

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ENTRY-LEVEL MASTER'S AND
DOCTORAL DEGREES FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS**

The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc.

Bethesda, Maryland

by

Commission on Education

October, 2015

Frequently Asked Questions About Entry-level Master's and Doctoral Degrees for Occupational Therapists

Q: What is an entry-level degree for occupational therapists?

An entry-level degree for occupational therapists is the degree required to enter the profession and to be eligible to sit for the Occupational Therapist Registered OTR[®] examination administered by the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT[®]). Currently, occupational therapist entry-level degrees in the United States are at the post-baccalaureate level: either master's-level or doctoral-level degrees. Students who have successfully completed an accredited entry-level degree program may be eligible to sit for the national certification examination as an occupational therapist.

Q: How are entry-level programs accredited?

All entry-level programs must be accredited through the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE[®]). ACOTE develops and maintains the accreditation standards for occupational therapist entry-level programs, as well as accredits those educational programs that meet the standards. Any accredited occupational therapist entry-level degree program must meet these minimum standards. The standards for the doctoral programs are different than the standards for master's programs, reflecting the different roles graduates are prepared to assume. Each individual program also needs to meet the mission of the host institution, thus accounting for differences in programs' curricula and philosophy.

Q: How do I find a list of accredited occupational therapy programs?

AOTA provides lists of accredited and developing entry-level occupational therapist degree programs. Refer to the AOTA Educational Resource Web page at <http://www.aota.org/Educate/Schools.aspx> for links to specific institutions offering the occupational therapist entry-level degree. The requirements for admission may differ between entry-level master's and doctoral programs. Please refer to each individual institution's occupational therapist entry-level degree program for details and prerequisite information.

Q: How do I become eligible to sit for the national certification examination? Students who successfully complete an accredited entry-level occupational therapy program may be eligible to sit for the national certification examination if NBCOT requirements are met (see www.nbcot.org for specific information). Both the entry-level master's and doctoral degrees meet the entry-level degree requirements for NBCOT.

Q: What is the difference between an entry-level OT master's program and an OT doctoral-level program?

Educational curricula vary among master's-level and doctoral-level programs and are based on institutional prerogative. The variance in curricula can create confusion when comparing programs and degrees. Despite the variance among specific programs, accredited entry-level master's and entry-level doctoral programs meet the ACOTE requirements for entry-level programs.

ACOTE Standards for an Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist establish minimum standards that must be met by all accredited occupational therapist entry-level programs. These standards maintain consistency of content among the programs. Individual

programs may include additional content in the program of study and may deliver the content in different ways.

- ***Master's-Level Programs***

Entry-level master's degree programs prepare students to be entry level practitioners and to sit for the NBCOT Occupational Therapist Registered (OTR[®]) examination. Students may enter occupational therapist entry-level master's degree programs with any of a variety of undergraduate degrees or as undergraduates in a combined undergraduate/graduate program. Graduates from these programs are typically awarded the Master of Occupational Therapy (MOT) or Master of Science (MS) degree. The degree awarded is an institutional prerogative based on consistency with the mission and structure of the college/university. Entry-level programs must be accredited by ACOTE (see <http://www.aota.org/Educate/Accredit.aspx> for additional information) at an institution accredited by recognized institutional accrediting agencies.

Occupational therapist entry-level programs must meet minimum educational standards set by ACOTE for fieldwork (see <http://www.aota.org/Educate/Accredit.aspx> for more information). A minimum of 24 weeks of full-time Level II fieldwork is required for entry-level OT programs.

- ***Doctoral-level programs***

Like entry-level master's programs, entry-level doctoral programs prepare graduates to enter the profession as new practitioners. 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. According to ACOTE Standards, all doctoral programs must require their applicants to hold a baccalaureate degree or higher *prior* to admission, whereas that is not a requirement for the master's programs. Based on the ACOTE Standards, there are greater expectations for entry-level doctoral student outcomes related to technology; program development; staff development; synthesis and practice of advanced knowledge; and demonstrated competency in clinical practice skills, research skills, administration, leadership, program and policy development, advocacy, education, or theory development.

Entry-level doctoral programs require a minimum of 24 weeks of Level II fieldwork experiences as well as an additional experiential component (16 weeks) and culminating project. The experiential component facilitates the development of advanced skills beyond the generalist level in one or more of the following areas: administration, leadership, program and policy development, advocacy, education, and theory development.

