Preparing for a DPT Graduate Program

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11/26/2011

Applying

Most DPT programs utilize the Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service (PTCAS, www.ptcas.org). This is very convenient and makes it easy to apply to many programs. However, be careful, each school costs an extra $35 from the base fee and may also include an extra application fee. Don’t apply to a school if you don’t really want to go there or do not think that is financially feasible! It is a waste of your money. You should apply to multiple programs since admissions is competitive, but make sure they are all programs that you would go to and are worth the investment. I applied to seven schools but could have easily eliminated three of them because they were too expensive for me and did not offer any scholarships or grants. With the supplemental fees, that was $230 for nothing! Some schools (including a few in Wisconsin) do not use PTCAS so you will have to apply to the individual program. These programs are often easier to get into because it is harder to apply for them.

Apply early! Almost all programs have rolling admissions so you will be up against less people earlier in the application cycle. Also, PTCAS can take four weeks to process your application although it will be faster earlier, when they do not receive so many applications. I submitted my PTCAS in mid-August.

Components of the application

The following are the components of a PT school application. If one aspect is lacking (i.e. GRE scores or GPA), don’t worry! If you are strong in other pursuits (like PT observation experience and recommendations), schools may still accept you.

Coursework

For the vast majority of programs, you can take all of the needed courses at Beloit with enough planning. I didn’t know while I was an undergrad that I wanted to do PT so took many prereqs at a community college or online. I would strongly suggest getting these courses out of the way while at Beloit even if you plan on taking some time off between undergrad and grad to work. It is much more economical to do it that way and it’s a pain to have to go to class at night while working full time!

You can check your program-of-interest’s requirement on PTCAS (www.ptcas.org). Almost all programs require:

Biology I: I used Microbiology for this one. Human bio, cell bio, zoology, genetics and immunology should all work. If you want to use another course, check with the program.

Biology II: I used Genetics (Beloit)

Physics I

Physics II

Anatomy and Physiology I: Human Anatomy and Physiology

Anatomy and Physiology II: I self-designed a course to fill the requirement. Every school accepted it except for (unfortunately) my first choice! As I understand it there is a second anat/phys course you can now take at Beloit. I will take it at a community college.

Psychology I: Introduction to Psychology
Psychology II: Developmental Psychology. Some schools will let you take another advanced psychology class but Developmental is accepted across the board.

Chemistry I: I used Organic I for this but you can use almost any chem course, including Chem 117

Chemistry II: I used Biochemistry of Metabolism for this but you can also use Biochem of macromolecules, Organic I, Organic II, or Inorganic Chem.

Statistics: Biometrics

Math: I used Calc II but Calc I would be fine.

English Comp/Writing I: I received credit for AP English in high school

Some PT programs require...

Social/behavioral science: I used Introduction to Sociology but many courses could count for this.

English Comp/Writing II: I sent a description of LW/WL courses and a description of what the designations meant to the universities that required them. This worked for me but check with your programs if you have no plans to take a second English course.

Nutrition: I did a self-designed nutrition course at Beloit. This is not a common requirement.

Kinesiology: I didn't have to deal with this, but I know that at least UW-Madison requires 2 kinesiology courses. Its not a common requirement but if you do want to attend a program that requires it, you should contact that program to see if they will take another course or where to take it in the region.

Observation hours

It's important to spend quality time observing PTs practice. The purpose of this is not necessarily for you to gain knowledge of PT but rather to help you make sure that PT is right for you. To make observation hours enhance your application, make sure that you observation experiences in at least one inpatient and one outpatient facility. I had experience in two different outpatient clinics (an orthopedic/sports PT clinic and a geriatrics/neuro clinic) as well as a rehab hospital.

Record your hours and keep contact information from the PTs that you shadow as well as:

- The type of experience (inpatient or outpatient)
- Setting: Acute care, acute/sub-acute rehab, extended care facility (i.e. nursing home which is referred to as a skilled nursing facility or SNF), outpatient clinic, school/pre-school, wellness/prevention/fitness, industrial/occupational health or other
- You will then divide your hours into specialty: cardiovascular/pulmonary, clinical electrophysiology, geriatrics, neurology, orthopedics, pediatrics, sports, women's health, and other. If you’re not sure, ask the PT that you are shadowing.

You will fill in all of this info on the PTCAS when you apply. A good rule of thumb is to get in at least 100 observation hours. More importantly though, act professionally during the session. Offer to help, ask questions, and be engaged with the process. This is important not only to get the most out of your experience, but also because you will need a recommendation from at least one (sometimes two) physical therapists. Write down any interesting cases so that you will have them to talk about during your interviews.

Many applicants work as PT Aides part time before applying. You can get in observation hours that way while also getting paid!
**Recommendations**

You will need recommendations from at least one licensed PT as well as at least one professor. Some schools require two from PTs or two from professors. A few require an employer's recommendation. Again, info on individual program reqs is found on PTCAS.

**GREs**

Most programs require it, although I applied to one (Thomas Jefferson University) that didn’t. It’s important to certain schools but generally not as important as your GPA.

