



**COLLEGE OF  
HEALTH AND WELLNESS**  
NORTHWESTERN HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY



# 12 QUESTIONS

What to Look for in a Massage Therapy Program



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**12 QUESTIONS** What to look for in a Massage Therapy program

Click the links to be taken to that specific section of the guide.

[\*\*Massage Modalities\*\*](#)

[\*\*Program Flexibility\*\*](#)

[\*\*Program Accreditation\*\*](#)

[\*\*Program Cost\*\*](#)

[\*\*Next Steps – How to Apply\*\*](#)

To become a massage therapist, you'll first need to attain the necessary credentials from a massage therapy program. But which program should you choose? We'll help you answer that question by exploring what to look for in a massage therapy program. Our guide will help you find answers to the 12 most asked questions about the NWHHSU's Massage Therapy School Degree/Certificate Program.

The demand for massage therapists is intense. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates a whopping 18% job growth rate over the next decade, more than twice the average growth rate for all occupations.

One likely reason is massage therapy's expanding role in healthcare. In fact, students interested in a healthcare career as a massage therapist should be especially mindful of the program they select. Let's dive into what you should be asking as you consider massage therapy programs.



# 1

## What types of massage therapy programs does the school or university offer?



Massage therapy programs—and the credentials they grant—vary based on the type of setting they prepare you to work in.

That's why it's so important for you to think seriously about the kind of massage therapist you'd like to become. Does the program you're looking at match your career goals?

Some massage therapy schools actually offer multiple programs. For example, at Northwestern Health Sciences University (NWHHSU), [you have five massage therapy program options:](#)

**Associate of Applied Science (A.A.S.):** Add general education classes to prepare for further education or professional development.

**Relaxation:** Treat common medical conditions, working in an integrative healthcare team or working in a solo practice

**Therapeutic:** The fastest pathway to a career as a bodyworker in a spa environment

**Shiatsu:** Designed for those with previous massage therapy experience who want to expand their practice to include Shiatsu

**East-West:** Combine the therapeutic techniques of Eastern Chinese Medicine (Shiatsu) and Western massage therapy to treat the whole person.

Keep in mind that attending another program later to add credentials is certainly possible. However, it will likely be a more expensive process than achieving a higher level of credentials in the first place.

# 2

## What kinds of clinical experiences does the program offer?

Massage Therapists want to have the training and credentials that will enable them to do more, like, for example, help heal injuries, alleviate pain, and improve muscle function. (Check out [A Day in the Life of a Massage Therapist](#) to see what that can look like.)

**Why is it so important to have a variety of clinical experiences? Consider the following reasons:**

**YOU'RE EXPOSED TO DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTS.**

Massage therapy is now commonly administered in a multitude of settings. For example, a private practice, Integrative care clinics, and Chiropractic offices. How ready you'll be to practice in healthcare settings, in particular, will depend heavily on the diversity of your clinical experiences as a student.

By actually practicing in a variety of places, you'll have a better idea of the kind of environment you may want to work in once you enter the workforce.

NWHSU offers massage therapy students valuable experience in many different clinical settings. [Here are some specific examples:](#)

**De Rusha Clinic:** Students work with a variety of patients in a real-life massage therapy clinic environment that's conveniently located on the NWHSU campus.

**Human Performance Center:** Also located on the NWHSU campus, the Human Performance Center enables students to practice sports-related massage on athletes.

In addition, massage therapy students at NWHSU may choose an advanced rotation at an on-campus clinic and work with patients with conditions like shoulder pain, chronic neck pain, or low back pain.

Other examples of possible clinical experience include working with patients at: **Minnesota Oncology, Cerenity Senior Care, Pathways: A Healing Center.** Note that the connections students make with practitioners at their internship sites can potentially lead to job opportunities as well.

continued



# 2

## What kinds of clinical experiences does the program offer?

### YOU'RE EXPOSED TO DIFFERENT PATIENT POPULATIONS.

Massage therapists can develop an expertise and focus on specific client populations. But as a student, how can you know if a specialization path may be of interest to you? Your clinical experiences can play a pivotal role—if you're exposed to a variety of patient populations.

At NWH SU, for instance, you have the opportunity to work with many different types of patients. Some examples include; Athletes, Children, and Seniors.

### YOU'RE EXPOSED TO DIFFERENT HEALTHCARE DISCIPLINES.

Increasingly, massage therapists are routinely communicating with—and in some cases working alongside—healthcare professionals like chiropractors, acupuncturists, physical therapists, medical doctors, nurses, and more.

That's why it's so important to have an educational experience that prepares you for integrative healthcare.

