

OFFICE OF PRE-PROFESSIONAL ADVISING

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PLANNING GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION



The purpose of this booklet is to describe the process of preparing for and applying to physician assistant school. The most important challenge for students is deciding that becoming a physician assistant is the career for you and assessing the implications of that decision. It is our hope that you have consulted your pre-health advisor at several points during your undergraduate career at Hopkins, as well as practitioners in the physician assistant field, in order to help you clarify your motivation to become a physician assistant (PA). In making the decision to apply to physician assistant school, it is important to consider the range of health career options that are available to you.

The Department of Labor anticipates employment for physician assistants to grow much faster than average during the next few years, with growth rates averaging about 39%. With the expansion of healthcare systems many hospitals and healthcare facilities are turning to physician assistants to provide primary care and to assist with medical and surgical procedures. In addition to working in private practice settings, physician assistants can find a growing number of opportunities in hospitals, academic medical centers, public clinics, and prisons.

If you proceed with your application, the initiative is and must be yours. It is essential that you complete the tasks outlined here on time and do a thorough job of putting together the best possible presentation of yourself. We are here to support you throughout the application process and wish you every success in achieving your goals. A majority of the information in this booklet is provided by the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) and the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA).

We wish you success in your health career pursuits,

Shannon Jensen, MA

Advisor to Pre-Physician Assistant Students

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WHAT DOES A PA DO?

PAs are health care professionals licensed to practice medicine with physician supervision. They are educated in the medical model designed to complement physician training and serve as representatives of the physician, treating the patient in the style and manner developed and directed by the supervising physician.

- PAs share the responsibility for care of patients with physicians.
- PAs practice in all areas of medicine: primary care (including family, internal, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology), surgery, and surgical specialties.
- Forty-seven states, the District of Columbia and Guam have enacted laws that authorize a PA to prescribe medications (Indiana, Louisiana and Ohio do not yet authorize prescribing by PAs).



PERSONAL ABILITIES OF A PA

- Genuine interest in people and medicine.
- Capable of complex independent thought, judgment and action within the boundaries established by the employing physician.
- Requires patience and persistence.
- Willingness to care for patients and make them comfortable before or during any treatment.
- Emotional stability, calm mind, decision making ability and etiquettes to deal with variety of people.

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to the many geographic choices available to a physician assistant (PAs are licensed in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands), there are a variety of settings or types of practices from which to choose:

- ❖ **PRIVATE PRACTICE:** More than half of all physician assistants are in private clinical practice.
- ❖ **HOSPITALS:** Roughly 24% of physician assistants practice in general medical and surgical hospitals, public and private
- ❖ **HMOs:** The majority of PAs employed with Health Management Organizations work in family practice, pediatrics and internal medicine and generally provide primary care.
- ❖ **UNIFORMED SERVICES AND OTHER FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AGENCIES:** PAs serve in all seven branches of the U.S. Uniformed Services as well as other Federal Government agencies, including Veteran's Affairs, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Department of Justice.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL APPLICANT:

Those considering applying to a physician assistant school often ask what they need to do to get accepted or what the schools are seeking in candidates. What the schools seek in applicants are:



1. STRONG ACADEMIC RECORD

- Demonstrated mastery of the basic science requirements
- Demonstrated a broad and successful exposure to the humanities and social sciences
- Maintained or further developed an ability to read rapidly and understand sophisticated material in the humanities and social science. This is especially important for those taking a test like the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT).
- Demonstrated interest in being a lifelong learner, and have shown “mature and independent scholarship,” etc
- Established a relationship with at least four faculty members and with a professional in the field who can write a letter of recommendation.

2. FIRM AND CLEAR MOTIVATION

- Demonstrated care for fellow human beings and their welfare.
- Demonstrated understanding of the role of a PA from direct personal contact.

3. OUTSTANDING PERSONAL QUALITIES

- Demonstrated personal traits such as maturity, stability, integrity, responsibility, trustworthiness, leadership, enthusiasm, etc.
- Demonstrated accomplishment of something worthwhile, and development of skills and abilities to contribute to the intended profession.
- Demonstrated ability to communicate with varied populations.
- Demonstrated ability to deal effectively with those of other cultural backgrounds.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION



To enter a physician assistant program, one must first complete three to four years of college credit at an accredited institution. The majority of students who enter a physician assistant program have a bachelor's degree and some have completed graduate study.