**GPAs**

Very important since PT school is intense and admissions wants to make sure that you can stay afloat. PTCAS will calculate multiple GPAs for you (undergraduate, lower class, upper class, prerequisites, etc). PT schools usually take two into consideration: your overall and your core prerequisites. So do the best you can in the classes listed above. If you’ve taken multiple classes that can count for one prereq, designate the higher grade for the prereq course.

**Personal essay**

An opportunity to show off your writing skills as well as to tell your story. Have a few people look it over before you submit.

**Interviews**

If you are invited to interview, congratulations and relax! They are not so bad. If you get a weird question, pause, take your time, and then go forward. Show that you have a real, genuine interest and dedication to PT as well as an interest in their school. Make sure that you dress professionally and do not bring your parent with you! Yes this actually happened at Temple and I’m guessing that that person did not get accepted!

Remember that you are interviewing the school as much as they are interviewing you. The students are the best people to talk to at these interview events. They can give you real insight into the program. I’ve attached a list of common (but not all-inclusive) interview questions.

Keep in mind that not all schools require an interview. If they don’t, make sure that you visit to get a good feel for the school before you make your decision.

**Considerations for choosing your school**

- **NPTE Pass rates:** You can’t be a PT without passing the NPTE exam! Take a look at school’s first-time pass rates, which they usually publish on their website. Generally, it should be around or above 95%.
- **Location:** You are going to study there for 2.5-3 years. Make sure that it is somewhere that you want to be!
- **Price:** Some students don’t realize this but this is huge. There is a vast variation in prices that you will find in PT schools. You could be making very, very big payments down the line if you choose a school that’s more expensive. While it may seem unrealistic, by the time you graduate or a mere few years afterwards, you may want a house, car, family, etc and having a big monthly payment can have an adverse effect on that. The bright side is, as a PT you will get a job.
  
  You can calculate what your monthly payment will be on your loan after you graduate on this website: [http://www.finaid.org/calculators/loanpayments.phtml](http://www.finaid.org/calculators/loanpayments.phtml). Keep in mind, many federal loans have a 7.8% interest rate (ridiculous, I know).
- **Curriculum.** There is some variation in how things are taught during PT school. For example, my first choice university (Chatham University) utilizes “problem-based learning” where a lot of the learning is...
very active instead of passive. However, this wouldn't work for everyone. Try to find a curriculum that works for you.

- **Clinical experiences.** You are going to learn the most while you are out on your clinical rotations. The length of clinical and how it is fit into the program differs from school to school. Also, certain schools have more contracts with sites to send students so you will be more likely to get the type of experience that you want. Talk to students/alumni and see what's right for you.

- **Program length.** Some schools will get you out in 2.5 years, others in 3. This may make a difference, especially considering that you can get a head start on the job market if you graduate earlier and you will be making money as a practicing PT (and paying back those loans!) earlier.

- **Something that is not that important: rankings!** Do not choose a school simply because it is ranked highly on US News and World Report! It will not matter when you find a job where your school was ranked. The most important thing is that you have demonstrated your capacity to be a PT during your clinical experiences. The higher ranked schools are often the most expensive.

*When all is said and done*

If you got in somewhere, congratulations! If you were waitlisted, there is still a chance that you can get let in. Don't be afraid to continue contacting your schools about any new updates in your life like more volunteer hours. And if you don't get in, you can still find areas for improvement and apply again. Many people don't get accepted on the first time around but do after another year of observing PTs, bringing the GPA up, retaking the GREs, etc etc

**QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER-** on interviews or in your personal statement

1. Why do you want to be a PT?
2. Why not medical school/PA school/etc?
3. What are some issues going on in PT right now?
4. How do you think you are going to be able to handle the course load and demands of PT school?
5. How do you feel PT's help their patients?
6. What experiences have influenced your opinion of PT in a positive/negative way?
7. What don't you like about PT?
8. What skills do you think are important to have as a PT?
9. What do you think you can contribute to our program?
10. What are your strengths/weaknesses?
11. Tell me about a time in which you were in a problem and how you solved it.
12. Tell me about a time when you failed.
13. What are your plans if PT school doesn't work out?
14. Do you have any questions for me?
15. How well do you work in groups? What is an example of when you took charge of a group?
16. Give an example of a time when a conflict arose in a group and how did you handle it?
17. When is a time you had a lot on your plate and how did you handle it?
18. What have you learned from your clinical experience?
19. Where do you see yourself ending up? Where did you see yourself in 5 years?
20. What is something people tell you that you need to work on?
21. What qualities do you see in yourself that relate to you as a professional?
22. What is your definition of a professional?
23. What is the most difficult decision you've had to make and how did you arrive at your decision?
24. When is a time that you had to overcome a challenge?
25. What is your greatest accomplishment?
26. When did you have to do something that you did not agree with?
27. Explain why some of your prerequisite grades were a little bit lower than your other grades?
28. What is something positive that has resulted from managed care?
29. How would you choose who would receive life-saving care, such as dialysis, first?
30. Tell us about your experience in (overseas study).
31. Would you play on our softball team? If so, what position would you play?
32. What would you bring to a potluck after the game?
33. Suppose you walk into a hospital room to work with a patient and she refused because her favorite soap is on. What would you do?
34. Why did you choose to pursue PT instead of another health profession such as a doctor or nurse?
35. As a PT, what duties would you assign a PT assistant that you wouldn't an aide?