



CENTER FOR CAREER & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

# Planning for Physical and Occupational Therapy School

## What Is Physical Therapy?

Physical therapists (PTs) diagnose and treat patients of all ages who have physical conditions which impair their ability to move and perform functional activities. They examine patients and determine a course of treatment to promote ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability. They also work to prevent loss of mobility before it occurs by developing fitness and wellness programs for more active lifestyles. PTs treat patients who have suffered injuries, burns, amputations, strokes, or who have arthritis, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, or other conditions that have caused a loss of ability to move normally. PTs help patients perform therapeutic exercises using functional training, manual therapy techniques, assistive and adaptive devices and equipment, and physical agents and electrotherapeutic modalities.

The median annual wage of PTs was \$87,930 in May 2018. Employment of PTs is expected to increase 28 percent from 2016 to 2026, much faster than the average for all occupations. Demand for physical therapy services will come, in large part, from the aging baby boomers, who are staying active later in life compared to previous generations.

Certification involves a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) from a school accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE). DPT programs typically take three years. Students must also take a licensure exam.

## What Is Occupational Therapy?

Occupational therapy is a health profession that provides services to people whose lives have been disrupted by disabling conditions. Occupational therapists (OTs) treat physical injury and illness, developmental problems, problems related to aging, and accompanying social or psychological difficulties by helping patients develop skills, routines, and techniques for day-to-day living. They help patients recover basic motor function, improve memory skills, and use adaptive equipment. In addition to helping patients improve their ability to navigate their daily lives, OTs help communities reduce disability by identifying and addressing the factors that hinder health development. For example, OTs who work with children may modify classroom equipment and help children participate in activities aimed at developing such skills as following directions and personal

grooming. Those who work with the elderly may work on driving independence or assess homes for hazards to prevent falling.

The median annual wage of occupational therapists was \$84,270 in May 2018. Employment of occupational therapists is expected to increase 24 percent from 2016 to 2026, much faster than the average for all occupations. Occupational therapy will continue to be an important part of treatment for people with various illnesses and disabilities, such as Alzheimer's disease, cerebral palsy, autism, or the loss of a limb. While most OTs are employed in healthcare facilities (such as hospitals and long-term care facilities), about a quarter work in early intervention and/or school-based practice.

Occupational therapists must obtain a Master's degree or higher. They have the option of taking a certifying exam by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) for better career prospects. There are now 51 accredited or developing programs at the doctoral (OTD) level and 190 programs accredited or developing at the masters (MOT/ MS) level. The fastest growth is happening at the doctoral level. The entry-level degree requirement for the occupational therapist will move to the doctoral level by July 1, 2027.

## Work Environment

Physical therapists practice in hospitals, outpatient clinics, and private offices with specially-equipped facilities. These jobs can be physically demanding; therapists may have to stoop, kneel, crouch, lift, and stand for long periods. In addition to moving patients and helping them turn, stand, or walk, PTs also move heavy equipment and are at risk for back injuries. In 2016, most full-time physical therapists worked a 40-hour week with normal business hours, though some worked evenings and weekends to fit their patients' schedules. About 20 percent worked part-time.

Occupational therapists also generally work 40-hour weeks, though about one-third of OTs work part-time. OTs may work nights or weekends to accommodate patients' schedules, and many work for multiple facilities and have significant travel time. Those who are employed in large rehabilitation centers work with large machines, equipment, and noise-generating devices. Like PTs, OTs face long hours on their feet and the hazard of back strain from moving patients and equipment.

## Becoming a Physical or Occupational Therapist

### PT PROGRAMS IN TEXAS (U.S. RANK)

Angelo State University (164)  
Hardin-Simmons University (118)  
Texas State University (101)  
Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (53)  
Texas Woman's University (Denton) (28)  
University of North Texas Health Science Center (Fort Worth) (101)  
University of the Incarnate Word (193)  
U.S. Army-Baylor University (8)  
UT El Paso (154)  
UT Health Science Center at San Antonio (79)  
UT Medical Branch at Galveston (53)  
UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas (64)  
University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences (not ranked)

### TOP FOUR PT PROGRAMS IN U.S. (2016)

University of Delaware (tied for 1<sup>st</sup>)  
University of Pittsburgh (tied for 1<sup>st</sup>)  
University of Southern California (tied for 1<sup>st</sup>)  
Washington University in St. Louis (tied for 1<sup>st</sup>)

