# Guidelines for Doctoral Candidates

## 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 impactful 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 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 $15,000 scholarship is awarded annually to applicants who have completed the coursework and exam phases of their doctoral studies and become doctoral candidates 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 doctoral candidate scholarships for a maximum of $30,000 during this phase of their doctoral program. The maximum number of Foundation scholarship 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 PODSII application instructions.

Some of the PODSII awards each year are not dependent on a specific physical therapy specialty area or academy membership. In 2027, one Phoebe Rhomberger, one Florence P. Kendall, and one Karen St. John award for the best-scoring applicant focused on any research area will be offered. A new award is being developed with funding from the APTA Supporting the Profession Endowment Fund that will cover one PODSII.

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

- **Cardiovascular and Pulmonary**
- **Electrophysiology** (no academy requirement)
- **Geriatrics**
- **Health Services Research** (no academy requirement)
- **Neurology** (two)

The Foundation expects to offer one **Bella May Award** for creative approaches to one's doctoral education by an awardee intending to teach.

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, between 40 and 50 percent of PODSII applications are 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, if a career goal, be impactful educators.

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: Applicants and Mentors

Prior Foundation PODS funding is not a requirement to apply. All who are eligible to apply are welcome to do so at any point in their doctoral studies.

### 4.1. Applicants

Doctoral candidate applicants must 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, permanent resident of the U.S, or hold a 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 doctoral candidate in a fully accredited academic doctoral program whose content has a demonstrated relationship to physical therapy.
- Passed all exams and all other requirements to be a doctoral candidate no later than September 1, 2027. As a provisional award finalization requirement, an authorized representative will be required to affirm that the applicant's candidacy status is final by that date. If not, the award will be withdrawn.
- 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 applicants are **not eligible** for this award:

- Doctor of Physical Therapy students
- Students enrolled in transitional Doctor of Physical Therapy (t-DPT) programs
- If a doctoral candidate applies for this scholarship and subsequently finishes their doctorate prior to the start of the award, the award will be withdrawn.

### 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:

- 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;
- Confirmation of doctoral candidate status by September 1, 2027;
- Completed electronic funds transfer information form; and
- Signed final narrative and financial reports for 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. 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 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 PODSII applicants, more emphasis is placed on a demonstration that they have the needed research skills and the strength of their research plan. See also the section below on review considerations.

**APPLICANT**

1. Does the applicant's academic record (transcripts) demonstrate strong performance and potential?
2. Do the transcripts demonstrate satisfactory progression toward their degree, duly considering whether they are full-time or part-time?
3. How does the applicant demonstrate a commitment to physical therapy research and teaching?
4. Is the applicant clear about their career goals and the steps they plan to take to get there?

5. Does the applicant demonstrate the 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 reduce enthusiasm?

**MENTORS**

6. Are the mentors' research qualifications, e.g., award records and experience mentoring doctoral candidates, appropriate for the applicant?
7. Do each of the mentors demonstrate the respective knowledge, skills, and expertise and time commitment to meet the applicant's training needs?
8. If multiple mentors are named, does each one clearly and substantively contribute value?

**TRAINING AND RESEARCH PLANS**

9. Does the applicant's training plan address their training objectives and needs and is it reasonable to expect that they will meet them?
10. Does the research plan adequately align with and address their doctoral study objectives?
11. Does the applicant's research plan demonstrate significance, feasibility, and command of research design principles and methodologies and the knowledge and skills needed to complete their dissertation research successfully?
12. Is the link to an APTA research agenda priority or academy priority substantively supported in the research plan?

**INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND COMMITMENT TO TRAINING**

13. Does the institution demonstrate an appropriate level of commitment to supporting the applicant's education and training as an independent, productive researcher?
14. Do the program, facilities, and training resources provide the individualized and supervised experiences necessary to develop the applicant's ability to design and conduct high-quality research?

### 7.5. Other Review Considerations

The Scientific Review Committee has identified a number of characteristics of strong proposals that score in the outstanding and exceptional ranges:

- Aims are clear and well described; methods are appropriate, and the mentor team can support the applicant's research.
- In showing significance, the extent and quality of the existing evidence base is referenced as part of demonstrating command of the relevant literature and why and how the proposed research addresses the research needs that have been identified.
- A conceptual framework is included; conceptual weakness can risk triage after the first review
- The analysis plan is robust and contains sufficient detail.

- Internal validity is demonstrated.
- If using experimental methods, the applicant summarizes the work behind their sample size and power calculations. If power calculations are not provided and explained, reviewers will score the lack of this information as a weakness)
- Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria are adequately described.
- Recruitment and retention plans are feasible, well thought through, and have an adequate strategy for mitigating the risks of recruitment delays or target shortfalls.
- The target population is disaggregated, at a minimum, by sex and, if appropriate, by age.
- The training plan includes rigor and reproducibility.
- The applicant has taken or will be taking training in grant writing.

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 in the application.

## 8. Key Dates

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| 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 |