

Applying to Physical Therapy Schools

Alyssa Montanaro

Feel free to have any CMU students contact me with questions or advice.

The application process:

There are 3 major things you need to prepare for before applying to schools:

- 1) The correct prerequisites – every school has different requirements. You're not going to be able to apply to some programs because they require classes that are going to be really difficult for you to take. You most likely are going to have to take anatomy and physiology, which I would recommend doing at Pitt until CMU has its own class. Check the websites of the schools that you're looking at to determine what classes you need. Don't be afraid to contact programs if you aren't sure a course will count. In my experience, most schools want all of your basic sciences with labs, a little psychology, some math or stats, and an English class. This website will become your best friend and has a huge table of course prerequisites for each school: <http://www.ptcas.org/ProgramPrereqs/>.
- 2) The GRE – Do this early! A few schools don't require it, but most do. As a CMU student, you will breeze through it and it will only help you. Currently programs are in the process of switching to the new GRE, so there aren't a ton of stats out yet, but I remember when I was taking it, the mean GRE score, even for top schools, was around 450-600 per section scored like the SAT out of 800. No sweat. You probably want to get this done the summer between junior and senior year or early in your senior year. Programs won't look at your application without this, so you want them to have your scores when you're ready to submit.
- 3) Shadowing hours – PT schools want to know that you've done your research. There's a whole section on the application about hours, and I've never heard of a person who has been accepted with 0 hours. You don't need to do hundreds of hours, but you do need to show that you're well versed in the profession (no, we don't just fix up high school athletes). This means doing hours in a variety of settings: outpatient, inpatient, geriatrics, pediatrics, sports, etc. You are also going to need *at least* one letter of recommendation from a physical therapist, so it's not a bad idea to set up continual shadowing with one clinician. Jeff Rothman has an outpatient clinic down on Forward and Murray that a few of us have shadowed at and he's super nice (rothjs@upmc.edu). Don't be afraid to call clinics. I did a few day trips or afternoons with places like the Children's Institute and UPMC Shadyside. The volunteer service number is a good place to start to try and set up hours. Try to learn and ask questions while you're there. Take notes on interesting patients. These hours will come up during interviews.

Where do I start: how to determine where to apply

There are PT school rankings the US News and World does each year. I've been told over and over that these rankings are done by having each school rate themselves and rate each other, so it's not necessarily a flawless method. But I'll admit, I did start there. There is also a list here that lists programs by state: <http://www.ptcas.org/DirectoryProgramsList/>. A note: if you see a program that gives a masters degree: do not apply. It will soon be mandatory that all PTs have a Doctorate. Also make sure the program is accredited.

There are some things to keep in mind as you look at schools. I legitimately started with the rankings and kept a notebook about each school as I went down. If I didn't want to be in a particular location, I skipped it. If I found that I wouldn't be able to take all the prerequisites that they wanted, I skipped it. You can easily do this by state. Do your research. I looked at 50 some schools websites.

Things to keep in mind:

Passing rate and employment rate - If a school has a mid to low passing rate on the licensure exam, you probably don't want to go there

Location – You're going to be there for 3 years, year round. Make sure you'll be able to stand it

Class size – no programs are huge. Some are TINY. Know that you'll be with this group of people all the time

Curriculum – By looking at classes, you can tell what a school focuses on. Some focus on the abnormal patient, some do more sports, some have more neuro. Everyone passes the same exam, so you'll get the same basics, but you might be more marketable afterwards

Clinicals – do they do them all at the end or spread out? How many weeks do you spend in clinic? Can you go to a wide variety of locations or do you have to stay close?

Price – PT school is expensive. Some programs are VERY expensive.

You're ready to apply?

Application opens in the summer. PTCAS is the centralized application service, but there are still schools that don't use it. My number one piece of advice is **APPLY EARLY**. My application was in by early September and I am convinced that is why I had success. Most schools fill via rolling admissions. So your stats might be awesome, but apply too late, and it's going to be way harder to get accepted. Also, the earlier you apply, the earlier you can interview and the earlier you'll have a decision!

We already talked about the GRE, but you also need to think about letters of recommendation. I emailed requests in the summer for these as well. Certain schools require letters from certain people. You can send up to 4. I would recommend leaving that 4th spot for if something goes wrong (it happened to me, I am so thankful I had that spot open!) because it all goes through the online PTCAS application and they can't add more spots. Think of professors and advisors who know you as more than just a student. You didn't have to get an A in the class for them to say that you were a hard worker. These letters are crucial to a good application. Committees do read them!

Another important part of the PT application is the essay. Take your time with it. Proofread. Have someone else proofread it. Answer the question. Get creative. Know what you wrote. You will be asked about it in interviews.

Send transcripts early. It takes a few weeks for them to process it. Like your GRE scores, no one will look at you without this.

Take your time. The application can be tedious (especially since you have to enter every class you ever took exactly the way it is on your transcript plus a few details about each). Show yourself off. Some schools admit you straight off of this application. As a CMU student, you already are special and different. Highlight that.

Interviews:

Sounds scary, definitely isn't. The interviews I had were all very low key. They're trying to sell you on their program as much as you are trying to sell yourself.

Dress code: definitely wear a business suit. It doesn't need to be black. Boys - yes a tie, it can be fun colored though. Girls – you don't need a collared white blouse. I just wore a blue tank top underneath my suit jacket. Girls mostly had blouses underneath their blazer. Skirt or pants is fine. Wear shoes you can walk in.

What an interview day is like:

You'll typically have your interview along with campus tours, time to talk to current students, and program overview presentations. Make sure you're ready for a full day.

What to bring with you:

- Somewhere to take notes
- Something to hold papers or folders you are given
- A copy of your application for your reference
- A cheat sheet for yourself (see below)

Cheat Sheets:

I had 2 – one about myself and one about the school.

Myself: I tend to get nervous in interviews, so I had a list on my lap of experiences, patients I saw while shadowing, clubs I'm involved in, etc that I could pull from if I was blanking. You think you'll remember silly things like "what do you do for fun," but when you're nervous, you forget.

School: Mostly this consisted of questions I wanted to ask. Make sure you have questions. They want to know you are interested in them.

Interview questions and tips

The one question you will get always is why PT. Have an honest, unique response.

Some advice I received:

Reflect a little bit on your observation hours and be prepared to discuss in detail your experiences: ex- your hardest challenge, the most exciting thing you saw, what you learned, what you liked/didn't like, etc.

Relax! Just be yourself. If you know yourself then you'll be able to answer all the questions without sounding rehearsed. If you're capable of holding a conversation without being too nervous you should have no problems!

My advice:

Think about what makes you different. Good and bad things. If you have a low prereq grade in a class, be ready to explain it. I got asked a few times about CMU and how I ended up going into PT with my major.

Know yourself. They might ask about your strengths and weaknesses. I got asked what I thought the hardest part of being a PT for me would be.

Other questions you might be asked:

Something about a time when you worked in a team/worked with a difficult person

Where you see yourself in 5 or 10 years?

How you think the field of PT will change (check out APTA.org)

They might ask you specifics about a class you took, about an experience you had, or about an extracurricular.

What do you do besides school?

How do you handle stress?

Why this school?

REMEMBER, physical therapy is a career in which you need to be able to talk to people. They're looking for that. Be friendly. Try to find a common group with your interviewer. Sit up straight and smile! Ask questions. Be confident.