

Pre-Physician Assistant Preparation at UH Mānoa

Compiled from the American Academy of Physician Assistants website,
NAAHP's *Health Professions Admissions guide*, and UHM's *2011-2012 Catalog*.

Physician Assistants (P.A.s, also called R.P.A.s for Registered, or P.A.-C.s for Certified, or even R.P.A.-C.s) are licensed health professionals who practice medicine as members of a team under the supervision of a physician. P.A.s see many of the same types of patients as physicians and deliver a broad range of medical and surgical services. P.A.s conduct physical exams, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests, counsel patients on preventive care, assist in surgery, and (in all states except Indiana) prescribe medication.

The scope of a P.A.'s practice is determined by training, experience, state law, and the supervising physician's practice. Basically, P.A.s work wherever physicians work, whether in family practice, surgery, a specialty area, or research. A P.A.'s duties and autonomy depend upon the P.A.'s clinical experience and his/her relationship with the supervising physician.

Although P.A.s work under supervision, the supervision can be remote, which means the physician is not necessarily present. P.A.s may be the principal health care providers in rural or inner city clinics, where the physician is present for limited times or only for consultation via telephone or other media. P.A.s may also make house calls, check on patients at nursing care facilities, and conduct hospital rounds on their own.

The P.A. profession began in the 1960s and remains one of the fastest growing occupations. Like physicians, P.A.s serve in all types of communities, from rural to urban, and in a wide variety of settings, from private practice to clinics and hospitals. P.A.s also work in specialized settings such as nursing homes, health maintenance organizations (H.M.O.s), and the armed forces.

Related careers: nurse practitioners, registered nurses, and physicians.

P.A. Programs

Becoming a Master of Science Physician Assistant (M.S.P.A.) requires 4 to 6 ¼ years of education:

Undergraduate course work (~2 to 4 years);
Physician Assistant program (~2 to 2 ¼ years).

Although some of the more than 130 accredited P.A. programs will accept students with only two years of college credits, completing a Bachelor degree is generally expected, strengthens an application, and is highly recommended.

The first year of P.A. programs usually consists of courses in basic medical sciences: anatomy, physiology, pharmacology, biochemistry, microbiology, medical diagnosis, and disease prevention. The second year usually consists of rotations through a variety of specialties geared toward primary care, including obstetrics and gynecology, surgery, orthopedics, emergency medicine, psychiatry, pediatrics, and geriatrics, among others.

Graduation from a program accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education of the Physician Assistant (ARC-P.A.) qualifies P.A.s to sit for the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE) by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) in cooperation with the National Board of Medical Examiners. *All PAs must be licensed to practice!*

Prerequisites for Admission

More importantly, *remember that prerequisite requirements vary from school to school!* You must research to create a list of all the prerequisites you will need to apply to the P.A. programs you are interested in attending.

The following UHM courses are commonly required for admission to P.A. programs:

BIOL 171 + Lab and 172 + Lab	Introductory Biology I and II
CHEM 161+Lab and 162/162Lab	General Chemistry I and II
MICR 130 + 140 (Lab) *(or MICR 351 + Lab)	Microbiology
PHYL 141+Lab and 142+Lab *(or PHYL 301+L and 302+L)	Human Anatomy and Physiology I and II
PSY or SOCS 225	Statistics
English 100 and 2XX	English (2 semesters)
MATH 140	College Math

Additional requirements may include upper division microbiology and physiology*, computer science (ICS 101); medical terminology (HLTH 110 and 125 at KCC); and physics (PHYS 151/151Lab and 152/152Lab).

*Most programs also require **substantial health care experience**: 6-12 months of full-time, clinical, “hands on,” direct patient care (1000-2000 hours).* Consequently, the majority of applicants to P.A. programs come from those already in health care (see examples below).

What makes a strong candidate?

P.A. admissions committees are looking for students who have:

- completed the prerequisites;
- a high overall GPA;
- a high science/math GPA;
- performed well on the GRE or MCAT;
- strong letters of recommendation;
- life experience and maturity; and
- considerable health care experience.

Experience can be divided into two categories:

- Direct patient contact (as a phlebotomist, nurse aide, certified nursing assistant, physical therapy assistant, pharmacy assistant, medical assistant, emergency medical technician, x-ray technician, military corpsman, etc.)
- Health care related experience (as a lifeguard, ski patrol personnel, first aid personnel, laboratory or research staff, etc.)

Successful applicants log their health care experience in terms of months or years, not hours.

Researching Schools

There are now over 130+ public and private P.A. programs in the U.S., each one unique in its mission, philosophy, criteria, and strengths.

Although there are resources that “rank” schools (The Gourman Report, U.S. News & World Report, The Princeton Review, etc.), *the rankings are rarely pertinent for individual applicant or specific programs.* More important is whether there is a good match between applicant and school.

To find schools that are good a fit for you (PAC peer advisors can help with this process):

1. Assess your individual strengths and weaknesses, your professional interests, learning style, and personality;
2. Start with a list of all schools you would consider attending, which usually includes all 130+ schools;
3. Using the P.A. Program Directory (*please see the “additional information” section at the end*), create your “Long List” by omitting the schools that do not match your professional interests, learning style, and personality (*PAC offers a list of 7 factors to consider, found here: <http://www.manoa.hawaii.edu/pac/Choosing%20a%20School%20Handout.pdf>*);
4. Once you have your MCAT or GRE scores, create your “Short List” by categorizing the schools into ‘Reach’, ‘Match’, and ‘Safety’, ranking the schools by preference, and finally choosing how many schools to apply to.

