What does it mean to be a Physician Assistant?

A Physician Assistant (PA) practices and prescribes medicine under the license of a physician, and can work in a variety of healthcare settings. PAs are trained as generalists (but may work in specialty areas) and are formally trained through a master’s degree program to provide diagnostic, preventative and therapeutic services. PAs are not required to complete a residency and work under the authority of a supervising physician. Students prepare for entry to a PA program by obtaining a baccalaureate degree, completing the prerequisite course work for entry into specific programs, and by obtaining a broad variety of volunteer or paid clinical experience. This guide is not exhaustive, but is intended to get you started in planning your Pre-PA track while at Western.

Pre-PA Education

There is no one “right” major for gaining admission to a Physician Assistant program. Your undergraduate years offer you the opportunity to explore many academic fields, to develop basic skills and knowledge, and to demonstrate expertise and experience a field of study (major) of your choice. Pick one in which you excel and enjoy. Popular majors for Pre-PA students are Biology and Chemistry, but students have majored in a diverse range of academic disciplines including Anthropology, Behavioral Neuroscience, Community Health, Psychology, History, Philosophy, Communications, Spanish, and Fairhaven self-designed majors. Some pursue combined majors such as Anthropology/Biology, Biochemistry, and Cellular & Molecular Biology.

Core Courses

Regardless of your major, certain prerequisite courses expected by most schools include:

**CHEMISTRY**

**NOTE:** You must complete Precalculus I (MATH 114) to take CHEM 161

- General Chemistry series (includes labs): CHEM 161, 162, 163 (or Honors equivalent)
- Elementary Organic Chemistry with lab: CHEM 251
  - OR Organic Chemistry lecture series: CHEM 251, 352, 353
- Elements of Biochemistry: CHEM 375

**BIOLOGY**

- General Biology series (includes labs): BIOL 204, 205, 206
- Genetics: BIOL 321
- Microbiology for Health Sciences: BIOL 245
  - OR Fundamentals of Microbiology: BIOL 345, 346
- Human Anatomy & Physiology: BIOL 348, 349

**MATHEMATICS**

- Statistics: MATH 240 (or major equivalent; i.e. BIOL 340 for Biology majors)

**OTHER (NON-SCIENCE)**

- Introduction to Psychology (PSY 101), Psychology through the Lifespan (PSY 230)
- English 101, plus an additional English course

This document is for preliminary advising purposes only.

We encourage you to meet with a Pre-Healthcare advisor on a regular basis to determine a plan that is best for you.

Keep informed

- WWU students may join the Advisor’s Pre-PA Listserv. To join, e-mail Anna.Tognazzini@wwu.edu with the following SUBJECT information: Pre-PA listserv, Last name, First name, WWU student number, and major (if declared).
Notes

ADVANCED PLACEMENT (AP): Check with targeted schools whether they recognize AP as college-earned credit. Not all do. It is better to view any earned credits as qualifying to enroll in upper-division courses rather than as “testing out” of prerequisites.

DECLARING A MAJOR: Departments vary in how to declare majors. Behavioral Neuroscience, Biology, Chemistry, and others allow students to declare as a “pre-major” while taking their specified prerequisites. Some majors require a specific GPA in certain courses. Declare early, even as a “pre-major”, to help shorten your time to degree. While working on any pre-major content, explore many disciplines to keep your options open.

ACCESS TO CLASSES: High demand exists for upper-division courses, especially in the sciences. Many departments grant enrollment priority to students declared in specific majors over those seeking enrollment for professional school purposes. Registration access procedures for courses can change, and departments generally provide updates via their websites and email notifications, or by checking with the department’s program coordinator.

REPEATING/DROPPING COURSES: When you repeat a course, only your most recent grade is used when Western calculates your GPA. However, the class still shows up on your transcript. Although some students think that repeating a course will help them get into professional schools, this is almost always untrue. Medical schools will take into account ALL college-level coursework when performing their own calculation of your GPA, and this will include any courses you have repeated at Western. Still, in some circumstances it may be appropriate to repeat a course so talk to an advisor to be sure. Also, dropping a course can have an impact on eligibility for financial aid, scholarships, and athletic participation so consider your options carefully and speak with an advisor before making a decision.

SHADOWING: Students should gain shadowing experience with both a PA and a physician. Discuss your shadowing options with Pre-healthcare advisors.

CLINICAL HOURS: Most PA programs require that applicants obtain a certain number of paid clinical hours (UW requires at least 2000) before applying. Some examples are work as a CNA, Medical Assistant, ER Scribe, or EMT.

GRE: The Graduate Record Examination is offered monthly at the WWU Testing Center, and assesses your verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing skills. Information is available at www.ets.org/gre.

Additional Resources

WWU Allied Health Advising: www.wwu.edu/alliedhealth
WWU Pre-health Pinterest: www.pinterest.com/wwuprehealth/
Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA): www.paeaonline.org
The PA Platform: www.thepaplatform.com
Explore Health Careers: www.explorehealthcareers.org

Pre-Healthcare Advising Events

Typical programming events offered by Pre-Healthcare Advising include (but are not limited to):

Fall:
Health Professional & Grad School Info Fair, October 18 in MAC gym
Winter Registration Walk-in Advising: Nov 14 and Nov 15, 12-2 in BI 415

Winter:
Kaplan-sponsored practice MCAT in late January/February
Spring Registration Walk-in Advising: Feb 27 and 28, 12-2 in BI 415

Spring:
The Healthcare Professional School Application: A session overviewing the process
MEDEX info session (usually in April)
Fall Registration Walk-in Advising: May 15 and 16, 12-2 in BI 415