



The American Council of Academic Physical Therapy
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Promoting Excellence in Academic Physical Therapy

Dear University Leaders,

As members of the Board of Directors for the American Council of Academic Physical Therapy (ACAPT), we write to you today to share our perspective about the changing landscape of physical therapist education and to encourage discussions about this at your institution.

ACAPT represents more than 90% of accredited physical therapist (PT) education programs in the United States. Our mission is to support academic institutions to achieve excellence in physical therapist education. This quest includes developing future leaders, methods to benchmark excellence, meaningful and relevant professional development for faculty, educational research, and innovative clinical education models.

As integral and critical members of the health care team, physical therapists enjoy high job satisfaction and high employment rates. The profession has historically been in high demand both from consumers needing services and for applicants interested in the profession. Physical therapy education programs are also excellent and are often among the strongest academic programs in an institution. ACAPT celebrates this excellence, and we want to preserve it.

Over the past 10 years, many universities have increased class size or started new programs based on Bureau of Labor Statistics projections for the growth of the profession. At the same time, however, reimbursement for physical therapy services have been one target of the federal government and third-party payers. Health care cost containment has led to fewer reimbursable visits per episode of need and reduced reimbursement dollars per visit. Hence, the actual rise in physical therapy employment is not likely to match Bureau projections, and the continued proliferation and expansion of PT educational programs will likely be detrimental to all stakeholders. This continued pressure on cost containment has also stunted the salary growth potential for physical therapists at all levels of their career, including those just entering the profession.

Over the past 25 years, physical therapist education has transitioned from a baccalaureate to a masters to a doctoral degree, increasing PT knowledge/skills, but also increasing the time to degree completion and licensure and concomitantly student loan debt. In short, the rate of increased student debt has outpaced the rate of salary growth. Research shows that for DPT Graduates, a total debt load of more than \$85K begins to put pressure on the value of a PT education. At \$150,000 in debt or greater, the value falls below most other health care professions, and over \$200,000, the debt to income ratio is unsustainable.¹ The average PT graduate debt is over \$120,000. Some prospective students, recognizing the gap between loan debt and salary potential, have turned away from the profession. Nationally, we have seen 6.3% decrease in the number of Physical Therapy Centralized Application Service (PTCAS) applications over the past 2 years.²

Another challenge experienced by physical therapist education programs is a nationwide shortage of qualified faculty, with an average of 1-2 open faculty positions per program.³ Furthermore, accreditation requirements now stipulate that at least 50% of program faculty must have a PhD or equivalent

academic doctoral-degree, and all full-time faculty are required to have a defined scholarly agenda, including clinical or non-tenure track faculty.⁴ The result is that the demand for PT faculty with the necessary qualifications has outpaced the supply of qualified individuals.

Finally, each program must provide students with experiences within a physical therapy clinical setting.⁴ We have witnessed increased competition for clinical education sites across the country.⁵ Academic programs require an extensive network of clinical education sites and clinical instructors to provide adequate clinical education experiences for their students. Some clinical sites have limited the number of universities from which they will accept students to a small group of local/regional partners, while other clinics have begun to charge academic programs to place their students. The impact of these trends has been increased difficulty in placing students in required clinical experiences.

In light of these issues, we urge you to consider this changing landscape before adding new physical therapist educational programs, expanding your current class size, or increasing tuition. Programs must be adequately resourced with both infrastructure and qualified faculty, tuition commensurate with expected starting PT salaries of \$65,000 per year, and an adequate depth and breadth of clinical education sites.

In closing, we want to reiterate that careers in physical therapy are, at this time, highly satisfying, job prospects for current graduates are excellent, and physical therapy students and faculty are an asset to any institution. ACAPT celebrates this excellence and seeks to preserve and extend it. We hope this summary of current issues leads to meaningful discussions at your institution and collaboration with your DPT faculty, professional staff and community partners to help inform decision-making about all aspects of your DPT program and to preserve and enhance excellence in physical therapist education.

Sincerely,

The Board of Directors
American Council of Academic Physical Therapy

References:

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