

ASU Caduceus News



Spotlight On: Physician Assistant

Each week we will be spotlighting a different health profession. In addition, we will also put out editions focusing on common questions like, should I be an MD/DO or a PA? Today's spotlight is on Optometry. If you have a health profession or question you think should be addressed, feel free to email us and let us know at prehealthtempe@asu.edu

What is a Physician Assistant (PA)?

Physician Assistants are health care “professionals who practice medicine on healthcare teams with physicians and other providers.”(AAPA, 2014) Whether licensed or credentialed by a state, PAs provide a wide range of medical and surgical services in a variety of health care settings and are considered generalists for the healthcare profession. Offering many health related services historically provided by physicians, the profession has been integrated into the US healthcare infrastructure over the past four and one-half decades. As a part of their many roles in medicine, physician assistants:

- Gather patient histories and perform physical exams.
- Order laboratory tests and diagnose illnesses.
- Develop treatment plans and prescribe medications.
- Counsel and educate patients on issues of wellness and disease.
- Assist in surgery.
- Care for critically ill and injured patients, and perform a variety of medical procedures.

PAs are distinguished from other health care professionals by their intensive **generalist** medical education, their breadth of clinical knowledge and by the extent to which they are given decision-making authority regarding patient care, diagnosis and treatment. The generalist training and the unique MD-PA relationship form the foundation for the physician assistants' ability to practice in more than one specialty over the course of his career.

Physician assistants were developed to address healthcare access issues in rural and underserved areas of the United States due to a shortage and maldistribution of primary care physicians. In 1965, Dr. Eugene Stead, the Duke Department of Medicine chairman, established a program to formally educate “physician assistants” for the dual purposes of creating a solution for this shortage and providing career opportunities for returning military corpsmen. The education model was based in part on his experience of fast-track training of doctors during World War II, as well as his work in undergraduate medical education curricular reform. The physician assistant was initially viewed as a physician extender rather than a substitute.

Physician assistants contributions to interprofessional practice, together with the intensive and efficient education model, have propelled the profession forward. As of June 2020, there are 254 accredited PA programs throughout the country. (2020, ARC-PA) Today, PAs practice medicine in all 50 states as well as in many countries around the world, and are authorized to prescribe medications in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Guam.

Pros and Cons of a Career as a Physician Assistant:

Pros

- Education requirements - PA programs are typically much shorter in duration than many other professional healthcare programs. Programs usually range from 2-3 years.
- High interaction with patients (dependent on speciality) - exams will last 15-30 minutes and many patients will see their PA annually meaning you can create long-term relationships
- Job security - the demand for PAs across multiple specialities continues to grow
- Teamwork - PAs regularly work side by side with nurses, social workers, and physicians to provide comprehensive treatment for patients
- Job satisfaction - Being a PA provides opportunities to positively impact patients. Helping people, particularly through a difficult time, is a rewarding aspect of this profession
- Work/life balance - PAs are able to work full-time or part-time depending on specialty and may enjoy a more flexible schedule than an MD/DO.

Cons

- Salary - PA salaries are lower than those of MDs, DOs, and Dentists. However, PA school costs significantly less than these other programs. The median salary is \$98,180, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- Difficult patients - while many PAs have good relationships with their patients, not all patients are easy. You don't necessarily get to pick your patients, so it's important to see the full scope prior to entering the profession
- Stress/health risks - Being a PA may require precise movements for extended periods of time and requires manual dexterity. Many health professions come with a degree of risk related to blood-borne illness. There is also an element of unpredictability when owning

your own business and managing staff.

Pre-Physician Assistant Requirements

Students planning to enter dental school should focus on academic and non-academic factors prior to application.

Academics:

All PA programs require you to complete prerequisite coursework prior to admission. Many of these courses provide content which will serve as the foundation for your basic health sciences during the early stages of your program. Students preparing for PA school will need to have a strong foundation in the sciences and aim to take multiple sciences each semester to prepare for the rigor of their graduate education.