NWHSU is 100% focused on health science as it trains the next generation of healthcare professionals—not only massage therapists but also:

- Chiropractors
- Acupuncturists
- Functional nutrition experts
- Allied health professionals such as medical assistants, lab scientists, and radiation therapists

By the time massage therapy students complete their program from NWH SU, they're more than prepared to practice in their field. They have a significant grasp of other healthcare perspectives and are better able to practice an integrative healthcare approach.

This also helps them be more attractive job candidates to employers.



# 3

## How hands-on is the massage therapy program?

In theory, all massage therapy programs are designed to enable you to apply the hands-on techniques of massage therapy. But be aware that programs can vary widely in the amount—and quality—of the hands-on opportunities they offer.

In-person, hands-on practice under the guidance of experienced massage therapy instructors is profoundly valuable for students. It both prepares them to be more effective massage therapists and helps them enter the workforce with more confidence.

Keep that in mind if you're considering programs that are completely online. Note that NWHSU's massage therapy programs do include the convenience of online learning for certain courses. But they also include crucial hands-on instruction in massage therapy techniques.

This is in addition to the numerous opportunities students have for hands-on practice in a variety of real-life professional settings (see [question No. 2](#)). For more information on how courses and labs are taught, see [question No. 8](#).



Click on the video to get a powerful glimpse of what it's like to be a massage therapy student at NWHSU.

# 4

## How many massage modalities will you learn about?

Massage therapy includes numerous modalities, or specialized massage techniques. One of the best ways to become an effective massage therapist is to become proficient with a number of them.

How do you learn a variety of modalities? Ideally, it should start with your massage therapy program. Though no single program can cover them all, you'll benefit from one that exposes you to an array of massage techniques.

NWHSU, for example, offers a wide range of elective courses that give you the opportunity to learn about—and practice—various modalities. Examples include:

- Sports massage
- Neuromuscular therapy
- Reflexology
- Trauma-informed healthcare
- Craniosacral therapy
- Energy medicine
- Also, the more opportunities you have to experiment with different modalities, the more informed you'll be to create the kind of career path that's right for you.



# 5

## What's the school like in terms of its facilities and location?

While you're researching massage therapy programs, you should also consider the school or university itself. What's it like? Where is it located? What does it offer to help on your path to becoming a massage therapist?

To help understand what a school can offer, here are some highlights of NWHHSU:

**The educational facilities.** Although class sizes are relatively small, NWHHSU is a large facility with on-campus clinics, technology-enhanced classrooms, and an extensive research library.

**We are also the only massage therapy school in the region with a cadaver lab,** where massage therapy students can learn anatomy through direct observation. This can be tremendously helpful in understanding the complexities of the body and in becoming a deeply knowledgeable massage therapist.

Students also have the advantage of practicing skills with a broad mix of patients at on-campus clinics.

**The campus itself.** The NWHHSU campus comprises 25 scenic acres. Here students can enjoy the natural surroundings outside and also take advantage of the many campus facilities we have for studying, socializing, or a little of both.

**The overall location.** NWHHSU is located in Bloomington, a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and part of the Twin Cities Metro Area, a region that consistently ranks in the top ten most livable cities in the U.S.

Students can enjoy restaurants, culture, hundreds of miles of biking and walking trails, plus a full city experience in a place that still maintains a community feel.

The region is actually a great place to both live and practice as a professional. For example, the Twin Cities is a progressive healthcare innovation hub, the nearby Mayo Clinic in Rochester has been ranked as the No. 1 hospital for five years in a row, and the state of Minnesota frequently shows up on [various lists for its exceptional healthcare](#).



# 6

## Who teaches the courses?

As you explore massage therapy programs, try to gain a solid understanding of the faculty who could be teaching you. In fact, make the effort—if possible—to get to know your potential instructors before you commit to a program.

Note that it's not uncommon for massage therapy programs to have only one or two faculty members who teach the majority of courses. That can make it more challenging to access instructors.

Ideally, you want experienced, well-qualified faculty who are available to answer your questions and provide one-on-one support if you need it. At NWHHSU, for example, our faculty make it a point to be accessible to students and are dedicated to helping them succeed.

Additional highlights of the NWHHSU massage therapy faculty include:



Click on the video to see how massage therapy student Jeremy describes the community of students and faculty at NWHHSU.

**Significant professional experience.** Massage therapy faculty at NWHHSU include professionals who work at private practices, chiropractic offices, hospitals, spas, and wellness centers. They share valuable practical insights from their experience, helping to give students more than just a theoretical understanding of massage therapy.

**Knowledgeable instructors who teach in their speciality areas.** Instructors at NWHHSU teach in the areas they specialize in, which often isn't the case with smaller programs where one or two instructors teach most or all the courses.

This may be more important than you realize. Students at NWHHSU have the advantage of learning from experts in a diversity of topics related to massage therapy. This plays an important part in creating more deeply informed students who are better equipped to enter the profession and be successful.

