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Factors that Determine Admission to and Success in Physical Therapy Programs:  
A Pre-PT Website Designing Narrative

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## Introduction

Admission to graduate programs, such as a Doctorate of Physical Therapy program, is very competitive. There are often many more applicants than there are available seats in the program. Because of the highly competitive nature of the program, students begin asking questions about the application and admissions process early in their undergraduate education. In a study conducted at Grand Valley State University, only three out of twenty pre-physical therapy students stated that academic advisors were a major source of information (Randolph and Wieber, 20). The study also stated, “half of the subjects discussed a large amount of their information came from Pre-PT club meetings,” (29). After three years in the GVSU Pre-PT club, I noticed that club members were asking many of the same questions about the pre-PT process. Having many of the same questions myself, I began thinking about the need for a source of information that students can turn to when they cannot go to a club meeting, meet with their advisor, or ask a current PT student directly. I decided to take on this issue and turn it into my senior project, the website [PTSchoolPrep](#).

The process began with understanding how to design a useful and functional website. I decided to use the website builder WordPress as the foundation for my website. I then turned to online tutorials and help from a friend in building the actual website. First, I created the backbone of the website. I added pages, created menus, and updated the About page. I used the online tool Canva to create a header image for the website. I decided on the tagline “All the pre-PT info you need in one place,” as that was my hope in creating this website. For the home page, I picked out two videos by the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA). The first video, “You Can be Me- A Career in

Physical Therapy” showcases various physical therapists and is a really motivating video for anyone unsure about a career in therapy. The second video, “Why I Chose a Career in Physical Therapy” has a few therapists describe their career decisions. As a pre-PT student, I found that these videos to be a good source of information and motivation, and therefore, I put them on the homepage. After the design and set-up process was complete, I moved onto the biggest part, researching and writing content.

When deciding on what content to include on the website, I brainstormed a list of possible topics based on my own experience in applying for physical therapy school. After coming up with my own list, I decided to compare it to the Physical Therapy Centralized Application Service (PTCAS), APTA, and scholarly articles. The website pages that I decided were most important to include are the following: prerequisites, references, observation hours, GRE, interview tips, and a timeline.

### Prerequisites and GPA

According to the APTA, “the course prerequisites for admission vary significantly across PT education programs,” (APTA, 2013). This can create some confusion while applying to different programs. On my website, I advised students to always check each individual school’s course requirements for admission. Additionally, I included a list of commonly required courses, as stated by the APTA. These courses included: Anatomy, Physiology, Biology I and II, Advanced Biology, Chemistry I and II, Physics I and II, Psychology, Advanced Psychology, Statistics, and English Composition. I also included a list of recommended classes that some programs report as beneficial but not required. Those courses included: exercise physiology, kinesiology, nutrition, medical terminology, and biomechanics.

Undergraduate courses are important in the physical therapy admissions process. The average overall undergraduate GPA for accepted PTCAS applicants in 2014-2015 was 3.57 (2014-2015 Applicant Data Report). Starting from freshman year, students are advised to keep their GPA competitive in order to be accepted into a PT program. This advice agrees with research on this subject. A study by McGinnis for the Journal of the American Physical Therapy Association found that, “a significant relationship between freshman GPA and success for PT program admission does exist,” (57). She also stated “students with a GPA below this level [minimum program requirement GPA] should be told that they have decreased chances for admission,” (57). A survey conducted in 1978 found that “100% of the 32 surveyed schools in the United States used scholastic excellence as a preadmission factor for physical therapy school admission,” (Dockter, 60). While this data may be dated, it is still valuable information. As physical therapy programs become increasingly competitive, admission committees are faced with the dilemma of selecting the most qualified candidates, and often GPA is the most heavily weighted requirement.

One of the reasons undergraduate GPA may be so important in the admissions process is in its predictive value for future success in the physical therapy program. According to one study, a “positive correlation existed between pre-cumulative GPA and PY1GPA [PT year one GPA],” (Ruscingo, Zipp, & Olson, 141). Another study upholds these results, reporting, “Students with higher UGPA [undergraduate GPA] tended to have higher GGPA [graduate GPA] scores, with an increase of 0.1 point in UGPA translating to an increase of 0.027 points in GGPA,” (Shiyko & Pappas, 33). Therefore, undergraduate GPA appears to be a strong indicator of success in physical therapy

education programs. Another interesting find was an article that reported, “the best predictor of performance on the NPTE [National Physical Therapy Examination] was the GPA after the first year of physical therapy school,” (Dockter, 62). Connecting to the other research previously mentioned, it can perhaps be inferred that undergraduate GPA may then be a predictor of NPTE performance. With data like this, it makes sense to advise pre-physical therapy students to maintain a high GPA in order to be competitive for program admissions.

### References

The number and type of references varies for each program. However, most schools require 1-4 letters of recommendation, with at least one from a licensed physical therapist (APTA). The APTA recommends that applicants select individuals who “know you well; and can speak to your maturity, dependability, dedication, compassion, communication skills, leadership, and any hands-on experience in the field.” This recommendation comes from the list of questions PTCAS, the Physical Therapy Centralized Application Service, asks the evaluator. These questions are provided by PTCAS, and I included them on PTSchoolPrep. According to the 2014-2015 Applicant Data Report, 89.75% of accepted PTCAS applicants were highly recommended as a health care provider by the evaluator. Additional data shows that, 87.5% of accepted applicants received a 5/5 on reliability/dependability, 86.0% received a 5/5 on ethical and profession behavior, and 84.5% received a 5/5 on commitment to learning. Therefore, it is advised to choose someone who knows you well enough to evaluate you in these, and other, areas. While there is little research on the impact of reference letters with admissions and success in PT schools, it is still one of the top three most influential

factors in admission decisions. (Bezner & Boucher, 83). Even though the research is limited, I believe information about references is valuable to include on my website as it is an important factor in the application process. Physical therapy programs have limited information on which to base their decision of admittance into their school. A well-written reference letter from someone who knows you well may be the deciding factor for admission.

