

CoA RATE accreditation process: a case report from the program perspective

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INTRODUCTION

There are numerous federal and state laws and guidelines related to assistive technology, rehabilitation engineering and accessibility. "Professional development and recognition of the key role of qualified AT professionals in the AT service delivery process" is a key policy principle of the Rehabilitation and Engineering Society of North America (RESNA) ("RESNA Policy Position Statement," 2015) To that end, many universities and institutions have developed professional and pre-professional training programs to prepare AT professionals. RESNA's website lists 20 undergraduate, graduate degrees and certificates purporting to prepare AT Professionals (See Table 1). However, prior to the Committee on Assistive Technology and Rehabilitation Engineering Education on Accreditation (CoA RATE) there was no way to measure the content and rigor of the academic programs for students in allied health, assistive technology and rehabilitation engineering fields.

BACKGROUND

Pre-professional programs in the allied health professions including occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech and language therapy and others claim to provide pre-professional training. However, students report limited knowledge and competency in providing assistive technology services (Arthanat, Elsaesser, & Bauer, 2017; Brady, Long, Richards, & Vallin, 2007; Long & Perry, 2008). These programs rely largely on professional association or RESNA based standards and the ATP exam for their content. Determining the curricular specifics of the qualities an instructional program should strive to meet was not clear until recently. The Committee on Assistive Technology and Rehabilitation Engineering Technology Education (CoA RATE), with the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP), launched an accreditation program based upon specific standards and criteria for accreditation ("Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Education (CoA-RATE) Committee on Accreditation Policies and Procedures," 2017).

The prescribed process for accreditation of assistive technology programs is thoughtful and rigorous. According to the CoA-RATE Membership Policies and Procedures, the committee participating in developing and maintaining the mission and standards includes representatives from rehabilitation engineering, health/medical Assistive Technology (AT), and special education. Two members represent consumers, neither trained in assistive technology service provision nor employed by assistive technology service providers. One member is a member of the RESNA Board of Directors. Other members may include suppliers such as a registered member of National Registry of Rehabilitation Technology Suppliers (NRRTS), professionals from other rehabilitation consortium, or the members of the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA) Professional Standards Board (PSB). This process is expected to unify the growing profession of assistive technology practitioners allowing for uniform training and specific curricular expectations for AT educational programs.

While seeds of assistive technology training were planted at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) nearly 25 years ago, the Assistive Technology and Accessible Design (ATAD) Certificate was formally recognized by the University and implemented in 2007 in the department now named Occupational Science and Technology. The ATAD Certificate is interdisciplinary in nature where students in Occupational Therapy, Exceptional Education and Communication Sciences and Disorders are facilitated in their coursework for certificate completion. Its curriculum and content were based largely upon RESNA best practices in the field, its own advisory board and requirements of federal grants solicited to support students in AT practice.

The ATAD Certificate leadership viewed the development of the CoA-RATE accreditation process as an opportunity to formalize, streamline and validate its content and therefore decided to be among the first to apply for CoA-RATE accreditation.

Relative to the UW-Milwaukee ATAD Certificate and its accreditation application and review experience, this paper outlines a case study of the certificate, and the accreditation process. This includes the challenges and opportunities surrounding the CoA-RATE application and its review as well as how the overall accreditation leads to a vision and future development of the field.

CASE STUDY OF THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

The UWM ATAD Certificate accreditation process included the documentation of 5 key factors and supports:

- 1) Financial Support
- 2) Administrative Support
- 3) Leadership
- 4) Faculty support and expertise
- 5) Community support and expertise.

The first steps of the process included identifying these resources. There are specific and substantial fees associated with the accreditation process and future maintenance therefore it is crucial to ensure a source of application and future funding.

At our institution, financial support was able to be secured through both the College of Health Sciences and the Department of Occupational Science and Technology.

The financial resources could not have been secured without the direct support of the college and department leadership. The CoA-RATE application process specifically requests approval from the Dean or Medical director of the sponsoring facility. At UWM, this support was cultivated over the span of many years. As the ATAD program grew and developed, the Occupational Science and Technology Department spearheaded support through providing faculty and programmatic resources. Including requiring one of the courses in its own occupational therapy curriculum.

Leadership was crucial in this endeavor. The ATAD Certificate Coordinator led the process by completing all paperwork, managing the self-study and site visit and keeping College, Department and Program faculty and staff included and informed of the process.

