

## Quick Facts: Physician Assistant (PA)

<p><b>Is this career right for you?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you enjoy science and the study of the human body?</li> <li>• Do you enjoy researching information and solving problems?</li> <li>• Do you have the communication and interpersonal skills needed to advise and educate patients?</li> <li>• Do you like the idea of working as an essential member of a team and having a supervisor to consult?</li> </ul>
<p><b>What do PAs do?</b></p>	<p>Physician assistants (PAs) are healthcare professionals licensed to practice medicine with physician collaboration. PAs are experts in general medicine who can take medical histories, conduct physical exams, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests, develop treatment plans, write prescriptions, provide patients with education and counseling on preventive care, assist in surgery, and can conduct clinical research.</p> <p>The job responsibilities of PAs and nurse practitioners (NPs) often overlap, but their educational pathways are quite different. PAs are trained with the medical model.</p> <p>A unique element of the Physician Assistant career is its lateral mobility. Over the course of their careers, many PAs practice in two or three specialty areas. Note that the role of a PA differs across medical settings: In primary care settings, the scope of practice of a PA is similar to that of the supervising physician. In medical and surgical specialties, PAs work in a “tag-team” role with their supervising physicians, with a separate set of responsibilities that facilitate the work of the physician.</p>
<p><b>Degrees</b></p>	<p>The PA master’s degree is both the entry-level and terminal degree for the profession.</p> <p>Several types of dual degree programs are available for those attending PA school, although not all programs offer dual degrees. Typically, dual degree programs take some extra time to complete but require less time than completing each degree separately. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PA/MPH: for those who want training in Public Health in addition to direct patient care. These PAs generally opt for careers in community health or epidemiology where the focus is to affect healthcare outcomes for an entire population in addition to clinically treating individuals.</li> <li>• PA/MBA: for those who want formal business training in addition to training in patient care. These PAs may choose to enter healthcare management.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Average Age of Successful Applicants</b></p>	<p>PA programs value clinical and life experience, so the average age of a successful applicant is 26+ years old.</p>
<p><b>Length of Professional Training</b></p>	<p>Physician assistant programs vary in length between 18 and 36 months. The national average is 27 months long.</p> <p>It is important to research schools of interest carefully because each PA program has a specific mission and has structured its program accordingly. Shorter programs are very intense and require the applicant to have more extensive clinical experience at the time of application. Longer programs offer more electives and may not require as much clinical experience before you start. Some programs focus on preparing students to do procedures whereas some focus entirely on primary care.</p> <p>After completing your master’s degree, you may opt to complete a fellowship for additional training, but many new graduates from PA programs enter the workforce directly.</p>

