

## WHAT IS A PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT?

The physician assistant (PA) profession evolved during the 1960's in response to the national shortage of primary care providers. PAs, sometimes referred to as mid-level providers or advanced practice providers, are graduates of accredited PA educational programs and are nationally certified and state-licensed to practice medicine with the supervision of a physician, surgeon, and/or healthcare team. The licensure that PAs gain allows them to prescribe medication in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and all U.S. territories with the exception of Puerto Rico.

## JOB DESCRIPTION

The responsibilities of a physician assistant depend on state laws, the practice setting, the PA's level of experience, and the scope of practice of the physicians on the healthcare team. PAs obtain medical histories, conduct physical examinations, diagnose and treat illnesses, prescribe medication, order and interpret lab tests, perform procedures, assist in surgery, provide patient education and counseling, and make rounds in hospitals and nursing homes.

Additional duties may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Educating and counseling patients and their families
- Recording patient progress
- Researching the latest treatments to ensure the quality of patient care
- Conducting or participating in outreach programs

## EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Physician Assistants have been recognized by Congress and the President as crucial to improving U.S. healthcare. In the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Congress recognized PAs as one of three healthcare professions in primary care. According to U.S. News and World Report's 2014 "100 Best Jobs" ranking, physician assistant (PA) is one of the top 15 best jobs in America. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 30% job growth rate for the profession through 2024.

There are many reasons for the career's appeal. The average length of a PA program is 27 months. According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook, the median annual wage for physician assistants in May 2015 was \$98,180. The career offers flexibility to practice in different areas of medicine without additional education and training. PAs are uniquely suited to provide preventive care services in all settings, from primary care to surgery. Physician assistants, who can perform many of the same services as doctors, are expected to have a larger role in giving routine care because they are more cost effective than physicians. As more physicians retire or enter specialty areas of medicine, more physician assistants are expected to take on the role of primary care provider.

The work of the physician assistant can be both physically and emotionally demanding. Physician assistants spend much of their time on their feet, making rounds and evaluating patients. Physician assistants who work in operating rooms often stand for extended periods. Although the work can be stressful, helping patients can be rewarding.

Physician assistants held about 94,400 jobs in 2014. The industries that employed the most physician assistants were offices of physicians (57%) and hospitals (22%). Another 13% worked within the following settings: outpatient care centers, government, and educational services.

## EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

The University of Tennessee's physician assistant program of the College of Health Professions is located in Memphis, Tennessee, and results in an entry-level Master of Medical Science–Physician Assistant (MMS-PA) degree. Following the completion of a bachelor's degree, students complete 24 months of course work on the Memphis campus. According to the MMS-PA, the program's mission is to "prepare a diverse group of highly skilled physician assistant practitioners who are dedicated to improving access and providing high quality primary and/or specialty health care as part of interprofessional teams and who are committed to lifelong learning and to increasing the knowledge base of the profession." Students matriculate in January of each year.

Graduates of the program are eligible to sit for the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam (PANCE). This exam is administered and scored by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (<http://www.nccpa.net/>).

Once a graduate obtains a passing score on the certification exam, the individual contacts the state regulatory board to obtain licensure in the state where the graduate intends to practice. Located in Nashville, the Committee on Physician Assistants is a division of the Health Related Boards that govern licensure in the state of Tennessee. The Committee can be contacted at: (<http://health.state.tn.us/boards/PA/>).

## ADMISSIONS REQUIREMENTS

A bachelor's degree must be completed prior to matriculation, with a minimum overall cumulative grade point average of 3.2 on a 4.0 scale (no science minimum requirement). Prerequisite course work must be completed with a grade of C or better. If a required course is repeated, both grades are calculated in the cumulative GPA, but the credit hours assigned to the course may be counted only once toward fulfillment of the required number of hours. The Admissions Committee looks at the following factors in making admissions decisions: overall GPA and prescribed GPA, number of prerequisites completed, the number of science courses completed by the application deadline, direct patient care experience hours, repeated courses, extracurricular activities, involvement in service and leadership, the essay, the score on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) (taken within the previous five years), and the pre-professional evaluations completed by faculty, advisors, employers, and/or physician assistants.

