

The Physician Assistant Profession

Qualifications to Practice as a PA in the United States

In order to practice as a PA in the United States, you must:

- Graduate from a PA program accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education of the Physician Assistant, [ARC-PA](#)
- Pass the national certifying exam, PANCE, administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants, [NCCPA](#)
- Comply with licensing requirements in the state you practice

State Licensing Requirements: A summary of state licensure requirements can be found on the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) website:

- [State Licensure Requirements](#)

Locating the PA Programs: There are two ways to locate the 170 accredited PAEA member PA programs in the United States:

- [PAEA Member Program Map](#)
- [PAEA Online Programs Directory](#)

The PAEA member map lists the PAEA member programs and is searchable by state. You will find programs' general contact information and website link, as well as information on tuition, class size, entrance requirements, admission deadlines, financial aid, housing, curriculum, and more.

All 170 accredited PA programs can be viewed here: [ARC-PA Accredited Programs list](#)

New PA programs are accredited by the ARC-PA each year in March and September. Programs in active development can be viewed here: [PA Programs in Active Development](#)

Distance Learning in PA Programs: Because of the nature of PA education, distance or online learning is limited. There are two programs that offer a distance learning option:

- [The University of Wisconsin-Madison](#)
- [The University of North Dakota](#)

For more information on distance learning options, please contact the programs individually.

The PAEA Physician Assistant Programs Directory

This online directory is the only comprehensive listing of PA educational programs in the United States. It contains the following information on each program:

- Contact information
- Admissions deadlines and information
- Application instructions
- Entrance requirements and prerequisites
- Curriculum
- Tuition and fees
- Financial aid
- Housing information
- Website links
- Other relevant program information

The directory is a useful guide for currently enrolled undergraduates choosing their major, course work, and electives as they complete their bachelor's degree and apply to the PA programs. Applicants will be able to compare programs nationwide to locate the program that best fits them.

Subscriptions: The cost for a subscription to the *Physician Assistant Programs Directory* is \$35 annually. Applicants will create a username and password when they sign up and will need to keep this to login and view the directory. The current directory information is the 2013 entering class and will be updated again in March 2013 for the 2014 entering class.

- [Subscribe to the Directory](#)

Applying to the PA Programs

Central Application Service for PAs (CASPA): Eighty-six percent of PA programs participate in the central application service. Through CASPA, applicants can apply to multiple PA programs by submitting just one application and set of transcripts and reference letters.

- [CASPA Application Portal](#)
- [CASPA Participating Programs](#)
- [CASPA FAQs](#)
- [Before Applying](#)

In the 2010-2011 CASPA application cycle, there were 3.5 applicants per seat, with an average of 6 designations per applicant. It is wise to apply to multiple programs to help increase your chance of admission.

Preparing to Enter the Physician Assistant Profession

There are three defined routes into the physician assistant profession. Your undergraduate years are ideal for researching PA programs, learning the prerequisites, and obtaining patient care experience. Being familiar with prerequisites will help you choose a major to fulfill the academic course work required for application to PA programs.

1. Applicants with Completed Bachelor's

- 85% of programs require applicants to have a bachelor's degree prior to entry
- Bachelor's degree may be from any accredited college or university, in any major

Of the eighty-six percent of the PA programs participating in the Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) for the 2011-2012 application cycle, the top 10 majors applicants reported, in order, were:

- Biology
- Other
- Psychology
- Health science
- Exercise science
- Nursing
- General studies
- Science
- Kinesiology
- Business

2. Applicants with Patient Care Experience and Some College Credits

Most programs require applicants to have some patient care experience. Experience requirements vary by individual program and may be hourly, yearly, volunteer, or paid. Programs requiring extensive experience in health care may be a good choice for already practicing health care professionals.

During the 2010-2011 application cycle, of the 84% of the PA programs participating in the Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA), applicants reported their average health care hours as follows:

	Applicant Average (hours)	Matriculant Average (hours)
Direct patient care	1,488	1,355
Health care-related experience	570	1,825
Shadowing	66	65
Overall	2,214	1,870

*The mean total health care experience of all applicants in the 2010-2011 application cycle was 2.3 years

Some examples of health care experience may include:

- Health educator
- Hospital, clinic, or nursing home employment
- Medical assistant
- Medical technologist
- Military medic or corpsman
- Nurse (LVN or RN)
- Paramedic, EMT
- Patient care attendant or nursing aide
- Peace corps volunteer
- Physical or respiratory therapy
- Radiology technician
- Volunteer activity
- Other cross-cultural health care experience

Regardless of the type of degree an applicant has, all PAs must graduate from an accredited PA program in the United States, pass the National Certifying Exam for Physician Assistants, and obtain a license from the state in which they wish to practice.

