

# WCSU Pre-Health Programs

## Pre-PA Pathway



### Background on Physician Assistant/Associate programs

PA (physician assistants/associates) are licensed clinicians who practice medicine in partnership with a physician in every specialty and setting.

There are 308 accredited Physician Assistant programs in the United States that offer PA degrees (a list of schools in the United States is included at: <https://paeaonline.org/our-programs>). These programs are accredited by the PA Education Association.

The PA profession was created to improve and expand healthcare, the first PA class graduating from the Duke University PA program on October 6, 1967.

PA programs take 24-28 months to complete and are considered a master's level education. PA programs provide an education in medical sciences that is used to diagnose patients and devise treatment plans. Most programs divide the education in didactical followed by 2000 hours of clinical rotations.

### Pre-Requisite Coursework

Each PA program has their own pre-requisite course requirements, so make sure that you consult each school's website in advance so that you can organize your coursework as appropriate. The table below provides a summary of required courses that you can use as a general framework.

You can use the excel file provided here (<https://www.wcsu.edu/prehealth/pre-pa/>) to keep track of what school requires what prerequisite.

Courses	PA School Pre-requisites
MAT 115/120 (Statistics/Biostatistics)	Most PA programs
BIO 105/106 Anatomy and physiology I & II	Virtually all PA programs
CHE 110/111 (General Chemistry I and II)	Virtually all PA programs (also a prereq for Orgo I)
CHE 210 (Organic Chemistry I)	Most PA programs and some require Orgo II
CHE 421 (Biochemistry)	Some PA programs (Note: pre-requisite is Orgo I)
BIO 103/104 (General Biology I and II)	Not every school spells it out as a prerequisite but you need it to take BIO216.
BIO 216 (Microbiology)	Most PA programs (prereq is gen Bio I and II) Some will PA school will accept BIO215
Science Electives (e.g., Genetics and Cell Biology)	Depends on PA program – check with individual institutions
Psychology	Depends on PA program
English (1 year of college English or equivalent writing intensive courses)	Depends on PA program

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## Pre-Requisite Direct Patient Contact Hours (PDC)

Most PA programs require between 500-3000 hours of relevant patient care experience (paramedic, EMT, nurse, ER tech, certified nurse's aide, medical assistant, patient care assistant, orthopedic technician, radiology technologist, respiratory therapist, registered/licensed practical nurse, licensed clinical social worker, surgical technician, pharmacy technician, military medic, physical therapist/aide and occupational therapist/aide). This experience needs to be paid and if acquired as a volunteer documented.

Some schools specify what experiences do not count towards PDC. Some that are not considered: lab technician, patient transport technician, massage therapist, personal trainer, medical secretary, life coach, lifeguard and patient sitter. Scribe and coordinator positions only permitting observation and record-keeping do not count towards PDH.

## Entrance Exams

Most schools have no required entrance examination but virtually all require a bachelor's degree.

Some schools require the GRE (Graduate Record Examination). It's a standardized test that is about 2 hours long. The GRE tests your writing, reading, vocabulary, math, and logic skills - and also will test your decision making and carefulness. You can take official GRE practice tests at the ETS (the test provider) website. ETS offers two free practice tests and some paid ones as well. The website where you find the practice tests is <https://www.ets.org/gre/test-takers/general-test/prepare/powerprep.html>

A few schools require situational judgement tests that assess whether applicants meet competency standards by examining how they would act/respond to certain situations. The Computer-Based Assessment for Sampling Personal Characteristics (CASPer) test is one of those tests. It is administered by the company Acuity Insights ([see: https://acuityinsights.app/](https://acuityinsights.app/)). The CASPer test takes between 90 and 110 minutes to complete and you will provide responses to 14 different scenarios and assesses collaboration, communication, empathy, equity, ethics, motivation, problem solving, professionalism, resilience, and self-awareness. Each section of the CASPer test is rated by a different individual and the raters use a scale from 1 (poor) to 9 (excellent) to score each test taker. You will not receive a specific score, but rather your quartile ranking. Even less schools might require the Duet. Duet is required by some PA schools in which it is determined how well you "fit" with the PA school and it is administered by the company Acuity Insights, which also offers the CASPer test ([see: https://acuityinsights.app/](https://acuityinsights.app/)).

