Physician assistants (PAs) are licensed health professionals who practice medicine with physician supervision as members of a medical team. The exact responsibilities of a PA depend upon the type of medical setting in which they work, the understanding they have with their supervising physicians, their level of experience, and the laws of their state. Physician assistants can develop treatment plans, perform physical exams, order and interpret laboratory tests, diagnose and treat illnesses, counsel patients on preventative health care, assist in surgery, and write prescriptions.

Physician assistants are educated as generalists in medicine, and their education and credentialing are based on a primary care foundation, which gives them the flexibility to be employed in all areas of medicine. PA’s practice in family medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology, as well as in any specialty fields such as cardiovascular surgery, orthopedics, and emergency medicine. PA’s must have a license and a supervising physician before they can practice.

Most physician assistant programs award a Master’s degree and the average length is about 27 months. PA’s are required to complete more than 400 hours in basic sciences, 75 hours in pharmacology, 175 hours in behavioral sciences and nearly 580 hours of clinical medicine. They also need to complete 2,000 hours of clinical rotations with an emphasis on primary care in ambulatory clinics, physician’s offices and acute/long-term care facilities. All states require that PA’s graduate from an accredited PA program and are required to pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE) certified by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA).

### Advising Sheet

**University of Southern California**

**Physician Assistant**

**Common Pre-Physician Assistant Prerequisite Courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
<th>Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>One year of coursework with lab</td>
<td>BISC 120Lg &amp; BISC 220Lg OR BISC 121Lg &amp; BISC 221Lg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>One year of coursework with lab. Some schools may only require one semester.</td>
<td>CHEM 105aLg &amp; CHEM 105bL OR CHEM 115aLg &amp; CHEM 115bL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anatomy</td>
<td>One semester is generally required</td>
<td>HBIO 301L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microbiology &amp; Physiology</td>
<td>One semester of each course is generally required</td>
<td>BISC 300L &amp; BISC 307L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>At least one semester of Math is generally required at most Physician Assistant schools. College Algebra is the typical requirement. Some PA schools also require Statistics. Contact individual schools for specific requirements.</td>
<td>MATH 108 Statistics: MATH 208x, BISC 305, HP 340, PSYC 274G or equivalent stats course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genetics</td>
<td>One semester of Genetics may be required at some schools. In addition, please note: there are a few schools in the US that may require one semester of organic chemistry. Contact individual schools for specific requirements.</td>
<td>BISC 325 and/or CHEM 322aL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Chemistry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>One year is required for most PA schools in the country. Please note: Often some schools will look for an English Literature course which can be fulfilled by ARLT 100 or 101</td>
<td>WRIT 150 and WRIT 340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities/Social Science</td>
<td>PA schools typically require a course in General Psychology and/or Developmental Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology and/or Public Speaking. Contact individual school for specific requirements.</td>
<td>PSYC 100G; PSYC 336L; SOC 200Gm; COMM 204 General Education &amp; elective courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Office of Pre-Health Advisement**

**USC Dornsife**

**College of Letters, Arts and Sciences**
There are over 140 PA programs in the US. Programs that are accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA). The ARC-PA is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

The structure of education programs for PA students is similar to that for medical students, although shorter in length (average medical school education is four years, plus residency; average PA program is 27 months).

Most PA programs take 24-27 months to complete, with about one year of classroom studies followed by 12-15 months of supervised clinical rotations.

The majority of PA students have earned a bachelor’s degree and have nearly 2-3 years of health care experience before they are admitted to a program.

All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands have enacted laws that authorize PA prescribing of drugs.

Results of the 2012 AAPA Physician Assistant Census Survey indicate that the mean total income from primary employer for PAs who are not self-employed and who work at least 32 hours per week for their primary employer is $93,105.

Only graduates of an accredited PA program are eligible to take the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE). You will see PA-C, meaning “physician assistant certified,” in a PA’s credentials indicating they have passed the national certifying exam.

Once a PA is certified, he/she must complete a continuous six-year cycle to keep her/his certificate current. Every two years, a PA must earn and log 100 CME hours and reregister her/his certificate with the NCCPA (second and fourth years), and by the end of the sixth year, recertify by successfully completing either the Physician Assistant National Recertifying Examination (PANCE).

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**RESOURCES**

American Academy for Physicians Assistants (AAPA)  
www.aapa.org

Physician Assistant Education Association  
www.PAEAonline.org

CASPA  
www.caspaonline.org

National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA)  
www.nccpa.net

Graduate Record Examination (GRE)  
www.ets.org/gre

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)  
www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/

The Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA)  
www.arc-pa.org

CASPA Participating Programs  
https://portal.caspaonline.org/caspaHelpPages/participating-programs/

Physician Assistant Programs Directory  

This information is not comprehensive and should not be used as your only advising tool. Research each school for a complete listing of requirements.