

THE CASPA SURVIVAL GUIDE

A Comprehensive Roadmap for Pre-Physician
Assistant Students

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2026 Honors Thesis

PURPOSE:



To provide undergraduate CSU students with a guide to preparing for and applying to physician assistant (PA) programs while clarifying the expectations of admissions committees and the realities of the profession.

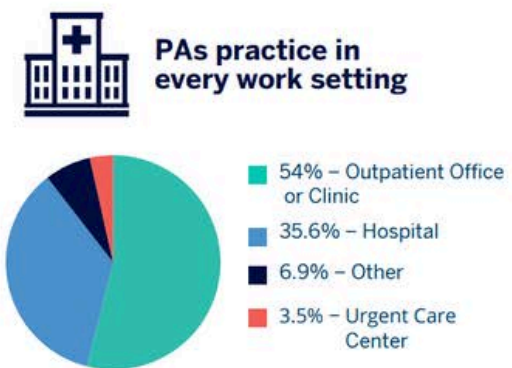
By the end of this guide, students will understand how to build a competitive PA application and navigate the Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) with a clear plan.

WHAT IS A PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT/ASSOCIATE?

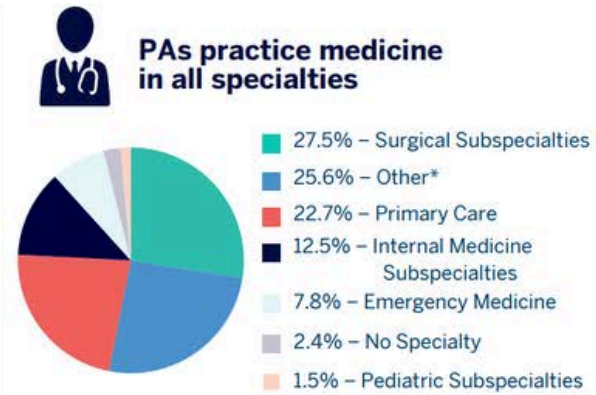
- PAs are licensed clinicians who practice medicine in every specialty and setting
- Scope of practice includes diagnosing illnesses, developing treatment plans, prescribing medications, and assisting in surgery under the supervision of a physician



ACCORDING TO THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PHYSICIAN ASSOCIATES (AAPA)



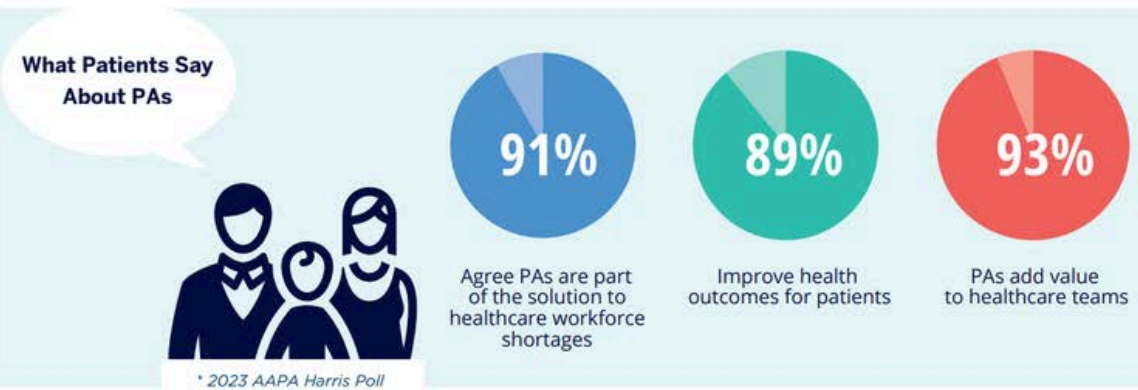
2025 AAPA Salary Survey, All data based on clinically practicing PAs in the U.S. *Other refers to a variety of work settings including but not limited to schools/universities, rehabilitation facilities, nursing homes and correctional facilities.



2025 AAPA Salary Survey, All data based on clinically practicing PAs in the U.S. *Other refers to a variety of healthcare settings including but not limited to psychiatry, hospice and palliative care, obstetrics and gynecology, addiction medicine, pain management, public health and dermatology.

