Physical Therapy Career Options

Human Biology Health & Society (HBHS)
Nutritional Sciences – CHE (NS-CHE)
Nutritional Sciences – CALS (NS-CALS)

Many NS-CHE, NS-CALS and HBHS majors consider physical therapy as a career option because they are interested in this health care field or in combining nutrition with a specialty that focuses on wellness, performance and rehabilitation. The pathway to a career in physical therapy for Cornell undergraduates is through a graduate program in physical therapy to which they apply in their senior year and enter after they graduate from Cornell. This path is the long route to a physical therapy career compared to entering a physical therapy program directly from high school. Coming to Cornell to study Nutritional Sciences or Human Biology, Health and Society, however, provides a broad education at an Ivy League institution and allows the student to explore many different health-related careers.

The job opportunities in physical therapy have been good. However, the limited number of spaces in physical therapy programs means that acceptance to these programs is highly competitive. In some years, acceptance to physical therapy programs has been more competitive than acceptance to medical school.

Becoming a Competitive Applicant

Admission to graduate physical therapy programs is determined by a student's overall academic record, completion of required courses, experiential qualifications, and recommendations from teachers and placement supervisors.

Many of the courses required by the Nutritional Sciences and the Human Biology, Health and Society majors fulfill requirements for graduate programs in physical therapy. Students then elect to take the extra courses that are required by physical therapy programs. Because physical therapy programs vary in their admission requirements, the students must check the requirements for programs of specific interest. In addition to the courses already completed for their majors, many graduate programs in physical therapy require courses in:

- College physics (full year)
- Human anatomy
- Physiology
- Kinesiology
- Statistics
- Psychology (3 courses)
- Ethics

The students interested in physical therapy generally complete the minor in Applied Exercise Science that is offered through Cornell's exchange program at Ithaca College. Please refer to the information about the Applied Exercise Science minor in the blue pages.

In addition to having all the right courses, students must have a strong record of experience in physical therapy, including all aspects of physical therapy (not just sports medicine). Students should seek paid or volunteer experience in physical therapy settings through the Cornell, Ithaca and home communities. In some situations, students may earn academic credit (NS 4020) for non-paid field experiences when the experience is prearranged, supervised by a faculty member, and has definite learning objectives, activities, and outcomes that can be evaluated. Please refer to the information concerning Field Experiences in Food, Nutrition and Health for Undergraduates in the GOLD pages.
Because admission to graduate programs in physical therapy is so competitive, most students should consider alternative plans in the event they are not successful in their first application. Work experience in the health care field and advanced study related to exercise science are pathways that will often enhance a student’s competitiveness for admission at a later date.

**Graduates in Physical Therapy-Related Programs**

Upon graduation about 10% of our majors indicate that within one or two years they intend to pursue training in physical therapy, exercise science, athletic training, strength and conditioning or related fields. (Based on student reports at graduation, 1992-2011.)

The graduate programs that these students have attended include:

- Auburn University (exercise science)
- Boston University (physical therapy)
- Columbia University (exercise physiology)
- Florida State University (exercise physiology)
- Hahnemann University (physical therapy)
- Kansas State University (exercise science)
- Massachusetts General Hospital
- NYU Steinhardt (physical therapy)
- Pennsylvania State University (exercise physiology)
- State University of New York at Stony Brook (physical therapy)
- Syracuse University (physical therapy)
- University at Buffalo (physical therapy)
- University of California at San Francisco (physical therapy)
- University of Florida (exercise physiology)
- University of North Carolina (athletic training)
- University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (athletic training)
- University of Texas (exercise science)
- Washington University (physical therapy and exercise physiology)

**More Information**

Extensive information about the physical therapy profession and lists of approved programs from The American Physical Therapy Association can also be obtained through the association’s World Wide Web site ([http://www.apta.org/](http://www.apta.org/)).