A few schools require the PA-CAT (Physician Assistant College Admissions Test). There are a total of 240 multiple-choice questions on the test. Applicants will have 4 hours and 30 minutes to take the test but there are breaks between sections. The PA-CAT is administered through Prometric, a testing center with branches all across the United States, where the test is administered. The test is also available to take through Prometric remotely from your computer at home using their live remote proctor system.

## Experiential Preparation

PA programs admissions committees will evaluate the experiences that you engage in by looking at different criteria including the length of time that you participated in the experience, the depth to which you were involved in the experience, and what you learned or gleaned from the experience. Each school has its own requirements for how many hours

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of shadowing experience you need, with some schools requiring none and some schools requiring 10-20 shadowing hours. Regardless of the requirement shadowing will allow you to learn what the PA role beyond the description. You should aim for 20-50 hours.

To find a PA to shadow, you should ask your personal doctor or PA, professors, advisors, and contact local hospitals. Make sure that you are professional in all communications and that you stress why you are so interested in shadowing them.

Within the application, there is a section entitled “Experience/Achievements” in which you can enter non-health care employment, research, volunteer, *patient care experience*, *healthcare experience*, shadowing, leadership roles, extracurricular activities, teaching experiences, awards, honors, scholarships and publications.

For *patient care experience* most school will have minimum requirement and this minimum needs to be reached before you submit your application. Again this experience needs to be paid and if acquired as a volunteer documented. CASPA will not confirm the experience but they will require the contact information for your supervisor. Working at the front desk of a doctor’s office will count towards health care experience but not patient care experience. You want to be clear what experience is filed under what heading.

Academic enrichment can augment your application, and these are programs that are sponsored by colleges and universities through which one can explore interests in medicine and other pre-health disciplines (e.g., Summer Health Professions Education Program (<https://www.shpep.org/>)). The SHPEP program spans six weeks and is open to individuals in underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and those from rural areas, regions that are economically disadvantaged, or populations that have received substandard medical care. This program does offer a small stipend and exposes students to areas within the basic sciences as well as quantitative concepts. Accepted students receive exposure to the clinical realm and participate in career development sessions.

### Letters of Recommendation

The CASPA application portal allows you to have up to 5 letters of recommendation associated with your application. Most PA programs require 3 letters. Those writing your letters of recommendation will get an email inviting them to submit their documents using the CASPA/Liasion interface. You want to think early on who your letter writers will be so you can establish those relationships.

### Application Process

The centralized application service for PA programs in the United States is called the Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistant (CASPA) and most schools use this platform for submissions.

For the 2026 CASPA application cycle, the initial processing fee was \$184, and this encompasses the application for one PA school. After that, each PA school cost \$61. Before you begin your application, you will have to register with CASPA

<https://caspa.liasoncas.com/applicant-ux/#/login>

Some PA programs have different deadline to have all the requisites fulfilled by. There are 10 different dates and 3 different states that your application can be in by that deadline (submit, complete and verified)

The CASPA application has four sections. Personal Information, Academic History, Supporting Information and Program Materials.

You need to officially request that your transcripts from any postsecondary institution to be forwarded to CASPA after the portal open at the end of April. If you have taken courses at other schools (e.g., a community college), those transcripts are required as well. This also encompasses any college-level coursework that you completed in high

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school. Once your grades are entered and transcripts received, the CASPA program calculates its own CASPA GPA, which serves to standardize grades for assessment and evaluation purposes.

Each applicant must submit a personal statement that is up to 5,000 characters in length. In that document, you can discuss what drove you to pursue a career as a PA, which factors push you to want to learn more about medicine and what makes the PA role the better path for you, and any other details that you feel the admissions committee should know about you. Shadowing experiences will help when you craft the statement and asking for editing from the Writing Center will also improve your essay.

