



Guidelines for Prospective Student Applicants Requesting Observation Hours

The professional scope of physical therapy practice is founded in patient and client management. Physical therapists (PT) aim to improve population health and the human experience through “diagnosis and prognosis, to optimize physical function, movement, performance, health, quality of life, and well-being across the lifespan.”¹(lines14-17) The scope of PT practice also includes “innovation, research, collaboration, and changes in societal needs.”¹(lines 10-11) Physical therapists practice in a variety of settings such as acute care, inpatient rehabilitation, outpatient orthopedics, pediatrics, skilled nursing facilities, etc. and work with a diverse patient population.

Physical therapist assistants (PTA) assist PTs in provision of care under the direction and supervision of a licensed PT.² It is within the scope of a PTA to implement components of care, obtain and document data related to intervention, and communicate/collaborate with the PT to modify a patient’s plan of care.² As such, physical therapy stakeholders encourage prospective students to be informed before deciding to become a PT.

Observation hours (ObHr), also referred to as volunteer hours, shadowing, or paid hours,³ as required or recommended by several physical therapy (DPT and PTA) programs, are reported to offer prospective physical therapist (PT) students several benefits. Such benefits include the opportunity to: increase their knowledge about the profession of physical therapy^{4,5}; “gain a thorough understanding and appreciation for depth and breadth of the settings, patient populations, tasks, obligations and responsibilities of the physical therapist”³(p11); and “assess whether the profession is an appropriate fit for them, given the time and financial resources required”³(p11).

Prospective students often have questions related to the ObHr process, such as the number of required/recommended hours for academic programs; type of settings; how to obtain hours; how to keep a record of hours; etc. Although information regarding ObHr for most academic programs can be found on their respective website, as well as the Physical Therapy Centralized Application Service (PTCAS and PTACAS) for participating programs, this resource will provide guidance on additional considerations regarding ObHr.

Observation Hour FAQs

1. What is the difference between shadowing and volunteer hours?

- a. Volunteering is a hands-on and unpaid delivery of an individual's time and services.⁶ Volunteer hours are more formally arranged and normally scheduled through a volunteering office at a hospital or clinic. Individuals are required to fill out paperwork and go through a specific orientation process.
- b. Shadowing may be a less formalized process depending on the facility, however, clinical facilities may require paperwork or screening ahead of scheduled experiences. It is essential to inquire about pre-shadowing requirements. Shadowing differs from volunteer hours in that they are a concentrated type of observation of a healthcare professional; typically, a physical therapist. Individuals observe the healthcare professional provide care to patients or clients in a clinical setting, such as a hospital, clinic, assisted living/care facility, private practice, etc. Through clinical observation/shadowing experiences, individuals see what the day-to-day responsibilities of a given health career might involve within that respective healthcare setting.

2. What does a prospective student need to know about the required/recommended observation hours for each academic program where they choose to apply?
- a. Number of required hours
 - b. Number of recommended hours
 - c. Number of settings (e.g. one, two, any)
 - d. Type of settings (e.g. outpatient, inpatient, specialty)
 - e. Are paid and unpaid hours accepted?
 - i. Paid hours are accepted by several DPT programs. These hours are obtained through paid positions such as a rehabilitation technician/aide, athletic trainer, etc.
 - f. How much time can lapse between completion of observation hours and application submission?

3. How are the observation hours used in the application process?
- a. Recommend seeking clarification about the use of observation hours throughout an academic program's admissions process (i.e. advancement to an interview, points toward an admissions ranking, to enhance responses during an interview, etc.).

4. Who should the prospective student observe in order for the observation hours to meet academic program requirements?
- a. Prospective physical therapist students - Licensed physical therapist
 - b. Prospective physical therapist assistant students - Licensed physical therapist or physical therapist assistant

5. Who must verify the completed observation hours?
- a. Prospective physical therapist students - Licensed physical therapist (unless otherwise indicated by the academic program)

b. Prospective physical therapist assistant students - Licensed physical therapist or physical therapist assistant

6. Will volunteer experience(s), such as hours at a camp, food pantry, older adult facility, special Olympics, etc. meet the requirements for observation hours?

7. Who does the prospective student contact at a clinical site/healthcare facility to arrange observation hours and/or volunteer hours?

- a. Prior to contacting a facility, review the organization's website for guidance.
- b. Healthcare systems and clinical facilities arrange/schedule observation hours through different offices and/or individuals, including, but not limited to:
 - i. Volunteer services
 - ii. Clinic owner
 - iii. Clinic manager
 - iv. Site Coordinator for Clinical Education
 - v. Staff liaison

8. Communication Tips

- a. Phone conversation
 - i. Introduce oneself using first and last name
 - ii. Indicate the reason for the call
 - iii. Ask to speak to the individual who arranges observation hours
 - iv. Speak clearly, be mindful of volume and use proper language
 - v. Actively listen and take notes
 - vi. Repeat a summary of the information provided to ensure accuracy of what is written it down
 - vii. Thank the individual for their time and indicate when/how to communicate in the future
- b. Email etiquette
 - i. Use a professional email address (e.g. jacksonsmith@gmail.com, anna.mueller@mnd.edu)
 - ii. Include a clear, direct subject line (e.g. Inquiry into PT Observation Hours)
 - iii. Signature line should include the prospective student's name, undergraduate institution, and contact information (email and phone number)
 - iv. Use professional salutations
 1. Appropriate salutations (e.g. Dear Dr. Duplechan, To Whom it May Concern, Dear Mr. Burgess)
 2. Inappropriate salutations (e.g. Hi Mike, Hello Mrs. Dixson, no salutation)
 - v. Use professional terminology and grammar - avoiding slang, inappropriate humor, animated punctuation
 - vi. Use professional font and color

- vii. Proofread the message prior to sending
- viii. Double check that the correct recipient has been selected and the email address is spelled correctly

Preparation for Observation Experiences

9. Onboarding Requirements: Physical therapy practices and healthcare systems often have onboarding requirements in order to complete observation hours. It is essential to clarify the requirements with the facility's observation hour coordinator and/or human resources/volunteer services.

