

# PREPARING to APPLY for ADMISSION to a PHYSICAL THERAPY PROGRAM

College of Health Sciences · Office of Student Affairs



## OVERVIEW

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Individuals wanting to work as a physical therapist must complete a graduate degree from an accredited physical therapy program before taking the national licensure examination. All entry-level physical therapy programs are now offered at the doctoral level and award a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) to graduates. Professional DPT programs are typically three years in duration. For most programs, applicants must complete a bachelor's degree prior to entering a graduate program in physical therapy. Visit the following site for an overview of physical therapy education: <http://www.apta.org/PTEducation/Overview/>.

It is important to note "pre-physical therapy" is not an undergraduate major at UWM; rather, it is a career classification that allows the College of Health Sciences to identify UWM students who may benefit from special advising services. While choosing a science undergraduate major – kinesiology specifically – is common, physical therapy programs typically do not specify or favor any particular major. Therefore, pre-physical therapy students are encouraged to select a major that is of interest to them and with which they will excel academically. Many pre-physical therapy students at UWM major in kinesiology, but others select majors in music, dance, psychology, business, and biological sciences, for example. The required pre-physical therapy courses are added into the student's undergraduate program of study.

## ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

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Applicants to doctoral programs in physical therapy must satisfy the coursework requirements and rigorous admission standards of the program(s) to which they plan to apply. Admission is highly competitive.

Because each physical therapy program has its own set of required courses for admission, it is *critical* for applicants to gather information on each program of interest. A list of accredited physical therapy programs can be found on the American Physical Therapy Association website: <http://www.apta.org/ProspectiveStudents/>. See page three of this packet for additional information.

Prospective DPT students are encouraged to begin their DPT program research one year before application submission (which is two years before you hope to start a program). For traditional undergraduate students, this is the summer following sophomore year.

### ***Prerequisite Courses:***

It is common for DPT programs in the United States to require the following prerequisite courses:

- General Biology I (with lab)
- General Biology II (with lab)
- Human Anatomy (with lab)
- Human Physiology (with lab)
- Statistics
- Chemistry I (with lab)
- Chemistry II (with lab)
- Physics I (with lab)
- Physics II (with lab)

Programs may require additional coursework in areas including but not limited to psychology, sociology, math, biomechanics, and exercise physiology.

### ***Grade Point Average (GPA):***

Nationwide, most DPT programs require a minimum undergraduate cumulative GPA of **3.0** for admission, although this minimum can vary among institutions. In the most recent admission cycle, the national average undergraduate cumulative GPA of admitted students was **3.5**. Many institutions consider an applicant's lifetime GPA (including original grades in courses that are repeated), while others consider only the GPA of the last 60 credits earned. Prospective DPT applicants are advised to research the GPA requirements of each institution they may consider for application.

Prospective applicants are encouraged to calculate their undergraduate cumulative GPA, their lifetime GPA (including all courses ever completed), and their GPA for prerequisite courses by utilizing this online GPA calculator:

<https://www4.uwm.edu/DES/apps/gpacalculator/>.

*The information provided here is intended to serve as an overview for students considering a career in physical therapy. It is intended to be used as a springboard for further research and investigation into the admission requirements of individual institutions.*

## PHYSICAL THERAPIST CENTRALIZED APPLICATION SERVICE (PTCAS)

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The PTCAS ([www.ptcas.org](http://www.ptcas.org)) is a service of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA). The PTCAS allows applicants to use a single Web-based application and one set of materials to apply to multiple PT programs. Approximately 95% of physical therapy programs in the U.S. participate in PTCAS, including UW-Milwaukee.

The PTCAS application is easily completed online using their Web-based data entry system. Applicants must submit all required materials as outlined on PTCAS for inclusion with their application. Materials should *not* be sent directly to the PT programs and will not be accepted. Please mail materials to: PTCAS, PO Box 9112, Watertown, MA 02471.

The PTCAS application cycle typically begins on or shortly after July 1st each year, at which time applicants may create an account and begin the online application process. If you have questions regarding the PTCAS application, please contact PTCAS directly at [ptcasinfo@ptcas.org](mailto:ptcasinfo@ptcas.org). Please note: if you have applied in a previous year, no applicant data is saved from previous application cycles, and you must begin an entirely new application.