PA Profession in the News

- #3 Best 100 Jobs List (U.S. News & World Report 2025)
- #2 Best Healthcare Jobs List (U.S. News & World Report 2025)
- #3 Best STEM Jobs List (U.S. News & World Report 2025)



HISTORY OF THE PROFESSION

In the 1960s, physicians and educators recognized there was a shortage of primary care physicians. After World War II, many primary care providers moved to specialize in hospital settings. As a result, Eugene A. Stead Jr. created the first PA cohort at Duke University. He recruited former military medics and trained them using an accelerated medical model to quickly expand the healthcare workforce, particularly in primary care and underserved areas. Today, the profession continues to evolve with a focus on team-based, collaborative care and improving access to healthcare.

For more information, check out AAPAs webpage: <https://www.aapa.org/about/history/>

PA VS NP

Nurse Practitioners (NP) and Physician Assistants (PA) are both advanced health professionals who can diagnose illnesses and prescribe medications, but their training and education, as well as their approaches to patient care, differ.

- NPs are trained in advanced nursing and focus on a specialized role, such as a neonatal nurse practitioner
- PAs have a general medicine foundation: training follows the medical model and covers foundational aspects of medicine and specialties



PA VS NP EDUCATION

To become an NP:

1. Earn a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN)
2. Pass the NCLEX-RN: Required to pass to be an RN
3. Earn a graduate degree: Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) or a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP). Each degree program requires a nurse practitioner role specialty. Specialties are primarily organized by patient population focus, allowing NPs to provide specialized care in areas like family medicine, pediatrics, mental health, and acute care.
4. Become a Certified Nurse Practitioner (CNP): Take the national board exam to become an NP
5. Become licensed in your state

PA VS NP EDUCATION

To become a PA:

1. Earn a Bachelor's degree in a major of your choosing, as long as you fulfill PA school prerequisites
2. Earn a Master of Science in Physician Assistant Studies (MSPAS)
3. Pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE)
4. Maintain national certification by completing 100 hours of continuing medical education (CME) every 2 years and take a recertification exam every 10 years

PA VS NP WORK ENVIRONMENT

Both work in primary care, acute, and specialty care in medical offices, hospitals, nursing homes, VA facilities, community clinics, etc

Both: Scope of practice differs from state to state

PAs: Typically work under direct supervision from a physician, but still have their own patients and determine treatment plans

NP: Can practice autonomously in 28 states (including Colorado) and 2 US territories

PA VS NP SPECIALIZATION

NPs: Need formal education and licensure before changing specialties

PA: Can switch specialties without a new certification



CAREER OUTLOOK

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there will be a 40 percent increase in NP roles and a 28 percent increase in PA roles between 2023 and 2033

Also, U.S. News & World Report ranks these professions as the top two roles in 2024: nurse practitioner sits at #1 and physician assistant at #2 in the publication's Best Health Care Jobs list

PA SCHOOL ADMISSIONS OVERVIEW

Most programs evaluate:

GPA: 3.0+

Patient Care Experience (ranges between programs: 500-2000)

Shadowing

Letters of recommendation (3+)

Personal statement

Interviews

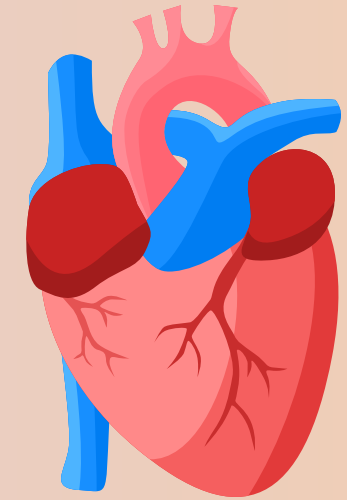
Standardized tests (ranges between programs: GRE/CASPR/PCAT)

The logo for the Central Board of Standardized Examinations (CASPA) is displayed in a white rectangular box. The text "CASPA" is written in a large, bold, blue sans-serif font, with a small "TM" trademark symbol to the upper right of the letter "A".

