



# Pre-Physician Assistant

## *Advisement*

### Nature of the Work, Earnings and Occupational Outlook

Physician assistants (PAs) provide a wide range of health care services under the supervision of physicians. They should not be confused with medical assistants, who perform routine clinical and clerical tasks. Many PAs work in primary care areas such as general internal medicine, pediatrics, and family medicine. Others work in specialty areas, such as general and thoracic surgery, emergency medicine, orthopedics, and geriatrics. Physician assistants take medical histories, perform physical exams, order and interpret laboratory tests, diagnose and treat illnesses, counsel patients, assist in surgery, and set fractures. The responsibilities of a physician assistant depend on the practice setting, education, and experience of the PA, and on the state laws and regulations. Physician assistants are required to have leadership skills, self-confidence, and emotional stability. They must be willing to continue studying throughout their career to keep up with medical advances.

According to the American Academy of Physician Assistants, there were about 66,000 certified PA's in clinical practice in 2006 (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 20082009). State laws regulating physician assistants have expanded access to physician services provided by PAs, including the authority to prescribe medications in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and Guam. The development of HMOs and other prepaid plans and the growing acceptance of PAs by other health care professionals have combined to strengthen the job market for PAs. Employment of PA's is expected to grow much faster than average for all occupations through 2016 (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 20082009). According to the American Academy of Physician Assistants, median income for physician assistants in fulltime clinical practice in 2006 was about \$74,980; median income for first-year graduates was about \$69,517. Income varies by specialty, practice setting, geographical location, and years of experience (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 20082009).

### Physician Assistant Education

There are many entry pathways into the physician assistant profession. Options include certificate of completion, as well as associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree. There are 140 accredited physician assistant programs in the United States, and they are located at medical schools, medical centers, hospitals, two- and four-year colleges and universities, and in the uniformed forces (Association of Physician Assistant Programs). More than 90 PA programs offered the Master's degree option and most applicants to PA programs already possess a bachelor's degree at the time of entry. Physician assistants are educated as generalists in medicine; all programs emphasize primary care. PA programs require students to complete 9 to 12 months of classroom studies and then 9 to 15 months of supervised clinical rotations (Association of Physician Assistant Programs). PA education includes classroom instruction in biochemistry, nutrition, human anatomy, physiology, microbiology, clinical pharmacology, clinical medicine, geriatric and home health care, disease prevention, and medical ethics. Students obtain supervised clinical training in several areas, including primary care medicine, inpatient medicine, surgery, obstetrics and gynecology, geriatrics, emergency medicine, psychiatry, and pediatrics.

### Pre-Physician Assistant Preparation

In 2006-2007 a total of 9,031 applicants applied to PA programs via the Central Application for Physician Assistants (CASPA) and 3,715 applicants were offered admissions. The mean age was 27.6 with a mean GPA: Science GPA: 3.08, Cumulative GPA: 3.23. CASPA is a centralized Web-based application service provided by the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA). CASPA allows you to apply to any number of participating schools by completing a single application. CA schools not participating in CASPA include Drew University, San Joaquin Valley College, Stanford University, Riverside Community College and UC Davis. For more information regarding CASPA refer to their website: <http://www.caspaonline.org> or contact CASPA by phone at (240) 4971895. Any major is appropriate for PA preparation. Students are advised to select a major they find interesting and to work at developing a broad-based, interdisciplinary foundation of knowledge and skills from which they can build upon. Most PA programs require that applicants have a minimum of two years of college credits and some health care experience prior to admission. Analysis of student enrollment data shows that more than half of those who apply to physician assistant programs already have a college degree (PAEA).

### ***Prerequisite Requirements:***

Prerequisite admission requirements vary from school to school. Selection criteria may also vary according to the individual institution's philosophy, thus refer to the individual program website for detailed information. For a list of programs accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for Physician Assistant (ARCPA) visit the PAEA website [www.paeaonline.org](http://www.paeaonline.org), and click on the Member Programs tab.