

# ACCREDITATION PROCESS FOR NEW PROGRAMS

## 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).

*ACOTE will accept and review a maximum of 10 Candidacy Applications from new or transitioning programs during a given cycle. The assignment of due dates for Candidacy Applications will be based on the receipt date of the Letter of Intent. After the program cap is reached, programs will be subject to the next available review cycle and planned student admission must be delayed accordingly. (See [New Program Slots](#).)*

**One (1) year prior to the submission of the Candidacy Application, a qualified\* program director must be hired full-time and on-site. Six (6) months prior to the submission of the Candidacy Application, a qualified\* academic fieldwork coordinator must be hired full-time and on-site. For doctoral programs that submitted a Letter of Intent on or after January 1, 2022, a qualified doctoral capstone coordinator must be hired full-time and on-site at least six (6) months prior to the submission of the Candidacy Application.** At least 1 year prior to the submission date for the Candidacy Application, the program must notify the Accreditation Department ([accred@aota.org](mailto:accred@aota.org)) that a qualified\* program director has been hired full-time in order to proceed with the initial accreditation process. Otherwise, the program will be moved to the next available review cycle and planned student admission must be delayed accordingly.

At least 6 months prior to the submission date for the Candidacy Application, the program must notify the Accreditation Department ([accred@aota.org](mailto:accred@aota.org)) that a qualified\* academic fieldwork coordinator (and for doctoral programs that submitted a Letter of Intent on or after January 1, 2022, a qualified doctoral capstone coordinator) has been hired full-time in order to proceed with the initial accreditation process. Otherwise, the program will be moved to the next available review cycle and planned student admission must be delayed accordingly.

*\*Qualified program director: For the purposes of this policy, program directors must meet all requirements of 2018 Standard A.2.1 one year prior to submission of the Candidacy Application with the exception of the required years of experience in a full-time academic appointment with teaching responsibilities. That requirement must be met prior to starting the first class of students in occupational therapy coursework.*

*\*Qualified academic fieldwork coordinator: For the purposes of this policy, academic fieldwork coordinators must meet all requirements of 2018 Standard A.2.4 six months prior to submission of the Candidacy Application with the exception of the required years of clinical experience as an occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant. That requirement must be met prior to starting the first class of students in occupational therapy coursework.*

#### 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. All reports and documentation must be submitted in English.

- **STEP 1: CANDIDACY REVIEW**

For new programs, the process begins with the submission of a Letter of Intent, and completion and submission of the Eligibility Data. Once eligibility is confirmed, the program may submit a Candidacy Application according to the approved timeline. The program director must be hired, full-time, and on-site one year prior to submission of the Candidacy Application. The academic fieldwork coordinator must be hired, full-time, and on-site 6 months prior to submission of the Candidacy Application. The Candidacy Application must be electronically signed by the occupational therapy program director, the dean or administrator overseeing the proposed program, and the chief executive officer of the sponsoring institution. 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 appears to demonstrate the ability to meet the applicable ACOTE Standards 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.

### Provisional Candidacy Status Granted

ACOTE has an **exception clause** to include granting Provisional Candidacy Status for programs that wish to submit Candidacy Applications for a new occupational therapy or occupational therapy assistant program and **reside in a state that requires Candidacy Status from ACOTE prior to approving the new program**. This exception allows programs to move forward with the understanding that state approval must be received before the first class of students enter the program. All other rules apply.

Once ACOTE receives official notification of state approval, the status of the program will be changed from Provisional Candidacy Status to Candidacy Status and the program may proceed with admission of the first class of students into the program.

- **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. The maximum length a program may hold preaccreditation status is 2 years unless extended by ACOTE for good cause.

If Preaccreditation Status is denied, programs **must** note the denial of Preaccreditation Status on the program's homepage.

- **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 grant a status of Accreditation or Accreditation with Conditions, or defer or deny Accreditation. (Descriptions of each accreditation status are provided in [ACOTE Policy IV.C. Classification of Accreditation Categories](#)).

### **PROGRAM DIRECTOR CHANGES DURING CANDIDACY OR PREACCREDITATION**

If the qualified program director resigns from a program holding Candidacy Status or Preaccreditation Status, the program may not admit another cohort of students until a new, qualified program director has been hired and is on-site.

### **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 candidacy 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 deadline for receipt of the Candidacy Application is 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 10 Candidacy Applications during a given cycle. Only institutions with occupational therapy/occupational therapy assistant program directors hired, full-time, and on-site at least 1 year prior to submission of a Candidacy Application may proceed with the assigned Candidacy Application submission slot. This determination will be based on the receipt of submitted signed documentation that the program director has been hired full-time and is on-site at least 1 year prior to the submission of the Candidacy Application.**

**Programs must also submit signed documentation that the academic fieldwork coordinator has been hired full-time and is on-site 6 months prior to the due date for the Candidacy Application. For doctoral programs that submitted a Letter of Intent on or after January 1, 2022, a qualified doctoral capstone coordinator must also be hired full-time and on-site at least six (6) months prior to the submission of the Candidacy Application. Programs that are unable to meet these requirements will be moved to the next available review cycle and planned student admission must be delayed accordingly.**

It is suggested that the 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. Candidacy Applications or fees received after the deadline may result in loss of the Candidacy Application submission slot.** 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.