<p><b>Pre-PA Clinical Experience</b></p>	<p>On average, successful applicants have worked full-time in a paid patient care position for one to three years before matriculation into a PA program. The expectation of extensive clinical experience prior to applying to PA programs is a distinctive element of this career path. Aim for 2,000+ hours of paid patient care experience before submitting your application to PA programs.</p> <p>Note that the CASPA application distinguishes among types of clinical experience, as follows:</p> <p><b>Patient Care Experience</b>  <i>Experiences in which you are directly responsible for a patient's care. For example, prescribing medication, performing procedures, directing a course of treatment, designing a treatment regimen, actively working on patients as a nurse, paramedic, EMT, CNA, phlebotomist, physical therapist, dental hygienist, etc.</i></p> <p><b>Healthcare Experience</b>  <i>Both paid and unpaid work in a health or health-related field where you are not directly responsible for a patient's care, but may still have patient interaction; for example, filling prescriptions, performing clerical work, delivering patient food, cleaning patients and/or their rooms, administering food or medication, taking vitals or other record keeping information, working as a scribe, CNA (depending on job description), medical assistant, etc.</i></p>
<p><b>Other Desired Traits and Experiences</b></p>	<p>Refer to the <b>List of Core Competencies for Pre-Health Students</b>, taking note that PA programs especially emphasize the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Scientific Inquiry:</b> Your future work as a PA will require you to use strong critical thinking skills on the job and to remain committed to lifelong learning. Getting involved in an independent study project or another form of research is a great way to demonstrate that you enjoy asking new questions and to gain formal practice in critically analyzing your results and presenting your findings. Research is defined as involvement in a scholarly or scientific hypothesis investigation that is supervised by an individual with verifiable research credentials. Although involvement in research is not an absolute requirement, many successful applicants have spent at least one semester working/volunteering as a research assistant, in a role that offers true intellectual engagement (i.e., attendance at lab meetings/journal club meetings, completion of a literature review, etc.).</li> <li>• <b>Service Orientation:</b> Physician Assistants typically have strong altruistic motivations. Most successful applicants have consistently engaged in paid and volunteer positions involving non-clinical service to others since high school. This work can come in many forms and settings, depending on the applicant's interests. Examples include retail/restaurant jobs, working as a tutor, and volunteering in roles that allows you to directly help others who are in need. Greater consideration is given to long-term efforts that exemplify the applicant's dedication and depth of commitment to the service chosen.</li> <li>• <b>Cultural Sensitivity:</b> Every PA cares for patients from a wide variety of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, a history of experiences with people of diverse backgrounds is valued. Such experiences may include living abroad for a period of time, involvement with multicultural organizations, or other volunteer or paid positions that have allowed you to understand and appreciate people whose backgrounds and belief systems are quite different from your own.</li> <li>• <b>Effective Teamwork and Leadership:</b> Physician assistants typically work closely with their supervising physicians, so PA programs look for a past history of collaborating successfully with others on a team in a professional setting (such as in research, business, etc.). In addition, leadership roles provide valuable experience in influencing the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of others. For that reason, a history of serving as a leader of a team of people in an organized environment (such as serving as a teaching assistant, a resident assistant in a dormitory, a wilderness guide, a manager at work, the captain of an athletic team, or an officer in the military) is valued.</li> </ul>

<p><b>GPA</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mean <i>cumulative</i> GPA of accepted students nationwide: 3.57</li> <li>• Mean <i>science*</i> GPA of accepted students nationwide: 3.51</li> </ul> <p>Although it is ideal to apply with mean cumulative and science GPAs at or above the nationwide means for accepted students, you can become a strong candidate with lower GPAs <i>if your recent academic history demonstrates a long-term trend of academic success.</i></p> <p>If your cumulative and/or science GPAs are currently below the means for accepted students, you can still become a competitive applicant if <i>each</i> of your term GPAs <i>for the four consecutive terms leading up to the time of application</i> are at or above 3.5, while taking a rigorous pre-PA science curriculum. If you have already completed the prerequisites but are worried that your GPA is too low, consider taking completing additional semesters with upper-division science elective courses or completing a one-year pre-health master's program before applying to PA programs.</p> <p><i>*Science GPA is defined as your average GPA in all biology, chemistry, and physics courses. (CU Boulder prefixes of EBIO, IPHY, MCDB, NRSC, CHEM, and PHYS.) Writing and Statistics courses taken in these departments do not count toward your science GPA.</i></p>
<p><b>Admissions Test</b></p>	<p>Historically, many PA programs have required the General GRE (Graduate Record Exam) test, but PA programs have been discontinuing this requirement in recent years. A few PA programs now require the PA-CAT.</p> <p><b>Information about the PA-CAT</b>  The <b>PA-CAT</b> (Physician Assistant College Admissions Test) is a science-based test that covers the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anatomy</li> <li>• Physiology</li> <li>• General Chemistry</li> <li>• Organic Chemistry</li> <li>• Biochemistry</li> <li>• General Biology</li> <li>• Microbiology</li> <li>• Genetics</li> <li>• Behavioral Sciences</li> <li>• Statistics</li> </ul> <p>To learn more about the PA-CAT and register for the test, visit the following website: <a href="https://www.pa-cat.com/">https://www.pa-cat.com/</a>. Free test prep materials have been posted at <a href="https://www.pa-cat.com/preparing-for-the-pa-cat/">https://www.pa-cat.com/preparing-for-the-pa-cat/</a>.</p> <p><b>Information about the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) General Test</b>  This general test includes the following sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal Reasoning</li> <li>• Quantitative Reasoning</li> <li>• Writing Sample</li> </ul> <p>As a general guideline, PA programs typically look for applicants who have scored a minimum of 50% or better on each section, though section scores of 55% or higher are considered more competitive. On average, successful GRE test-takers devote a total of about 150 hours to GRE prep.</p>