There is no particular major required for physician assistant school, just the prerequisite of certain science classes. You should check the specific admissions requirements for your schools of interest; however, some typical prerequisite courses include:

- Biology with lab (8 credits)
 - Microbiology with lab (4 credits)
 - Chemistry with lab (8 credits)
 - Organic chemistry with lab (3-4 credits)
 - Biochemistry with lab (3-4 credits)
 - Human anatomy and physiology with lab (8 credits)
- Psychology (3 credits)
- English (3 -6 credits)
- Humanities and social science classes (3-6 credits)

Johns Hopkins University does not offer all of these courses. Students needing to complete prerequisites that are not offered at Johns Hopkins University may take courses at other colleges and universities through the Johns Hopkins University Academic Cooperative Program.

<http://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/preprofadvising/pre-medhealth/overview/other-health-professions/academic-cooperative-programs/>

In some cases students can also complete these courses through accredited online programs or at community colleges. Students will need to meet with their academic advisor and an advisor in the Pre-Professional Programs and Advising Office about these options.



APPLICATION PROCESS

CHOOSING A SCHOOL

Choosing which physician assistant schools you apply to is a personal decision, so relying on any rankings you find may be misleading. Instead, below are questions you should consider as you review each school's material to make your choices:

- ❖ What is the focus of the PA training? Does it match my interests and needs?
- ❖ What is the structure of the curriculum in terms of what is taught and when?
- ❖ What academic resources are available?
- ❖ What services are available to the students?
- ❖ Where is the school located? Most state-supported physician assistant schools give significant preference to state residents.



THERE ARE FOUR MAJOR STEPS IN THE APPLICATION PROCESS:

1. Taking the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) - however, some colleges will accept the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) and some also require the biology subject test in addition to the GRE.
2. Completing the Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) form for the U.S. schools that participate in CASPA or individual school applications for non-participating institutions.
3. Submitting supplemental materials such as letters of evaluation and academic transcripts.
4. Managing the timing of the application process.

SUBMIT THE FOLLOWING APPLICATION MATERIALS DIRECTLY TO CASPA:

- CASPA application (submitted electronically).
- Application fee.
- Three completed evaluations using official CASPA form in paper or electronic formats.
- Supplemental application, if required by the designated CASPA, and any associated fees.
- College transcripts.
- Standardized test scores.

CENTRAL APPLICATION SERVICE FOR PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS (CASPA)

CASPA is the online application service that allows students applying to physician assistant programs to complete one application and send it with other information to a centralized service. CASPA will verify your application accuracy, computer process it, and send it along with your supplemental materials to the physician assistant programs you designate. Please note that not all physician assistant programs participate in CASPA and will require applicants to complete and submit separate admissions applications. Fees for using CASPA are based on a graduated scale that varies according to the number of programs you designate to receive your application information.

Three letters of recommendation are required for CASPA and they should be written by individuals such as academicians, physicians, licensed and practicing PAs or other health care providers. Some programs may have requirements or specifics as to the type of letter of recommendation so be sure to check with the schools to which you are applying for specific information. Further information on CASPA requirements and the process of completing a CASPA application can be found at: <https://portal.caspaonline.org/>

SUPPLEMENTAL APPLICATION MATERIALS

While CASPA has application requirements, there may be other requirements for admission, including application forms, personal statements, and a personal interview. Be sure to check with the individual schools to determine what supplemental materials are required.

GRADUATE RECORD EXAMINATION (GRE)

Physician Assistant programs typically require the GRE (however, some institutions will accept the MCAT). The examination is administered in a computer-based format and takes just over half a day to administer. It consists of three separate sections that cover the following:

- **Analytical Writing:** Tests your critical thinking and analytical writing skills. It assesses your ability to articulate and support complex ideas, analyze an argument, and sustain a focused and coherent discussion. It does not assess specific content knowledge.
- **Verbal Reasoning:** Measures your ability to analyze and evaluate written material and synthesize information obtained from it, to analyze relationships among component parts of sentences, to recognize relationships between words and concepts, and to reason with words in solving problems. There is a balance of passages across different subject matter area: humanities, social sciences and natural sciences.
- **Quantitative Reasoning:** Measures your basic mathematical skills, your understanding of elementary mathematical concepts, and your ability to reason quantitatively and solve problems in a quantitative setting. There is a balance of questions requiring arithmetic, algebra, geometry and data analysis.

For more information (including fees and testing sites) and to register visit the GRE web site, www.gre.org.

APPLYING TO PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT SCHOOL



MANAGING THE TIMING OF THE APPLICATION

DON'T PROCRASTINATE! Application deadlines vary and every school has its own program start date. Please be sure to research the application deadlines and program start dates ahead of time. Applicants are advised to apply early as it can take up to four weeks for your application to be processed.

