

How do I become a good candidate for graduate school?

Successful candidates for graduate school (e.g., PT, OT, Nutrition, PA, Chiropractic, Nursing, Medical, etc) have the following characteristics: they achieve high grades and score well on the GRE, they are actively involved in their studies and clinical experiences, and they pursue additional enrichment activities.

Get good grades

- Admission to graduate schools is very competitive. High grades are part of the package. You can see the most recent average scores of the entering classes at graduate schools by going to the website of a graduate school you are interested in, and in most cases they will publish a profile of their recent entry class.
- Take just enough courses that you can be sure to do very well at everything that is on your plate. Keep in mind that any work, clubs, family commitments, and social participation must to be included in your total workload for the quarter. It would be a mistake to take 18 credits while also having a lot of extra commitments outside of class. In the pursuit of admission to graduate school, you must hit the mark with the grades, so if this requires additional quarters beyond a typical four-year plan in order for you to be successful, then consider setting up an extended course plan.
- If you score less than a 'B' on any course listed as a prerequisite for a graduate school you want to apply to, your chances of admission would likely improve if you were to re-take the course for a better grade. This would demonstrate your competence with the material and your commitment to the career path you are following.

Score well on the GRE

- This test is administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS): <http://www.ets.org/gre>. Check their site for schedules and locations for the exam, as well as what can be expected on the exam. (*Note that Pre-Med students must be planning for the MCAT, instead of the GRE.*)
- You should take this exam in the months before applying to graduate programs. If you plan to apply during the Fall of your senior year, then you should take the exam in the Summer or in September before returning to classes.
- You should take the GRE only after having several weeks of time to prepare. You must reserve several many-hour chunks of time for preparing for the GRE. Assuming that you will have time to prepare for this exam while taking classes does not typically work well.
- You should get a study book that has practice exams. Walking into this exam fully prepared will have a positive effect on your score. For a self-motivated student, is unlikely to be necessary to take a GRE prep class.
- We do not advise planning in advance to take the GRE twice, since that nearly ensures that you will not prepare well for the first attempt. Give your best effort, and plan to take it once.

Involve yourself in observational clinical experiences that allow you to get both breadth and depth of experience:

- Breadth of experience: admissions committees find it to be important for candidates to have done their due diligence in becoming aware of the breadth of rehabilitation settings. The most common applicant many admissions committees see is a student who is only interested in sports rehab, and who has only experienced

sports rehab. Over the next several decades, clinicians are more likely than ever to work with older adults (65+ years) in their clinics, as this population is growing the fastest of any age group. Candidates are advised by graduate programs to experience several of these clinical settings: in-patient acute care in the hospital, out-patient centers in the community, geriatric care in long-term care facilities, clinics that focus on women's issues (lumbo-pelvic pain and pelvic floor muscle dysfunction), pediatric care in clinics and schools, hand therapy, sports medicine, core/spine rehabilitation, and the list could go on...

- Depth of experience: while achieving the 'breadth' of experience element of your candidacy, you could end up with several relatively brief experiences with different clinicians. It is in your best interest to also have one or two clinics where you spend a long period of time. This will allow the clinical staff to have many more opportunities to observe your professionalism and suitability for a career in a clinical field, and they will have much more to say in a letter of recommendation when it is time for you to apply to graduate programs.

Be actively involved in your studies and clinical experiences

- Keep in mind that your letter of recommendation is writing itself every day. You will need recommendations from clinicians and educators.
 - Put your best foot forward when you volunteer and work in clinical settings. You are building your letter of recommendation with your behavior. It matters that you are always on time, dressed appropriately, professional, adhering to proper office etiquette, pursuing learning opportunities or special projects, etc. Keep in mind that it is sometimes difficult for clinicians to find something for you to do during the 'down time' in the clinic when s/he must complete paperwork. You can offer to do a variety of things to make your experience really meaningful:
 - Ask for conditions/injuries/rehabilitation methods to investigate and report back to your supervisor about what you find. You could use the clinic's library of texts or trusted online resources that the clinician directs you to. Then, you could report back to the clinician in written or oral form, in order to prompt some discussion and learning for you. You can also suggest with conditions you'd like to look up, based on your curiosity or what you have seen in the clinic recently.
 - Ask for a special assignment to create some sort of educational materials for the patients or staff. You could use your academic skills of researching a topic in the research literature, and reporting on it in a brochure, flyer, poster, or oral presentation format.
 - Get to know your professors, and allow them to get to know you. It is difficult for a professor to write a letter of recommendation for a candidate who took a class from him/her, but never visited office hours, never had a conversation with the professor, never spoke up in class, etc. You may need to step outside of your comfort zone in order to allow your professors to get to know you. We suggest that you become a regular in their office hours and allow them to get to know you as you pursue your studies. For example, schedule office hours appointments days before an exam or big assignment, and come with a list of questions that have come up during your studying/preparation.

Pursue extra enrichment experiences

- Research opportunities
 - Faculty members conduct their own research programs, and they often involve students. Ask your academic advisor and other professors for ideas about upcoming opportunities.

- We have a graduate program where we train master's students in Kinesiology. They often need assistants to help them collect their data. You can inquire about this.
- If you are extra ambitious and have time in your schedule for it, you could pursue a research project of your own. This requires a faculty sponsor, and this would best be met by a faculty member who has expertise in the area of research you aim to pursue. Keep in mind that such projects typically require months to complete the following phases: planning, proposal write-up, submission to the human subjects review board, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, presentation of results. Given the time and work involved, this is not something to start in your final quarter, or something that is advised if you have to take a heavy load of classes.
- Community activities
 - If there are on-campus and off-campus clubs or causes that you care about, then do contribute your time and energy to them. These opportunities will broaden your horizons and provide you with an understanding of (and possibly a commitment to) service. Such experiences also allow you the chance to understand the needs of people and communities. These can be a very worthwhile attributes for health care professionals to develop. If these are health related activities, and if they involve you utilizing and developing your skills of working with people, then they would be more useful than other forms of community activities.

Can I afford graduate school?

- Graduate school is expensive. Be sure to check with specific programs about their cost and typical financial aid packages early in the process of considering a school. It is important for you to consider the financial aspect of your investment in becoming a clinician.

How much can I expect to earn as a clinician?

- You can investigate the average wages for all careers at the Bureau of Labor and Statistics website: www.bls.gov. You can search the site by city or region. The specific link for wages in health-care related fields in the state of Washington is here: http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_wa.htm#29-0000.

What about becoming a Physical Therapy Assistant or an Occupational Therapy Assistant?

- Some students want to be involved in rehabilitation as a career, but are not interested in pursuing one or more of the requirements of becoming a PT or an OT: extensive coursework, high grades, time, location, and/or expense. Students in this case should consider a position as a Physical Therapy Assistant (PTA) or Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA).
 - A PTA or OTA position is different than a PT Aide or OT Aide position, since PTA and OTA positions require a certification program. See here for details for PTA: <http://www.apta.org/PTAEducation/>, and for OTA: <http://www.aota.org/Students/Prospective/OTA.aspx>.
 - Several community colleges in WA offer these two-year programs for PTA: <http://apps.apta.org/Custom/wstemplate.cfm?cfml=accreditedschools/Index.cfm&cfmltitle=Accredited%20PT%20and%20PTA%20Programs&process=1&state=WA&type=PTA&&fromStudentMap=1>, and for OTA: <http://www.aota.org/Students/Schools/EntryLevelOT/38117.aspx#wa>.