<b>Common Application</b>	The Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA)
<b>Application Fee Assistance</b>	<p>A limited number of CASPA application fee waivers are available to financially disadvantaged applicants each year and are granted on a first-come, first-served basis, so you should apply at the very beginning of the application cycle if you think you may qualify. Note: Your fee waiver request must be received and processed <i>before</i> you submit your CASPA application. If the fee waiver is granted, you <i>must</i> submit your CASPA application within 14 days.</p> <p>CASPA will decide if you qualify for a fee waiver based on your income, or your parent's income if you are claimed as a dependent, as reported on the most recent federal income tax return</p> <p>If you receive a fee waiver, you may apply to one program through CASPA for free. If you choose to apply to more than one program, you will pay the regular fee for each additional designation. You also will be responsible for paying each school's supplementary application fee.</p>
<b>Timing of Application</b>	<p>CASPA opens in mid-April each year for the following year's entering class. Application deadlines vary by school. Some PA programs conduct admissions on a rolling basis, which gives preference to candidates who apply early in the application season. For your best chance of admission to schools with rolling admissions, you should submit your CASPA application by the end of June.</p> <p>If you need to take the GRE, be aware that scores are reported three weeks after your test date, and your application will not be complete until those scores are available.</p>
<b>Reference Guides for School Selection</b>	<p><u><a href="#">The Applicant's Manual of Physician Assistant Programs</a></u>, Volpe and Hogan</p> <p>PAEA School Directory: <a href="https://paeaonline.org/our-programs">https://paeaonline.org/our-programs</a></p> <p><i>A note about public vs. private PA programs</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In general, most applicants have their best chance of admission at the public school(s) in their state of residency and at private schools.</li> <li>• At private schools, all applicants are in the same evaluation pool. In contrast, most public PA programs give strong preference to applicants who are residents of their state. This preference works in your favor at your in-state school(s) but against you at all other public schools, where all out-of-state applicants compete for the small number of seats allocated for out-of-staters.</li> </ul> <p><i>Another note about the geographical distribution of PA programs and the competitiveness of their admissions processes</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a general trend, PA programs located in the western U.S. tend to have the most competitive admissions processes. In the eastern U.S., there are far more PA programs per capita, so they tend to have less-competitive admissions processes.</li> </ul>
<b>Number of schools to which to apply</b>	Most applicants apply to five to eight PA programs.

**Letters of Recommendation**

PA programs typically request a total of 3 letters of recommendation. Check each school's website to determine their specific LOR assortment requirement. **Please provide each of your evaluators with a copy of our *Pre-Health Guidelines to Recommenders* form.**

The following assortment meets most schools' requirements:

- One science\* faculty member, ideally one who has taught you in a lecture or seminar course and thus can comment upon your intellectual engagement as a student.
- One clinician (PA, MD, or DO) with whom you have worked extensively, who can comment upon your passion for patient care and your communication skills with patients and colleagues in that setting.
- One additional professor, clinician, or other supervisor from a long-term work or volunteer experience who can attest to your intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

*\*Science, for the purposes of applying to PA programs, is defined as Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Math (CU Boulder prefixes: MCDB, EBIO, IPHY, NRSC, CHEM, PHYS, MATH). Scientific writing courses and statistics courses taken in these departments do not count as "science."*