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. 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.

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 [or Honors: 125, 126, 225]
- 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

NOTE:
Advanced Placement is generally not recognized by professional schools as college-earned credit. Check with each school.

For most programs it is expected that applicants gain at least 1000 hours of 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, Medical Scribe, Registered Nurse*, Emergency room technician, Nursing Assistant Certified (NAC)*, etc. *Both WCC and BTC offer programs to train you for these.

This document has been created for advising purposes only. Please contact Advising for Pre-Healthcare Professions for updates and changes.
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) or Honors CHEM 125*, 126, 225 (5 each)
- 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 (5, 5), and additional courses under advisement
- One quarter of Microbiology: BIOL 245 (5) or 345, 346 (3, 2)
- Two quarters of Human Anatomy & Physiology: BIOL 348, 349 (5, 5)
- One quarter of Biochemistry: CHEM 375 (4) (optional)
- Statistics: MATH 240 (4) or major equivalent
- Two or three Social Science GUR courses: PSY 101 and PSY 230 or 250 (5 each)

*Completion of MATH 114 or Math Placement into MATH 115 or higher is a prerequisite for CHEM 121 or 125

NOTE: At WWU, General Chemistry (CHEM 121 or 125) is prerequisite to General Biology. It is important for students to begin chemistry as early in their program as possible.

Additional Resources

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

DECLARING A MAJOR: Always check with the department of your intended major for clarification about how to declare. Many programs (such as Behavioral Neuroscience, Biology, Chemistry, Kinesiology, and others) don’t allow students to declare a major until certain prerequisites have been met, such as having taken specific classes or maintaining a certain GPA. Many departments allow you to sign up as a “pre-major,” which will keep you updated on major requirements and events happening within the department.

ACCESS TO CLASSES: Due to high student demand for many upper-division courses, especially in the sciences, many departments give enrollment priority to students who are in the major over those who want to take them for elective credit or as a prerequisite for professional school. As a result, you may need to ask for an override well in advance of taking the class. Registration details for heavily impacted courses and programs change frequently and are posted at department websites.

REPEATING/DROPPING COURSES: In general, this is not viewed favorably by professional schools but an isolated case may be acceptable. It will likely also require an explanation on your application so discuss your options first with a Pre-Healthcare Advisor. Both dropping and repeating courses can have impact on eligibility for financial aid, scholarships, and athletic eligibility. Speak to an advisor in each area that applies to you when making your decision.

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

Explore Health Careers: www.explorehealthcareers.org