**A great faculty-to-student ratio.** Massage therapy students at NWHHSU enjoy an average of a 12:1 student-to-faculty ratio, which helps create a close-knit educational environment where small group and one-on-one learning opportunities are common.



## Does the program prepare you for the business administration side of massage therapy?

Using practical business skills can be an important part of a massage therapist's daily routine. As you look at programs, you may want to investigate what opportunities you'll have to learn, for instance, how to establish and maintain your own massage therapy practice.

At NWHHSU, the practice management courses offered do more than address general business topics like accounting, marketing, and insurance reimbursement; they involve exploring these and related areas within the specific context of a massage therapy practice.

On a related note, whether you're self-employed or work for someone else, knowing how to navigate an electronic health records (EHR) system will be a valuable skill to have.

NWHHSU massage therapy students work with an EHR system during their experience practicing at on-campus clinics. This is actually quite rare among massage therapy programs.



Click on the video to watch former student Jason Erickson explain his experience at NWHHSU and how it inspired him to open a clinic of his own.



## How flexible is the program?

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### **Special note on flexibility in instruction and hybrid learning.**

As you're researching massage therapy programs, find out how [courses and labs](#) are taught. This will vary from program to program and is an especially important consideration in a COVID-19—and post-COVID-19 world.

NWHSU offers a carefully designed hybrid learning approach in which students can conveniently view and re-view pre-recorded lectures and hands-on demonstrations, as well as use other video tools to reinforce their learning.

More specifically, students benefit from Moodle, Panopto, and other technology that helps create an exceptional online learning experience, one that's also highly interactive.

Importantly, the online learning features also help prepare students for the intensive hands-on massage therapy labs they take on campus. See No. 3 above for more information on the importance of hands-on education.



# 9

## What student services are offered?

Keep in mind that being a student involves more than completing assignments and attending classes. Make sure to explore how a given school or university can help you make the most of your student experience. What opportunities are there to get involved more deeply with the student community? What kind of student services does the school you're looking at offer?

At NWHSU, for example, the [Office of Student Affairs](#) offers a wide range of programs and services that not only enhance your student experience but also help you prepare for your career. Here are highlights:

**Student clubs and organizations.** NWHSU has over 50 clubs and organizations available that cover a wide range of interests and give you a chance to pursue topics beyond those taught in class.

**Student Senate.** By participating in the Student Senate, students can help determine how they experience life at NWHSU. They also serve as a liaison between the student body and the larger community, helping to plan student and community events.

**Career Services.** Students can receive one-on-one career counseling; check out career fairs; attend workshops to prepare for job interviews; and search for job opportunities more efficiently with the members-only job platform Handshake.

**Counseling Center.** Students have access to no-cost mental health counseling, both on campus and online.

**Alumni Services.** After students complete their massage therapy program at NWHSU, they can continue to look to NWHSU for support with career development. Plus, they can stay up-to-date on continuing education opportunities in massage therapy. Former students even have access to healthcare through the De Rusha Clinic services.

These are in addition to [Academic Support](#) services such as tutoring, which is available at no cost to all students.



# 10

## Is the program accredited?

In terms of accreditation and program excellence, massage therapy programs are not equal. You'll want a program that meets official standards established within the massage therapy profession.

Be sure the program you choose is designated as an [accredited massage therapy program](#) by the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA).

Additionally, NWSU is institutionally accredited by the [Higher Learning Commission](#).



# 11

## How much will the program cost?

This question should encompass not only tuition, fees, and supplies but also all the other expenses that will be involved in attending. For example, how will you get to school? And what will the expenses be related to that travel?

You should also be aware of possible hidden expenses in some massage programs. A massage therapy program should be as transparent as possible as it [clearly lays out](#) just how much it will cost to attend.

Make sure you incorporate financial concerns into your search early on. The best place to start is with a school's [financial aid specialists](#). Be sure to also research both [school-sponsored](#) scholarships and [external](#) scholarships.



# 12

## How can I learn more about the school?

You're investing in your future when you enroll in a massage therapy program. So, it's well worth your time to seize the opportunities you have to better understand the program you're considering.

Does it provide convenient ways for you to do that?

NWHSU puts on multiple [admissions events](#) a year for prospective students, in addition to virtual events.

You can also schedule a [campus tour](#), in person or virtually, and set up phone call appointments to talk to an [admission counselor](#) and a [current student](#).





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## What should your next step be?

You've just gotten a lot of helpful insights on what to look for in a massage therapy program. This is the perfect time to take the next step toward becoming a massage therapist—a profession with a bright future and vast career possibilities.

**Contact** NWHSU today to learn more about our massage therapy programs.