### Graduate Records Exam (GRE)

Programs may require a minimum GRE score, and they may provide average GRE scores of accepted applicants. Since this information varies by program, on my website I made it clear that applicants should be checking the requirements specific to the program. The GRE is used to assess students' verbal and quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing skills. According to one study, "GREV [verbal] and GREQ [quantitative] scores were highly predictive of GGPA, with higher scores corresponding to better performance," (Shiyko & Pappas, 34). This is valuable information to an applicant as admission committees may be more likely to choose an applicant with a higher GRE score for that reason. Additionally, this study found that "higher performance on GREQ was associated with a lower probability of experiencing academic difficulties," (34). These findings support the use of the GRE as an admission requirement and provide students with motivation to do their best on the exam. For these reasons, I focused the GRE content of PTSchoolPrep on study materials. I compiled a list from my own experiences and from the GRE official website of helpful study tools students may want to use before taking the exam. I tried to include mainly free tools to allow everyone equal access to preparing themselves.

### PT Observation Hours

Many programs require applicants to have a certain number of volunteer or paid PT experiences working with patients. The types of settings and number of hours needed varies depending on the program. Applicants may also be required to have a licensed physical therapist verify the hours.

Observation hours are an important experience in the pre-PT process. Studies show that “students perceive interaction in real-life situations as positive learning,” (Fougner & Horntvedt, 33). One case study found that “using shadowing as a learning method at an early stage provided students with examples of good role models and opportunities to observe the real world of practice as they learned about their respective professions and their interprofessional relations,” (37). Not only does observation provide students with great experience and reinforce their career choice, it can provide them with stories to tell in their personal statements and interviews. The bulk of the information about observation on PTSchoolPrep is centered on what to do while at a clinic observing. I decided that this type of information is important based on my own experiences. It can be intimidating and the student may just become another body in the room. However, after talking to various therapists, this is the exact opposite of what to do. Therapists I talked to recommend asking questions, staying curious, and interacting with the patients. This shows the therapist you are observing that you are interested and engaged. I felt that this was important information to have on the website, despite little research on the impact of hours on admission.

### Interview



PT programs may require applicants to visit the campus for an interview. The interview format varies by program. According to the APTA, “During the interview, applicants may be rated on their oral communication skills, professional behaviors and attitudes, ability to interact in a group, knowledge of the profession, ability to solve problems, and motivation to pursue a career in physical therapy.”

The importance and use of the interview has been researched in a few studies. As one article stated, “the interview is used to assess personal characteristics and noncognitive strengths and weaknesses in order to effectively select caring professionals who can succeed both academically and clinically,” (Bezner & Boucher, 83). Some professionals critique interviews due to the possibility of interview bias. One bias is the notion that an individual will be attracted to another who has similar attitudes, opinions, and values as his or her own (84). However, a study found that this type of bias did not occur. It reported, “interview scores were not significantly different between applicants who interviewed with clinical/faculty team that were ‘like the applicant’ compared with those that were ‘not like the applicant,’” (87). While this particular bias was not identified, the presence of stereotyping was. The study found that one personality type received higher interview scores than the other types (88). However, this study was limited and more research needs to be done. Therefore, applicants should not worry about not having the “right” personality. Additionally, the article explicitly states, “Educators should examine their admission practices and procedures to ensue that they do not discriminate against any personality type,” (89). Programs will benefit from having a variety of personality types in order to meet the diverse needs of society. Even though interview processes are varied depending on the program and may contain bias, it is

important to be prepared for interviews. One survey found that “the interview was the third most influential factor in admission decisions, behind GPA and references,” (83). Therefore, I thought it important to include some tips on the interview process on PTSchoolPrep. I used advice that I had received from others, and thoughts from my own personal experience of preparing for and participating an interview. I included advice for before, during, and after the interview.

### Timeline

The last page of content that I created for PTSchoolPrep was a general timeline. As graduate schools continue to become more competitive it is important to start getting prepared as early as possible. The timeline I created is not the one that every pre-PT student will follow. I based it off of my own personal experiences and intended it to be a general guideline that could be helpful for students unsure of everything that they will have to do during the pre-PT process. I included a few things a prospective student might do during his or her freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years.

### Conclusion

From my own experience, I found there were many questions for which I did not have answers until I actually applied. The purpose, then, of this project was to create a website for pre-physical therapy students to use as a source of information, serving to guide them through the process. My hope is that this website will provide information to students who are unsure or confused about the process. To confirm this notion, the website was presented to GVSU’s pre-PT club this semester. Feedback received from the president of the club and the members was really positive. This should be a tool that the club could utilize in the future.

The final step in this project will be to place future website management in the hands of the GVSU Pre-PT Club. Monitoring changes in the application process and adjustments to the website will become the responsibility of future club members. I believe that my ultimate goal of helping pre-PT students with the admissions process was met, and I hope that many students are able to find the answers they are looking for with PTSchoolPrep.

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