

**OAKLAND UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF HEALTH SCIENCES  
PHYSICAL THERAPY PROGRAM**

## **ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS OF PHYSICAL THERAPY**

### Introduction

In addition to meeting academic standards required for admission into, retention, and graduation from the Physical Therapy Program, students must also acquire and maintain certain essential functions that are necessary to the practice of physical therapy. These essential functions consist of minimum physical, cognitive, and behavioral abilities required for both the successful completion of the program and the ability to practice safely once students graduate. Oakland University is committed to the principles of equal opportunity and is opposed to discrimination in any form. It is also the responsibility of the faculty to ensure, to the best of their ability, that students and graduates of the program are capable of safely interacting with patients. Patient safety is, therefore, a major consideration when establishing essential function standards for admission to and continuation in the program.

The essential functions outlined below have been formulated based on the mission, philosophy, and goals of the program and the University; the guidelines of the Commission on Accreditation for Physical Therapy Education of the American Physical Therapy Association; the Generic Abilities as outlined by May, et. al. (1995); the Clinical Performance Instrument of the American Physical Therapy Association (1999); The Guide to Physical Therapy Practice (APTA, 1997); and the Normative Model of Physical Therapist Education (APTA, 1997). In addition, although not serving as a primary basis for this document, several policy statements from other universities were reviewed by the Essential Functions Committee of the Program in Physical Therapy to provide a framework for the organization of this document.

### Policy

The Physical Therapy Program adheres to high standards in all areas to select and graduate students who have the ability to become highly competent professionals. The entry level program at Oakland prepares students to enter the profession as generalists. Therefore, students must meet the academic, clinical, educational, and essential functions requirements that will allow them to practice safely and ethically.

The essential function standards are based on the guidelines outlined in the accreditation standards of the Commission on Accreditation of the American Physical Therapy Association. Within these guidelines, the faculty of the Physical Therapy Program have the freedom and responsibility for the selection and retention of students. Both admissions and retention decisions are based on academic, as well as non-academic, standards that will insure that graduates can successfully and safely carry out the essential functions required for graduation and practice.

It is the responsibility of students with disabilities to notify and faculty and to request, in writing, any accommodations for disability. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, some allowances in the form of technology or minor adaptations in skills will be made for students with disabilities. Students, however, should be able to act reasonably independently with these compensations. Extensive dependence on (1) technological assistance; or (2) a trained intermediary to interpret information or perform skills that cannot be accomplished by the student due to sensory, motor, cognitive, or emotional impairment is an unacceptable limitation.

### Essential Functions

The student must have the cognitive abilities to master relevant content in basic science and clinical courses at a level deemed appropriate by the faculty. Students must be able to comprehend, memorize, analyze, synthesize, and apply information. Students must have the ability to master this information which may be presented in course work in the form of lectures, written material, and projected images. He or she must be able to discern and comprehend

dimensional and spatial relationships of structures, and be able to develop reasoning, critical thinking, and clinical decision making skills appropriate to the practice of physical therapy. Students must be able to make clinical judgments based on data gathered during the evaluation process and must be able to carry out any necessary interventions as outlined in the Guide to Physical Therapy Practice. A major component of physical therapy practice is the assessment and management of movement disorders, including those related to neuromuscular, musculoskeletal and cardiopulmonary dysfunction. Students must, therefore, have the ability to observe any problems with movement related to these systems. They must be capable of perceiving (through a physical examination and evaluation) signs and symptoms of disease and disability. Students must be able to obtain information through observation and palpation of the body, through palpable changes in the various organs and tissues, and through auditory information (such as patient voice, heart sounds, and respiratory sounds). The student must also have the ability to discern changes in skin, subcutaneous masses, muscles, bones, joints and joint structures, and intra-abdominal structures (e.g., liver and spleen) that may be contributing to the movement disorder. In summary, the student must possess sufficient visual, auditory and tactile sensation to perceive the presence of abnormalities of all systems that may contribute to movement disorders and be able to complete physical therapy evaluations and interventions through the use of visual auditory and tactile input.

Because the management of movement disorders is a major component of physical therapy practice, the student must have the ability, within reasonable limits, to assist a patient in moving, for example, from a chair to a bed, or from a wheelchair to a commode. The student must also have the ability to move him or herself and the patient in three-dimensional space in order to perform motor function tests and treatments. Additionally, the student must be able to ensure the physical safety of the patient at all times, including measures related to basic life sustaining skills, such as CPR and first aid.

The student must be able to communicate effectively with patients, their families, groups in the community, and members of the health care team. Effective communication skills include the ability to obtain accurate and complete information from a patient or family member and to process this information in order to seek follow-up information and be able to relay the findings to others in both written and oral formats. Effective communication includes the ability to take, and document in a patient's record, an appropriate history, to perform a thorough physical examination and evaluation, and to provide appropriate interventions. The student must be able to recognize and interpret nonverbal, as well as verbal, communication; and must be an empathetic listener who is able to establish rapport with others in a way that promotes concern and sensitivity to potential social, cultural, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual differences. Finally, in the area of communication, students must be aware of limitations in her or her knowledge and have the ability to make appropriate judgments about when to seek guidance, supervision, or consultation from a colleague or supervisor.

Students must be able to understand and demonstrate ethical practice. Students must be able to demonstrate empathy, concern, responsibility for their actions, professionalism, and integrity with colleagues and patients. Students must be emotionally stable, flexible, able to work as part of a team, and able to manage stress in the demanding and changing health care environment. Students must exhibit characteristics that do not compromise the health and safety of themselves, clients, or coworkers. This includes adherence to universal precautions and OSHA requirements for blood-borne pathogens and following professional and legal guidelines for disclosing information to others regarding their own health status.