Five hundred hours of prior health care experience or shadowing is required. The program considers it vital that prospective students enhance their knowledge of medicine through direct, patient-oriented clinical experience in a variety of settings. Such experience, which is frequently gained through volunteer work, should enable the student to acquire a greater understanding of the realities of medicine and provide an opportunity for service. The program also considers a

combined GRE score of 300 to be competitive. If the GRE has been taken more than once, the committee will take the highest score.

Science courses taken more than five years prior to application may not be accepted in fulfillment of the required number of hours if they are considered outdated. The admission committee has the right to ask an applicant to take additional courses to ensure proper preparation for the program.

<b>Basic Science Requirements</b>	<b>CREDIT HOURS</b>
Biology 101-102 or Biology 150-160-159 (see Note 1)	6-8
Biochemistry and Cellular and Molecular Biology (BCMB) 230 (see Note 2)	5
Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (EEB) 240 (see Note 2)	4
Chemistry 120-130	8
Math elective (see Note 3)	3
Psychology 110 or Sociology 110 or 120 or Anthropology 130 (see Note 4)	3
Microbiology 210 or Biology 220, 229 (see Note 5)	3-4
Classics 273	3
Electives (see Note 6)	

Note 1: Students considering a major in biological sciences or other natural science/health related major should consider Biology 150-160-159 to keep their options open.

Note 2: Online anatomy and physiology lab courses will not meet this prerequisite.

Note 3: While the PA program in Memphis only requires one math elective, UTK requires two quantitative reasoning courses as part of its general education. UTHSC recommends algebra or calculus, with statistics being preferred. Math 119 (college algebra) satisfies the pre-requisite for the PA program, but does not fulfill a quantitative reasoning course for UTK's general education; therefore, the recommended courses at UTK are Math 125 and Statistics 201.

Note 4: Although no specific courses are required within these disciplines; the courses listed above satisfy UTK's social sciences general education requirement.

Note 5: Students considering a major in Biological Sciences should select Biology 220-229 (General Microbiology lecture and lab).

Note 6: Recommended electives include organic chemistry (Chemistry 350) and genetics (Biology 240).

## PROGRAM PLANNING

Students with an interest in becoming a PA should gain first-hand knowledge by contacting a variety of practicing physician assistants, visiting their facilities, and talking to them directly. Students should arrange for observation, volunteer or actual work experience in a direct patient care setting with PAs or other health care providers.

Program planning for the individual aspiring to be a PA is important. Because admission to all PA programs is competitive, students should consider applying to more than

one program.

Pre-health advisors are available in Arts and Sciences Advising Services, 313 Ayres Hall, to help students plan programs with maximum flexibility; however, in the final analysis, it is the student's responsibility to determine the program which will best satisfy his or her particular needs.

## ALPHA EPSILON DELTA (AED)

Alpha Epsilon Delta is a pre-health honor society that seeks to provide information and opportunities for students with an interest in the health professions. The Tennessee Beta Chapter of AED is active at The University of Tennessee. AED activities include information sessions on preparing to apply to professional schools, local speakers from the medical community, trips to Tennessee medical schools and health centers, and service activities. The schedule of meetings is available at <http://web.utk.edu/~aed/>.

Requirements for national membership include three terms of college (at least one at UT), a cumulative GPA of 3.2, a science GPA of 3.2, and participation in AED sponsored events and meetings. Students interested in AED should first affiliate themselves with the organization as a pledge during the first semester of college attendance at UT. Applications for both pledge status and national membership are available in Arts and Sciences Advising Services, 313 Ayres Hall, and at the organizational website.

Students who do not meet the criteria to become national members may continue as pledges. Pre-health students wishing to receive notification of pre-health activities and AED events should send an e-mail to [mhoskins@utk.edu](mailto:mhoskins@utk.edu) to request to be added to the pre-health distribution list.

