

# I. INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION TO ACCREDITATION

*Accreditation is a system for recognizing educational institutions and professional programs affiliated with those institutions for a level of performance, integrity, and quality which entitles them to the confidence of the educational community and the public they serve. In the United States, this recognition is extended primarily through nongovernmental, voluntary institutional or professional associations. These groups establish criteria for accreditation, arrange site visits, evaluate those institutions and professional programs which desire accredited status, and publicly designate those which meet their criteria.*

*In most other countries, the establishment and maintenance of educational standards is the responsibility of a central government bureau. In the United States, however, public authority in education is constitutionally reserved to the states. This system of voluntary nongovernmental evaluation, called accreditation, has evolved to promote both regional and national approaches to the determination of educational quality. Although accreditation is basically a private, voluntary process, accrediting decisions are used as a consideration in many formal actions—by governmental funding agencies, scholarship commissions, foundations, employers, counselors, and potential students. Accrediting agencies, therefore, come to be viewed as quasi-public entities with certain responsibilities to the many groups which interact with the educational community.*

*In America, accreditation at the postsecondary level performs a number of important functions, including the encouragement of efforts toward maximum educational effectiveness. The accrediting process requires institutions and programs to examine their goals, activities, and achievements; to consider the expert criticism and suggestions of a visiting team; and to determine internal procedures for action on recommendations from the accrediting agency. Since accreditation status is reviewed on a periodic basis, recognized institutions and professional programs are encouraged to maintain continuous self-study and improvement mechanisms. [Directory of Recognized Accrediting Agencies and Supporters of Accreditation, Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA), 1995].*

Accreditation of educational programs for the occupational therapist and the occupational therapy assistant is granted by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®) of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). ACOTE is recognized as the accrediting agency for occupational therapy education by the United States Department of Education (USDE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

Accreditation by an agency recognized by the USDE is one of the conditions qualifying an educational institution or program (freestanding) to participate in federal funding programs. Placement on the list of recognized accrediting agencies also serves consumer interests by acknowledging an accrediting body's ability to identify institutions or programs of quality.

Federal legislation requires the U.S. Secretary of Education to publish a list of the accrediting agencies the Secretary recognizes as reliable authorities concerning the quality of education offered by educational institutions or programs. The criteria and procedures developed by the Department for its evaluations and the list of agencies granted national recognition are published in the *Federal Register*.

## PURPOSES OF ACCREDITATION

*Accreditation has two fundamental purposes: to assure the quality of the institution or program and to assist in the improvement of the institution or program ...*

*In fulfilling its two purposes, quality assurance and institutional and program improvement, accreditation provides service of value to several constituencies:*

*To the **PUBLIC**, the value of accreditation includes:*

- a. an assurance of external evaluation of the institution or program, and a finding that there is conformity to general expectations in higher education or the professional field;*
- b. an identification of institutions and programs which have voluntarily undertaken explicit activities directed at improving the quality of the institution and its professional programs, and are carrying them out successfully;*
- c. an improvement in the professional services available to the public, as accredited programs modify their requirements to reflect changes in knowledge and practice generally accepted in the field;*
- d. a decreased need for intervention by public agencies in the operations of educational institutions, since their institutions through accreditation are providing privately for the maintenance and enhancement of educational quality.*

*To **STUDENTS**, accreditation provides:*

- a. an assurance that the educational activities of an accredited institution or program have been found to be satisfactory, and therefore meet the needs of students;*
- b. assistance in the transfer of credits between institutions, or in the admission of students to advanced degrees through the general acceptance of credits among accredited institutions when the performance of the student has been satisfactory and the credits to be transferred are appropriate to the receiving institution;*
- c. a prerequisite in many cases for entering a profession.*

***INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION** benefit from accreditation through:*

- a. the stimulus provided for self-evaluation and self-directed institutional and program improvement;*
- b. the strengthening of institutional and program self-evaluation by the review and counsel provided through the accrediting agency;*
- c. the application of criteria of accrediting agencies, generally accepted throughout higher education, which help guard against external encroachments harmful to institutional or program quality by providing benchmarks independent of forces that might impinge on individual institutions;*
- d. the enhancing of the reputation of an accredited institution or program because of public regard for accreditation;*
- e. the use of accreditation as one means by which an institution can gain eligibility for the participation of itself and its students in certain programs of governmental aid to postsecondary education; accreditation is also usually relied upon by private foundations as a highly desirable indicator of institutional and program quality.*