Requirements may include, but are not limited to:

- a. TB attestation/TB test results within the last 12 months
- b. Background check
- c. Consent and release forms (self, clinician, guardian if under 18 years of age)
- d. Signed confidentiality statement
- e. Copy of government issued photo ID/passport
- f. Evidence of seasonal flu vaccine
- g. Evidence of COVID-19 vaccine

10. Professional attire and appearance - The clinical facility likely has a dress code, which the prospective student should follow. In addition, they should consider the following guidelines:

- a. Volunteers/observers are expected to present themselves in a neat and clean manner. The following guidelines *may* apply:
 - i. Apparel
 - 1. Polo shirt, dress shirt, sweater; T-shirts and sweatshirts are often not permitted.
 - 2. Dress slacks, khakis or Docker-style pants; shorts, jeans, tight fitting slacks, stretch pants, capris, cutoffs or clothes showing a bare midriff are inappropriate.
 - 3. Socks or footies regardless of shoe type should be worn.
 - 4. Tennis shoes or low-heeled close toe shoes; mules or clogs may be permitted, however, sandals or shoes with open toes are not acceptable.
 - 5. All clothes should be clean and neatly pressed.
 - b. Grooming/Appearance
 - i. Hairstyles should be well kept.
 - ii. Mustaches, beards or sideburns should be neat and well-trimmed.
 - c. Jewelry and make-up should be worn in moderation.
 - d. Seek clarification from a clinical site about their policy related to visible tattoos

- and body piercings.
- e. Fragrances should be kept to a minimum due to allergies.

11. First Impressions/Behaviors

- a. Be 10-15 minutes early for every shift/day that one is present
- b. Introduce oneself upon entering the facility; whether to the receptionist/patient service specialist, the clinician, etc.
- c. Let the provider introduce the observer to the patient.
- d. Don't be overbearing or too aggressive; avoid giving the site a reason to not allow an applicant back but rather be willing to provide a good recommendation.
- e. Ask questions; but know when to ask questions.

12. Dos and Don'ts While Observing

- a. Dos
 - i. Gain an appreciation for the professional skills needed for that area of practice: time management, motivation, non-verbals
 - ii. Take note of different communication styles used with patient interaction:
 - 1. Bedside manner, approachability
 - 2. Active listening vs. passive listening
 - 3. Ability of the clinician to educate the patient
 - iii. Take note of the different patient populations seen in a particular setting (age, race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education level, type of diagnosis, etc.)
 - iv. Seek clarification from the supervising therapist about variability in productivity expectations: how many patients are generally seen on an average day in one setting vs. another?
 - v. Be mindful of the physical requirements required in the profession: sitting vs. standing time in different settings
- b. Don't
 - i. Monopolize a conversation with the clinician/patient
 - ii. Interject perspective unless sought by supervising therapist
 - iii. Interject into a conversation with personal experiences unless asked
 - iv. Ask questions about a patient directly in front of the patient and/or other patients
 - v. Don't question what the supervising therapist is doing during patient care

13. What should be documented for proof of observation hours?

- a. Inquire about the preferred method with each academic program (which may be outlined in PTCAS and PTACAS)

14. How should observation hours be documented? Is there a standardized form?

- a. Inquire about the preferred method with each academic program (which may be outlined in PTCAS and PTACAS)
- b. Commonly used documentation includes, but is not limited to:
 - i. applicant's name
 - ii. program for which they are applying
 - iii. facility name, address, phone number, and setting
 - iv. date(s) of observation hours
 - v. hours observed each day (time in and time out plus total)
 - vi. and signature of supervising physical therapist
- c. Documentation may be submitted as a formal letter from the supervising physical therapist on official letterhead
- d. For academic programs that utilize PTCAS/PTACAS, the supervising physical therapist may be emailed a link to verify hours in place of uploading a signed form.

15. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)

To observe physical therapy care, it will be expected by the patients/clients, clinical site, and physical therapist that applicants follow the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) at all times. This federal law protects sensitive health information of all patients/clients from being shared without their consent or knowledge. Therefore, applicants will not be allowed access to their medical records or to participate in their care. And while an applicant is there, they may encounter patients/clients requesting to have privacy versus allowing permission to have others observe their care.

Applicants may be excited to share their experiences or others may be curious how they liked the experience. Before speaking, please note applicants cannot share patient information with friends, family or anyone else. Protected health information includes details such as, but not limited to, name, date of birth, admit date, discharge date, SSN, diagnoses, physical or mental health, provision of health care, contact information, payment for provision of health care and physician notes.

What information can applicants share? After verifying initially, the prospective student should ask the clinical supervisor about their policy. Examples of what a prospective student can share might be observation of how the therapist assisted a patient to improve patients: walking ability, motion in their shoulder, and strength.

References

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