Physician Assistant Schools can require anywhere from 200 - 2000 hours of healthcare related experience. These hours must be completed by the time you submit your application. During your pre-professional planning, either during the semester or in the summer months, you should plan to gain healthcare related experience. Healthcare related experience must include direct patient contact or the observation of direct-patient contact. Acceptable healthcare related experiences include:

HEALTHCARE RELATED EXPERIENCE

- Shadowing of PA, NP, MD/OD
- Emergency Medical Technician
- Military Medic/Clinical Specialist Corpsman
- Surgical Technician
- Radiological Technician
- Certified Nursing Assistant
- Laboratory Technician
- Athletic Trainer
- Scribe
- Nurse
- Orderly
- Certified Physical/Occupational Therapist
- PT/OT Assistant
- Home health with verification of job duties
- Hospital volunteer

Experiences that will not be considered PA-related and will not count towards your application include:

- Clerical duties for any organization
- Veterinarian work
- Medical answering service
- Ward Secretary
- Massage Therapist
- Dental Assistant
- In-home care assistant (i.e., personal care giver for ill family member)
- Shadowing of any profession other than PA, NP or Physician

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION



Types of recommendation letters vary by physician assistant school. If you are applying through CASPA, they require that at least three letters be submitted to CASPA using the official CASPA form in paper or electronic formats. Most schools prefer the three letters to be from:

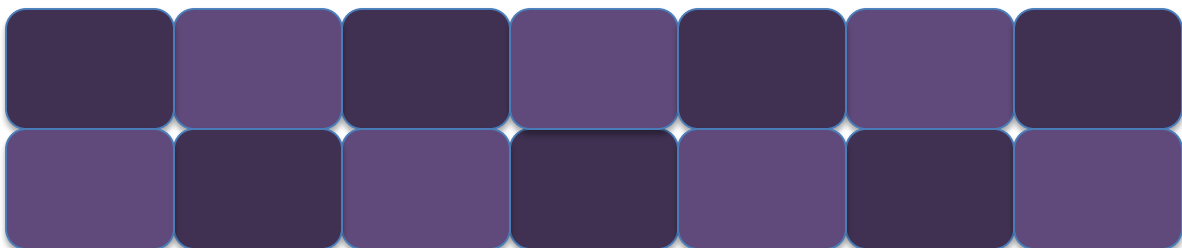
- Academic advisor or faculty member
- Employer
- A licensed and practicing physician assistant or other health care provider

Keep in mind that an important part of your application consists of letters of recommendation written by people who know you personally. It is your job to solicit the strongest possible letters of recommendation/evaluation.

Select your recommenders to reflect a variety of your strengths. A strongly supportive letter from someone in your major field of study can be very important. If you are taking a tutorial, or have done independent research, ask your supervisor to write a letter for you. Be thoughtful about what each person can contribute.

Whenever possible, ask for your letter in person. Request a brief interview and use the opportunity to discuss your application. We advise you to prepare a statement of why you wish to attend physician assistant school to help the writer.

Be respectful of demands on your recommender. Allow approximately a month for your letter to be written. Follow-up with a written thank-you note, and later advise them of your admissions decision. Your recommenders are interested in you.



FINANCING PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT SCHOOL

Everyone knows that the cost of physician assistant school is expensive and getting more expensive. In general, physician assistant schools do not consider ability to pay when selecting applicants. They expect each student will manage with the help of parents, spouse, and other family members to pay for the tuition and costs. Fortunately, however, additional help is available from a variety of other sources, including federal and state government loans, institutional loans and scholarships, and private foundations.

As you complete the application process, your main source of information will be the financial aid offices of the physician assistant schools themselves. They will help you put together a financial aid package based on your estimated costs and ability to pay. The financial aid is usually an important consideration in finalizing your choice of a physician assistant school.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A number of sites offer information about careers as a physician assistant, preparing for admission and financial aid for physician assistant students.

US Physician Assistant School Web Sites:

<http://www.paeaonline.org/index.php?ht=d/ContentDir/pid/255>

American Academy of Physician Assistants

<http://www.aapa.org/>

Physician Assistant Education Association

<http://www.paeaonline.org/>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources - Health Resources and Services Administration

www.hrsa.gov

Johns Hopkins Career Center

<http://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/careers/>

Johns Hopkins University Office of Undergraduate Advising - National Scholarships Advising

<http://fellowships.jhu.edu/>

Free Application for Federal Student Aid

www.fafsa.ed.gov

Stafford Loan

www.staffordloan.com

Central Application Services for Physician Assistants (CASPA)

<https://portal.caspaonline.org/>

Graduate Record Exam (GRE)

<http://www.ets.org/gre/>

Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)

<https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/>

Johns Hopkins University Academic Cooperative Programs

<http://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/preprofadvising/pre-medhealth/overview/other-health-professions/academic-cooperative-programs/>