If possible, visit the schools to see their facilities, talk to Admissions Directors, and chat with students.

Entrance Exam

All accredited P.A. programs require applicants to take either the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). The GRE and MCAT differ significantly; *be sure to check which test you need!*

GRE Overview: The revised GRE was introduced in August of 2011 and includes new types of questions featuring real life scenarios. The format allows you to edit, change your answers, and skip around within a section.

The GRE can be scheduled for almost any day of the year and is available only in computer-based format. The test requires approximately 4 hours to complete and assesses your skills in Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Analytical Writing.

Appointments are scheduled first-come, first served basis. You can register three ways: 1) via telephone, at 1-800-473-2255 or 1-443-751-4820 or by calling the test center directly; 2) via online at www.gre.org; or 3) via mail, by sending a completed *Authorization Voucher Request Form* (found in the *GRE Registration Bulletin*) and registration fee payment to ETS-CBT/GRE Box 371859 Pittsburgh, PA 15250-7859.

Payment:

Registration fee: \$160

Payment for Computer-based Tests

- Credit/Debit Card (American Express®, Discover®, JCB®, MasterCard® or VISA®).
- Money Order/Certified Check/Voucher
- Personal check, payable to ETS-GRE. If paying by check, please comply with the following:
 - Bank name and address must be preprinted on the face of the check.
 - Check must have a preprinted check number.
 - Candidate/ payee name and address must be preprinted on the check
 - Check date CANNOT be over 90 days old.
 - New bank account starter checks missing the preprinted name and address are not acceptable.

Scoring: Scores for the Verbal and Quantitative sections range from 130 to 170 in one-point increments, with 170 being highest and 150 being the average. Scores for the Writing section range from 0 to 6 in half-point increments, with 6 being highest and 3 being the average. Your score report will be mailed to you, and will include not only your scores but also your percentile ranking. Starting November 29, 2011, you will receive your scores within 10-15 days.

Preparation: Your most important preparation for the GRE is your undergraduate courses, many of which sharpen your writing and verbal reasoning skills.

Official Test Preparation Material:

- *The Official Guide to the GRE revised General Test* from ETS
- Practice Questions on GRE website

- Free diagnostic exam on GRE website

MCAT Overview: Almost all medical colleges require applicants to take a standardized test called the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). The MCAT assesses your knowledge and skills in Biological Sciences, Physical Sciences, Verbal Reasoning, and Writing. The test requires ~5 hours to complete, and entails ~144 multiple choice questions and two 30-minute essays. The MCAT is administered in a computer-based format, and is offered about twenty times each year.

Scoring: Writing samples are scored by letter grades ranging from J to T, with T being the highest; the other three sections are each scored 1-15, for a possible total of 45.

Preparation: Your most important preparation for the MCAT is your undergraduate courses (not only the prerequisites for medical school), many of which sharpen your writing and verbal reasoning skills.

Official Test Preparation Material:

- *The Official Guide to the MCAT Exam*, by AMCAS
- *Practice Exams*, on AMCAS website

Remember that your verbal reasoning (MCAT) and Analytical Writing (GRE) scores are not only the most accurate predictor of how well you will do in veterinary school, but also the most difficult score to improve.

The Application Process

There are generally **three steps** in applying to most P.A. programs: the primary application, the secondary application, and the interview.

1. Primary applications must be filed with the Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA). *Once your application is complete*, CASPA forwards it to whichever schools you have designated.

2. Secondary applications are specific to individual P.A. programs and are sent to applicants after schools receive the CASPA application. Some but not all schools screen applicants before requesting secondary applications. Secondary applications commonly request additional information, essays, and letters of recommendation.

3. Interviews: After reviewing applicants' primary and secondary applications, P.A. programs invite promising applicants to interview. *Applicants are responsible for all costs of interviewing, including airfare, lodging, professional attire, and meals.*

Note: A majority of P.A. programs participate in CASPA, but to apply to those that don't, contact the schools directly to request their individual applications. For their schools, the application process consists of only steps 2 and 3.

CASPA's Admissions Code of Cooperation: Although the application process varies from school to school, CASPA has established “traffic rules” to ensure fairness for all concerned. The rules, available at www.paeaonline.org/index.php?ht=a/GetDocument Action/i/3534, stipulate both schools' and applicants' rights and responsibilities in the application process. Before applying, all applicants should be familiar with these.

Tips:

- The more you know about a school, the better your chances of being accepted.
- Most application questions can be answered by reading the P.A. Programs Directory.
- Contact individual schools' Admissions Offices to find out how they handle:
 - Advanced Placement (AP) credits
 - International Baccalaureate (IB) credits
 - College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) credits
 - Military credits
 - courses taken at a community college
 - non-U.S. coursework
 - courses taken for credit/no credit instead of a grade
 - residency issues
 - time limits on prerequisite science courses

Additional Information

UH Mānoa's **Pre-Health/Pre-Law Advising Center (PAC)** has reference books, lists of volunteer opportunities, academic planning worksheets, and one-on-one advising by peers who can help you prepare for and apply to P.A. programs.

UHM's Pre-Medical Association (PMA)	www.hawaii.edu/premed premed@hawaii.edu
Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) <i>(Linked to the P.A. Programs Directory)</i>	http://www.paeaonline.org/ Available in PAC, or purchased online
American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA)	www.aapa.org
Association of Physician Assistant Programs (APAP)	www.apap.org
Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA)	https://portal.caspaonline.org
Graduate Record Exam (GRE)	www.gre.org
Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)	https://www.amc.org/students/applying/mcat/
<i>Physician Assistants in American Medicine</i> by Hooker and Cawley	available in PAC