



AMERICAN COUNCIL OF ACADEMIC PHYSICAL THERAPY

MOTIONS TEMPLATE

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PROPOSED BY: James Gordon, University of Southern California

TITLE: Minimum Duration of Professional DPT Education Programs

The professional education program leading to the Doctor of Physical Therapy Degree shall be no less than 32 months (three academic years) in duration.

SUPPORT STATEMENT:

At least five programs, four new and two established, are or will soon be offering DPT programs that are two years in length. CAPTE has already approved some of these programs. The purpose of this motion is to put ACAPT clearly on the record affirming that three academic years should be the minimum duration for DPT educational programs. There are two important reasons for opposing the reduction of program duration from the standard of three years. First, reducing program duration will lower the quality of professional education, and graduates of those programs will not be adequately prepared to function as doctors of physical therapy. Second, reducing program duration will damage the reputation and credibility of the doctor of physical therapy degree among critical stakeholders, including other health care professionals, our colleagues in higher education, and our patients.

Effect of reduced duration on educational outcome. The new two-year DPT programs refer to themselves as “accelerated” programs, but this term is at the very least misleading, if not deceptive. It implies that students receive the same education as they would in a three-year program, only faster. This is, of course, impossible. All DPT educators know that our current three-year programs are already accelerated to the maximum possible degree and that students consequently suffer from high levels of stress and anxiety. The reality is that two-year programs will necessarily have reduced content, reduced time to practice, and reduced clinical experience. Graduates will have less knowledge, less skill, and less clinical expertise. So, for the DPT graduate, the degree will have lower value and a lower professional ceiling.

Effect of reducing program duration on professional standing of doctors of physical therapy. Twenty years ago, our profession made a profound decision – to elevate our education to the doctoral level. This was the aim of APTA’s Vision 2020: “By 2020, physical therapy will be provided by physical therapists who are doctors of physical therapy, recognized by consumers and other health care professionals as the practitioners of choice to whom consumers have direct access...” When we took that step, we made a promise to our stakeholders – to our colleagues in academia, to our professional colleagues in healthcare, to our students, and above all to our patients. We promised that the DPT would be a true doctoral degree, equivalent in rigor to the doctoral degrees of physicians and other healthcare professions. In return, we would be recognized as highly educated doctors – practitioners of choice – with direct access to our services. Allowing two-year-long educational programs breaks that promise. A two-year program is simply incompatible with awarding a doctoral degree, certainly not one that is comparable to that of other recognized doctoring professions. Furthermore, this move by even a



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49 small number of programs jeopardizes the recognition of all our graduates as doctors of physical therapy, even
50 those who graduate from three-year programs.

51 Is reducing program length a solution to the problem of excessive student loan debt? One argument that is
52 sometimes made in favor of shortening the DPT curriculum to two years is that it will reduce the cost of DPT
53 programs and thus lead to less student debt. We are justifiably concerned about rising student loan debt, and we
54 do need to find effective solutions to this problem. But lowering the quality of DPT education is not a solution.
55 It reduces tuition cost by lowering the value of the degree obtained. This does not do the students any favors,
56 and it will harm patients by reducing the quality of care they receive.

57 How is it that CAPTE has approved two-year programs? As recently as 2015, CAPTE standards explicitly
58 stated that “the professional curriculum is at least three academic years (or the equivalent) in length.” Current
59 standards, however, say nothing explicitly about the length in time, only that total duration is “no less than 6
60 semesters or the equivalent.” Everyone in higher education knows that the term “semester” is an elastic
61 concept, and when you add “or equivalent,” this standard clearly allows programs to argue that a duration of
62 two years meets the minimal standard. Apparently, CAPTE has allowed that argument to succeed.
63 It might be argued that CAPTE’s minimum credit requirement would solve this problem. CAPTE currently
64 requires “90 semester credit hours (or the equivalent).” The calculation of credit hours is even more elastic than
65 semester. Indeed, one of the new two-year programs has a curriculum in which students take 135 credit hours in
66 24 months. Another new two-year program has 127 credit hours in 24 months. The average DPT program,
67 according to CAPTE, has 121 credits, and a length of about 33 months in duration, when official holidays and
68 breaks are included. This motion, if approved, will communicate to CAPTE that it should reinstate the three-
69 year requirement.

70 Why choose 32 months as the minimum duration? Three academic years is slightly ambiguous. The standard
71 academic year begins in August or September and ends in May or June. If the program were to begin in
72 September and end three years later in May, it would be 33 months in duration, when the two intervening
73 summers are included. Thirty-two months was chosen as the minimum duration because some universities
74 might have slightly later starts and earlier ends to the academic year.

75 Should ACAPT set standards for DPT education? It might be argued that setting the minimum duration of DPT
76 education is a CAPTE function, and that ACAPT has no power to enforce the minimum duration. ACAPT is
77 the primary governing body of DPT education. Its primary mission is “...to achieve excellence in physical
78 therapist education.” Furthermore, one of ACAPT’s purposes as delineated in Article II of the Bylaws, is “...to
79 promote quality physical therapist education standards at the institutional and national levels.” Setting
80 minimum DPT curriculum length is clearly related to achieving excellence in physical therapist education.
81 Although ACAPT cannot force programs to adhere to a minimum length, we can expect that CAPTE will take
82 an official ACAPT position into account when it revises accreditation standards. In addition, universities,
83 especially those contemplating starting new DPT programs, will be put on notice that a two-year program
84 violates the minimum standards set by ACAPT.

CURRENT POSITION/STANDARD/GUIDELINE/POLICY/PROCEDURE:

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87 There are currently no positions, standards, guidelines, or policy/procedures on this issue.

RELATED POSITION/STANDARD/GUIDELINE/POLICY/PROCEDURE:

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90 There are currently no related positions, standards, guidelines, or policy/procedures on this issue.
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