## SEMINAR FOR PRE-HEALTH STUDENTS

During each fall semester, Arts and Sciences Advising Services offers a one credit hour course entitled "*Introduction to Health Care Delivery*." This one credit hour seminar course is taught in the Wood Auditorium of UT Medical Center. The course provides weekly seminars on topics such as managed care, family practice, ethical issues in medicine, malpractice, allied health programs, and many others. The course is listed in the timetable under Interdisciplinary Programs (INPG) 100 and is open to any interested student. The course typically meets at from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. on Thursday mornings.

## CASPA AND APPLICATION TO THE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PROGRAM

CASPA (Central Application Service for Physician Assistants) allows PA applicants to use a single web-based application and one set of materials to apply to multiple PA programs. All applications for the PA program at UTHSC must be received through this service.

Through CASPA, applicants submit a completed web-based application comprised of biographical data, colleges attended, academic course history, direct patient care experience hours, list of reference providers, work experiences, extracurricular activities, honors, professional licenses, and a personal narrative. CASPA opens for submissions in April of each year and applications must be submitted by October 1 for consideration to the UTHSC MMS PA Program. The program is also based on rolling admissions and students are encouraged to apply early as spaces may fill up before the October 1 deadline.

Applicants must demonstrate good physical and mental health consistent with the demands of the educational program and of the professional field. Additional admission information is available at <http://www.uthsc.edu/allied/PA/admissions.php>.

### LETTERS OF EVALUATION

Students applying to PA programs should provide three letters of reference from faculty, advisors, employers, and/or PAs. Applicants list the names of their evaluators in CASPA after which an automated email from CASPA is sent to each evaluator with the subject "CASPA Reference Request." The evaluators submit their reference letters on-line.

Applicants should make every effort to become well acquainted with their professors and other potential evaluators prior to requesting the evaluations. Once a reference is completed on the CASPA application, it can NOT be removed or replaced. Please note that references from family members are frowned upon by admissions offices.

### ACCREDITATION

The Physician Assistant Program is accredited by Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA). The UTHSC's physician assistant program is provisionally accredited and will be evaluated for full accreditation within four years.

### 2015 ADMISSIONS STATISTICS

Cumulative GPA- 3.5  
Average GRE- 306  
Class Size - 30

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE FROM:

Master of Medical Science  
Physician Assistant Program  
66 North Pauline, Ste. 116  
Memphis TN 38163  
(901) 448-8000  
[paprograminfo@uthsc.edu](mailto:paprograminfo@uthsc.edu)  
<http://www.uthsc.edu/allied/PA/>

Arts and Sciences Advising Services  
313 Ayres Hall  
The University of Tennessee  
Knoxville, TN 37996-1335  
(865) 974-4481  
[asadvising@utk.edu](mailto:asadvising@utk.edu)  
<http://www.artsci.utk.edu/advising/>

National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA)  
12000 Findley Road Suite 100  
Johns Creek, GA 30097-1409  
(678) 417-8100  
[nccpa@nccpa.net](mailto:nccpa@nccpa.net)  
<http://www.nccpa.net/>

American Academy of Physician Assistants  
2318 Mill Road, Suite 1300  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
(703) 836-2272  
[aapa@aapa.org](mailto:aapa@aapa.org)  
<http://www.aapa.org/>

#### Sources:

*American Academy of Physician Assistants*  
*Occupational Outlook Handbook*  
*Bureau of Labor Statistics*

The information in this bulletin is subject to revision. Students are strongly encouraged to consult with a health professions advisor on a regular basis.

ADMISSION TO THE PHYSICIANS ASSISTANT PROGRAM IS AT THE DISCRETION OF THE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE. ADMISSION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE, AND COMPLETION OF THE PRE-REQUISITES TO THE PROGRAM DO NOT ASSURE ADMISSION TO UTHSC.

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE  
EEO/TITLE IX/SECTION 504 STATEMENT

The University of Tennessee is an EEO/AA/Title VI/Title IX/Section 504/ADA/ADEA institution in the provision of its education and employment programs and services.

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