Chapter One: Introduction and Background

This chapter presents an overview of student learning and development outcomes assessment, as well as specific applications of outcomes assessment for physical therapist and physical therapist assistant education. It also provides physical therapy education stakeholders with a process to assess outcomes to promote student learning and for continuous program improvement.

Background

In 2005, to better prepare students for the 21st century workforce, the United States Secretary of Education formed the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Commission). In November 2006, the Commission began to explore strategies for streamlining and improving the higher education accreditation process to support innovation, promote consistency in accreditation standards, and to increase accountability and transparency to the public.

Efforts by CAPTE in the area of outcomes assessment presaged efforts in higher education overall. Since the early 1990s, CAPTE and the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) have been discussing the development and assessment of education program and graduate outcomes. In 2002 and 2006 respectively, CAPTE revised its documents, Evaluative Criteria for Accreditation of Education Programs for the Preparation of Physical Therapist Assistants and Evaluative Criteria for Accreditation of Education Programs for the Preparation of Physical Therapists, expanding the requirements that programs provide evidence on how they assess program and graduate outcomes. Assessment is an ongoing aspect of the educational environment. Within the 10-year accreditation cycle for CAPTE there is an opportunity for every physical therapy education program to develop, renew, and revisit its assessment plan.

CAPTE provides professional accreditation criteria, and APTA developed A Normative Model of Physical Therapist Professional Education: Version 2004 by a consensus process (first published in 1997 and revised in 2000 and 2004) and A Normative Model of Physical Therapist Assistant Education (first published in 1999 and revised in 2007). These documents address key issues confronting physical therapist professional education and physical therapist assistant education, including the need for physical therapy education programs to perform outcomes assessment to meet the expectations of the CAPTE criteria. Outcomes assessment requirements and practices vary among institutions; therefore, it is assumed that the regional accreditation processes address the broader perspective of postsecondary education, and that any physical therapy education program functions within an accredited postsecondary institution.

In March 2005, APTA’s Board of Directors charged APTA staff with producing an Education Strategic Plan to identify and address the Vision 2020 goals related to education. The outcomes initiative was targeted by APTA’s education stakeholders to be included in Goal 11 of the Education Strategic Plan:

*Develop leaders in physical therapy academic and clinical education and research with established roles and influences in prominent national and international agencies.*
Contained within this goal is the specific objective:

**Develop an educational outcomes assessment model in response to accountability demands for higher education programs.**

Numerous other goals in the Education Strategic Plan are associated with outcomes assessment (Goals 1-4, 7, 8, 15-17). Therefore, APTA created the Consulting Group on Uniform Outcomes Assessment (CGUOA). This group was responsible for defining outcomes assessment, articulating a purpose for outcomes assessment, identifying individuals who should be involved in the outcomes assessment process, and suggesting a framework for conducting outcomes assessment for use by physical therapy education programs.

The CGUOA initially met at the APTA offices in Alexandria, Virginia, on March 23 and 24, 2007. All six working group members attended: Bill Andrews, PT, MS, NCS (Elon University), Cathy Bieber Parrott, PT, MS (Youngstown State University), Lorna Hayward, PT, EdD, MPH (Northeastern University), Diane Jette, PT, DSc (University of Vermont), Leslie Portney, PT, DPT, PhD, FAPTA (MGH Institute of Health Professions), and Steve Tippett, PT, PhD, SCS, ATC (Bradley University). Several members of the APTA staff were present: Janet Bezner, PT, PhD, senior vice president for the Education Division; Jody Gandy, PT, DPT, PhD, director of physical therapy education; Mary Jane Harris, PT, MS, director of accreditation; Marc Goldstein, EdD, director of research services; and Ellen Price, PT, MEd, associate director in the Department of Accreditation. Janet Bezner and Karen Paulson, senior associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), facilitated the meeting.

The CGUOA convened a second time on October 25 and 26, 2007. This meeting, also attended by Ken Harwood, PT, PhD, CIE, the new vice president of practice and education, resulted in a draft of this document that framed the purpose, components, and suggested processes for outcomes assessment in physical therapy education. The CGUOA acknowledges the work of the Commission on Accreditation for Dietetics Education and the American Dietetic Association (*Outcomes Assessment for Dietetics Educators*, 2002) and the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (*A Guide for Doctor of Pharmacy Program Assessment*, 2000), whose outcomes assessment documents influenced the development of *Outcomes Assessment in Physical Therapy Education*. (A complete list of references that informed the development process is included at the end of the document.)

### Purpose of Outcomes Assessment

*Outcomes assessment* is defined as “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs that is undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (Palomba & Banta, 1999). A key goal of assessment efforts is determining whether a program is contributing to student growth and development. The emphasis of outcomes assessment is on the greater good of the program, rather than the performance of an individual student. The following statements serve as guidelines for outcomes assessment (modified from Palomba & Banta, 1999, p 21):

- The fundamental purpose of outcomes assessment is improvement of the education program.
- Assessment of student learning and development is a collaborative process.
- Assessment is aligned with the institutional mission.
- Assessment is not used for faculty evaluation.
- Assessment is an ongoing process.
- Assessment as a process is continually evaluated.
- Assessment is related to the curriculum, and the faculty “own” the curriculum.

Outcomes assessment encompasses three primary areas: student/graduate, faculty (as it relates to student learning and development), and program. A culture of outcomes assessment includes faculty and uses a team approach. Focus on outcomes assessment should be sustained over time. Meetings and work are public, driven by a common purpose and a shared vision related to the larger issues of teaching and learning. Perhaps most important, in a culture of outcomes assessment, there is shared ownership and agreement that assessment results will be used to implement necessary changes.

Goals are assessed by a process of establishing expected program outcomes and defining indicators, targets, and thresholds. The outcomes assessment process involves stakeholders consisting of faculty, administrators, professional staff, students, alumni, employers, and community members. It uses authentic and available artifacts to regularly analyze current progress and integrate that information back into the ongoing outcomes assessment process.
Suggested Outcomes Assessment Process for Physical Therapy Education

The model of outcomes assessment presented here for physical therapy education programs parallels Donabedian’s (2003) quality assurance framework in health care (Appendix A). The model adopted by CGUOA employs a five-step cyclical process for outcomes assessment in physical therapy education programs. Although it makes the process of assessment explicit and manageable, it is not prescriptive. The five steps include: (1) setting goals, (2) developing an assessment plan, (3) implementing the developed assessment plan, (4) analyzing results of assessment, and (5) closing the loop (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model for outcomes assessment in physical therapy education programs.

Summary

This chapter has provided a historical perspective of the APTA’s efforts in the development of education program outcomes assessment. A suggested structured process for outcomes assessment in physical therapy education programs has been outlined. The remainder of Outcomes Assessment in Physical Therapy Education is organized into five chapters that detail each step in the model: goal setting, planning, implementation, analysis, and feedback.