Once financial and administrative support was gathered and committed, the next step in the process is self-study. This is a lengthy and intensive look at the resources and curriculum presently in place and what needs to be improved or replaced for accreditation.

The ATAD Coordinator required the certificate faculty complete reviews of their own coursework and curriculum to be sure it would align with the CoA RATE Standards. The coordinator also needed to collect information about financial, equipment and human resources available and manage the aggregation and presentation of the resources in a quantitative format for the report. Information related to completion and employment rates was required as well as follow up data including what areas of assistive technology the student is working in.

The self-study was reviewed by members of the CoA-RATE Board and an executive summary sent to back to the ATAD coordinator outlining conforming, concerning and possible violations to the standards reviewed in the self-study. The Coordinator had an opportunity to respond to the executive summary and then the site visit was planned.

The site visit was a deep in person review of the executive summary documents along with a review of the curriculum maps ensuring compliance with all required educational standards.

This too was led by the coordinator. It included specific meetings with many of the stakeholders involved in the specific program being reviewed. The site visitors collected data from previous students, current students, teaching faculty, advisory board members including community partners as well as employers of graduates and fieldwork supervisors. While this was a complicated endeavor to manage, it was necessary for the site visit team to provide a detailed and accurate report of what is implemented at our program and the resources present.

There were 3 specific challenges brought to light by this review process.

- 1) Defining, monitoring and measuring fieldwork and clinical internship process.
- 2) Documenting equivalent competencies for preservice occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language therapists as well as professionals already working in the field.
- 3) Documenting equivalent competencies while implementing parallel distance and face to face educational strategies targeting different service populations.

While these challenges are unique to the ATAD Certificate at UWM program, it is suspected that there will be some work to be done on the part of the CoA-RATE team regarding these concerns. Since the accreditation process is new and there are already existing programs in place, there are undoubtedly programs employing various methods for accommodating field work and clinical rotations as well as addressing the needs of pre-service practitioners and those already working in the field each of whom are in need of consistent education.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The next steps in the process are for the CoA-RATE team to review the self-study and site visit and make recommendations related to accreditation status. It is expected that the CoA-RATE team will also refine their policies and requirements based on their review experiences as well as feedback from the programs being considered for accreditation.

This new accreditation process is a crucial step in the future of the assistive and rehabilitation technology profession. Once complete, this along with the Assistive Technology Professional Certification offered by RESNA, will ensure a level of constancy not previously present in the education of assistive technology professionals. Additionally, it will unify the field and position it for further unification as an independent profession and specialization opportunity for allied health professionals and rehabilitation engineers.

Table 1. Assistive Technology College/University Level Programs

| College or University | Certificate | Undergraduate Degree | Graduate Degree |
|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Bowling Green State University | | | Online Masters in Special Education with specialization in AT |
| California State University-Dominquez Hill | AT Certificate | | |
| California State University-Northridge | Rehabilitation Technology | | Engineering Human Services |
| Rutgers University | | | Biomechanics and Rehabilitation Engineering |
| California State University-San Diego | Rehabilitation Technology | | |
| Illinois Institute of Technology | Rehabilitation Engineering Technology | | |
| Northern Arizona University | Interdisciplinary Certificate | | |
| Stony Brook School of Health Technology and Management | | | Ph.D. Health and Rehabilitation Sciences |
| University of Denver AT Partners | AT Certificate | | |
| University of Illinois at Chicago | AT Certificate Program | | |
| University of Michigan | | Rehabilitation Technology | Ergonomics and Rehabilitation Engineering |

| | | | |
|---|--|----------|--|
| University of New Hampshire | AT Certificate | | |
| University of Pittsburgh | Certificate in AT | | MS in Health and Rehabilitation Sciences with a concentration in Rehabilitation Science and Technology |
| University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee | Assistive Technology and Accessible Design Certificate | | |
| University of Wisconsin – Stout, Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute | Training and Online Classes | | |
| Simmons College | | | Special Education: Assistive Technology MEd |
| George Mason | Graduate Certificate | | |
| Total | 13 | 1 | 6 |

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RESNA Policy Position Statement. (2015, 2016). Retrieved from <http://www.resna.org/knowledge-center/government-relations/resna-policy-position-statement>