Pre-Physician Assistant

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. 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.

Program Checkpoints:

Freshman year:
- Meet with Pre-Healthcare Advisor to develop a plan of study
- Take Math 114
- Begin General Chemistry series: CHEM 121, 122, 123
- Work on GUR courses, including ENG 101 and PSY 101
- Begin prerequisite and co-requisite courses for possible major
- Begin gaining direct patient care experience.

Sophomore year:
- Begin General Biology series: BIOL 204, 205
- Begin Organic Chemistry series: CHEM 351, 352, 353 or take CHEM 251
- Take stats class: MATH 240 (or equivalent in major, if offered)
- Take an additional Psychology (PSY 230 or 250) or Sociology class
- Declare or apply for major

Junior year:
- Research PA programs and requirements
- Take BIOL 348, 349
- Take Chem 375 (optional)
- Prepare for the Graduate Records Examination (GRE) to be taken around beginning of Senior year
- Draft personal statement
- Request letters of recommendation from professors and professionals.

Senior year:
- Prepare for possible PA school interview with a mock interview (or do spring of junior year)
- Complete major, GUR, WP, and other graduation requirements
- Begin application to Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA)
- Two quarters before graduation, meet with major advisor for major evaluation and apply for graduation

Additionally:

NOTE: Advanced Placement is generally not recognized by professional schools as college-earned credit. Check with each school.
It is expected that students gain at least 1000 hours of healthcare experience with hands-on patient care (UW requires 2000 hours). Most students have a bachelor’s degree and about three years of healthcare experience before entering a program. You can get healthcare experience by being a medical assistant, Emergency Medical Technician (EMT)*, Paramedic, Peace Corps Volunteer, Lab assistant, Registered Nurse*, Emergency room technician, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)*, etc. *Both WCC and BTC offer programs to help you train for these.
Core Courses

Academic course requirements for PA schools may vary but, regardless of your major, certain prerequisites are expected by most schools and include:

- One year General Chemistry with labs: CHEM 121*, 122, 123 (5, 5, 4)
- One to three quarters Organic Chemistry: CHEM 251 (5) or CHEM 351, 352, 353 (4, 4, 3)
- Two quarters of General Biology with labs: BIOL 204, 205 (4, 5), and additional courses under advisement
- One quarter of Microbiology: BIOL 245 or 345, 346
- Two quarters of Human Anatomy & Physiology: BIOL 348, 349
- One quarter of Biochemistry: BIOL 375 (optional)
- Statistics: MATH 240 (4) or major equivalent
- Two or three Social Science GUR courses: PSY 101 and PSY 230 or 250

*Completion of MATH 114 or Math Placement into MATH 115 or higher is a prerequisite for CHEM 121

**NOTE:** At WWU, General Chemistry (CHEM 121) is prerequisite to General Biology. It is important for students to begin chemistry as early in their program as possible.

Declaring a Major*: refer to the department of your chosen major for prerequisites and GPA requirements for declaring.

**NOTE:** To major in Biology requires a grade point average of 2.9 or better for CHEM 121, 122, 123, and BIOL 204, 205, and 206 in order to advance to Phase II of the Biology major. Admission to Phase II is required in order to take upper division Biology classes.

To major in Biochemistry requires a 3.0 grade average in CHEM 121, 122, 123, 351, 352 and BIOL 205 in order to move on to a Phase II Biochemistry major.

To major in Chemistry (BS) requires a grade point average of 3.0 in CHEM 121, 122, 123, 351, 352 and MATH 124 and 125 in order to move on to a Phase II Chemistry major.

Access to Classes:

Due to high student demand for many upper-division courses, especially in the sciences, many departments must give enrollment priority to students for whom these courses are required for their major over those who want to take them for electives. Registration details for these and other heavily impacted programs are posted at department websites:

- Biology: https://cse.wwu.edu/biology/registration
- Chemistry: https://cse.wwu.edu/chemistry/registration

Repeating Courses: is not viewed favorably by professional schools. An isolated case may be acceptable but may also require an explanation in application. Discuss your options first with a Pre-Healthcare Advisor.

The courses below satisfy GUR requirements and may also be applied to pre-PA requirements.

**ACOM:** ENG 101

**SSC:** PSY 101

**QSR:** MATH 240

**LSCI:** BIOL 204, 205

- CHEM 121, 122, 123

Additional Resources

Join the advisors’ Pre-PA Listserv by sending an e-mail to Anna.Tognazzini@wwu.edu with this information: Subject: pre-PA listserv, Last name, First name, student number, and major and concentration (if declared).

**WWU Allied Health Advising:**
www.wwu.edu/alliedhealth

**Pre-Health Advising PA Resources Page:**
www.pinterest.com/wwuadvisor/physician-assistant/

**Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA):** portal.caspaonline.org

**Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA):**
www.paeaonline.org