



CENTER FOR CAREER & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Planning for Physician Assistant School

Applying to physician assistant programs usually takes place during the senior year, following several years of planning and acquiring the requisite academic knowledge and out-of-class experience. Many individuals also choose to work in healthcare after graduation in order to gain experience before applying. More than 75% of PA programs are part of a graduate school and offer a Master's degree. In consultation with your academic advisor, SU faculty pre-health Advisor Dr. Maria Cuevas, other faculty, and the Center for Career & Professional Development, you can access the resources you need to construct a well-managed professional life as a physician assistant.

The Profession

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, physician assistants, also known as PAs, practice medicine on a team under the supervision of physicians and surgeons. They are formally educated to examine patients, diagnose injuries and illnesses, and provide treatment. PAs typically:

- Review patients' medical histories
- Conduct physical exams to check patients' health
- Order and interpret diagnostic tests (e.g. x-rays, blood work)
- Make diagnoses concerning a patient's injury or illness
- Give treatment, such as setting broken bones and immunizing patients
- Educate and counsel patients and their families
- Prescribe medicine when needed
- Record a patient's progress
- Research the latest treatments to ensure quality patient care
- Conduct or participate in outreach programs (e.g. talking to groups about managing diseases and promoting wellness)

PAs work under the supervision of a physician or surgeon, and their specific duties and the extent to which they must be supervised differ from state to state.

PAs work in all areas of medicine, including primary care and family medicine, emergency medicine, and psychiatry. The work of PAs depends in large part on what their supervising physician needs them to do. A PA working in surgery may close incisions and provide care before and after the operation, while one working in pediatrics may give routine vaccinations.

In rural and medically underserved areas, PAs may be the primary care providers at clinics where a physician is present

only one or two days a week. In these locations, PAs confer with physicians and other healthcare workers as needed and as required by law.

PA Quick Facts

www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physician-assistants.htm

2018 Median Pay	\$108,610 per year
Lowest 10% Pay	<\$69,120
Highest 10% Pay	\$151,850+
Entry-Level Education	Master's Degree
Number of Jobs, 2016	106,200
Job Outlook, 2016-2026	Grow by 37% (much faster than average)

PA School Pre-Requisites

Required and suggested courses vary by school and program, so be sure to check with each school. Courses required by many schools include:

- General chemistry with lab
- Organic chemistry with lab
- General biology
- Microbiology
- Human anatomy and physiology with lab (most schools require courses tagged as biology)

Other commonly required or suggested courses may include statistics, introductory psychology, English, and genetics. General requirements for PA programs can be found at: http://explorehealthcareers.org/en/Career/19/Physician_Assistant#Tab=Requirements. Outside of class experiences, including shadowing, volunteering, working in a healthcare setting, and a strong record of community service, are important to a strong application.

Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA)

CASPA (<https://portal.caspaonline.org/>) is a non-profit, centralized application processing service for applying to Physician Assistant programs. Currently, about 95% of accredited PA programs in the United States use CASPA. The base rate CASPA application fee is \$179 is to apply to a single school, plus \$55 for each additional school added. Fee waivers

are possible if you qualify. Regardless of the number of programs to which you apply, you submit just one online application to CASPA. CASPA does not render any admission decisions and does not advise applicants where to apply. The CASPA application cycle runs annually from April to March. School application deadlines may differ from the CASPA deadline, so check with each school ahead of time. Apply early!

Components of the Application

ACADEMIC RECORD

Do your grades reflect academic excellence, rigorous coursework, upward trends and overcoming obstacles? All of these factors will be considered in your own academic context.

STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES

CASPA provides a section to self-report test scores. Many schools require Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores, which can be officially submitted electronically using a special PA-specific CASPA GRE code, which is different from the school's regular code. Scores sent in this way may be submitted even after the CASPA is finished. While the CASPA application does not require test scores, some schools may require them, so be sure to check with each individual school on your list. These scores *cannot* be changed after the application is submitted.

WORK AND VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Schools seek candidates with well-rounded interests and participation outside the classroom in activities both related to medicine including patient care experience; other health care experience; health care shadowing; research; community service; awards, honors, and leadership; and other work experience. Schools will evaluate breadth and depth—it's more important to dig deep into a few experiences than be in every student organization. Keep good records so you will be prepared to write your application essays and to interview.

PERSONAL STATEMENT/NARRATIVE

Personal statements express your motivation or desire to become a PA. Keep your statement general, since it will be sent to all schools to which you apply through CASPA. Personal statements (and any other narrative parts of your application) should be well-written using correct English grammar without typos. Do NOT count on spell-check alone. Have someone (e.g. your professors, the Writing Center, or the CCPD) review any and all narrative responses before submission.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Supportive letters of recommendation are extremely valuable. Individual schools have varying requirements, but most request two or three letters, with at least one from a professor and one from a healthcare professional. These letters are basically character references, so they should come from someone who knows you well, such as professors with whom you've had significant contact (e.g. several courses, collaborative research, academic advising, etc.). Ideally, you will have been working to cultivate relationships with faculty throughout undergrad, but you can also strengthen your relationship with a prospective recommender by requesting to speak with her/him in office hours about your school interests. References from healthcare

professionals via shadowing, volunteering, or job connections are also options.

OTHER

All encounters (in person or virtual) with evaluators from your target programs can affect their impression of you. PA programs may even research you online, so do a trial run and search for yourself. Use good judgment about your "online brand" and don't count on privacy settings. Check social media often for negative information and take it down. Be discrete when posting photos and keep your opinions offline. Employ the grandmother rule (i.e. if you wouldn't share it with your grandmother, don't post it). And most of all, remember that you can't take it back.

Having a positive online brand is not only about limiting negative information; it's also about creating a positive public record. Personal blogs, LinkedIn profiles, and other websites where you can document your academic, extracurricular, research, volunteerism, and employment success stories can be helpful.

The Interview

For tips on preparing for an interview, researching the school, interview attire, and possible interview questions, the CCPD has a number of resources. There are also various websites with advice, such as www.aapa.org and www.mypattraining.com. CCPD offers tailored practice interviews for PA school and other graduate programs in healthcare.

Resources

The Center for Career & Professional Development and SU Faculty Pre-Health Advisor Dr. Maria Cuevas provide graduate and professional school advising; review resumes, applications, and essays; and offer practice interviews. We also bring healthcare professionals to campus and facilitate off-campus job shadowing so you can explore career options.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Occupational Outlook Handbook: Physician Assistants www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physician-assistants.htm
- Searchable menu of all PA programs in the United States: <http://directory.paeaonline.org/> (drop-down menus enable one to search by state, GRE and GPA requirements or norms, and other selection criteria to help you see where you would have the best chance of admission)
- CASPA: <https://portal.caspaonline.org/>
- American Academy of Physician Assistants: www.aapa.org
- American Association of Surgical Physician Assistants: www.aaspa.com
- Inside PA Training (blog started by a PA student): www.mypattraining.com
- National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants: www.nccpa.net
- Physician Assistant Education Website: <http://physician-assistant-ed.com>
- Physician Assistant Education Association: www.paeaonline.org
- Physician Assistant Forums (includes student forums): www.physicianassistantforum.com
- Texas Academy of Physician Assistants: www.tapa.org