Some schools require additional short essays.

### Application Timeline

The first timeline below outlines what you should do each year before you apply to and start PA school:

#### Four or more years before you plan to attend PA school

- Connect with your pre-health advisor to introduce yourself and map out a plan to complete your courses
- Learn about and attend pre-health meetings and functions
- Subscribe to the pre-health email list to learn about future events
- Cultivate relationships with faculty, advisors, and other mentors on campus
- Learn about health care-related internships or employment opportunities
- Seek out volunteer opportunities in addition to shadowing experiences
- Document all the activities/experiences that you engage in for your application
- Consider working on your Patient direct care hours (PDC) during the summer.

#### Three years before you plan to attend PA school

- Continue to meet with your pre-health advisor and attend events
- Continue to nurture relationships with faculty, advisors, and mentors on campus
- Continue to engage in meaningful experiences (volunteer work, paid work, shadowing, and assuming leadership positions)
- Collect information about the PA school application process and fee assistance program.
- Consider working on your Patient direct care hours (PDC) during the summer.

#### Two years before you plan to attend PA school

- In conjunction with your pre-health advisor, devise a timeline for your application and decide if you will take a gap year
- If you do decide to take a gap year, consider what you will do during that time
- Make sure that you are taking all the required courses
- Approach individuals that you want to write your letters of recommendation.
- Consider working on your Patient direct hours (PDH) during the summer.
- Assemble a preliminary list of PA programs you are interested in applying to
- Seek out pre-health leadership opportunities
- Familiarize yourself with the PA school application platforms (CASPA)

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### **One year before you plan to attend PA school**

- Meet with your pre-health advisor to discuss your letters of recommendation and your overall application plans
- Ask specific individuals to write your letters of recommendation
- Seek meaningful opportunities to round out your application
- Complete the CASPA application
- Gather information on application and acceptance protocols for the schools to which you are applying
- Prepare for interviews

### **Gap year(s)**

- Work on getting patient direct hours and/or educational experiences
- Research financial options to fund PA school
- Maintain contact with your pre-health advisor

### **After you are accepted to a PA program**

- Assess and evaluate your acceptances.
- Make your final decision about where you will attend PA school.
- Give notice to the PA programs that you will not be attending. This can be done through CASPA by withdrawing applications that might still be under process.
- Fill out all financial aid forms
- Purchase textbooks, equipment, and prepare your living arrangements
- Attend your orientation program and start PA school

Below is an example timeline for a student that would start PA school in Summer/Fall 2026. It is advised that you pay close attention to deadlines for the individual schools and consider the timeline.

### **January – April 2025**

- Request and obtain individual letters of recommendation
- Register and take the GRE, PA-CAT or CASPer exam if required by the school.
- Examine the PAEA site to learn about each PA school's specific requirements
- Outline and draft your personal statement. Have your advisor and the writing center read it.
- Curate a list of work and activities for your application

### **April - May 2025**

- Complete the demographic and academics section of the CASPA application
- Release GRE, CASPer, PA-CAT scores to the CASPA system
- Follow-up with the individuals writing your letters of recommendation
- Finalize your personal statement and work and activities
- Request official transcripts from every institution that you have attended
- Finalize the list of schools that you are going to apply to
- Check that your letters of recommendations and transcripts have been received
- Work on secondary application essays if required by the school.



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### May - June 2025

- Submit CASPA
- The earlier you apply the more chances to get waivers for CASPA fees (if you qualify)
- The earlier you apply the higher chances of getting considered at school that have rolling admissions.

### July – August 2025

- Prepare for admissions interviews
- Share any updates with the admissions committees that have happened since you submitted

### October 2025 – May 2026

- Review your admission and financial aid offers
- Determine which program you will attend and look forward to starting PA school

### Admissions Process

Interviews can take different forms including virtual, in-person, hybrid, or asynchronous meetings that are conducted between you and an individual(s) that represent a PA school. The interview is an opportunity for you to learn more about the school and for the school to assess your qualities, competencies, and interests. You are encouraged to check with the specific school that invite you for interviews as to how the schools that you are applying to conduct their interviews in conjunction with the school's dedicated website.