**Early Decision Cycle:** Some programs offer "early decision" (ED) status through PTCAS. The Early Decision program is a binding option for applicants who have decided that a particular PT program is their first choice and that they will enroll if admitted. During the early decision application cycle, you can apply to only *one* PT program. The application submission deadline for the early decision process will vary annually but will always occur in early August. Applicants are encouraged to monitor deadlines on the PTCAS website. Applicants will be notified of the outcome of their early application by the end of September. Applicants should use the following guidelines if considering applying during the early decision cycle:

Timeline	Deadline/Recommended Action
One year before application submission (junior)	Research DPT programs of interest
Fall in the year PRIOR to graduation (junior)	Begin observation hours
January/February in the year PRIOR to graduation (junior)	Take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE)
Spring in the year PRIOR to graduation (junior)	Prepare application materials
July in the year PRIOR to graduation (junior)	Complete the early decision application on the PTCAS website
August in the year PRIOR to graduation (junior)	Deadline for early decision application submission
September in the year PRIOR to graduation (senior)	Notification of early admission decision by the program

**UWM Early Decision Application Preference:** The UWM DPT program *strongly* encourages applicants to submit their application during the early decision window, as the UWM program strives to fill its class with early decision applicants. The other UW System programs (UW-La Crosse & UW-Madison) operate similarly with regard to early admission decision.

**Regular Admission Cycle:** Applicants may apply to multiple programs during the regular admission cycle. Deadlines are posted on the PTCAS website: <http://www.ptcas.org/Deadlines/>. UWM's application submission deadline for the regular cycle is November 1st.

## ADVISING FOR PROSPECTIVE PHYSICAL THERAPY APPLICANTS

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Prospective applicants who have questions about pursuing physical therapy are encouraged to seek advising from the College of Health Sciences Office of Student Affairs: 414-229-2758; [www.chs.uwm.edu/students](http://www.chs.uwm.edu/students). Prospective applicants are encouraged to carefully review the UWM DPT program website ([www.dpt.uwm.edu](http://www.dpt.uwm.edu)) and the entirety of this packet prior to scheduling an advising appointment.

Questions may also be directed to [pt-program@uwm.edu](mailto:pt-program@uwm.edu).

**Completed Baccalaureate Degree:** Prospective applicants who have already completed a bachelor's degree and are interested in taking courses at UWM to satisfy DPT program prerequisites should apply for admission to UWM (<http://apply.wisconsin.edu>). On the application, applicants should identify their reason for applying as "Undergraduate courses as a visitor/guest student" and their "applying as" status as "Undergraduate non-degree student with a bachelor's degree." Students should apply as a second degree student *only* if they plan to complete a second bachelor's degree. Questions regarding financial aid for non-degree students should be directed to Gayla Jenkins ([jenkinsg@uwm.edu](mailto:jenkinsg@uwm.edu)) in the UWM Department of Financial Aid.

## HOW TO SEARCH FOR DPT PROGRAMS OF INTEREST

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One year before you will submit your application (in the summer before junior year for traditional students), begin to research physical therapy programs that are of interest to you. With over 200 programs in the United States to choose from, this can be a daunting task. The following questions can help you refine your search:

1. Geographically, where would you like to attend school?
  - a. Would you prefer to attend a program in Wisconsin?
  - b. Are you willing to attend a program out of state?
  - c. Are you willing to attend a program out of the Midwest region?
  - d. Does the size of the city/town/village in which a program is located matter to you? Would you mind living in a large city like Chicago for three years? In the country?
2. How much money are you willing to spend on tuition?
3. Do you prefer a private school or a public school?
4. Do you prefer a larger program with many students in the cohort (50+) or a smaller program with fewer students in the cohort (20-50)?
5. Do you want your program to have a focus on research?

Using your answers to the questions above as your guide, begin your research by reviewing the PTCAS Programs Directory (<http://www.ptcas.org/Directory/>) to identify programs that align with your preferences.

Approximately one year prior to application submission (by the start of junior year for traditional students), identify 5-10 programs that are of interest to you. Throughout the following fall, research and document the individual requirements of each program on your list. Many students find it helpful to use an Excel document to track the requirements for all programs of interest in one document for easy comparison. Consider the following as you document your findings:

1. Prerequisite coursework and required or recommended minimum grades
  - a. Some programs may have additional course requirements beyond the national standard outlined on page one.
2. Minimum number of observation hours required
  - a. In-patient
  - b. Out-patient
3. Required or recommended minimum GPAs (cumulative and prerequisite courses)
4. Required or recommended minimum scores on the GRE
  - a. Quantitative reasoning
  - b. Verbal reasoning
  - c. Analytical writing
5. Recommended co-curricular experiences, such as:
  - a. Employment
  - b. Student organizations
  - c. Student leadership
  - d. Volunteerism
  - e. Undergraduate research
6. Required letters of reference, such as:
  - a. Academic (instructor)
  - b. Character (supervisor)
  - c. Physical Therapist
7. Application essay requirements
8. Estimated tuition and associated costs of attendance
  - a. Scholarship, grants, and other financial assistance

Identify the programs on your list that you are eligible to apply to or could be eligible to apply to in the future. Additionally, using each programs' minimum and competitive criteria, identify those programs to which you would be a *strong* applicant.

