
A Descriptive Review of Occupational Therapy Education

Introduction

In August 2002, the Commission on Education developed *A Guide to Occupational Therapy Education*. With the advent and passing of Resolution J—which became Resolution 670–99 at the 1999 Representative Assembly meeting of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA; Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education® [ACOTE®], 1999)—and new degree structures within the profession (i.e., professional/clinical doctorate), a new guide to occupational therapy education was warranted. This resultant guide, retitled *A Descriptive Review of Occupational Therapy Education*, is intended for practitioners, academicians, and potential occupational therapy program applicants to augment their understanding of current occupational therapy education.

Organization of Review

The Review is organized into several sections. The introductory section describes the process of developing the Descriptive Review. The second section distinguishes between professional and graduate education and provides the background and foundational groundwork for the Review. The next section describes levels of education in the United States used by most colleges and universities. It is the common language used in all degree majors and programs and should be the guide for occupational therapy so that degrees in occupational therapy can be recognized and understood by other fields. The Review then delineates the levels of education in occupational therapy in the United States from the technical level of education to the doctoral level. Finally, the Review describes types of accreditation for occupational therapy programs and lists factors that should be considered when choosing an occupational therapy program.

The Review was written to describe the present state of occupational therapy education within the American educational system and is limited to this perspective only. It does not intend to promote one occupational therapy degree over any other, nor is it intended to resolve the multiple issues regarding the various degree levels or entry-level competencies.

Levels of Education in the United States

One of the hallmarks of higher education in the United States is the diversity of institutions, degrees, and programs available. A prospective student may choose to pursue higher education at a research university, comprehensive university, 4-year college, community college, or technical school. Institutions may be public or private, for profit or nonprofit (Bok, 2013). One well-known classification system for American higher education institutions is the Carnegie Classification (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, n.d.).

Common Carnegie Classifications for institutions offering occupational therapy programs include Research Universities (very high research activity), Research Universities (high research activity), Doctoral/Research Universities, Master's Colleges and Universities, Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields, Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges, and Special Focus Institutions. Common Carnegie Classifications for institutions offering occupational therapy assistant programs include Master's Colleges and Universities, Baccalaureate Colleges, Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges, Special Focus Institutions, Associates—Public Rural-serving, Associate's—Public Suburban-serving, Associate's—Public Urban-serving, Associate's—

Private Not-for-Profit, and Associate's—Private For-Profit. Although this is not a complete list of Carnegie Classifications, it represents the range of types of institutions that house occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant programs. Each type of institution has a different focus or emphasis in terms of research, student body, curriculum, and funding formula. Further description of Carnegie Classifications can be found at <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/descriptions/basic.php>.

Levels of education are represented by the academic degree conferred to graduates. A *degree* is a credential or title "conferred by a college or university as official recognition for the completion of a program of studies" (Shafritz, Koeppe, & Soper, 1988, p. 145). Academic degree levels include associate, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral.

Associate Degree

The associate degree is recognized among higher education degrees. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an *associate degree* is defined as

an award that requires completion of an organized program of study of at least 2 but less than 4 years of full-time academic study or more than 60, but less than 120 semester credit hours. . . . Most associate degrees earned in academic programs are associate of arts (AA) or science (AS) degrees. Associate degrees earned in professional, technical or terminal programs are frequently called associate of applied science (AAS) degrees, but will sometimes carry the name of the program of study in the title. (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2008a, p. 1)

Baccalaureate

A *baccalaureate degree* is an award requiring completion of 4 to 5 full-time equivalent academic years of college-level work in an academic or occupationally specific field of study and that satisfies institutional standards of the requirement of the degree level (USDE, 2008b). Two common baccalaureate degrees are the bachelor of arts (BA or AB, for the Latin *atrium baccalaureus*) for programs in the humanities and the bachelor of science (BS) for programs in the sciences. Some institutions offer baccalaureate degrees in specialized areas, for example, bachelor of music (BMus) or bachelor of education (BE; Unger, 1996).

Master's

The *master's degree* is the first graduate-level degree awarded in the United States and typically requires 2 years of postbaccalaureate education to complete. The value of the master's degree varies, depending on the field. The master's degree may serve as the entry into an area of study, as the terminal degree, or as a step toward the doctoral degree. Recent years have seen more doctoral programs admitting students at the baccalaureate level, eliminating the need for the master's degree in these programs (USDE, 2008c).

