

## Candidate Bio and Statement – 2026

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The information below was provided by each candidate in response to a request to provide a brief bio and statement of interest and qualifications for the position.

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**Name:** Heather Ross, PT, MPT, PhD

**Title:** Assistant Dean, Program Director and Chair, Professor of Physical Therapy, Ivester College of Health Sciences

**Candidate for:** ACAPT- President

### Brief Bio

Dr. Heather Ross earned a Bachelor of Arts in Exercise and Sport Science (Minor in Biology) from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a Master of Physical Therapy from East Carolina University, and a Ph.D. in Anatomy and Neurobiology from Virginia Commonwealth University. She received post-doctoral training in the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of Florida and McKnight Brain Institute. Dr. Ross served as a K12 Rehabilitation Research Career Development Program Scholar (2009-2012) and full-time faculty member (2009-2015) in the University of Florida's Physical Therapy Department. She joined the faculty at Brenau University in 2015 and has served as the Program Director and Chair since 2018 and as the Assistant Dean of the Ivester College of Health Sciences since 2022. She has served ACAPT as a member and chair of the Reference Committee (2019-2022) and as a board Regional Director (2024-present). Dr. Ross is passionate about translating a strong basic science foundation into clinical relevance to first year DPT students, while supporting their academic and personal development. Dr. Ross has practiced in the acute, subacute and outpatient settings, primarily serving patients with neurological diagnoses.

**Candidate statement for Board position:** Physical therapy remains essential to the health of our communities, yet our educational programs face substantive external pressures. Clear positioning of physical therapy education has never been more important. I believe ACAPT, as the trade organization representing our programs, is well positioned to protect our professional pipeline, sustain educational excellence, and safeguard accreditation.

My service as a program director, assistant dean, and ACAPT Reference Committee and board member has prepared me for the work required of the next board president. I care deeply about shared governance and about strengthening the faculty voice through respectful dialogue and diplomacy. I am especially interested in how organizations bring forward complex issues, engage stakeholders meaningfully, and advocate for decisions that serve the collective good. Mentorship within ACAPT and my Fellowship in Higher Education Leadership capstone work helped me found my institution's first faculty shared governance council, navigating history while building on a positive culture and strong partnerships. This work strengthened my approach to transparency, communication, and steady leadership during complex change. I am prepared to apply these skills with curiosity, humility, and resolve to advance our strategic priorities, collaborate with professional partners, and support the educators who shape the future of physical therapy.

## Experience

Candidates were asked to rate their experience with the following criteria. (Developing): no experience, (Proficient): some courses/experience, (Advanced): fully competent with experience and educational courses. Candidates were also requested to identify examples to support their rating.

**Advocacy (includes personal, professional, social, community, and patient advocacy): Advanced;** I am deeply committed to advocacy and view it as one of the most important aspects of leadership. I have learned that it is possible—and essential—to engage dispassionately on issues about which one feels profound passion. I approach advocacy with the philosophy that lasting success is achieved through diplomatic partnership. This work is neither easy nor fast, but it is work to which I am naturally drawn and for which I am well suited.

I have had numerous opportunities to practice and refine these skills at the institutional, state, and national levels. I have negotiated critical resource allocations for my program and faculty, often in collaboration with units outside traditional academic affairs. At the state level, I have served on my APTA chapter's Legislative Committee and State PAC Board, raising awareness and support for the profession while cultivating relationships with legislators. In at least one instance, these efforts contributed to a meaningful impact for physical therapy in our state.

I believe advocacy is one of my strongest potential contributions as president. Given the external pressures facing our profession, and the exceptional emphasis on relationship-building that has defined recent ACAPT leadership, I am prepared to leverage experience, diplomacy, and strategic vision to advance the interests of our educational community and profession.

**Analytical Skills: Advanced;** For this role, it is essential to understand and thoughtfully consider the perspectives of those with whom we engage. Trained as a bench scientist, health care professional, and educational leader, I bring strong analytical skills and the ability to evaluate complex issues from multiple angles. ACAPT's emphasis on data generation and analysis provides valuable insight across domains, and I have relied on information from ACAPT, CAPTE, and the broader higher education landscape to guide strategic and operational decisions within my program.

At the same time, data must be interpreted within appropriate context. Effective leadership requires discernment, judgment, and the ability to translate information into action. I have invested significant time developing skills in negotiation and diplomacy to address complex challenges. For example, navigating an increasingly intricate admissions and tuition environment required a comprehensive, collaborative process involving multiple nonacademic units across my institution. Through careful analysis, stakeholder engagement, and sustained dialogue, we established coordinated processes that strengthened program stability and positioned us for continued growth.

**Business Experience: Proficient;** Most of my business experience has been rooted in higher education. That background is both a strength and a growth opportunity. I am deeply committed to the values of equity, collegiality, and service to students, faculty, and staff, and I tend to approach negotiations and decisions through that principled lens rather than personal advantage. As I seek the presidency of ACAPT, I am intentionally broadening my practical business expertise to ensure a balanced understanding of complex financial and operational realities.

