

Guidelines for Pre-candidacy Doctoral Students

1. Introduction

The **Foundation for Physical Therapy Research** is the research funding organization for the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) and is a registered 501(c)(3) not-for-profit entity. Our mission is to fund physical therapy-related research and develop physical therapy researchers to optimize movement and improve the health of society.

Through the generosity of our donors and community of supporters, our sole purpose is to fund physical therapy research and researchers through grants, scholarships, and fellowships. Through our investments in academic doctoral degree scholars and early career researchers, we are advancing the quality and impact of physical therapy researchers and research evidence that help ensure the profession will provide high-quality, effective, evidence-based physical therapy to all who need it.

The purpose of the Foundation's post-professional Promotion of Doctoral Studies (PODS) scholarship program is to help ensure that the profession has a sustainable supply of highly qualified physical therapy researchers. We fund licensed physical therapists and physical therapy assistants who are academic research doctoral degree students and candidates who are preparing for and who have high potential to have successful physical therapy research careers. The phased nature of the PODS program ensures that there is Foundation funding available to qualified applicants throughout their doctoral program.

2. General Information

This \$7,500 scholarship is awarded annually to applicants who are completing the coursework phase of their doctoral studies at an accredited academic institution. The award period is from September 1, 2026 to August 31, 2027. See section 4 below for detailed eligibility requirements.

Applications must be submitted online using ProposalCentral.com by **January 20, 2026 by 4:59 p.m. EST.**

Applicants may receive up to two pre-candidacy scholarships for a maximum of \$15,000 during this phase of their studies. For scholarships during the doctoral candidacy phase, please see the guidelines and instructions for PODS doctoral candidacy (PODSII) scholarships. The maximum number of awards any applicant may receive over their doctoral program is four (two pre-candidacy and two candidacy) for a total of \$45,000.

These guidelines are an overview of eligibility, basic administrative information, and application review criteria. Details about how to apply can be found in the PODSI application [instructions](#).

The Foundation makes a number of awards that are not dependent on a specific physical therapy specialty area. Awards that are open to any area of study vary from year to year. Those awards are not listed below.

The Foundation also makes awards based on specific areas, although which areas and which type of scholarship may vary from year to year. To be considered for specifically designated awards, applicants must also be members of the respective sponsoring APTA academy at the time the application is submitted and continue that membership throughout the scholarship year. For 2026, the Foundation expects the following academy-sponsored awards will be available for PODSI applicants:

- **Acute Care**
- **Cardiovascular and Pulmonary** (two PODSI or one PODSII¹)
- **Geriatrics**
- **Neurology** (two)
- **Pelvic Health**
- **PT Education** (two PODSI or one PODSII)

The Foundation expects to offer one award for an applicant focused on **health services research**. No additional APTA academy membership is required.

The Foundation expects to offer four awards for PODSI applicants that have specific requirements:

- **Bella May Award** for creative approaches to one's doctoral education by an awardee intending to teach
- **Charlene Mae Nelson Award** for a student focusing on electrophysiology (preferred)
- **Mildred L. Wood Award** for an outstanding student who intends to teach in a PT education program
- **Viva J. Erikson Award** for extraordinary academic merit and leadership

Awardees can only hold one scholarship at a time.

There is no set number of awards each year because the Foundation will only award scholarships to sufficiently well scored applications. In recent years, approximately half of pre-candidacy applications have been funded. The Foundation reserves the right not to make any award.

3. Foundation Priorities

The Foundation wishes to support doctoral students who have excellent academic records and outstanding potential to become highly qualified, productive, and impactful physical therapy researchers who will sustain successful research careers and educators.

¹ When an award may be given for two PODSI or one PODSII, the Research Committee will make recommendations to the Board based on best scores and most prudent allocation of the funds available for that specific award.

The Foundation prioritizes and **requires** all applicants to demonstrate a link between their research and training focus in their doctoral studies to one or more research priorities identified in the [APTA Research Agenda](#) or published priorities of an academy that is sponsoring an award in your research area. Please follow the [instructions](#) closely to ensure that your application explicitly identifies one or more priorities and names the APTA or academy research agenda.

