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 through grants, support early-career researchers through postdoctoral fellowships, and support future researchers through doctoral scholarships. Through these investments, 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 U.S. 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.

The Foundation recognizes that health research is evolving all the time to meet societal needs. To this end, the Foundation welcomes education, training, and research priorities that reflect these advances in how research is conducted to advance effective value-based physical therapy care to all who need it:

- Addresses the social and structural determinants of people's health and healthcare system disparities and inequities
- Uses multidisciplinary, collaborative, and team-based designs and approaches that involve stakeholders
- Includes knowledge translation science
- Demonstrates a strong foundation in a robust range of research methodologies that can measure effectiveness, efficiency, and outcomes

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, 2027 to August 31, 2028. See section 4 below for detailed eligibility requirements.

Applications must be submitted online using ProposalCentral.com by **January 20, 2027 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.

Some of the PODSI awards each year are not dependent on a specific physical therapy specialty area or academy membership. In 2027, one Phoebe Rhomberger award for the best-scoring applicant focused on any research area will be offered.

Other awards will be to best-scoring applicants who are members of the sponsoring academy, where required, and who are focusing their research in that area. Unless otherwise indicated, one PODSI will be awarded for each of these specialty areas:

- **Geriatrics**
- **Health Services Research** (no academy requirement)
- **Neurology** (three)
- **Pediatrics**
- **PT Education**

The Foundation expects to offer these awards to best-scoring PODSI applicants that have met these specific requirements:

- **Bella May Award** for creative approaches to one's doctoral education by an awardee intending to teach
- **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 for two main reasons. The Foundation will only award

scholarships to sufficiently well scored applications. The number of awards with or without specialty requirements varies from year to year. 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.

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 APTA academy that is sponsoring an award in the applicant's research area. **Failure to identify the specific priority that is substantively reflected in the research area will disqualify the application from review.**

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. or hold a valid F-1 visa that is valid for the award period and can be renewed.
- By September 1, 2027, possess a license to practice physical therapy or practice as a physical therapist assistant in the U.S. or have received a passing score the licensure exam.
- No later than September 1, 2027, 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.
- Intend to pursue a career in physical therapy-related research in the United States.
- 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, 2027, their pre-candidacy award will be withdrawn. Under no circumstances will the Foundation offer the awardee the candidacy scholarship instead.

4.2. Mentor(s)

All mentors listed in the application must hold academic doctoral degrees. At least one mentor must be a physical therapist licensed in the United States. Applicants listing mentors who do not meet these requirements risk being disqualified from review.

The application requires multiple mentors to show the percent time each one devotes to the mentorship. The one providing the most time will be considered the primary mentor by reviewers, whether designated or not by the applicant. All mentors listed in the application must 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. Responsible Conduct of Research and Human Subjects' Protection Training

The Foundation considers responsible conduct of research training to be a fundamentally important part of doctoral studies. All applicants are expected to have to fulfil responsible conduct of research and human subjects protection training. Applicants are asked to demonstrate that they are undertaking or have fulfilled these requirements.

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;
- Confirmation of enrollment from the program director or department chair;
- Signed Foundation publicity consent form;
- Completed electronic funds transfer information form; and
- Signed final narrative and financial reports for a 2026 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 add or drop provisional award requirements. 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 must accept Foundation funds directly. An awardee may be tax liable for any or all scholarship funds. The Foundation assumes no responsibility for any tax obligations incurred by the awardee accepting these funds. The Foundation does not issue 1099s.

Payments are made in two installments: 50% in September 2027 provided all pre-award requirements have been fully met and 50% in March 2028 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 includes non-durable living expenses, although some living expenses 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, 2027. 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 2028 and final narrative and financial reports no later than the end of the award period on August 31, 2028. In September 2029, 2030, and 2033, 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 2026 PODS 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 prior to review and scoring. The Foundation has no obligation to inform applicants of this decision at any point during the application cycle.

7.2. First Review

For applications that move to the review phase, two reviewers review and score each application. Their respective summary scores are averaged. Depending on the overall scores in the pool, 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. Review Considerations

The review criteria contain guiding questions provided to reviewers. The wording may change, but the main considerations do not. The potential of an applicant to become a successful, impactful, independent investigator who can sustain a career in research is the main consideration, based on the criteria listed below. For PODSI applicants, more emphasis is placed on a demonstration that they are gaining the knowledge needed, that they have a strong training plan and are in a program with strong mentoring to achieve their training objectives.

APPLICANT

1. Is the applicant's academic record of high quality?
2. Do they demonstrate satisfactory progress towards doctoral candidacy?
3. Does the applicant demonstrate a commitment to a career in physical therapy research?
4. What are the strengths that demonstrate the applicant's potential to become an independent researcher capable of producing high-quality, relevant, innovative, and impactful evidence that helps advance the profession? Are there weaknesses that limit their potential and reduce enthusiasm for this applicant?

MENTORS

4. Are the mentors' research qualifications (including award record of primary mentor) and record of mentoring doctoral students appropriate for the applicant?
5. Do the mentors demonstrate both the ability and time commitment to meet the applicant's training needs? Are there any substantive gaps?
6. If multiple mentors are named, does each one clearly and substantively contribute value?

Training and Short Research Plans

1. Does the applicant outline a clear training goal, objectives and a plan that will provide them with needed knowledge and research skills acquisition? Does their research plan support their training plan to provide them with the knowledge, experiences, and research skills needed at this stage of their program?
2. Taking their stage of study into account, does the applicant describe the potential significance and feasibility of their research plan?
3. Do they substantively link their research to the explicit priority(ies) they cite from either the APTA Research Agenda or their academy's research agenda?

Institutional Environment and Commitment to Training

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

7.5. Other Review Considerations

The Foundation encourages first-year applicants to apply. Significant percentages of these applicants are successful in their first year. Moreover, the experience and reviewer feedback helps unsuccessful first-year applicants be successful in subsequent application rounds. Reviewers recognize that first-year students may have a research plan that is not fully developed. Second-year applicants are expected to have a research plan that shows sufficient clarity, even if it is still not fully developed.

The Foundation expects the mentor(s) to help the applicant finalize their plans. The Foundation also expects mentors to review applications prior to submission. Applicants are strongly encouraged to ensure

their 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

October 13, 2026	Applications open
January 20, 2027	Application deadline at 4:59 p.m. EST/3:59 p.m. CST/2:00 p.m. PST
Late June 2027	Provisional awardees will be notified via email