Research Master's

The *research master's degree* typically involves advanced study in the field, a comprehensive examination, and preparation and defense of either a master's thesis or a major project. The most commonly awarded master's degrees are the master of arts (MA) and the master of science (MS; USDE, 2008c).

Professional Master's

Professional education has been part of higher education in the United States for more than a century, and today most students enrolled in institutions of higher education are in professional or preprofessional programs (Sullivan, 2012). The professional master's degree structure can vary, depending upon the profession. Some *professional master's degree* programs are similar to research master's in that they involve advanced study in the field combined with a thesis or other major project. Other professional degrees are intended to prepare students to work in the field and typically do not include a thesis, although they often require a professional internship under supervision (USDE, 2008c).

Doctorate: Research and Professional

A *doctoral degree* is the highest degree conferred by an institution of higher education. Most doctoral degrees require the equivalent of 3 years of full-time postbaccalaureate study (Kapel, Gifford, & Kapel, 1991). Commonly, universities require a minimum of 72 hours of postbaccalaureate study plus a residence requirement. "Doctorate entitles bearers to be addressed as 'Doctor' and to append their names with the appropriate letters of their degrees—that is, PhD (doctor of philosophy) or MD (doctor of medicine)" (Unger, 1996, p. 305). There are two types of doctoral degrees: the research doctorate and the professional doctorate (Shafritz et al., 1988; Unger, 1996). The professional doctorate is also referred to as a *clinical doctorate* in many health professions (Pierce & Peyton, 1999).

Research Doctorate

The *research doctorate* (also called the *academic doctorate*), or PhD, was originally awarded for the study of philosophy in the mid-to-late 19th century. However, the degree was extended to include many disciplines of the humanities and sciences, with each PhD simply modified to indicate the field of study; for example, PhD in engineering, PhD in history, or PhD in chemistry. The purpose of the PhD degree is to develop graduates who are independent researchers and are knowledgeable in a specific area of study. Requirements for the PhD degree usually include a course of didactic study, followed by written or oral comprehensive examinations (upon passing, one applies for candidacy) and the completion of a dissertation in an area of new knowledge as deemed appropriate by a committee of senior faculty after an oral defense of the research (Shafritz et al., 1988).

The *doctor of science* (ScD) is an alternative doctoral degree similar to the PhD. Its curriculum is focused on the study of an applied science, such as audiology, occupational therapy, and so forth. ScD degree programs commonly include didactic coursework focused on the study of an applied science, an advanced clinical practicum, and a supervised clinical research project (Kidd, Cox, & Matthies, 2003).

Professional Doctorate

The *professional doctorate* reflects academic attainment and seldom requires a master's degree or dissertation (Unger, 1996). Unlike the PhD's focus on developing independent researchers, "sophisticated practice competencies" (Pierce & Peyton, 1999, p. 64) are emphasized in the professional doctorate degree. A person with a professional doctorate, such as an MD or doctor of jurisprudence (JD), must pass state or national qualifying examinations to obtain a license to practice (Unger, 1996). In the health sciences, the term *clinical doctorate* is synonymous with the term *professional doctorate*, and the program of study typically requires "mentored advanced clinical experiences for autonomous practice competencies" (Pierce & Peyton, 1999, p. 65; see also Edens & Labadie, 1987; Faut-Callahan, 1992; Hummer, Hunt, & Figuers, 1994; Watson, 1988).

Postdoctoral Education

As a result of globalization and the increased pace and complexity of knowledge, postdoctoral education has emerged to meet the growing need for scholars trained in both basic and translational science (Nerad, 2011). The adjective *postdoctoral* is frequently used to describe the variety of postdoctoral educational experiences. For example, terms such as *postdoctoral fellow*, *postdoctoral research associate*, and *postdoctoral trainee* are typically used. The competencies expected from postdoctoral education now require skills such as project management, which are well beyond those typically found in academia (Manathunga & Pitt, 2009).

Residencies

Residencies are a form of postprofessional education that are becoming more common in occupational therapy. "The purpose of post professional residency education is to advance the resident's preparation as a provider of patient care services in a defined (specialized) area of clinical practice" (Di Fabio, 1999,

p. 81). Residencies are focused on advancing knowledge, performance and interpersonal skills, and critical and ethical reasoning of practitioners in a focused area of practice (AOTA, 2014). Residency programs are between 9 and 12 months in length and may be situated in hospitals, schools, organizations, or community sites. As of mid-2015, there were four approved occupational therapy residency sites and one additional candidate residency site (AOTA, n.d.).