Q: Can students pursuing an occupational therapist entry-level degree obtain financial aid?

Financial aid for entry-level education is available from a variety of federal, state, and private agencies and institutions. Individuals interested in finding out about financial aid may use a variety of resources, including but not limited to the U.S. Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov/inaid/info/find/edpicks.jhtml?src=ov>). Prospective students should also

contact the financial aid office of each prospective school, as financial aid opportunities can differ from institution to institution.

Q: What is the rationale for selecting an entry-level master’s or doctoral degree?

Prospective students should consider a variety of issues when deciding which degree best meets their needs. They should ask themselves these questions:

- What are my future career goals?
- Does the degree contribute to accomplishing my short-term and long-term goals? (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2007, p. 676)

In addition, prospective students should consider location, costs, availability of financial support, length of program, full- or part-time programming, format of program (e.g., on campus or distance learning), admission requirements, program requirements, faculty, alumni, and the institution (AOTA, 2007).

Employment

Q: Will entry-level doctoral prepared therapists earn more money than entry-level master’s prepared therapists?

Preliminary informal surveys of entry-level doctoral graduates indicate that the doctoral degree does not guarantee advanced salaries. However, many entry-level doctoral graduates are able to pursue and fill unique positions due to their advanced education. In some situations, such as with designated positions in school systems, the acquisition of a relevant advanced degree or doctorate may qualify an individual for an increase in salary. More data continue to be gathered to determine salaries of therapists holding entry-level and post-professional doctoral degrees.

Q: Can entry-level-prepared faculty teach in colleges and universities?

Entry-level-prepared occupational therapists may be able to teach at a college or other educational institution. It depends on the institution. Someone with an entry-level doctoral degree may be hired as a faculty member and teach in a college or university. However, each institution has specific requirements for faculty members, and individuals with an entry-level degree may or may not meet these qualifications. Entry-level-prepared master’s or doctoral graduates may qualify for faculty positions in occupational therapy assistant education or occupational therapist education programs, depending on other related experience, degrees, and ability to conduct research. Hiring practices vary within institutions and may include other factors, such as the educational format in which the program is offered (e.g., face-to-face instruction, independent study, distance education) and the expectations of the institution offering the degree. Persons with an entry-level doctoral degree have been hired in teaching, research, and administrative positions at the university and college levels. As the number of therapists with an entry-level doctoral degree increases, there will be a larger critical mass affecting this issue.

Q: Can entry-level doctoral prepared faculty members obtain tenure?

The tenure and promotion process is determined by each college or university. The occupational therapist entry-level doctoral degree is a terminal degree, as defined by the Commission on Education. However, some research institutions require an academic terminal degree for tenure based on institutional goals. Some examples of an academic terminal include but are not limited

to PhD, ScD, and EdD. Rank, promotion, and tenure are processes determined by individual institutions.

Q: Will it be easier to compete in the job market with a doctoral degree than a master's degree?

Market value of an entry-level doctoral prepared therapist is a complex entity. In a rapidly changing health care environment, professionals with additional education, additional experience, and advanced degrees will be more desirable. However, demonstrated competence is the true advantage. More compelling data on employment outcomes and other information describing the impact of doctoral prepared therapists are still forthcoming.

Resources

- Clark, F. (2003, June). *Positioning yourself to make a difference in the future*. Presentation at the Education Special Interest Section Workshop at the Annual Conference of the American Occupational Therapy Association, Washington, DC.
- Glazer, J. (1988). The master's degree. *ERIC Digest*. ERICEDRS, 19880101.
- Krutis, S. (2002). Consider doctoral education. *OT Practice*, 7(22), 19–22.
- Pierce, D., & Peyton, C. (1999). A historical cross-disciplinary perspective on the professional doctorate in occupational therapy. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 53, 64–71.
- Professional Program Directors Educational Council. (2002, November 16). Minutes from the PRODEC meeting, Chicago.
- Professional Program Directors Educational Council. (2002, Nov. 16). Roundtable summaries from the PRODEC meeting, Chicago.
- Royeen, C. B., & Stohs, S. J. (1999). Should the clinical doctorate be the standard of entry into the practice of occupational therapy? In P. A. Crist (Ed.), *Innovations in occupational therapy education* (pp. 171–177). Bethesda, MD: American Occupational Therapy Association.