



Applying to Physician Assistant Programs

About the Profession

Physician assistants (PAs) are health professionals who practice medicine under the direction of a supervising physician. They may deliver a broad range of medical and surgical services including physical exams, diagnosing and treating illnesses, ordering and interpreting tests, counseling on health care, assisting in surgeries, and prescribing medications.

There are more than 150 accredited PA programs located throughout the United States. They are generally affiliated with two- and four-year colleges and university schools of medicine or allied health. The average PA program takes 26.5 months to complete. The first year generally is composed of classroom study involving the essential medical sciences such as microbiology, anatomy, and physiology. This is followed by a year of clinical rotations in private practice and institutional settings.

Prerequisite Courses

Requirements for admission to PA programs vary widely, so it is important to check each individual school. Some common prerequisites include courses and lab work in anatomy, physiology, chemistry, microbiology, general biology, organic chemistry, biochemistry, statistics, college mathematics, psychology, nutrition, and medical terminology. Prospective applicants should work with a pre-health adviser to ensure proper preparation before applying to a PA program. Links to schools that offer PA programs and specific information about requirements may be found at:

<http://www.paeonline.org/index.php?ht=d/ContentDir/pid/255> or www.arc-pa.org/acc_programs

Suggested Penn State Science courses include: anatomy with lab (BIOL 129), physiology with lab (BIOL 141 and 142), statistics (STAT 200 or 250), general biology (BIOL 110 plus 230W or 240W; or BMB 251, BMB 442, and BIOL 322), general chemistry with lab (CHEM 110, 111, 112, 113), organic chemistry with lab (CHEM 210, 212, 213, but CHEM 202 and 203 may suffice), microbiology (MICRB 201/202 or MICRB 106/107), and biochemistry (BMB 211). Many schools require general psychology (PSYCH 100), nutrition (NUTR 251) and medical terminology.

Entrance Exams

Currently, it is possible to obtain an associate, baccalaureate, or master's degree. Regardless of the academic degree awarded, all graduates sit for the same national certifying exam. Many students that are applying to Master's Degree programs may be required to take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE).

Competitive Applicant

Your GPA, health care experience, GRE scores, letters of recommendation, and your school interview will be the most important factors in a school's decision to admit you. Many schools required a documented amount of health care hours (many require time spent with a PA). Each particular school may define how they count health care experience hours. Some requirements range from 50-1000+ hours of direct health care experience.

Other relevant considerations may be your interpersonal skills and your record of extracurricular, community, or research-oriented work. PA schools require at least three letters of recommendation, and with each school defining the types of letters (many require a letter from a PA). In the last several years, the average science GPA has been about a 3.43 and the overall GPA 3.50.

Application Process

Of the 156 accredited programs, 131 participate in the Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA). The CASPA simplifies the process of applying to physician assistant programs. Students complete one application and send it along with other information to the centralized service. CASPA will verify your application for accuracy, calculate your GPA, and send your materials to the physician assistant programs you designate. The CASPA Web site is <https://portal.caspaonline.org>

Physician Assistant Programs — Timeline for Success

First Year

- Take entry-level courses in biology, chemistry, and math.
- Focus on getting adjusted academically.
- Get involved in campus activities.
- Begin to explore health care fields, shadow a physician assistant, volunteer at health related facilities, and consider joining the Penn State Pre-Physician Assistant Club.
- Begin researching specific requirements of PA programs.

Sophomore Year

- Take appropriate science and other prerequisite courses.
- Continue to focus on getting good grades.
- Stay involved in campus activities and pursue leadership positions within an organization.
- Continue gaining experience with a physician assistant.
- Meet with an adviser in the Health Pre-Professional Advising Office.

Junior/Senior Year

- Finish prerequisite courses like physics and additional life science requirements.
- Check with the schools that you are interested in to determine that you have met their guidelines for admission and what type of letters they require.
- Early in the junior year begin studying for the GRE if required.

Junior/Senior Year *(continued)*

- Register for the GRE if required at <http://www.ets.org/gre/> and take the exam when ready.
- Apply to PA schools through CASPA at <https://portal.caspaonline.org/>
- Solicit letters of recommendation from faculty and/or physician assistants which will be submitted electronically through CASPA. Make sure that you are checking with the schools on the requirements for letters of recommendation. CASPA requires three letters.
- You will need to follow the instructions very carefully and submit CASPA in a timely manner. May-June is a good timeframe to submit application as it takes 4-6 weeks to process.
- It is your responsibility to check to see if your letters and file are complete. Continue gaining any relevant experiences with a physician assistant and involvement in extracurricular activities.
- Communicate with the PA schools to make sure your file is complete and submit any additional information if warranted.

Helpful Web Sites

American Academy of Physician Assistants
www.aapa.org

Physician Assistant Education Association
www.paeaonline.org

Listing of accredited programs
www.arc-pa.org/acc_programs

Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA)
<https://portal.caspaonline.org/>

Advisers are here to help! Contact:

Health Pre-Professional Advising Office
Eberly College of Science
The Pennsylvania State University
213 Whitmore Laboratory
University Park, PA 16802-6101
814-865-7620 or 814-863-3889
www.science.psu.edu/premed

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