Levels of Education in Occupational Therapy

Occupational Therapy Assistant

Associate Degree–Level OTA

Occupational therapy assistant (OTA) programs are commonly offered at community colleges, private junior colleges, and some 4-year colleges and universities. OTA programs obtain accreditation from ACOTE and must adhere to the *Standards for an Accredited Educational Program for the Occupational Therapy Assistant* (ACOTE, 2016). As articulated in the Preamble of the Standards, a graduate from an ACOTE-accredited associate degree–level OTA program must

- Have acquired an educational foundation in the liberal arts and sciences, including a focus on issues related to diversity;
- Be educated as a generalist with a broad exposure to the delivery models and systems used in settings where occupational therapy is currently practiced and where it is emerging as a service;
- Have achieved entry-level competence through a combination of academic and fieldwork education;
- Be prepared to articulate and apply occupational therapy principles and intervention tools to achieve expected outcomes as related to occupation;
- Be prepared to articulate and apply therapeutic use of occupations with individuals or groups for the purpose of participation in roles and situations in home, school, workplace, community, and other settings;
- Be able to apply occupational therapy interventions to address the physical, cognitive, psychosocial, sensory, and other aspects of performance in a variety of contexts and environments to support engagement in everyday life activities that affect health, well-being, and quality of life;
- Be prepared to be a lifelong learner and keep current with best practice;
- Uphold the ethical standards, values, and attitudes of the occupational therapy profession;
- Understand the distinct roles and responsibilities of the occupational therapist and the occupational therapy assistant in the supervisory process;
- Be prepared to effectively communicate and work interprofessionally with those who provide care for individuals and/or populations to clarify each member's responsibility in executing components of an intervention plan; and
- Be prepared to advocate as a professional for the occupational therapy services offered and for the recipients of those services.

After completing the OTA didactic and fieldwork requirements, the OTA graduate is eligible to sit for the national certification examination for OTAs. On successful completion, the certified occupational therapy assistant (COTA) may apply for the appropriate state credential and, under specified supervision, render occupational therapy services.

Occupational Therapist Master's: Entry-Level and Postprofessional

In January 2007 the master's degree became the minimum degree level to enter the profession as an occupational therapist. Some entry-level programs require students to earn a baccalaureate degree in a related field before entering the master's degree program in occupational therapy. Other entry-level programs may require extensive prerequisite coursework but not mandate a baccalaureate degree. For example, the course of study may comprise two semesters beyond an undergraduate degree in a major such as occupational science; in other programs, the course of study may be a 5-year program leading to a master's degree. Coursework that is considered prerequisite is not generally included in the total credits required for the master's degree. On successful completion of the academic and fieldwork requirements, the graduate is eligible to take the national certification examination, then apply for state licensure and provide occupational therapy services at the professional level.

Postprofessional master's degree programs are available to individuals who have a professional degree in occupational therapy (e.g., baccalaureate, entry-level master's, entry-level doctorate degree). Such postprofessional degrees are typical of master's degree programs in other disciplines with a range of 30 to 36 credits. Many postprofessional programs are developed to enhance occupational therapy skills in a specific area (e.g., pediatrics, assistive technology, gerontology). Other master's degree programs may provide a general program with a curricular emphasis (e.g., leadership, research).

Doctorate: Clinical/Professional and Research

Currently, doctoral-level occupational therapy offerings include the clinical or professional and research doctorates. Some programs offer the PhD degree in occupational therapy. These doctoral programs focus on preparing graduates who are independent researchers and who will develop original knowledge pertinent to occupational therapy. Other doctoral degree programs related to occupational therapy exist, such as the PhD degree in rehabilitation science or occupational science or the ScD. Although many of these programs focus on the application of occupational therapy, it is beyond the scope of this document to describe the variations in doctoral programs closely aligned with occupational therapy.

The clinical or professional doctorate degree in occupational therapy confers the degree of occupational therapy doctorate (OTD) or doctor of occupational therapy (DrOT). Two pathways exist for pursuing the clinical or professional doctorate degree. The first is available to postprofessional students, that is, students who have an entry-level degree in occupational therapy and are occupational therapists. The second pathway is an entry-level doctorate. Entry-level professional doctorate degree programs are available for individuals who do not have an entry-level degree in occupational therapy but who have completed specified prerequisite coursework and, as of 2010, a baccalaureate degree.