By March 1st in the year you will submit your application, identify the one school to which you will apply during the early decision cycle in summer, and refine your list of remaining schools of interest – those that you will apply to if not admitted during the early decision cycle – to 3-5 programs.

## **HOW TO CONDUCT PT OBSERVATION HOURS**

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To search for the opportunity to shadow a licensed physical therapist, you need to contact PT clinics. All practicing PTs once had to shadow another PT, so clinics expect to receive calls from prospective PT students who are in need of observation hours. Some clinics may require you to submit a volunteer application prior to them considering you.

You can conduct an Internet search to find PT clinics that are close to you. Keep in mind that most pre-PT students at UWM want to conduct their observation hours near campus, so oftentimes clinics near UWM are “full” and don’t have frequent openings for student observation hours. You may need to utilize a vehicle or the Milwaukee County Transit System (bus) to get to a clinic that is a bit further from campus.

While practicing PTs do anticipate student requests for shadowing hours, the time these clinicians will spend with students is a completely voluntary commitment. PTs offer time for student observations as well as DPT student clinical internships on top of managing their typical daily schedules. When contacting sites or therapists, consider this a professional interaction that is respectful of that person’s time; understand that you may be communicating with a future colleague.

It is not necessary for you to document your observation hours as you complete the hours; rather, when you are completing your application to PT programs via the PTCAS system in the future, you will be required to enter the contact information (email address) for each PT you observed. When you enter that information, that PT will be sent an automated email with a link they will use to verify your hours and provide quantitative and qualitative feedback about their experience with you. Because often a good amount of time can pass between when you complete hours at a particular location and when you will submit your application, it is recommended that upon completion of your hours at an individual facility you send an email summary to the PT you shadowed to 1) thank them for their time, 2) document the exact number of hours you spent shadowing them, and 3) notify them that they will receive an automated verification request in the future from the PTCAS system as you are completing your application for admission to programs. Verification of observation hours must be completed by the PT you shadowed (not an administrator or coordinator at that facility), as the PT is required to enter their individual license number upon submission.

## UW-MILWAUKEE DPT PROGRAM

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For a complete list of requirements and detailed application information for the UWM Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program, please visit [www.dpt.uwm.edu](http://www.dpt.uwm.edu). Additionally, the UWM Program Page on the PTCAS website contains this information for each admission cycle. The requirements for admission to the UWM DPT program include:

- Undergraduate degree and prerequisite coursework must be completed by the time the applicant plans to enroll in the DPT program. An applicant must satisfy the Graduate School requirements in addition to these program requirements to be considered for admission to the program.
- Completion of an undergraduate degree from an accredited institution with an overall cumulative grade point average (GPA) of a 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale).
- Completion of the program application on the Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service (PTCAS) website: [www.ptcas.org](http://www.ptcas.org). Narrative essays are evaluated as part of the selection process.
- Submission of scores on the General Test of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) taken within the last five years. Information about the GRE can be found here: [www.ets.org/gre](http://www.ets.org/gre). See below for recommended minimum scores.
- Completion of two 20-hour observational experiences (for a total of 40 hours) with a licensed physical therapist within 12 months of application submission. PTs verify hours electronically through the PTCAS application.
- Two letters of recommendation, one of which must be an academic reference.
- Completion of 10 prerequisite courses with a minimum grade of "C" or better and a prerequisite GPA of 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale).

The UWM DPT program reviews candidate files only after the application submission deadline. Students who do not meet the minimum criteria for any of those outlined above will not be reviewed by the admission committee. Qualified applicant files are closely reviewed by the admission committee considering *all* components of the applicant profile. No singular element of the admission criteria is weighed more heavily than another. The program receives approximately 400 applications each year and seeks to enroll 24 new students each May.

### UWM PROFILE OF ADMITTED DPT APPLICANTS

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On average, applicants who were admitted to the DPT program at UWM earned the following:

- cumulative GPA of 3.5
- prerequisite courses GPA of 3.5
- GRE quantitative reasoning score of 154
- GRE verbal reasoning score of 155
- GRE analytical writing score of 4.0

Applicants to UWM who satisfy the following criteria are considered competitive applicants:

- cumulative GPA of 3.3 or higher
- prerequisite courses GPA of 3.3 or higher
- prerequisite course grades not lower than B
- GRE quantitative reasoning score of 150
- GRE verbal reasoning score of 150
- GRE analytical writing score of 4.0

### PREREQUISITE COURSEWORK

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UWM does not permit substitutions for prerequisites. Preference will be given to applicants that have completed all prerequisite courses at the time of application submission. More than one outstanding prerequisite at the time of application submission is discouraged. Students are encouraged to complete laboratory science prerequisites at a four-year institution of higher education instead of a two-year or technical school. The program *will* accept college credits that were granted retroactively to students who achieved appropriate scores on high school advanced placement (AP) tests; however, the program will not use those credits in the calculation of the prerequisite courses GPA for admission. Students can consult the following website to determine how UWM accepts AP scores: <http://uwhelp.wisconsin.edu/testing/ap/milwaukee.aspx>.