For 2026, the Foundation will welcome seeing increased numbers of applications focused on research in these areas:

- Acute care
- Cardiovascular and Pulmonary
- Electrophysiology
- Health Services Research
- Pelvic Health
- PT Education

The Foundation has these further priorities in providing doctoral scholarships:

- Doctoral studies that substantively examine and provide skills and knowledge for addressing the social and structural determinants of people's health and healthcare system disparities and inequities
- Doctoral studies that provide sufficient training in the conduct of research
- Doctoral studies objectives that include teaching and research career plans designed to include teaching
- Doctoral studies that prepare researchers for multidisciplinary, collaborative, and team-based research
- Doctoral studies that clearly demonstrate a strong foundation in research methodologies that can measure effectiveness, efficiency, and outcomes

4. Eligibility: Applicant and Mentor(s)

4.1. Applicants

Pre-candidacy student applicants should meet these eligibility requirements:

- Be a member of the APTA at the time of application and throughout the award period.
- Be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident of the U.S.
- By September 1, 2026, possess a license to practice physical therapy or practice as a physical therapist assistant in the U.S. or in a U.S. territory or have received a passing score the licensure exam.
- No later than September 1, 2026, be enrolled as a full or part-time student in a fully accredited academic doctoral program whose content has a demonstrated relationship to physical therapy.
- Demonstrate commitment to further the physical therapy profession through research and

teaching in the U.S. or its territories.

- Have sufficient training in human and/or animal protections in research and conduct of research
- Be considered to be in good standing with the Foundation. Good standing pertains to applicants who have received Foundation funding prior to applying for this scholarship. Good standing means that the applicant has complied with all contractual obligations associated with a current or prior award.

The following students are **not eligible** for this award:

- Doctor of Physical Therapy students
- Students enrolled in transitional Doctor of Physical Therapy (t-DPT) programs
- If a student applies for this pre-candidacy award and then passes all their requirements for doctoral candidacy by September 1, 2026, their pre-candidacy award will be withdrawn. Under no circumstances will the Foundation offer the awardee the candidacy scholarship instead.

4.2. Mentor(s)

Starting with the 2026 application round, the Foundation is instituting minimum requirements for mentors listed in the application:

- All mentors must hold academic doctoral degrees.
- At least one mentor must be a physical therapist licensed in the United States.

If an applicant wishes to name multiple mentors, they no longer have to designate one as the primary mentor. The Mentor Information and Support template has been modified. All mentors listed in the application must now submit letters of support.

5. Institutional Assurances, Approvals, and Training

5.1. Assurances

The Foundation expects that the applicant's academic institution will have current Federalwide assurances indicating compliance with Department of Health and Human Services regulations governing the protection of human subjects.

5.2. IRB or IACUC Approval or Exemption

In the conduct of their dissertation or any other research undertaken during the scholarship period of performance, the Foundation expects the candidate will be complying with all of their institution's requirements for IRB or IACUC approval or exemption and all personnel policies.

5.3. Standards for Privacy of Individually Identifiable Health Information

The Privacy Rule is a federal regulation under the 1996 Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) that governs the protection of individually identifiable health information from covered entities through collaborative or contractual agreements. Decisions about whether and how to implement the Privacy Rule reside with the awardee and their institution.

5.4. Human Subjects' Protection and Conduct of Research Training

If data are to be collected on human subjects, or if data used in the research project contain identifiable private information that can be linked to human subjects, the applicant will need to demonstrate that they have completed a human subjects' protection training course or provide a certificate of training.

The Foundation does not require or recommend a particular training course(s). If training is needed and not offered by the academic institution, the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Human Research Protections offers online [courses](#) or the [Citi human subjects training](#) meet this requirement. The training should be relevant to human subjects research itself and not limited to research administration or management.

The Foundation expects all doctoral students and candidates to have sufficient training in the conduct of research and to be able to summarize how they will or have attained that level of training.

