



PA Education: Preparation for Excellence

Comprehensive master's degree educational programs prepare physician associates (PAs) for a career in medicine and a team-based approach to providing high-quality, patient-centered medical care. The broad 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. As of Dec. 31, 2023, there were 178,708 board certified PAs,¹ allowing them to 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 four healthcare professions, along with physicians, nurse practitioners (NPs), and clinical nurse specialists (CNSs) named in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act as providers of primary care.²

PA PROGRAMS

As of March 3, 2025, there are 310 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 11,700 new PAs each year.³ This number is likely to continue growing; as of 2025 over 50 developing programs were in the pipeline for accreditation.⁴

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.⁵ 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 patient contact experience⁶ — in such jobs as paramedic, athletic trainer, or medical assistant.⁷ The median age of PA students entering PA school is 25, and about 79% identify as female.⁸ More than 30,000

¹ The National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants, *Statistical Profile of Board Certified PAs by State*. [PDF] Retrieved from <https://www.nccpa.net/wp-content/uploads/2023%20NCCPA%20Statistical%20Profile%20of%20Board%20Certified%20PAs%20by%20State.pdf> NCCPA; 2023.

² The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Pub. L. No. 111-148, 124 Stat. 652 (2010).

³ Physician Assistant Education Association, *By the numbers: Program report 36: Data from the 2021 program survey*, Table 53: 2021 cohort: Student status at graduation, page 59. Washington, DC: PAEA; 2021.

⁴ Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant. *Applicant programs*. <https://www.arc-pa.org/provisional-accreditation/applicant-programs/> Accessed March 11, 2025.

⁵ American Academy of PAs. *Become a PA*. <https://www.aapa.org/career-central/become-a-pa/> Accessed March 11, 2025.

⁶ PAEA. *Program report 36*, page 56.

⁷ Physician Assistant Education Association, *By the numbers: Student report 6: Data from the 2022 matriculating student and end of program surveys*. Table 52, page 35. Washington, DC: PAEA; 2024.

⁸ PAEA. *Student report 6*. Table 7, page 10.

students applied to PA programs in 2022, about three applicants per seat.⁹ 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 Physician Associates (AAPA), Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American College of Physicians (ACP), and American Medical Association (AMA), 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.¹⁰

THE PA EDUCATIONAL MODEL

Master's degree programs provide PAs with an intensive generalist medical education. Programs typically last 27 months,¹¹ 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 695 hours in clinical preparatory sciences, 390 hours of basic medical sciences, 115 hours in behavioral and social sciences, 190 hours in health policy and professional practice and in research.¹² 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 approximately 2,000 hours of supervised clinical practice in various settings and locations by graduation.¹³

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 (PANCE) developed by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants¹⁴ 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

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 approximately 2,000 hours of supervised clinical practice.

⁹ CASPA. Applicant trend data 2022-2023. On file with AAPA.

¹⁰ Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant. *Accreditation Standards for Physician Assistant Education*, Fifth edition. (with clarifications as of July 2024). <https://www.arc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Standards-5th-Ed-July-2024.pdf>

¹¹ PAEA. Program report 36, Table 8, page 9.

¹² PAEA. Custom Report. October 31, 2024. On file with AAPA.

¹³ Physician Assistant Education Association, *By the Numbers: Curriculum Report 3: Data from the 2017 Clinical Curriculum Survey*, Washington, DC: PAEA; 2018.

¹⁴ National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants. <https://www.nccpa.net/> Accessed March 11, 2025.

years to remain certified. To maintain their certification, PAs must also complete 100 hours of continuing medical education (CME) every two years.¹⁵

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 PAs a more immediate depth of experience in a specialty area.

EXCELLENCE IN PRACTICE

PA programs teach students clinical problem-solving skills, professionalism, and how to stay current on medical knowledge. Numerous studies have shown that PAs provide high quality healthcare,^{16,17,18} and patient satisfaction is very high.^{19,20} A 2023 Harris Poll survey found that 93% of respondents agreed that PAs are “trusted healthcare providers,” and 91% agreed that they improve quality of care.²¹ 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.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

On PAs: [aapa.org](https://www.aapa.org)

On accreditation of PA programs: [arc-pa.org](https://www.arc-pa.org)

On PA education: [paeaonline.org](https://www.paeaonline.org)

On PA certification: [nccpa.net](https://www.nccpa.net)

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¹⁵ NCCPA. <https://www.nccpa.net/maintain-certification/> Accessed March 11, 2025.

¹⁶ Kurtzman E, Barnow BS. A Comparison of Nurse Practitioners, Physician Assistants, and Primary Care Physicians' Patterns of Practice and Quality of Care in Health Centers. *Med Care*. 2017 Jun;55(6):615-22.

¹⁷ Yang Y, Long Q, Jackson SL, et al. Nurse Practitioners, physician assistants, and physicians are comparable in managing the first five years of diabetes. *Am J Med*. 2018 Mar;131(3):276-83.

¹⁸ Faza NN, Akeroyd JM, Ramsey DJ, et al. Effectiveness of NPs and PAs in managing diabetes and cardiovascular disease. *JAAPA*. 2018;31(7):39-45.

¹⁹ Hooker RS, Moloney-Johns AJ, McFarland MM. Patient satisfaction with physician assistants/associate care: an international scoping review. *Hum Resour Health*. 2019;17(1):104.

²⁰ Lindelow J, Birdsong H, Hepp C, et al. Patient satisfaction and preferred choice of provider: Advanced practice providers versus urologists. *Journal of Urology*. 2018;199(4S):e299.

²¹ American Academy of PAs. What is a PA? <https://www.aapa.org/download/80021/?tmstvt=1741722194> Accessed March 11, 2025.