Accreditation serves the **PROFESSIONS** by:

- a. providing a means for the participation of practitioners in setting the requirements for preparation to enter the professions;
- b. contributing to the unity of the professions by bringing together practitioners, teachers and students in an activity directed at improving professional preparation and professional practice.

*(Adopted by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation Board April 15, 1982). (Affirmed by the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation January 16, 1994).*

The specific purposes of the ACOTE accreditation process are:

1. to encourage continuous self-analysis and improvement of the occupational therapy educational program by representatives of the institution's administrative staff, teaching faculty, students, governing body, and other appropriate constituencies, with the ultimate aim of assuring students of quality education in this profession and assuring patients of appropriate occupational therapy care.
2. to determine whether the occupational therapy educational program meets the appropriate approved educational standards.
3. to encourage faculty to anticipate and accommodate new trends and developments in the practice of occupational therapy that should be incorporated into the educational process.
4. to assure the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that the program has both clearly defined and appropriate objectives, maintains conditions under which these objectives can reasonably be expected to be achieved, appears to be accomplishing them substantially, and can be expected to continue to do so.

## **HISTORY OF AOTA ACCREDITATION**

The National Society for the Promotion of Occupational Therapy was founded in 1917 and incorporated under the laws of the District of Columbia.

The object of the Association as set forth in its Constitution "shall be to study and advance curative occupations for invalids and convalescents; to gather news of progress in occupational therapy and to use such knowledge to the common good; to encourage original research, to promote cooperation among occupational therapy societies, and with other agencies of rehabilitation."

About 3 years after its incorporation, the Association was urged by several leading physicians and authorities on hospital administration to establish a national register or directory of occupational therapists "for the protection of hospitals and institutions from unqualified persons posing as occupational therapists."

After careful consideration and on the advice of other national organizations in the field of medicine, the Association decided that the first step toward the establishment of a national register or directory was the establishment of minimum standards of training for occupational therapists.

In 1921, the name of the Association was changed to the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). In 1923, accreditation of educational programs became a stated function of the American Occupational Therapy Association, and basic educational standards were developed.

AOTA approached the Council on Medical Education of the American Medical Association (AMA) in 1933 to request cooperation in the development and improvement of educational programs for occupational therapists.

The “ESSENTIALS OF AN ACCEPTABLE SCHOOL OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY” were adopted by the AMA House of Delegates in 1935. This action represented the first cooperative accreditation activity by the AMA.

In 1958, AOTA assumed responsibility for approval of educational programs for the occupational therapy assistant. The standards on which accreditation was based were modeled after the Essentials established for baccalaureate programs.

In 1964, the AOTA/AMA collaborative relationship in accreditation was officially recognized by the National Commission on Accrediting (NCA). The NCA was a private agency serving as a coordinating agency for accrediting activities in higher education. Although it had no legal authority, it had great influence on educational accreditation through the listing of accrediting agencies it recommended to its members. The NCA continued its activities in merger with the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education since January 1975. The new organization was the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA).

In 1990, AOTA petitioned the Committee on Allied Health Education and Accreditation (CAHEA) to include the accreditation of the occupational therapy assistant programs in the CAHEA system. After approval of the change by the AMA Council on Medical Education, CAHEA petitioned both COPA and the USDE for recognition as the accrediting body for occupational therapy assistant education.

In 1991, occupational therapy assistant programs with approval status from the AOTA Accreditation Committee became accredited by CAHEA/AMA in collaboration with the AOTA Accreditation Committee.

On January 1, 1994, the AOTA Accreditation Committee changed its name to the AOTA Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) and became operational as an accrediting agency independent of CAHEA/AMA.