Although clinical doctorate degree programs vary in philosophy, curriculum, and delivery method (particularly postprofessional programs, which often offer part-time and/or online options), typically the postprofessional clinical doctorate programs are shorter in duration and/or require less coursework than entry-level clinical doctorate programs. The rationale for the difference in program length is that postprofessional clinical doctorate students are occupational therapists who have previously completed an entry-level occupational therapy degree and also in consideration of the amount of clinical practice experience applicants possess. Unlike entry-level clinical doctorate programs, postprofessional clinical doctorate degrees are not currently accredited by ACOTE.

Accreditation

Institutions of higher education may choose to pursue *accreditation*, an external review to ensure that established standards are met. There are two types of accreditation: *institutional accreditation* and *program* (or *specialized*) *accreditation* (USDE, 2015). Accreditation of occupational therapy programs is the second type—program (or specialized)—and is completed by ACOTE, which is recognized by the USDE as well as by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

Institutional Accreditation

Regional and national accrediting bodies are recognized by the USDE and accredit institutions based upon established evaluation criteria (USDE, 2015). There are six regional agencies that accredit institutions located in distinct geographic areas. Accreditation standards from regional or national accrediting bodies influence ACOTE in that ACOTE standards must be aligned with requirements from the USDE and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (Kramer & Graves, 2005).

Program or Specialized Accreditation

Program or specialized accreditation “applies to a particular school, department or program within the institution” and “may also apply to an entire institution if it is a free-standing, specialized institution . . . whose curriculum is all in the same program area” (Kaplin & Lee, 1995, p. 873). Currently ACOTE accredits OTA programs as well as entry-level programs in occupational therapy. The educational standards are developed through ACOTE with input from stakeholders. For postprofessional occupational therapy programs, there is no specialized accrediting body. However, institutional accrediting bodies can require a focus visit of a particular program. A focus visit does not result in the accrediting of a specific program.

Suggested Considerations When Choosing an Occupational Therapy Educational Program

When choosing an occupational therapy educational program, important factors must be considered (Box 1).

A variety of resources provide information about specific education programs. Institutional websites can be helpful in acquiring information about a program’s curriculum and faculty. Brochures, catalogs, and bulletin descriptions often present the program’s mission, philosophy, curriculum, or policies. These materials can be requested from the admissions office of each institution. Contacting faculty within the program is frequently useful to answer specific questions. Prospective students may request contact with a current student or with alumni to gain a consumer’s perspective of the program.

In addition, it is important to answer the following questions:

- What are my future career goals?
- Does the degree offered contribute to accomplishing my short-term and long-term goals?
- If considering an online program, do I have the necessary skills to be successful (e.g., motivation, self-initiative, technical skills)?

Box 1. Considerations for Occupational Therapy Entry-Level and Postprofessional Education

- Location of program
- Tuition, return on investment, cost–salary considerations
- Length of program
- Availability of student scholarships
- Full- or part-time programs
- On-campus, distance-formatted, hybrid, or bridge-weekend programs
- Admission requirements
 - Interview
 - Entrance exams (e.g., Miller's Analogy, Graduate Record Exam)
 - Letters of recommendation, essays
 - Prerequisite classes or degree
 - Observation hours in occupational therapy
 - Undergraduate and prerequisite GPA
 - Community service and work experience
- Type of program
 - Degree awarded (e.g., AA, MS, MA, MOT, PhD, ScD, OTD)
 - Thesis requirement
 - Dissertation requirement
 - Curriculum (e.g., courses offered, course descriptions printed in catalog)
 - Program mission and philosophical grounding
 - Specialization (e.g., gerontology, pediatrics, entrepreneurialism)
 - Experiential components
 - Fieldwork, internships, rotations, etc.
 - Length of clinical preparation
 - Opportunities for post-degree experiences (e.g., residencies/fellowships)
- Institutional variables
 - Carnegie Classification
 - Library resources
 - Information technology/computer support
 - Stability of program as measured by accreditation status, retention and degree completion rates
 - Graduate or professional school
 - Ratings and rankings of programs
 - Community partnerships and international collaborations
- Graduate/alumni accomplishments
 - Graduation rate
 - Employment rates, sites
 - Employer satisfaction with graduates
 - Consumer satisfaction with graduate performance
 - NBCOT® exam pass rate
 - Graduate scholarly activity
- Faculty
 - Faculty credentials (e.g., doctorally prepared, specialty certified)
 - Faculty-to-student ratios
 - Faculty accessibility
 - Faculty projects (e.g., grants, publications)
 - Faculty clinical practice
 - Faculty community engagement, university citizenship, and professional service

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