<b>Planned Start Date for First Class of Students</b>	Fall (August/September)	Winter (December/January)	Spring/Summer (May/June)
<b>Latest Date for Completed Candidacy Application and Application Fee NO LATER THAN 5:00 P.M. EASTERN ON:</b>	December 15	April 15	August 15
<b>Candidacy Review and ACOTE Action on Candidacy Status (ACOTE Meeting)</b>	April	August	December
<b><u>IF CANDIDACY STATUS IS AWARDED, THE SCHEDULE WOULD CONTINUE APPROXIMATELY AS FOLLOWS. NOTE THAT THIS SCHEDULE IS ADJUSTED AS NEEDED TO ACCOMMODATE THE LENGTH OF EACH PROGRAM:</u></b>			
<b>Students May be Notified of Acceptance Into the Program</b>	April/May	August	December
<b>First Class May be Enrolled</b>	Fall (August/September)	Winter (December/January)	Spring/Summer (May/June)
<b>Initial Report of Self-Study Due</b>	March 1	July 1	November 1
<b>Preaccreditation Review (ACOTE Meeting)</b>	August	December	April
<b>On-Site Evaluation</b>	Late Winter/Early Spring	Late Spring/Early Summer	Fall
<b>Accreditation Action (ACOTE Meeting)</b>	April	August	December

### SAMPLE TIMELINE FOR FALL CLASS ENROLLMENT

The following example is a minimal timeline in anticipation of a fall class enrollment.

- **ON OR BEFORE NOVEMBER 1**

A Letter of Intent, Letter of Intent Data Form, and the program director's curriculum vitae (if hired) must be attached to an email addressed to [accred@aota.org](mailto:accred@aota.org). Upon receipt, accreditation staff will follow up regarding payment options for the non-refundable deposit that will be applied toward the application fee.

This letter must be signed by the chief executive officer of the sponsoring institution(s). 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 [ACOTE Policy III.A.1. 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.

- **BY DECEMBER 15**

The Candidacy Application and payment for the balance of the application fee must be received no later than 5:00 p.m. on December 15. The Candidacy Application must be electronically 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 full-time by the institution and on-site **at least 1 year prior to submission of the Candidacy Application. An academic fieldwork coordinator meeting ACOTE requirements must be hired full-time and on-site 6 months prior to submission of the Candidacy Application. Both the program director and the academic fieldwork coordinator** 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 or academic fieldwork coordinator during the initial accreditation process for new programs, the progression of the program to the next step in the accreditation process will be delayed until the requirement of having a qualified program director and academic fieldwork coordinator hired full-time and on-site 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 and academic fieldwork coordinator on staff. If students have already begun the occupational therapy coursework after Candidacy Status has been granted, but prior to a decision on Preaccreditation Status, the program's Preaccreditation Status decision will be delayed until a qualified program director and academic fieldwork coordinator are hired and on staff.

Upon receipt, the Candidacy Application will be assigned to the designated reviewers. The reviewers assess all materials submitted and may request additional written information to clarify or enhance submitted materials. Upon receipt and review of the additional materials, the review team coordinator will present recommendations to ACOTE for consideration at its next scheduled meeting.

- **APRIL**

At the ACOTE meeting, a subcommittee examines the findings of the candidacy 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 details the concerns of ACOTE is reflected in 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 or Preaccreditation Status **resign 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 assesses all materials submitted and may request additional written information to clarify or enhance submitted materials. Upon receipt and review of the additional materials, the review team coordinator will present 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 emailed to the program director, with a copy to the dean and chief executive officer of the sponsoring institution, indicating action taken on the Preaccreditation Status. A Report of Preaccreditation Review that details the concerns of ACOTE is reflected in 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 its 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 should provide any additional information requested in the Report of Preaccreditation Review. This information should be provided for review by the evaluation team 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 with conditions is granted and areas of concern are cited in the official Report of the Accreditation Council (RAC), a due date for the required report is established. The program will receive the letter of notification regarding the action of ACOTE within 4 weeks after the meeting.

<b>INITIAL ACCREDITATION FEES</b>
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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 must be paid immediately after submission of the Letter of Intent. This deposit is applied toward the candidacy application fee.
- The balance of the candidacy 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 on the ACOTE website ([www.acoteonline.org](http://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 ([accred@aota.org](mailto:accred@aota.org)). 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 moved to the next available review cycle. A new initial accreditation schedule will be generated.

The previously submitted Candidacy Application fee deposit will be applied toward the Candidacy Application fee as long as the balance of the application fee is scheduled to be paid within the next fiscal year. For example, an application fee deposit paid in December 2021 (FY 2021/2022) may be applied toward an application fee due on April 15, 2023 (FY 2022/2023). Otherwise, a new application fee deposit must be submitted with the request for a revision to the initial accreditation schedule.