Pre-Occupational Therapy Guide
2021-2022

Occupational therapists are healthcare professionals who help individuals with illness, disabilities or injuries develop or regain skills that allow them to participate in everyday activities and reach independence. An occupational therapist’s (OT) work can be diverse: an OT may help an elementary-aged student improve handwriting or help an elderly patient with self-care following a stroke. OTs work in numerous settings including: hospitals, schools, clinics, prisons, rehabilitation centers, assisted living centers, mental health clinics and senior centers. OTs work with individuals from across the lifespan in diverse settings, and work with a variety of healthcare providers.

Occupational therapy programs vary in length depending on the type of program and degree earned. Most students attend occupational therapy school after a baccalaureate program. Post-baccalaureate programs include MOT (Master of Occupational Therapy), DOT (Doctor of Occupational Therapy), combined Masters and Doctorate OT degrees and OTA (Occupational Therapy Assistant) to OT degree programs. All OT post-baccalaureate programs will transition to DOT-granting degrees only by 2027. The University of Iowa does not offer an OT program. There are three programs in Iowa, and several other programs in the Midwest.

Sample Pre-Occupational Therapy Four-Year Academic Plan

Year 1:
RHET:1030 Rhetoric
SOC:1010 Intro. to Sociology or social science course.
ENGL:1200 Interpretation of Literature
PSY:1001 Elementary Psychology

Year 2:
HHP:2130 Human Dev. Through Lifespan BIOL:1140 Human Biology (prep for anatomy)
CHEM:1070 General Chemistry if needed***

Year 3:
HHP:1100 Human Anatomy HHP:1300 Fundamentals Human Physiology
HHP:1110 Human Anatomy lab ‡ HHP:1310 Human Physiology lab
PSY:2930 Abnormal Psych. for Health CLSA:3750 Medical Technical Terminology

Year 4:
Courses needed to complete major
HHP:1310 Human Physiology lab (if needed)
Apply to programs in early fall

**Some schools require more advanced statistics courses such as Biostatistics or Intro. to Statistical Methods, which DO NOT satisfy QFR GE. Check with OT programs for proper statistics course selection.
***CHEM 1110 Principles of Chemistry I can be taken if a lab is required and the Chem. diagnostic test score indicates.
‡Some OT programs require an anatomy lab component to satisfy the anatomy requirement.
Prerequisite Coursework

Occupational therapy programs vary considerably in their required prerequisite coursework. Most require two semesters of anatomy and physiology, social science coursework, a statistics class and two to three psychology courses including abnormal psychology and developmental/lifespan psychology. Some programs require one to two courses in chemistry, biology, physics and computer science with lab components. Students should begin researching OT programs early on in order to satisfy all prerequisite requirements for the programs they are considering. Students can view prerequisites for OT programs by finding individual programs on the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) under the Education and Careers drop-down menu.

Types and list of OT programs: https://www.aota.org/Education-Careers/Find-School.aspx

Academic Guidelines

A minimum 2.60 is required for a few programs; many require a 2.75 to 3.00 minimum GPA and no grade lower than a C in any pre-requisite coursework. Most OT programs admit students in the 3.30-4.00 cumulative and prerequisite GPA range. Some schools will consider students under the academic guideline if prerequisite GPA is higher or if a student has shown significant improvement in the last 60 hours of coursework, however many programs are becoming more selective as interest in the field grows. Admissions profiles which include average GPAs of admitted students and class size can be found on each individual school’s website.

Non-Academic Guidelines

Exposure to the work that OTs do in a variety of settings is important. Many OT programs will require documentation of observation hours with a registered OT. A minimum of 50 hours in at least two different OT settings is strongly recommended with more hours and settings encouraged. Some OT programs require Red Cross CPR/First Aid certification within three years of application. Many schools require information about applicants’ extra-curricular activities, internships, volunteering, accomplishments, and awards.

