Physician Assistant Information

Career Description
Physician Assistants (PAs) provide healthcare services under the supervision of physicians. They should not be confused with medical assistants, who perform routine clinical and clerical tasks.

PAs are formally trained to provide diagnostic, therapeutic, and preventive health care services, as delegated by a physician. They take medical histories, examine and treat patients, order and interpret laboratory tests and X-rays, make diagnoses, and prescribe medications. They also treat minor injuries by suturing, splinting, and casting. PAs record progress notes, instruct and counsel patients, and order or carry out therapy. PAs may prescribe medications in all 50 states. They also may have managerial duties. Some order medical and laboratory supplies and equipment and may supervise technicians and assistants.

Although PAs work under a physician, they may be the principal care providers in rural or inner-city clinics, where a physician is present for only one or two days each week. In such cases, the PA confers with the supervising physician as needed or as required by law. PAs also may make house calls or go to hospitals and nursing homes to check on patients and report back to the physician.

Physician Assistant earnings vary from state to state. Results of the 2008 AAPA Physician Assistant Census suggest the average total income for PAs who are not self-employed and who work at least 32 hours per week for their primary employer is $89,987, or $76,232 for PAs who have been in clinical practice for less than one year. Speciality may also influence salary (the specialty for a PA is based on the specialty of the physician that they work for; typically surgical specialties pay higher than general care practice).

Although PAs usually work in a comfortable, well-lit environment, those in surgery often stand for long periods, and others do considerable walking. Schedules vary according to practice setting, and often depend upon the hours of the supervising physician. The workweek of PAs in physicians' offices may include weekends, night hours, or early morning hospital rounds to visit patients. These workers also may be on call. PAs in clinics usually work a 40-hour week. In 2009, 85 percent of PAS practiced in clinic settings.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that the number of PA jobs will increase by 30 percent between 2010 and 2012. The PA profession was ranked the fourth fastest growing profession in the country by CNN.com and Forbes.com in 2007.

Admission Requirements
Students interested in pursuing a career as a PA may choose any major, as long as they also complete the prerequisite courses for admission to the schools they wish to attend. Although some schools claim that a bachelor’s degree is not necessary, virtually all accepted applicants have at least a bachelor’s degree or certification in another area within healthcare.

Clinical experience is absolutely essential for acceptance into most PA programs. Although some schools say they require a minimum of 200 clinical hours, the clinical experience of the most recently accepted PA students actually ranges between 1000–2000 hours. Paid clinical experience is given preference over volunteer hours.

PA programs are often housed in the graduate programs of universities. Because of this, about 80 percent of the programs require the GRE (Graduate Record Examination). The GRE measures verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing skills that have been acquired over a long period of time and that are not related to any specific field of study. The General Test is offered year-round at computer-based test centers. To find a location, go to etis4.ets.org/tcenter/cbt_dm.cfm. More information about the GRE in general can be found at www.ets.org/gre.
Sample Prerequisite Classes (*common, although not necessarily for every school*)

There are no standardized class requirements for all PA schools. Many schools will require some common classes; however, they often vary on required hours and specialty classes. **Be sure to investigate the schools you plan on applying to;** make sure you have completed the prerequisites for each of them. Listed below are a few of the classes required by many PA programs. Not all of them are required by all schools (e.g. Psychology); check schools you are interested in to verify requirements.

- **Psychology (3 hours)**
  - Psych 111 General Psychology

- **Biology (3–6 hours)**
  - PD Bio 120 Science of Biology
  - Any science class relevant to medicine

- **Anatomy & Physiology (6–8 hours)**
  - PDBio 220 Human Anatomy with Lab
  - PDBio 305 Human Physiology with Lab

- **Chemistry (may require labs) (8 hours)**
  - Chem 105 General College Chemistry
  - Chem 106/107 General College Chemistry and Lab

- **Organic and Biochemistry (may require labs) (10 hours)**
  - Chem 351 Organic Chemistry
  - Chem 352/353 Organic Chemistry and Lab
  - Chem 481 Biochemistry

- **Microbiology (3–6 hours)**
  - MMBio 221 General Microbiology

*The need for Organic and Biochemistry is dependent upon specific schools.*

**Application Process**

More than 80 percent of PA schools utilize CASPA, a centralized application service. Through CASPA, you can apply to any number of participating PA programs by completing a single application. After you complete this one application, CASPA will verify your application for accuracy, calculate your GPA, and send your materials to the programs you designate. Once you create your account, you can access your application frequently to complete the required portions of the application. For more information or to use CASPA, go to portal.caspaonline.org/.

Because there are so many PA schools, you will have to be selective about which schools you apply to. Check out www.paeaonline.org/index.php?ht=d/ContentDir/pid/255 to investigate the schools available by state; from there, you can research each school individually to see program requirements.

**Other Resources**

- www.paeaonline.org – Physician Assistant Education Association
- www.aapa.org – American Academy of Physician Assistants
- portal.caspaonline.org – CASPA online application