CAREER INFORMATION

What is a Physical Therapist Assistant?
A physical therapist assistant (PTA) works under the supervision of a physical therapist. The PTA assists the physical therapist in implementing treatment programs according to the plan of care, training patients in exercises and activities of daily living, using special equipment, administering modalities and other treatment procedures, and reporting to the physical therapist on the patient’s response. Physical therapist assistants also educate and interact with PT and PTA students, aides, volunteers, patients, families, and caregivers and demonstrate an understanding of the significance and impact of cultural and individual differences.

Where do Physical Therapist Assistants work?
According to recent employment surveys administered by the APTA, most PTAs work in hospitals, private physical therapy offices, and nursing homes. Opportunities are also available in community health centers, corporate or industrial health centers, sports facilities, research institutions, rehabilitation centers, home health agencies, schools, pediatric centers, and colleges and universities. Of course, settings, employment arrangements, career responsibilities, and career opportunities depend on the interests of each practitioner.

What is the job outlook?
According to the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), employment conditions for the PTA continue to improve on an annual basis. In a 2009 survey administered by the APTA, the median salary for a PTA was reported as approximately $46,000. According to the 2012-2013 Occupational Outlook Handbook, employment for PTA’s is projected to grow much faster than average, with a 46% projected growth rate between 2010 and 2020.

The American Physical Therapy Association has worked hard over the years to improve physical therapy education, research, and practice, making the field an accessible and favorable career choice. In addition to the deliberate endeavors of APTA to encourage a gainful future for physical therapists and assistants, many outside factors have positively influenced the physical therapy profession.

One factor affecting the need for physical therapy services is the changing make-up of the population. As the “baby boom” generation ages, PTs and PTAs will be in demand to treat patients who are affected with arthritis, stroke, heart disease, and other prolonged-care conditions common to older people.

As a consequence of society’s increasing participation in sports and fitness activities, more physical therapy will be needed to treat and help prevent knee, leg, back, shoulder, and other musculoskeletal injuries. In addition, physical therapy personnel will have an ongoing role in the promotion of “wellness”.

Technological and medical advances also play a role in determining the increased need for physical therapy professionals. The need for physical therapy will continue to increase as new diagnostic and treatment equipment and methods are developed.
What are the qualifications for becoming a PTA?
Qualifications are based on each state’s Education Law or Practice Act. In New York State, an individual must complete an application and submit appropriate fees, be at least 18 years old, be of good moral character, have graduated from an accredited 2 year physical therapist assistant program, and pass the National Physical Therapy Examination for the PTA. The application for licensure requires applicants to answer questions related to conviction of a crime or professional misconduct. The State Education Department can issue a six-month limited permit to PTA candidates that have met all requirements for licensure except the examination. Students who plan on applying for licensure in another state would need to contact that state’s education department or licensing board for qualifications.

Is the Physical Therapist Assistant program a stepping stone to a Physical Therapist program?
All physical therapy programs in the US have transitioned to the doctoral level (DPT), many requiring a Bachelor’s degree to enter. The technical credits earned for the physical therapist assistant degree are not designed to be transferred toward a degree as a physical therapist. At the present time the physical therapist assistant curriculum does not provide the necessary prerequisites required for physical therapist education, however, SUNY Canton has a bachelor degree program in Health and Fitness Promotion that is designed to allow students with an AAS degree in PTA to transfer directly into the four-year program. This degree program will assist a student in meeting the requirements to be eligible for admission to a DPT program.

Additionally, there are a few accredited PT programs designed to allow experienced physical therapist assistants to continue working while attending a physical therapist degree program. The faculty at SUNY Canton will assist students who are interested in continuing their education in physical therapy, with finding a program that will best meet their needs. Our program has had several graduates go on to physical therapy programs after graduation and become licensed physical therapists.