The Application Process

Students can apply to multiple occupational therapy programs by using the Occupational Therapy Centralized Application Service (OTCAS) (www.otcas.org). For the 2021-2022 admissions cycle, OTCAS opened July 22, 2021 and will close in June 2022. Not all OT programs participate in OTCAS. To check if a school participates, go the school’s website for application information. Application deadlines vary, with some schools enforcing firm deadlines while others have soft deadlines. Since some schools have rolling deadlines; it is ideal to get applications in as early as possible. Typically students start working on their applications in late summer/early fall of their senior year. Applicants should check with schools for more deadline information. Most schools require supplemental application material and fees.
Letters of Evaluation

OTCAS allows applicants to submit up to three letters of recommendation. Applicants should seek letters of recommendation from a faculty member and from a volunteer coordinator, occupational therapist or pre-occupational therapy advisor. OTCAS will not accept committee or composite letters. Some programs require a letter of recommendation from an occupational therapist. Many programs recommend a letter of recommendation from an occupational therapist that a student knows from work or shadowing.

Interviews

Not all OT programs require interviews. OT programs will contact applicants who have been selected for an interview. Interviews are an important part of the admissions process. Students can arrange for an online practice interview through the UI Career Center at C310 Pomerantz Center, but this must be done in advance. Contact the Career Center at 319-335-1023.

Criminal Background Checks

On the OTCAS application, applicants will be required to disclose and explain any felony convictions and instances of academic fraud or dishonesty. Criminal activity can have negative impacts on admissions and licensure for professional practice.

Diversity in Occupational Therapy

AOTA actively seeks to increase participation and matriculation of minority applicants in OT programs. In 2018, 22% of practicing occupational therapists identified as non-white. In 2020 the American Occupational Therapy Association launched its AOTA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Plan to increase the diversity of the OT workforce: https://www.aota.org/Practice/Manage/multicultural-initiatives/DEI-Strategic-Plan.aspx

Entrance Examination Requirements

Some OT programs require Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores. Arrange to take the test at least two to three months before applying to ensure receipt of scores. Students should allow three to four months to prepare for the GRE. A few schools have minimum GRE score requirements.

Citizenship/International Students

Most OT programs will accept international students. Many require the TOEFL test for admission. Some programs require international students to demonstrate financial ability to pay tuition before matriculation. Programs vary in what they will accept as prerequisite coursework outside the United States.

---

1 Collins, Prisca M. and Carr, Cynthia (2018) "Exposure to, Knowledge of, and Interest in Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy as Career Options," The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 12
Websites

American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) www.aota.org
National Board for Certification on Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) www.nbcot.org
Occupational Therapy Centralized Application Service (OTCAS) www.otcas.org
American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) www.aotf.org

Pre-Occupational Therapy Coursework Checklist

__ RHET:1030 Rhetoric
__ ENGL:1200 Interpretation of Literature
__ PSY:1001 Elementary Psych.
__ PSY:2401 Intro. to Develop. Science OR HHP:2130 Human Development/Lifespan
__ PSY:2930 Abnormal Psych. for Health Prof.
__ HHP:1100 Human Anatomy
__ HHP:1110 Human Anatomy lab if needed

__ HHP:1300 Fundamentals of Human Physiology OR HHP:3500 Human Physiology
__ HHP:1310 Human Physiology lab (if needed)
__ RCE:4195 Ethics Human Relations/Counseling
__ SOC:1010 Introduction to Sociology or other social science
__ STAT:XXX Statistics*
__ CLSA:3750 Medical and Technical Terminology

Required for some programs:

__ CS:1020 Principles of Computing
__ PHYS:1400 Basic Physics (check to see if needed with lab)
__ CHEM:1070 General Chemistry
__ BIOL:1140 Human Biology (recommended before Human Anatomy)
__ CHEM:1110-1120 Principles of Chemistry I-II
__ BIOL:1141 Introductory Animal Biology
__ College-level Algebra or higher
__ MATH:1460 Calculus for Biological Sciences

* STAT:1020 Elementary Statistics is satisfactory for most programs and satisfies QFR GE. Some programs require STAT:3510 Biostatistics or other advanced statistics class.

Academic Advising Center, 2021-2022