Prerequisite Course	UWM Course Number
General Biology I (4 cr. with lab)	Biological Sciences 150
General Biology II(4 cr. with lab)	Biological Sciences 152
Human Anatomy (4 cr. with lab)*	Biological Sciences 202
Human Physiology (4 cr. with lab)*	Biological Sciences 203
Chemistry I (4 cr. with lab)	Chemistry 102
Chemistry II (4 cr. with lab)	Chemistry 104
Physics I (4 cr. with lab)	Physics 120 (lecture) and 121 (lab)
Physics II (4 cr. with lab)	Physics 122 (lecture) and 123 (lab)
Introductory Psychology (3 cr.)	Psychology 101
Introductory Statistics (3 cr.)	Kinesiology 270

*\*Applicants must complete a 2-semester sequence of anatomy/physiology with lab. This can be a stand-alone anatomy course and a stand-alone physiology course or a 2-semester combined anatomy/physiology course.*

## **PREREQUISITE COURSEWORK** *continued*

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**Non-UWM Undergraduates:** Applicants completing their undergraduate degree at another institution within the UW System should refer to the Transfer Information System (TIS) to evaluate courses for equivalency with UWM prerequisites (<http://tis.uwsa.edu/>). Applicants completing prerequisite courses outside of the UW System should meet with the academic advisor at their undergraduate institution to determine appropriate equivalents to the UWM prerequisite courses.

**At UWM:** One or two repeated courses typically does not cause concern during application review, and repeating coursework to earn a higher grade is encouraged to increase your application's competitiveness. UWM considers both the original grade *and* the grade earned in the repeat of the course in the calculation of the overall cumulative GPA, but only the higher/highest grade is considered in the calculation of the prerequisite courses GPA. If a student demonstrates persistent struggle with prerequisite courses and needs to repeat multiple to achieve competitive grades, it should be cause to reflect on whether or not PT is the most appropriate career path.

## **GRADUATE RECORD EXAMINATION (GRE):** [www.ets.org/gre](http://www.ets.org/gre)

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Applicants are encouraged to complete the GRE approximately six months before the date of application submission, if not sooner. This timeframe allows an applicant to repeat the test to increase scores if desired. GRE scores can take up to 8 weeks to be delivered to PTCAS and posted to your applicant profile. Applicants are encouraged to prepare in advance for the test. Additional information (including preparation materials) is available on the GRE's website (link above).

**At UWM:** UWM's DPT program considers an applicant's most recent GRE scores. For UWM's program, there is no harm in repeating the GRE to increase your application's competitiveness. UWM's GRE Code for PTCAS is **2131**.

## **OBSERVATION HOURS**

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The number of PT observation hours required for admission can vary greatly among institutions. Prospective DPT students are advised to research the specific requirements of each institution they may consider for application, as some programs grant an advantage to applicants who have completed additional hours beyond the minimum requirement. Observation hours may be paid or volunteer. PTs verify your hours electronically through the PTCAS application when you apply, and they have the opportunity to provide qualitative narrative feedback through this process (separate from your letters of reference). See page four of this packet for more information.

**At UWM:** Two different 20-hour experiences (for a total of 40 hours) are required. UWM does *not* advantage students who complete any hours beyond the minimum requirement. Observation in more than one type of PT practice setting (in-patient/out-patient) is required.

## **CO-CURRICULAR EXPERIENCES**

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A strong applicant demonstrates balance between rigorous academics and enriching, co-curricular experiences.

**At UWM:** Competitive applicants have participated in a variety of co-curricular experiences, for example, volunteer opportunities, student organizations, undergraduate research, employment, and other activities related to their academic and personal development.

## **APPLICATION ESSAYS**

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Applicants should respond to all required essays. Applicants are strongly encouraged to address how their academic, co-curricular, employment, and life activities are interrelated and have prepared them for the study and practice of physical therapy.

**At UWM:** Essays play an exceptionally important role in the consideration of an applicant.

## **LETTERS OF REFERENCE**

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On your PTCAS application, list two (2) persons submitting evaluations on your behalf – one academic reference (preferably a faculty member as opposed to a graduate student instructor) and one character reference (e.g. employment/volunteer supervisor). Evaluators complete the process via the Electronic Letters of Reference (eLORs), which is initiated by the applicant once they have begun their PTCAS application. The evaluations these individuals submit are included in your application to each program, so they should be general and not specific to one institution.