6. Overview of Legal and Administrative Requirements

This section covers only an overview of some of the most salient information about Foundation legal and administrative requirements. It is not exhaustive or binding. Should an applicant be offered a provisional award, they will receive a letter of agreement and deliverables instructions. If an applicant has specific questions prior to submission, they should contact the Foundation at info@foundation4PT.org. The Foundation does not make letters of agreement available prior to making an award.

6.1. Letter of Agreement

All scholarship recipients will sign a Letter of Agreement (i.e., contract) with the Foundation. They are the only signatory, along with the Foundation CEO, to their award. Any discussions about the letter of agreement will be with the awardee only. The Foundation reserves the right not to agree to any changes in the agreement. Should the recipient and the Foundation not agree to its terms, the award will be withdrawn.

Indicative terms and conditions include, but are not limited to:

- The recipient remains enrolled and in good standing at their academic institution
- Use of funds
- Reporting

- Consent to publicity terms
- Post-award reporting of progress and of presentations, publications and so on for five years

6.2. Finalizing a Provisional Award

All awards are provisional until the recipient indicates that they accept it, and the Foundation receives the following required documents or information by the date indicated in their award letter:

- Finalized Letter of Agreement signed by the recipient and the Foundation;
- Color headshot photo;
- ORCID account and authorization completed on ProposalCentral.com ;
- Signed Foundation publicity consent form;
- Completed electronic funds transfer information form; and
- Signed final narrative and financial reports for a 2025 PODS award, if applicable.

The first payment of funds will not be made until all these requirements are fully met. The Foundation reserves the right to change them without notice. The Foundation reserves the right to withdraw the award if the provisions are not fully met by the stated deadline.

The recipient has the right to decline the award for any reason.

6.3. Payment of Funds

A provisional award recipient will have to choose whether to receive funds directly or have their funds be sent to their academic institution. This choice is made once, and it cannot be changed. An awardee may be tax liable for any or all scholarship funds, regardless of who receives the funds or how they are spent. The Foundation assumes no responsibility for any tax obligations incurred by the awardee accepting these funds.

If the awardee chooses to have their academic institution receive their funds, an authorized representative must provide banking information and agree to administer the funds without deducting any money from those funds for any reason and to pay the awardee in a timely manner.

Payments are made in two installments: 50% in September 2026 provided all pre-award requirements have been fully met and 50% in March 2027 upon receipt and acceptance of an interim progress report.

6.4. Use of Funds

Allowable expenses. Scholarship funds may be used to meet expenses reasonably and logically associated with the successful completion of the recipient's doctoral program, which include but are not limited to academic fees and tuition, supplies, printing and postage, specialty services (e.g., computer time), books and supplies required by the doctoral program, purchase of journal articles or books directly related to doctoral studies, equipment needed for study or research, and doctoral studies-related travel. Living expenses are allowed, but some may require supporting documentation.

Limitations on the use of scholarship funds. Under no circumstances are funds allowed to be used to cover living expenses, personal obligations, or costs associated with doctoral studies that are incurred prior to September 1, 2026. Expenditures may be subject to reporting requirements or required approval in advance. Details about reporting requirements and prior approval are shared with awardees during the provisional award phase. The Foundation reserves the right not to give prior approval or to disallow any expenditure that is considered excessive, not reasonably or logically related to the recipient's doctoral studies or not supported by required documentation. No funds are allowed to be used for any overhead, indirect, or administrative costs associated with the administration of this award by the recipient or their academic institution. No funds will be allowed to cover any costs of any kind for a mentor or instructor.

6.5. Reporting Requirements

The awardee will be responsible for providing one interim narrative report in March 2027 and final narrative and financial reports no later than the end of the award period on August 31, 2027. In September 2028, 2029, and 2032, the awardee will be responsible for submitting completed career progress reports.

If a 2027 scholarship award is made to a recipient who holds a 2026 PODS award, then the new award will be provisional until the final reports for the PODS 2026 award have been received. There can be no overlap between Foundation funding periods of performance.