CASPATM



COMMON PREREQUISITES



- General Chemistry I with Lab (CHEM 111 & 112)
- General Chemistry II with Lab (CHEM 113 & 114)
- Genetics (BZ 350 or LIFE 201B or SOCR 330)
- Organic Chemistry with Lab (1 semester: CHEM 245 & 246) or (2 semesters: CHEM 341, 343, & 344)
- Human Anatomy (BMS 301)
- Human Physiology (BMS 300)
- Microbiology with Lab (MIP 300 & MIP 302)
- Statistics (STAT 301 or 307)
- General Psychology (PSY 100)
- Medical Terminology (OT 215)

**Variability Between Schools: Make sure to check each program's requirements, e.g., some schools require 2 semesters of psychology/English composition/etc

**Some schools have time limits for prerequisites, different policies for AP credits, and Pass/Fail

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL CSU COURSEWORK



- BC 351: Biochemistry
- BMS 345: Neuroanatomy
- BMS 450: Pharmacology
- BMS 575: Human Dissection
- HES 440: Perspectives in Clinical Patient Care
- Life 210: Cellular Biology
- LSPA 346: Spanish for Healthcare
- MIP 342: Immunology
- PSY 320: Psychopathology
- PSY 328: Psychology of Human Sexuality
- VMBS 165: Social Justice Issues in Healthcare



CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

Very important part of the application!
Some schools will recommend patient care experience, but won't have a minimum-hour requirement. Other programs could have a minimum requirement of 500 to 2000 hours.



Examples:

- Medical Assistant
- EMT
- CNA
- Phlebotomist
- Paramedic
- Nurse
- Medical Scribe
- ER Tech

** Research each program's requirements for patient care experience

OPPORTUNITIES IN FORT COLLINS

Medical Assistant

- Certification at Front Range, IBMC, etc
- Some small clinics will train you on the job without a certification

Nurse Aide

- Certification at Front range, AIMS, etc
- Lots of job opportunities in Fort Collins, easier shifts to work while in school

For example: 6am-2pm, 2pm-10pm, 10pm-6am, many facilities will also allow 4 hour shifts



SHADOWING

- Very important for understanding healthcare workflows and variability between professions! It can also help individuals identify their career choices.
- Who to shadow for PA applications?
 1. PA!
 2. MD
 3. NP
- Recommended hours: 30-50 hours
- Tips:
 - Be respectful and ask questions when appropriate
 - Dress professionally: Business casual or scrubs, depending on clinic preferences
 - Take notes on interesting cases, observations, and questions
 - Respect patient privacy (HIPAA)



STANDARDIZED TESTING

Research each school's requirements on standardized testing! Some schools don't require any, while some schools may require GRE/ CASPR/ PCAT

GRE: Standardized test with quantitative, verbal, and written sections.

Casper: Situational Judgment Test

PA-CAT: Tests Anatomy, Physiology, Biology, Chemistry, Microbiology, Genetics, and Behavioral Sciences

CLICK ON THESE LINKS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE EXAMS AND HOW TO REGISTER

GRE



Schedule Your GRE General Test

The GRE General Test is offered 24 hours a day at home and most days of the week at a test center near you. Schedule your test and register for the GRE test today.

ets.org

Casper



Taking the Casper assessment

Casper and Duet give applicants opportunities to showcase their unique personal and professional strengths, providing programs with insights into your key personal and...

[Take Casper](#)

PA-CAT



Register and Schedule

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[Exam Master PA-CAT](#)

LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

- Required 3+
- Who should I ask?
 - PAs
 - MDs
 - NPs
 - Science professor
 - Clinical supervisor
 - Volunteer Coordinator
- Characteristics of strong letters:
 - **STRONG** and **POSITIVE**
 - Give specific examples
 - Evidence of professionalism
 - Demonstration of patient care skills
- Provide your resume, personal statement, and any supporting materials to your recommender to make the process easier for them.



PERSONAL STATEMENT

Very important part to application! Your personal statement will be submitted in the CASPA portal, so keep it general to all schools you are applying to. Your personal statement is your time to write about your motivation for becoming a PA, clinical experiences, showcase your growth and resilience, and share unique perspectives.

If you are stuck on what to write about, make an appointment with the Health Professions Advising and/or the Career Center

Use the writing center for editing, revising, brainstorming, etc. You can make an in-person appointment, meet over Zoom, or simply submit your work through their online portal!

Helpful Resources:



PERSONAL STATEMENT

Make an appointment with a Health Professions advisor: <https://hp.colostate.edu/contact-us/>

Writing center: <https://writingcenter.colostate.edu/>

Career center: <https://career.colostate.edu/connect-1-on-1/>



VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering in Fort Collins: Some ideas!