Course credits must be fairly recent as defined by each program, and must meet the individual program requirements. Programs' admissions departments can advise applicants on whether their completed course work and earned credits are transferable. Exceptions may be made by the programs on a case-by-case basis.

Applicants meeting prerequisites for academic course work, credit hours, and patient care experience may apply to a number of programs. Programs award three types of credentials (*note: some programs may offer more than one credential*):

- 160 programs offer Master's degrees
- 33 programs offer Certificates
- 17 programs offer Bachelor's degrees
- 7 programs offer combined Bachelor's/Master's degree
- 5 programs offer Associate's Degree

Master's Degree: The master's degree was endorsed in 2009 as the entry-level and terminal degree for the PA profession. After 2020, all students who enroll in PA programs must be awarded master's degrees.

PA programs may continue to award other credentials until the change in 2020. You will still be eligible to sit for the national certifying exam and practice as a PA in every state except Missouri, which requires a master's degree.

Applicants should be mindful that state regulatory agencies can require PAs to obtain their master's degree to continue practicing in their state after 2020. A few programs offer online options for currently practicing PAs who wish to obtain their master's degree; it is anticipated the number of these programs will increase in the future - [Online Master's Degree Programs](#)

Affiliate Programs: Some PA programs whose sponsoring institutions are not authorized to award the bachelor's or master's degree affiliate with PA programs at other institutions to offer these credentials. While in transition to a master's degree, some programs will continue to award associate's and bachelor's degrees.

3. Recent High School Graduates or Those Without a Completed Degree

Applicants without a college degree, or who have recently graduated from high school, may want to consider a pre-professional program (also called undergraduate PA or pre-PA phase). Students complete the core requisite courses to advance to a program's accredited professional phase to complete their PA education. This pathway into the profession can range from four to six years. Once complete, applicants will be eligible to sit for the certifying exam and obtain a license in their state of practice.

Students enrolled in a pre-professional phase must:

- Successfully complete all academic course work
- Complete additional program requirements as necessary

An estimated # programs have a pre-professional phase – [Pre-Professional Degree Programs](#) (*incomplete*)

PAs in the Medical Specialties and Continuing Education

PAs receive a broad education in medicine, providing a foundation for practice in both primary care and medical specialty practice. PA education consists of classroom and laboratory instruction in the basic medical and behavioral sciences:

- Anatomy
- Pharmacology
- Clinical medicine
- Physical diagnosis

Followed by clinical rotations in:

- Internal medicine
- Family medicine
- Surgery
- Pediatrics
- Obstetrics & gynecology
- Emergency medicine
- Geriatric medicine

After graduation, a PA's education is ongoing through continuing medical education requirements and continual interaction with physicians, patients, and other health care providers.

PAs interested in specialty practice have many options. PAs may align themselves with a supervising physician who specializes in the PA's chosen field. This allows PAs to be eased into a specialty practice, where they will receive on-the-job training necessary to practice.

PAs may also gain experience in specialty areas by enrolling in residencies, fellowships, and other degree programs. While this is not an exhaustive list, the Association of Postgraduate Physician Assistant Programs, [APPAP](#) lists its residencies and fellowships on its website. The Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA), the agency that accredits PA programs, also accredits a number of the APPAP residencies and fellowships.

Prospective applicants are often interested in the issues and causes in which PAs become involved and the groups that support them. Applicants who wish to practice in a particular specialty area as a PA following graduation, should check out the specialty organizations that partner with the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) to address challenges such as reimbursement, clinical practice, and regulation. AAPA also has a number of caucuses, or groups of individuals who share a common goal or interest related to health care access or delivery.

PA Programs: Campus-Based, Non-Traditional, Part-Time, and Distance Learning

PA programs with Non-Traditional Schedules and Off-Campus Rotations

- *Arcadia University* – Pennsylvania – offers a three-year option
- *Drexel University* – Pennsylvania – offers a three-year option on a limited basis
- *Eastern Virginia Medical School* – offers opportunities for students to initiate rotations outside of the local Hampton Roads area of campus

PA programs for Native Americans

- *Arizona School of Health Sciences* (A.T. Still University) offers an entry-level PA program for Native Americans. Contact Cynthia Wilson, [cywilson@atsu.edu](mailto:cwilson@atsu.edu) for more information

Programs with part-time options or afternoon/evening/weekend hours

- *San Joaquin Valley College* – California – offers afternoon and evening classes

- *Touro College Manhattan* – New York – offers the first 16 months of didactic coursework to be completed evenings/weekends; Monday-Thursday from 4-9pm, and Sundays from 9am-5pm
- *University of Detroit Mercy* – Michigan – offers a three-year course of study, which spreads the didactic coursework over two years instead of one
- *University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey* offers a part-time option

Distance Learning in the PA programs: There are two limited distance learning options

- *University of North Dakota*
- *University of Wisconsin – Madison*

For additional information, or any electronic documents, please contact:

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