### OT PROGRAMS IN TEXAS (U.S. RANK)

Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (37)  
Texas Woman's University (Denton, Dallas, Houston) (17, 22, 25)  
UT El Paso (88)  
UT Health Science Center at San Antonio (44)  
UT Medical Branch at Galveston (14)  
UT Rio Grande Valley (75)

### TOP THREE OT PROGRAMS IN U.S. (2016)

Boston University (tied for 1<sup>st</sup>)  
Washington University in St. Louis (tied for 1<sup>st</sup>)  
University of Southern California (3<sup>rd</sup>)

## Prerequisites for PT and OT Programs

### ACADEMIC

Most graduate programs in PT and OT require completion of an undergraduate degree, ideally with a GPA of 3.5 or higher, while a few will admit students after three years of undergraduate study. Application requirements vary by school and may change at any time, so visit school websites often for the most up-to-date information. In Texas, PT and OT program prerequisites are very similar and usually require the following courses:

- General biology (most programs require a lab component)
- General chemistry
- Anatomy/physiology with labs
- Physics
- Statistics
- Psychology

Programs may also require genetics, English and technical writing, speech, medical terminology, and sociology.

### NON-ACADEMIC: PAID OR VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

While academics are important, many PT and OT programs also require applicants to spend a certain number of hours (from a minimum of 20 to more than 100) gaining hands-on patient contact. Local PT/OT volunteerism opportunities include:

- Texas Physical Therapy Specialists, Georgetown
- St. David's Georgetown and Round Rock Hospitals, Cardiac Rehabilitation
- Ride On Center for Kids (ROCK), Georgetown
- Easter Seals Central Texas, Round Rock
- KidWorks Therapy Services, Austin
- North Austin Medical Center
- OT Connection, Pflugerville
- Reavis Rehab & Wellness Center, Round Rock
- Wellness Matters Physical Therapy, Austin

## Application Process

Applying to PT and OT schools is a long process, and you should plan on applying one year in advance of enrollment. Because each program has its own admissions process and requirements change from year to year, you should contact individual schools to determine admission requirements and application deadlines.

### PTCAS/OTCAS

Many, but not all, PT and OT programs require applicants to apply through the Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service (PTCAS), a service of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), or the Occupational Therapist Centralized Application Service (OTCAS), through the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). Each CAS allows applicants to use a single application and one set of materials to apply to multiple programs. Applications typically open in July while application deadlines vary by school. Apply early—your application typically takes 4-5 weeks to process.

### TESTING

Most PT and OT programs require applicants to take the GRE General Exam ([www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)). Minimum scores accepted will vary between institutions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally, three letters of recommendation or recommendation forms are required. You should also gather one additional letter from an instructor (preferably in the sciences) and one from an employer or volunteer advisor.

### PERSONAL STATEMENT/ESSAYS

Applications will generally require one or several essays about your interest in and preparation for becoming a physical or occupational therapist.

### THE INTERVIEW

The interview is typically the last step of the admissions process. It allows the admissions committee to learn more about you, and you to learn more about the school. A tour of the school's facilities may be provided the day of the interview. The interview day also provides additional opportunities to ask questions of the committee and the tour guide.

## Additional Resources

- Bureau of Labor Statistics: Physical Therapists  
<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/Healthcare/Physical-therapists.htm>
- American Physical Therapy Association  
<http://www.apta.org>  
Texas Physical Therapy Association  
<http://www.tpta.org/>
- The Princeton Review: Physical Therapist  
<http://www.princetonreview.com/careers/114/physical-therapist>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics: Occupational Therapists  
<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/occupational-therapists.htm>
- American Occupational Therapy Association  
<http://www.aota.org/>
- Texas Occupational Therapy Association  
<http://www.tota.org>
- StudentDoctor.net (Rehabilitation Sciences)  
<http://www.studentdoctor.net>
- U.S. News and World Report School Rankings  
<https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools>
- Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service  
<http://www.ptcas.org/Home.aspx>
- Occupational Therapist Centralized Application Service  
<https://otcas.liaisoncas.com/applicant-ux/#/login>

*Adapted from:*

*Health Professions Office, UT Austin; Professional & Graduate  
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*US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics*