
Essential Functions for Physical Therapists¹

Purpose

Students in the DPT program must acquire and integrate a large body of scientific knowledge, while simultaneously developing the clinical skills, behaviors, and attitudes necessary for physical therapy practice. In accordance with the accreditation standards set forth by CAPTE, the DPT program has the prerogative and ultimate responsibility for the selection and evaluation of its students; the design, implementation, and evaluation of its curriculum; and the determination of who is eligible to receive a degree. Admission and retention decisions made by the faculty are based on both academic and non-academic factors. Enrolled students are evaluated across didactic and clinical courses to ensure that they can successfully perform the essential functions of the program required for graduation.

The DPT program meets its responsibility to society to graduate knowledgeable, competent, and caring physical therapists, by requiring students to meet academic standards as well as the essential functions of the program. Consistent performance across all of these domains is required to enter the DPT program, progress through the curriculum, and graduate. Policies and procedures outlining academic requirements for entrance into the DPT program and progression through the program are located elsewhere in this handbook.

Essential Functions Defined

Essential functions refer to the aptitudes and abilities that DPT students need to complete the professional curriculum and perform clinical skills consistent with the contemporary practice of physical therapy. Acceptable levels of mastery are judged by standards/criteria established by the core faculty, clinical faculty, examinations, professional standards, and other measurements of performance. These areas of competence include:

1. **Communication** that includes verbal (oral and written) and non-verbal abilities.
2. **Motor function** that includes all psychomotor skills needed to examine patients/client and perform interventions in a safe and effective manner.
3. **Sensory function** that includes perceptual and observation skills needed to ensure safe and effective patient care.
4. **Cognitive function** that includes sufficient intellectual, conceptual, integrative, and quantitative abilities to make effective judgments about patient/client management and other practice-related tasks.
5. **Affective behaviors** that demonstrate emotional, social, professional, and cultural competence.

¹ References include:

- *Minimal Requires Skills of Physical Therapist Graduates at Entry Level* (BODG11-05-20-49) Available at <http://www.apta.org>
- Online information on technical standards/essential functions from PT programs including: Loma Linda University, DeSales University, University of the Sciences Philadelphia, Samuel Merritt University.
- Long Island University Student Support Services Web Page on Section 504, ADA and Accommodations

Specific Behavioral Competencies Related to Essential Functions

COMMUNICATION: Use of appropriate verbal, nonverbal, and written communication with all individuals when engaged in physical therapy practice, research, and education, including patients, clients, families, caregivers, practitioners, consumers, payers, and policy makers. Specifically, students must be able to:

- Verbally express own ideas and feelings clearly and demonstrate a willingness and ability to give and receive feedback.
- Receive and send verbal communication in emergency situations in a timely manner according to the procedures established by each clinical setting.
- Analyze and accurately communicate information on the patient's status in a timely manner to members of the health care team, including seeking supervision and consultation as needed.
- Demonstrate interpersonal skills needed for productive classroom discussion, respectful interaction with classmates and faculty, and development of appropriate therapist–patient relationships.
- Communicate clearly and audibly during interactions with classmates, instructors, patients, members of the healthcare team, and others involved in the educational or patient care process.
- Listen attentively and actively in order to receive and accurately interpret oral communication.
- Communicate effectively and sensitively in English with other students, faculty, staff, patients, family, other professionals, and members of the general public in both oral and written formats.
- Elicit a thorough patient history and explain complex findings to patients and various members of the health care team using appropriate terminology.
- Receive, write, and interpret written communication in both the academic and clinical setting.
- Read and record observations and plans legibly, efficiently, and accurately in documents such as the patient's health care record, which may be written or electronic.
- Search for and evaluate published research/literature.
- Complete written assignments and maintain written records in both handwritten and electronic formats.
- Establish a professional rapport with patients/clients, caregivers, and colleagues.
- Recognize and promptly respond to signs of emotional distress such as sadness, worry, agitation, pain, and lack of comprehension of therapist communication.
- Use non-verbal therapeutic communication techniques such as attending, clarifying, coaching, facilitating, and touching.

MOTOR FUNCTION: Acquisition and application of a variety of gross and fine motor skills that reflect the physical capacities needed to safely and effectively perform the job of a physical therapist in a variety of settings. Specifically, students must be able to:

- Maintain and assume a variety of positions including sitting continuously for up to 2 hours, frequent standing, walking, bending, squatting, kneeling, stair climbing, reaching forward, reaching overhead, turning, and movement of the trunk/neck in all directions.
- Manually palpate various body structures during examination and intervention procedures.
- Perform manual material handling and manipulation of various sizes and weights including lifting and transferring patients, guarding patients during gait training on level surfaces/uneven surfaces/ramps/stairs, pushing and pulling to provide resistance and to assist in maneuvering patients. Specific requirements include:
 - Safely lift up to 50 lbs. independently
 - Safely lift up to 200 lbs. with manual or mechanical assistance
 - Safely push and pull up to 200 lbs.
- Demonstrate strong bilateral grasp during joint mobilization/manipulation and manually resisted exercise, bilateral gross and fine motor control and strength to perform therapeutic massage, and fine motor control to manipulate testing instruments/equipment/ writing instruments/computers.
- Balance self and provide support and balance to patients on a variety of surfaces including level and uneven ground, ramps, curbs, and stairs.
- Have sufficient endurance to continue performing a variety of exertional activities for up to 8-12 hours with occasional rest breaks.
- Respond quickly to emergency situations by physically moving patients, applying sufficient manual force to perform CPR, or assisting with patient transport during an evacuation.

SENSORY FUNCTION: The ability to perceive all information necessary for safe and effective patient/client management including the functional use of vision, hearing, and tactile sensations. Specifically, students must demonstrate:

Visual acuity to observe:

- Audiovisual presentations and written materials presented in class.
- Laboratory demonstrations and procedures.
- Patients (close up and at a distance) for purpose of eliciting information and monitoring changes in their functional status (e.g., facial expression, conscious awareness, posture, and gait patterns).
- Therapeutic devices/equipment, including textual and graphic readouts, for purpose of ensuring safe and effective operations.

Auditory acuity to:

- Effectively auscultate heart and lung sounds, apical pulse, blood pressure, bowel sounds, and joint noises.
- Detect environmental cues including but not limited to, telephones, overhead paging systems, equipment monitors/alarms, and verbal communications in a setting with competing ambient noise.

Tactile ability for:

- Safe application of gradient pressures during examination and intervention including, but not limited to, palpation of anatomical landmarks, muscle tone, and soft tissue restrictions; manual muscle testing; joint mobilization/manipulation; percussion; and massage.
- Appropriate manipulation of dials, sensors, and switches on all examination and therapeutic equipment.

COGNITIVE FUNCTION: Sufficient intellectual-conceptual abilities to obtain and process information from multiple sources to make informed clinical decisions related to patient/client management, efficiently and effectively operate a clinical practice, pursue advanced learning opportunities, and advocate for the needs of the profession and society. Specifically, students must be able to:

- Recall and retain information in an efficient manner in order to meet the minimal requirements in classroom and clinical environments to provide safe and effective patient care.
- Appraise published evidence to determine the most appropriate tests, measures, and interventions to use during a patient/client examination or treatment.
- Gather information during all patient examination and treatment procedures to make appropriate clinical decisions and/or respond to emergency situations.
- Evaluate the information gleaned from the patient/client examination, including patient history and any available medical/surgical/radiologic information, to formulate a patient/client diagnosis, prognosis, and plan of care.
- Prescribe therapeutic home programs as indicated by the results of the examination, utilizing a variety of instructional methods for patient/clients and/or family members.
- Acknowledge limitations of knowledge and/or performance in order to provide safe, effective patient care including the necessity of referring the patient/client to other healthcare professionals.
- Assess patient outcomes to determine the need for continuation of care by summarizing and interpreting changes in the patient's status over time.
- Integrate new information learned outside the classroom with prior body of knowledge to continuously improve decision-making abilities.
- Recognize the resources needed to effectively operate or manage a physical therapy clinical facility.
- Analyze current issues, payment policies, or other events that affect the delivery of health care and the practice of physical therapy.

AFFECTIVE BEHAVIOR: The emotional health and intelligence needed to fully utilize one's own intellectual abilities, exercise good judgment, and effectively complete all responsibilities attendant to the diagnosis and care of patients. Specifically, students must:

- Demonstrate a willingness to learn and be self-reflective in the learning process.

- Maintain mature, sensitive, and respectful relationships with patients, families, student colleagues, faculty, staff, and other health care professionals in academic and clinical environments.
- Accept suggestions and criticisms with humility; modify behavior as needed in response to such feedback.
- Serve individuals, families, and groups from a variety of social, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds in a humanistic manner that reflects compassion, tolerance, and justice.
- Foster collaborative interactions with colleagues, peers, and patients/clients by acknowledging and respecting their values and opinions.
- Recognize the extent to which one's own values, beliefs, opinions, and experiences may affect one's perceptions and relationships with others.
- Adhere to professional standards of practice with a commitment to excellence, integrity, and accountability.
- Possess the emotional stability and coping strategies to effectively manage the physical and mental stress associated with heavy workloads, time constraints, and a rapidly changing or unpredictable work environment.
- Protect oneself and others by adhering to legal regulations and ethical conduct in the practice of physical therapy.
- Utilize moral reasoning to effectively resolve ethical dilemmas.
- Maintain general good health, self-care, and hygiene in order not to jeopardize the health and safety of self or the individuals with whom one interacts.
- Demonstrate assertiveness and respect when delegating responsibilities to physical therapy support staff.