During 1994, ACOTE became listed by the USDE as a nationally recognized accrediting agency for professional programs in the field of occupational therapy. ACOTE was also granted initial recognition by the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA). CORPA was the nongovernmental recognition agency for accrediting bodies that was formed when COPA dissolved in 1994.

On March 1, 1994, 197 previously accredited/approved and developing occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant educational programs were transferred into the ACOTE accreditation system.

In a ballot election concluded October 31, 1994, the AOTA membership approved the proposed AOTA Bylaws Amendment that reflected the creation of AOTA’s new accrediting body and establishment of ACOTE as a standing committee of the AOTA Executive Board. At that time, responsibility for review and revision of the educational standards (Essentials) was transferred from the AOTA Commission on Education (COE) Educational Standards Review Committee (ESRC) to ACOTE. The authority for final approval of the educational standards, which previously required acceptance by both the AOTA Representative Assembly and CAHEA/AMA, was also transferred to ACOTE. This action allowed ACOTE to meet the recognition criteria of both USDE and CORPA.

The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is presently the nongovernmental agency for accrediting bodies that replaced CORPA. In February 1997, CHEA voted to accept CORPA’s recognition status of ACOTE.

In August 1997, ACOTE voted to open its accreditation process to occupational therapy programs located outside the United States. In December 1998, ACOTE accredited its first non-U.S. program: Queen Margaret University College in Edinburgh, Scotland.

At its April 1998 meeting, ACOTE adopted the following position statement regarding the draft accreditation standards: *Given the demands, complexity, and diversity of contemporary occupational therapy practice, ACOTE’s position is that the forthcoming educational standards are most likely to be achieved in post-baccalaureate degree programs.*

In December 1998, ACOTE adopted the *Standards for an Accredited Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist* and *Standards for an Accredited Educational Program for the Occupational Therapy Assistant*. These Standards, which went into effect on July 1, 2000, replaced the 1991 Essentials–Updated.

At AOTA’s April 1999 Annual Conference & Expo, the Representative Assembly passed Resolution J, “Movement to Required Postbaccalaureate Level of Education.” This resolution called for the eventual installation of a postbaccalaureate requirement for entry-level occupational therapy education. After an exhaustive evaluation of the short- and long-term impact of the decision to move to postbaccalaureate-degree entry, ACOTE voted at its August 1999 meeting that professional entry-level occupational therapy programs must be offered at the postbaccalaureate level by January 1, 2007 to receive or maintain ACOTE accreditation status.

In August of 2004, ACOTE voted to transition from accreditation of occupational therapy educational programs to accreditation of occupational therapy program degree levels, effective January 1, 2005. Any institution adding a new degree level or changing the current occupational therapy degree level was required to apply for and receive formal accreditation status for that degree level prior to the admission of students into the program.

In August 2006, ACOTE formally adopted new *Accreditation Standards for Master’s-Degree-Level Educational Programs for the Occupational Therapist* and new *Accreditation Standards for Educational Programs for the Occupational Therapy Assistant*. In December 2006, ACOTE formally adopted *Accreditation Standards for a Doctoral-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist*. An effective date of January 1, 2008, was established for all sets of 2006 ACOTE Standards.

At its April 2008 meeting, AOTA’s Representative Assembly (RA) established that the official position of AOTA is one that supports the associate degree as the requirement for entry to the field as an occupational therapy assistant. The RA further recommended that ACOTE implement a 5-year timeline for the existing 3 certificate-level programs to transition to the associate degree level. This transition period may be extended for good cause.

In response to the RA’s action, ACOTE adopted a policy at its April 2008 meeting that effective July 1, 2013, all occupational therapy assistant educational programs must be offered at the associate degree level in order to retain ACOTE accreditation. In addition, ACOTE voted that effective May 10, 2008, ACOTE will only accept applications for new occupational therapy assistant (OTA) programs that are offered at the associate degree level.