If you are given the choice as to which format to conduct your interview in, it is recommended that you consider the following factors: cost, convenience, comfort level, whether you will be able to adequately assess the fit of the school, and whether you can see and assess physical spaces. To prepare for the interview, you should gather information from the contact person about the structure of the interview, the number of people you are going to interact with, the length of the interview, and the competencies and skills that will be assessed. You should be well-prepared, punctual, and conduct yourself in a professional manner. On the interview, you may encounter general questions, behavioral questions, or even situational questions. Mock interviews are a useful tool in preparing for your real school interview.

If you are being interviewed virtually, you must make sure that you have a stable internet connection, a webcam so that you can be seen, and you silence any calls, alarms, or notifications. In addition, you should make sure that you have a dedicated space that is quiet and well-lit where you can conduct the interview. Common interview topics include questions about you, about your future career goals, your interest in the specific PA school, particulars about your application/academic record, specifics about your experiences, and how you would handle a hypothetical situation.

When you are faced with interview questions, it is important that you avoid speaking in generalities and instead provide specific details. For behavioral questions, it is recommended that you follow the Situation, Task, Action, Result (STAR) format in which you describe the circumstances surrounding a specific situation, detail the task/job that was completed, the steps you undertook to execute this plan, and the outcomes or results of the situation. For situational questions, you should discuss specific actions you would undertake and what the expected results are. It is critical that you do not share any patient information or share any private information about a colleague. If you encounter a question that you feel uncomfortable answering, you have the right to decline to answer.

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### Admissions Statistics

According to the 2020 PAEA Student Report, the overall GPA of PA matriculants is 3.6 (with a 3.5 average science GPA). The average PA student has a baccalaureate degree in one of the natural sciences and typically, has had at least three years of hands-on clinical experiences usually as a nursing assistant or medical assistant.

### Funding PA School

When considering which PA schools to apply to, you should assess the in-state and out-of-state tuition and fees in addition to health insurance. This will allow you to have a realistic and accurate understanding as to how you will fund your PA school journey.

There are several ways in which you can fund PA school, one of which is through loans. Federal loans include direct unsubsidized loans and direct PLUS loans. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) offers low-interest federal loans on a need-based basis which include loans for disadvantaged students and primary care loans. You should check with individual schools to see if they participate in specific loan programs. You can also consider applying for private loans that are offered by a financial institution or organization as opposed to the government. You can additionally apply for grants or scholarships, which normally do not need to be paid back. Lastly, some PA schools offer campus-based aid either through loans, grants, or scholarships. Applying for such funds requires that you check with the individual institution.

- Loan repayment programs include:
  - **National Health Service Corps:** A federal program for PAs who practice in primary care in underserved communities
    - [NHSC LRP](#)
    - [NHSC Substance Use Disorder \(SUD\) Workforce LRP](#)
    - [NHSC Rural Community LRP](#)
    - [NHSC Students to Service LRP](#)
  - **The U.S. Army:** A three-year loan repayment program for serving as an Army PA
  - **AmeriCorps:** Helps pay for education loans in exchange for a year of service in designated areas across the United States
  - **Indian Health Service (IHS):** A national program with the goal of placing health care professionals, including PAs, in IHS health centers for a minimum of two years

### Helpful Websites

<https://paeaonline.org/> – The PA education association landing page contains curated information about specific requirements for each PA school including tuition fees, application deadlines, and median GPAs.

<https://www.thepapplatform.com/mapppd> A website that has a GPA calculator resource that is free. Other services are provided but you will have to pay for them.

<https://www.aapa.org/> The website for the American Academy for physician assistant/associate. They offer a membership for pre-PA students with resources.

<https://connapa.org/> The website for the CT Academy of PA. They offer student membership with resources for pre-PA students.