by the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT). These types of programs will generally accept transfer students.

What is a certificate program?

A certificate program is an accredited occupational therapy assistant program that, on completion of the academic coursework and fieldwork, awards a certificate rather than a degree. The certificate is then the credential that enables the graduate to sit for the NBCOT certification exam for the occupational therapy assistant.

Will I have trouble getting a job if I have a certificate?

This depends on the law in the state in which you wish to work. A few states require a degree for licensure. Therefore, the certificate may not be as transportable as a degree. You should check with the regulatory board in the state(s) in which you intend to work.

What is the difference between an entry-level program and a postprofessional program?

An entry-level program is for those students who want to study to become an occupational therapist. A postprofessional program is for occupational therapists who want to further their education, usually in an area of specialization (e.g., pediatrics).

Are there any entry-level occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant educational programs offered online?

There are no accredited entry-level occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant educational programs that are offered in the online format. Some educational programs may offer some courses or parts of courses online (see http://www.aota.org/nonmembers/area13/docs/DistanceEd.pdf), but there are no educational programs offered entirely online.

Some programs require that I have observation or volunteer experience. Who do I contact to set this up?

It is suggested that you contact local facilities that employ occupational therapists and/or occupational therapy assistants (e.g., hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, or school systems). You can find these phone numbers in the Yellow Pages under Occupational Therapy or Rehabilitation. These requests are made quite frequently and you will find most facilities accommodating. Be prepared to discuss your reason for the request and your availability.

How do I know which program is the best or has a higher ranking?

Neither the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) nor ACOTE ranks programs. Accreditation of a program indicates that the program is in substantial compliance with the accreditation Standards. Various programs may exceed the minimum standards, but they are not acknowledged as such by AOTA. Those Standards are available on the ACOTE Accreditation section of the AOTA Web site (acoteonline.org). The list of accredited educational programs, available at http://www.aota.org/nonmembers/area13/links/link65.asp, will indicate the current accreditation status of the program.

How do I decide which school to attend?

Many factors will have an impact on your decision, including the mission and size of the college/university, faculty qualifications, geographic location, cost, degree awarded, length of the program, and program outcomes. The list of accredited programs will include hot links to the program's Web page and telephone numbers

for each program. You may wish to contact the program in which you are interested to inquire about the success of program graduates on the national certification examination, job placement rates, employer satisfaction with program graduates, and graduate satisfaction with the program.

What does Developing Program Status mean?

This term refers to new programs that are not yet accredited but have completed the first step in the 3-step initial accreditation process. New programs seeking initial accreditation must submit an Application for Developing Program Status to ACOTE. The Application is reviewed and ACOTE must take action to either grant or deny Developing Program Status (step 1). Not all programs are successful in obtaining Developing Program Status, and that status must be attained before students can be admitted into the program. Although the "Developing Program Status" designation does not guarantee that the program will be accredited, it indicates that the resource allocation and plan for development of the proposed program appear to demonstrate the ability to meet ACOTE Standards. After a program is granted Developing Program Status, the program will submit a Report of Self-Study for review by ACOTE (step 2) and will have an on-site evaluation (step 3). If the program can successfully demonstrate substantial compliance with the Standards, it will be granted accreditation. If not, accreditation will be withheld.

What happens if a program doesn't get accredited?

There is definitely a degree of risk involved in entering a program that is not yet accredited. When a program fails to obtain accreditation before the first class of students graduates, the program is no longer viable and closes. In order to be eligible to sit for the NBCOT certification examination, one must graduate from an ACOTE-accredited program. This is why it is essential for new programs to obtain accreditation before the first class of students graduates.

What happens to the students who are in a program with Developing Program Status if it is not accredited?

The students will have earned the course/credit hours taken but are not eligible for the certification examination. To be eligible for the certification examination, those students would need to transfer to a program that is accredited and complete that program's requirements for graduation. Credits from the unaccredited program may or may not be accepted by another program.

How many programs don't get accredited the first time?

The numbers are low, but occasionally there is a program that is not successful in obtaining accreditation. That is why the procedure requires that new programs obtain Developing Program Status from ACOTE before the admission of the first class of students.

Should I enroll in a program that is not yet accredited?

As previously stated, there is definitely a degree of risk involved in entering a program that is not yet accredited because students must graduate from an ACOTE-accredited program to be eligible to sit for the NBCOT certification examination. However, all new programs must follow a 3-step initial accreditation process, which allows ACOTE to monitor progress toward compliance with the ACOTE accreditation Standards. Students considering enrolling in a new program are encouraged to contact the program to obtain information on the progress made toward compliance with the Standards.

What is the difference between an occupational therapy assistant and an occupational therapy aide?

An occupational therapy assistant is a graduate of an accredited occupational therapy assistant educational program and is eligible to sit for the national certification examination. Most states regulate occupational therapy assistants. Occupational therapy aides provide supportive services to the occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant. Occupational therapy aides usually receive their training on the job and are not eligible for certification or licensure. Occupational therapy aide programs are not accredited by ACOTE and certification of aides is not required. You may want to contact your state regulatory board to determine what services and regulations apply to occupational therapy aides in your state.

I am currently working in another profession. I am considering occupational therapy as a second career. Is this feasible?

A good number of students go back to school to become an occupational therapist or an occupational therapy assistant. You would need to contact the individual educational programs to which you are interested in applying in order to determine what prerequisites you would need to take.

How much will I make as an occupational therapist?

For the most recent salary information, go to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Web site at http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos078.htm.

How much will I make as an occupational therapy assistant?

For the most recent salary information, go to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics Web site at http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos166.htm.

Where can I find financial aid information?

You should first start with the Financial Aid offices at the schools to which you have applied. Limited information is available on the AOTA Web site at http://www.aota.org/featured/area2/index.asp#scholarships.

Who can I contact if I have further questions?

For further information about studying to become an occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant, send inquiries to educate@aota.org. To ask questions of an OT or OTA student, send inquiries to AskAStudent@aota.org. Allow up to 1 week for a response.

Visit **www.aota.org** for more information about the profession and the activities of the American Occupational Therapy Association.

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