7. Overview of Application Review Process

Guidelines for selecting scholarship recipients are established by the Foundation Board of Trustees. The Scientific Review Committee is appointed by the Board to independently and expertly review and score applications without bias. It is comprised of physical therapist researchers with experience preparing physical therapists and physical therapist assistants for research careers and who have substantive experience conducting successful and impactful research. The Research Committee of the Board considers the Scientific Review Committee's application review scores and recommends to the Board which of the best scored applicants to be awarded scholarships. The Board makes final decisions on all awards and reserves the right not to make an award.

7.1. Application Compliance with Requirements

Each application is reviewed by the Foundation to ensure that **all** requirements are fully met. Applications that fail to provide all of the required information and documents as instructed will be triaged at this stage. The Foundation reserves the right not to review any application and ones not in compliance will not be reviewed.

7.2. First Review

For applications that move to the review phase, two reviewers review and score each application. These scores are averaged. Depending on the overall scores, a cut-off score is set. Applications that have scores

higher than the cut-off score will be triaged at this stage. There is no set cut off. In recent years, only applications scoring excellent (3) or better (2 or 1) have been moving forward to discussion meetings.

7.3. Discussion Meetings

The two reviewers present qualifying applications and a summary of comments. Other committee members pose questions. Then all committee members present for the discussion of that application score it a final time. Decisions about which applications to recommend for Board approval are based on these final committee scores.

The following section is indicative of the evaluative framework the Scientific Review Committee uses in reviewing Promotion of Doctoral Studies pre-candidacy scholarship applications. The guiding questions help focus and ensure consistent evaluations. The Foundation reserves the right to revise guiding questions without notice.

7.4. Illustration of Review Considerations

1. APPLICANT

1. Is the applicant's academic record of high quality?
2. Does the applicant demonstrate satisfactory progression towards doctoral candidacy, duly considering whether they are applying in their first year in the program, whether they are full-time or part-time?
3. How does the applicant demonstrate a commitment to physical therapy research and teaching?

2. MENTORS

4. Are the named mentors' research qualifications (including award record) and record of mentoring PhD students appropriate for the applicant?
5. Do the mentors demonstrate both the ability and commitment to meet the applicant's training needs?
6. If multiple mentors are named, does each one clearly and substantively contribute unique value?
7. Are there any substantive gaps in skills, knowledge, expertise, or availability for mentoring?
8. Are the research interests of the applicant and the mentor(s) compatible?

3. TRAINING OBJECTIVES AND PLAN AND SHORT RESEARCH PLAN

8. Are the training and short research plan appropriate for this pre-candidacy (PODSI) applicant and do they meet their stated objectives?
9. Taking their stage of study into account, does the applicant describe the potential significance and feasibility of their research plan?
10. Does the applicant outline training objectives and a research plan that will provide them with the knowledge, experiences and research skills needed at this stage of their program to advance with high potential to a successful candidacy and eventual career as an independent, successful, and impactful investigator?

4. INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND COMMITMENT TO TRAINING

11. Do the program, facilities, and commitment to training provide a sound foundation that provides the applicant with requisite individualized and supervised experiences that will develop rigorous research skills and support the applicant's doctoral studies?

5. POTENTIAL (most important criterion for pre-candidates)

12. Does this applicant demonstrate the potential to become an independent researcher capable of producing high-quality, relevant, innovative, and impactful evidence that helps advance the profession?

6. PRELIMINARY OVERALL SUMMARY AND PRELIMINARY OVERALL SCORE

13. Provide an overall summary of the applicant's potential to progress successfully through their doctoral program and develop as an independent and productive researcher. Please include sufficient details to support your conclusions. You must provide a preliminary overall score to submit your review.

7.5. Other Review Considerations

The Foundation expects the mentor(s) to help the applicant finalize their plans. The Foundation also expects mentors to review applications prior to submission and encourages applicants to ensure that the application is copyedited. Although not scored separately, writing quality is considered by reviewers.

The applicant is solely responsible for ensuring that all required information is provided correctly in the application.

8. Key Dates

Oct 14, 2025	Applications open
Jan 20, 2026	Application deadline at 4:59 p.m. EST/3:59 p.m. CST/2:00 p.m. PST
Late June 2026	Awardees will be announced via email