To that end, I will be completing coursework through my institution's College of Business and pursuing additional professional development to strengthen my knowledge of finance, operations, and organizational strategy. I have also engaged two experienced local mentors who are helping translate theory into applied practice, offering perspective on decision-making in complex environments. Through this focused preparation, I aim to pair my commitment to academic values with stronger business acumen, bringing a balanced, informed, and forward-looking perspective to the responsibilities of the presidency.

**Effective Communication & Public Speaking: Advancing;** My first national research presentation as a physical therapy student, while successful, revealed a mild fear of public speaking. Thus, I have worked diligently throughout my career to develop comfort and effectiveness in public speaking. I have presented to regional, national, and international audiences in scientific, educational, and governance settings. My vitae reflects a substantial record of peer-reviewed presentations, and my service and administrative roles have increasingly required communication on complex organizational issues.

As founding chair of my institution's faculty shared governance council, I led university faculty meetings for several years and periodically presented key issues to our administration and board of trustees. I've also addressed the membership of ACAPT as Reference Committee chair and as a Board member during annual business meetings. Through these experiences, I have learned to prepare carefully, tailor messages to varied audiences, and deliver information with clarity and professionalism. While I enjoy using appropriate humor to connect with listeners, my primary goal is always to ensure the message is clear, respectful, and effective. Over time, consistent preparation and practice have strengthened both my confidence and my delivery, enabling me to communicate thoughtfully and persuasively on behalf of the organizations and communities I serve.

**Financial Experience: Developing;** My formal financial experience is grounded in eight years of managing my program's budget. I stepped into the program director role shortly after initial accreditation and have since navigated major disruptions, including the financial strain of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, I learned to balance limited resources, invest surpluses strategically, advocate effectively with institutional leadership, and pursue fundraising and partnership opportunities when they arise. I also collaborated with an external clinical partner over three years to analyze profit and loss and guide the strategic management of our academic faculty practice. These experiences strengthened my understanding of budgeting, revenue planning, and responsible stewardship within a complex educational environment.

At the same time, as I prepare to serve in a broader leadership capacity with ACAPT, I am pursuing additional training in advanced financial planning and organizational strategy through aforementioned coursework and mentorship. My goal is to pair practical experience with deeper financial expertise so I can support ACAPT's sustainable growth and sound decision-making.

**Skills to address the ACAPT strategic Initiatives: Advanced;** One of a board's most complex responsibilities is balancing today's challenges with thoughtful anticipation of what lies ahead. As a regional director, I was grateful to contribute to ACAPT's recent strategic planning process, and I have contributed to similar efforts at both the program and institutional levels. This experience positions me to help the board advance ACAPT's current plan with clarity, discipline, and foresight.

As a program director, I have focused on academic excellence through participation in programmatic and national initiatives that support student well-being alongside strong academic outcomes, using data-informed strategies to guide improvement. I am deeply committed to an educational community that promotes excellence across individuals and institutions, and I bring sustained attention and experience to these priorities. I am equally invested in ACAPT's influence within physical therapy and higher education, ensuring our advocacy is collaborative, well positioned, and appropriately ambitious. Finally, I am committed to collaborating with the staff to maximize financial strength, building on the innovative strategies already in place so that our organization remains stable, effective, and forward looking.

**Technical Skills: Advanced;** I would like to address this section through a results-based lens. Throughout my career in higher education, I have learned to assess clearly what a role requires, what it could become, and how to balance present responsibilities with aspirational goals. My record reflects steady advancement built on demonstrated skills and outcomes. As a researcher, I have produced peer-reviewed publications and secured funding. As a physical therapy faculty member, I have translated content expertise into effective courses, reflected in strong student outcomes and performance on licensure benchmarks. My management and leadership abilities are evident in successive promotions and expanded service roles.

One example is my contribution to my institution's COVID-19 response. I was appointed co-chair of the Administrative Affairs Task Force, charged with redesigning curricular priorities during lockdown and recovery. Drawing on expertise in curriculum design, health care practice, and collaborative leadership, our team developed flexible solutions that maintained academic progress and minimized delayed learning. This experience demonstrates how diverse technical skills can align to solve complex institutional challenges. As I seek broader leadership responsibilities within ACAPT, I bring a record of measurable outcomes, thoughtful planning, and a commitment to applying practical expertise to advance our collective goals.

### Skill Set Evaluation

Candidates were asked to rate the following attributes on a scale of 1–5 and identify the top three in each category that best reflect their individual strengths.

<p><b>STRATEGIC THINKING 4</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Internal-external balance</li> <li>- Thoughtful</li> <li>- Team-first</li> </ul>	<p><b>RELATIONSHIP BUILDING 4</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intentional</li> <li>- Collaborative</li> <li>- Respectful</li> </ul>	<p><b>INFLUENCING 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ready to build</li> <li>- Clear-minded</li> <li>- Ambitious</li> </ul>	<p><b>EXECUTING 5</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Productive</li> <li>- Results-oriented</li> <li>- Willing to slow burn big initiatives</li> </ul>
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