Goal ~200 hours

- **Larimer Food Bank:** <https://foodbanklarimer.org/volunteer/>
- **Special Olympics:** <https://specialolympicsco.org/getinvolved/volunteer/>
- **Fort Collins Fall Clean Up Day:** <https://ocl.colostate.edu/volunteer/fall-clean-up/>
- Contact Palliative Care centers and Long term care facilities to see how you can contribute
- **UC Health Volunteering:** <https://www.uchealth.org/give-to-uchealth/volunteer/>
- **Banner Health Volunteering:**
<https://www.bannerhealth.com/services/volunteer/banner-fort-collins-volunteer>

***** Join on campus clubs to participate in their volunteering!

Ex: PreMedica, Pre-PA club, Medical Brigades, Biomedical Sciences Association

- Explore more clubs at RAMlink:
<https://ramlink.campuslabs.com/engage/organizations>

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Examples:

- Teaching assistant
Human Physiology (BMS 300), Human Gross Anatomy (BMS 301), General Chemistry (CHEM 111, 112), Microbiology lecture/lab (MIP 300/302), Biology (Life 102)
- TILT Tutoring
- Club leadership
- Research Projects
- Student athlete



APPLICATION SAMPLE TIMELINE:

CASPA application opens end of April

- **1-5 years before applying:** learn about PA profession, enroll in necessary prerequisites, gain experience (shadowing, volunteering, patient care), research PA programs and application requirements, create personal trackers to record patient care, shadowing, volunteer hours, etc
- **5 months before applying:** Create CASPA account, sign up for entrance exams (GRE, PA-CAT, CASPR)
- **4 months before applying:** Start preparing LOR, brainstorming ideas for Personal Statement
- **3 months before applying:** Construct rough draft of personal statement, get feedback from friends, family, health care providers, writing center, health professions advisor
- **2 months before applying:** Gather any other CASPA info, write supplemental essays, experience descriptions, and plan when to send transcripts

CASPA APPLICATION PROCESS

Tips:

1. Create a CASPA account here: <https://caspa.cas.myliaison.com/applicant-ux/#/login>
2. Add a school whose application is still open to explore the CASPA portal
3. Write a Personal Statement and prepare essays/experience descriptions before the application opens, the last Thursday of April.
4. Strive to turn in applications early: Late May/ Early June

CHOOSING A PA PROGRAM

Important factors include:

- Accreditation status: Continued/Provisional/Probation
- Tuition cost
- Clinical rotation opportunities
- Geographic location
- Program mission statement/ values
- Class size

GAP YEAR(S)

IT IS OKAY TO TAKE TIME IN BETWEEN UNDERGRAD AND PA SCHOOL!

- THE AVERAGE AGE OF A PA STUDENT IS 27 YEARS OLD
- OFTEN IT TAKES TIME OUTSIDE OF UNDERGRAD TO GET PATIENT CARE HOURS, SO A GAP YEAR MAY BE NECESSARY!
- BENEFITS: ALLOWS YOU TO TAKE A BREAK FROM SCHOOL, WORK FULL TIME, SAVE MONEY, TRAVEL, GO ON VOLUNTEER TRIPS, ETC
- SOME PEOPLE MAY PURSUE A MASTER'S DEGREE IN A SCIENCE FIELD TO INCREASE GPA, TAKE NEEDED PREREQUISITES, GAIN STRONG LOR, AND OVERALL BECOME A STRONGER APPLICANT; HOWEVER, IT IS NOT THE BEST FIT FOR EVERYONE: IF YOU ALREADY HAVE STRONG ACADEMICS, BUT LACK CLINICAL EXPERIENCE, GAINING HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE AS A CNA, MA, EMT, ETC., MAY BE MORE BENEFICIAL

ADVICE FROM PAST PRE-PA STUDENTS

- Apply early!!
- Gain meaningful clinical experience
- **Avoid comparing yourself to others - believe in your abilities!**
- Expect multiple application cycles
- Connect with other pre-PA students



DON'T COMPARE YOURSELF!

- Every person has their own journey!
- Someone will always have more patient care hours, a higher GPA, and service hours: This doesn't mean they are a better fit.
- PA programs have a holistic application process where they look at more than just metrics
- They value your why PA and how you fit within their program
- When researching schools, look into their mission statements and values to see if they are also a good fit for you!
- This process is stressful and overwhelming. What you are going through is completely normal and you got this! Ask for support and advice from health professions advisors and other pre-PA students!!

SOURCES

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