At its August 2015 meeting, ACOTE voted on the entry-level degree for the occupational therapist and the occupational therapy assistant as follows:

- Occupational Therapist: ACOTE determined that the entry-level-degree requirement for the occupational therapist will remain at both the master’s and the doctoral degree. The Council’s decision was based on a comprehensive review of available literature, specific reports, and extensive commentary from stakeholders. The overarching justifications for the Council’s decision were: (1) limited outcomes differentiate master’s and doctorally prepared graduates; (2) the academic infrastructure of many institutions is not sufficient to meet the occupational therapy doctorate standards, especially with respect to faculty resources and institutional support; (3) the readiness and capability of institutions to deliver quality fieldwork and experiential components of the program is constrained; and (4) retaining two entry levels allows for flexibility of the profession to assess and address the changing health care needs of individuals and populations.
- Occupational Therapy Assistant: ACOTE determined that the entry-level-degree for the occupational therapy assistant will be offered at both the associate and bachelor’s degree. The Council’s decision was based on a number of findings, which were informed in significant part by information and commentary from stakeholders, including: (1) the ability to better prepare individuals for further academic advancement and leadership positions; (2) the expansion of opportunities within the current scope of practice; and (3) two entry levels permits additional flexibility to assess and address the changing health care needs of individuals and populations. The option for programs to seek accreditation for the entry-level-degree for the OTA at the baccalaureate level will become active after baccalaureate entry-level Standards are written and adopted by ACOTE.

## ACOTE VISION STATEMENT

The Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®) is committed to the establishment, promotion, and evaluation of standards of quality in occupational therapy education. To this end, ACOTE will lead in the development of effective collaborative partnerships with the communities of interest, both internal and external to the profession of occupational therapy, which are affected by its activities.

## ACOTE MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®) is to foster the development and accreditation of quality occupational therapy education programs. As an autonomous entity, ACOTE establishes degree levels and comprehensive standards for occupational therapy education, thereby supporting the preparation of competent occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants. ACOTE will continually evaluate its functions to serve as a model for ethical, accountable, and efficient practice, and acknowledges occupational therapy's contribution to promoting the health and participation of people, organizations, and populations through engagement in occupation.

## REVIEW OF ACCREDITATION POLICIES

ACOTE periodically reviews its policies and procedures to ensure that:

- they are consistent with the requirements of the USDE,
- they facilitate an impartial and objective judgment of each program's compliance with the *Accreditation Standards for a Doctoral-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist, Master's-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist, or Associate-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapy Assistant*,
- they assure due process, and
- they minimize, as much as possible, the burden of the documentation required.

## PROCEDURES IN ACCREDITATION

The accreditation process is continuously evolving. The trend has been from quantitative to qualitative criteria, from the early days of simple checklists to an increasing interest and emphasis on measuring the outcomes of educational experiences.

For new programs, the accreditation process begins with submission of the Candidacy Application. Upon review of this application, ACOTE either grants, defers action on, or denies Candidacy Status. 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 conducts a programmatic self-study, a comprehensive self-assessment of the program's compliance with established ACOTE standards. Upon review of this report, ACOTE grants, defers action on, or denies Preaccreditation Status, a decision that reflects ACOTE's opinion of how likely the program is to meet the ACOTE standards by the time of the initial on-site evaluation.

In preparation for the initial or reaccreditation on-site evaluation, trained evaluators conduct a complete review of the Report of Self-Study submitted by the program. This serves as the basis for evaluation of the program by an on-site team. At the conclusion of the on-site evaluation, the team prepares an evaluation report, which is reviewed by the program for factual accuracy. The Evaluators' Report of On-Site Evaluation and any response

from the program are then reviewed by ACOTE. ACOTE uses these materials as the basis for action regarding the accreditation status of the program. Details regarding these procedures are contained in this manual.

## **LISTING OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY**

As required by the USDE, AOTA annually publishes a list of accredited occupational therapy educational programs, which includes a section devoted to developing programs that have entered the accreditation process and sections devoted to programs that have voluntarily or involuntarily withdrawn from the accreditation process. The fact that the program is included as an accredited educational program in the listing indicates that it is in substantial compliance with the *Accreditation Standards for a Doctoral-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist, Master's-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist, or Associate-Degree-Level Educational Program for the Occupational Therapy Assistant*. It should not be construed as indicating the rank or degree to which the program exceeds the *Standards*.