



## PA Education—Preparation for Excellence

Comprehensive educational programs prepare PAs for a career in medicine and a team-based approach to providing high quality, patient-centered medical care. The broad, generalist medical education that PAs receive makes the profession uniquely flexible and able to adapt to the evolving needs of the U.S. healthcare system. The intensive PA curriculum is modeled on that used in medical schools and PA students often take classes or have clinical rotations alongside medical students. More than 140,000 PAs are now in practice—in every medical and surgical specialty and setting.

PAs diagnose illness, develop and manage treatment plans for their patients, manage their own patient panels, and often serve as the principal healthcare professional for patients. The PA profession's team-based approach is well-suited for the patient-centered medical home model of care, as well as other integrated models of care management. The PA profession is one of three healthcare professions, along with physicians and nurse practitioners (NPs), named in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act as providers of primary care.

### PA PROGRAMS

There are nearly 290 accredited PA educational programs in the United States, located in schools of medicine or health sciences, universities, teaching hospitals, and the military. Together, these programs graduate more than 9,500 new PAs each year.<sup>1</sup> And this number is likely to continue growing; as of 2022 nearly 40 developing programs were in the pipeline for accreditation.<sup>2</sup>

A large well-qualified applicant pool allows PA programs to be very selective. Typical applicants to PA programs hold a bachelor's degree and have completed courses in the basic and behavioral sciences as prerequisites to entering a PA program.<sup>3</sup> This is analogous to premedical studies required of medical students.

Incoming PA students bring with them a wealth of patient care experience—an average of more than 3,000 hours of direct patient contact experience<sup>4</sup>—in such jobs as paramedic, athletic trainer, or medical assistant.<sup>5</sup> The median age of PA students entering PA school is 24, and about 75.5 percent identify as female.<sup>6</sup> More than 27,000 students applied to PA programs in 2020,<sup>7</sup> about three applicants per seat.<sup>8</sup>

PA programs must all adhere to the same accreditation standards. The high standards of PA programs are ensured by an independent accrediting body, the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA), which includes representatives from the American Academy of PAs, Physician Assistant Education Association, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Physicians, American College of Surgeons, and American Medical Association, as well as the general public. All PA programs undergo a rigorous evaluation to receive initial accreditation, then regularly demonstrate their continuing compliance with the accreditation standards.<sup>9</sup>

## THE PA EDUCATIONAL MODEL

Master's degree programs provide PAs with an intensive generalist medical education. Programs typically last 27 months,<sup>10</sup> approximately three academic years, compared to about 38 months for medical school. The first phase of PA school, the didactic or classroom phase, covers basic medical sciences, including anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, physical diagnosis, behavioral sciences, and medical ethics. In all, PA students take more than 75 hours in pharmacology, 175 hours in behavioral sciences, more than 400 hours in basic sciences, and nearly 580 hours of clinical medicine. This is followed by the clinical phase of the program, consisting of rotations in medical and surgical disciplines including family medicine, internal medicine, general surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, emergency medicine, and psychiatry. PA students will have completed at least 2,000 hours of supervised clinical practice in various settings and locations by graduation.<sup>11</sup>

The accreditation standards also require PA programs to provide students with a solid grounding in the nonclinical aspects of healthcare, including the healthcare delivery system, billing and coding, quality improvement, and licensing and credentialing. PA programs also stress the importance of knowing how to search, interpret and evaluate medical literature.

After graduation, PAs must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination developed by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants<sup>12</sup> and be licensed by a state in order to practice.

A PA's education does not end at graduation. PAs are required to take and pass a comprehensive exam every 10 years to remain certified. To maintain their certification, PAs must also complete 100 hours of continuing medical education (CME) every two years.<sup>13</sup>

During their careers, many PAs seek additional training for varied reasons—to return to practice following a break, to demonstrate competence for credentialing, to move to a new specialty, or to gain specific focused expertise in a specialized clinical area. There are numerous ways PAs accomplish this, including short, intense “boot camp” programs; formal postgraduate education programs; and procedure- or technology-specific certifications designed to give them a more immediate depth of experience in a specialty area.

## EXCELLENCE IN PRACTICE

PA programs teach students clinical problem-solving skills and how to stay current on medical knowledge. Numerous studies have shown that PAs provide high quality healthcare,<sup>14-16</sup> and patient satisfaction is very high.<sup>17, 18</sup> A Harris Poll found that 93 percent of respondents agreed that PAs are “trusted healthcare providers,” and 91 percent agreed that they improve quality of care.<sup>19</sup> PA education and practice emphasize patient education, preventive care, and chronic care management. This educational preparation qualifies PAs to provide the full spectrum of patient care.

The typical PA program extends over about 27 continuous months and consists of two phases.

In the didactic (classroom) phase, students take coursework in anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, physical diagnosis, behavioral sciences and medical ethics.

In the clinical phase, students take rotations in medical and surgical disciplines including family medicine, internal medicine, general surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, emergency medicine and psychiatry, for a total of 2,000 hours of supervised clinical practice.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

On PAs – visit the [American Academy of PAs website](#).

On accreditation of PA programs – visit the [Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant website](#).

On PA education – visit the [Physician Assistant Education Association website](#).

On PA certification – visit the [National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants website](#).

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## REFERENCES

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