

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ENTRY-LEVEL MASTER'S PROGRAM (MOT OR MSOT) AND AN ENTRY-LEVEL DOCTORATE (OTD)?

### Similarities

To start, it's helpful to talk about how these two degrees are similar.

- Both provide the education required to become an entry-level occupational therapist
- Both must meet educational standards determined by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE; <https://acoteonline.org/>).
- Based on the 2023 Standards for Occupational Therapy Education, which will be effective July 31, 2025, the standards for the entry-level OTD and the master's degree are the same in the broad categories of:
  - *Foundational Content*
  - *Theoretical Perspectives and Tenets of Occupational Therapy*
  - *Screening, Evaluation, and Intervention Plan*
  - *Intervention and Implementation*
  - *Fieldwork experiences (Level I and Level II)*
- Both Master's and OTD programs can be offered in-person, online, or in a hybrid format.
- Graduates of both types of programs must take and pass a national certification exam and obtain a state license to practice as an occupational therapist.
- The certification exam and state licensure requirements are the same for those with master's and OTD degrees.
- Salaries and job opportunities are similar for OTs entering the field with a master's and an OTD.

To date, there is no reliable published evidence that practitioners entering the field with an OTD make more money or have more clinical job opportunities than do those entering the field with a master's degree. Salary differences and clinical opportunities for new graduates largely are based on practice area (hospital-based, school-based, skilled nursing, etc.) and geographic region. Both degrees allow opportunities to teach at a college level, although *full-time faculty* positions in master's programs typically require a doctoral degree (PhD or clinical doctorate); teaching in an OTD program requires a doctoral degree (not necessarily an OTD; may be a PhD).

### Differences

- A major difference between master's and OTD programs is the time to completion. Master's programs take no more than 2 years to complete; an OTD program usually takes 3 to 3 ½ .
- Based on the 2023 Standards for Occupational Therapy Education, there are differences in the following areas:
  - *Context of Service Delivery and Management of OT Services*: Master's programs must include key content across all subcategories in this area; OTD programs must offer more content specific to developing quality assurance plans, supervision of personnel, and the writing of grants to secure funding for program development.
  - *Evidence-Based Practice*: Master's programs must include key content across all subcategories in this area; OTD programs must offer more content specific to conducting research.
  - *Capstone project*: Required in OTD programs; not required in master's programs.

**NOTE:** It is important to remember that the Accreditation Standards represent the *minimum* that is required for accreditation of the program. Many master’s and OTD programs provide depth and breadth of content that allow their students to perform beyond that minimum, though this is individual to the program. This means that prospective students need to look not only at the degree offered by a program, but also the curriculum, how fieldwork is integrated, the core philosophies guiding the curriculum, and multiple other factors, including costs, before deciding what program is the best fit for them.

### **Looking Forward**

While this could change, and there are programs that are transitioning from master’s to OTD level education, as of April 2024 there are no plans for the profession to move solely to an entry-level doctorate. If a change occurs, and the profession decides to require an entry-level OTD to enter the field, those with master’s degrees will continue to be able to practice. When the profession moved from Bachelor’s entry level to Master’s in 2007, those with BA or BS degrees in OT who kept their practice license/certification active continued to practice, so there is a clear professional precedent for this.

### **Making Your Decision**

As noted above, there are multiple factors that should be considered when choosing where you will get your OT education. Ultimately you are looking for the place that is the best fit for you as a person and for your most immediate career goals. Be cautious about information that may be provided on blogs, social media platforms, program websites, etc. that leads you to believe you absolutely **MUST** get one degree or the other. Consider carefully what biases or “marketing strategies” may be at play. As you are in the process of making decisions about where to apply or where to accept an offer of admission:

- Read the whole OT program website – you should be able to get information about the curriculum, specific course titles and course descriptions, fieldwork, faculty interests and work, prerequisites and other admissions requirements, how the program welcomes students with multiple diverse identities, the costs of the program, and their graduation and national exam pass rates.
- Go to online or in-person information sessions – ask your questions about whatever matters most to you in an OT program and listen to what other people ask as well.
- Ask to visit a class and/or talk with current students – this is a great way to learn about the teaching/learning approaches used in the program, what the content is like, and how the students currently in the program are experiencing it.
- Be proactive in figuring out how you will pay for your education – look at program costs and local costs of living, potential transportation costs, your current financial situation, and what resources you have. Think about how willing you are to apply for multiple scholarships – it takes time to do that, but a number of small scholarships can really add up, and there are very few, if any, large scholarships available for OT students in many programs. As you consider student loans, also look at the average starting salary for OTs in the geographic area in which you want to live and/or practice area in which you want to work after graduation. Will that salary allow you to manage your living expenses, pay your student loans, and have money for little “extras”? While you probably won’t be able to answer that question specifically, you should have a sense of cost/benefit of the programs you are considering.