Letters of Recommendation:

PA schools will require you to submit letters of recommendation along with your application. PA schools require students to submit 3 letters of recommendation at the time of application. At least one letter should come from a PA. Students should also consider a faculty member, preferably in the sciences, for additional letters. You should be introducing yourself to faculty members and engaging throughout the semester to build a good working relationship prior to asking for a letter. Coming from a large university with large classes will not absolve you from needing letters. Letters are an important component to your application and are reviewed prior to admitting you to an optometry program.

Non-Academics:

The PA profession was created as a way for ex-military medics to become certified to address the growing shortage of primary care physicians. Because it was created for those with a strong background in clinical care, that tradition continues today. PA schools require the applicants to have strong experience caring for patients in the field prior to being accepted. In addition, exposure to the PA field is essential to articulating why you are interested in entering the profession. Students should aim to spend time shadowing, volunteering, or working in settings with healthcare practitioners and PA's throughout their time as an ASU student.

PA programs require students to show evidence of direct patient care hours at the time of application. On average, accepted students have more than 3,000 hours of clinical patient care. The type of experiences accepted vary from school to school - not all schools will accept shadowing or scribing as those are passive activities, for example. Many Pre-PA students

Students should also plan to engage outside the classroom through internships, volunteer work, student employment, part/full-time employment, and/or research. What you choose to do with your time will help schools build a picture of who you are, what your interests are, and what

responsibilities you had in addition to being a student. There is no preference for students to engage in one type of activity over another.

PA School

Currently, there are 254 accredited PA schools in the U.S and students typically apply to 10-15.

There are three PA schools in Arizona:

- Arizona School of Health Science A.T. Still University,
- Midwestern University
- Northern Arizona University - Public Option

PA School is approximately 27 months (3 academic years)

- PA programs range from 24-36 months in length with no breaks for summer
 - PA programs typically begin in May, August, or January
- PA programs will have a combination of didactic instruction and clinical rotations; typically about ½ the program will be classroom didactic and ½ will be clinical rotations
- You would also complete more than 2,000 hours of clinical rotations, with an emphasis on primary care in ambulatory clinics, physician offices and acute or long-term care facilities.

In order to practice as a PA, you must complete your degree and pass the PANCE Certification exam. PA's do have some opportunity to specialize upon graduation and would apply for a specialty internship in order to do so.

PA School Applications

Applications to PA school open in late April each year

Total PA Applicants - 548

Total PA Matriculated - N/A

77% of PA schools require GRE for admission

Average cumulative GPA for accepted students - 3.58

Average science GPA for accepted students - 3.52

Average **direct** patient contact experience hours for accepted students - **3,000+**

Average other healthcare experience hours for accepted students - 1,500+

Average age at admission - 25

Physician Assistant Outlook

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects a 30% job growth rate for the profession through

2024.

Cost

Most students will apply to 10 PA programs

[GRE Test](#): \$205

- Results sent to 4 schools or programs
- \$27 per score report for additional schools

GRE Prep: Average \$500, but can increase to over \$1000

[CASPA Application](#): \$179 + \$55 for each additional program

- Average: \$500

Supplemental Applications: \$50-150

- Average: \$500

[CASPA Fee Waiver](#)

Interviews: Varies

Tuition

Public In-State Resident Tuition - \$52,000

Public Out-of-State Non-Resident Tuition - \$90,000

Private Tuition - \$96,000

PA Program Fees, Public - \$8,000

PA Program Fees, Private - \$6,000

Average PA school debt - \$90,000

Average PA salary - \$112,000

Videos and resources for more information:

[Physician Assistant Education Association PA Focus](#)

[PAEA](#)

[American Academy of Physician Assistants](#)

[thePALife](#) - blog

[The PA Club](#) Podcast

[Physician Assistant Insider](#) Podcast