

Pre-PA Student Guide

Planning for Physician Assistant School

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This guide helps you understand common PA school requirements, plan your coursework, and identify the steps in the application process. It is a starting point for conversations with both the Pre-Health Advisor and your academic advisor, not a substitute for one.

Before you plan anything: PA programs differ from one another in prerequisite courses, testing expectations, patient care hour requirements, and GPA thresholds. Confirm the exact requirements of every program you intend to apply to before you build your final academic plan. Program websites are the authoritative source, and admissions offices will answer direct questions by email.

WHAT PRE-PA STUDENTS SHOULD KNOW

- Ohio is home to seventeen accredited PA programs as of 2026, each awarding a master's degree. The Ohio Association of Physician Assistants maintains the current list at ohiopa.com. Program counts change, so check before you assume.
- Ohio law requires a master's degree for full practice. A physician assistant licensed in Ohio without a master's degree cannot receive a prescriber number, so a master's is effectively required. Every accredited program now awards one.
- Licensure follows certification, not graduation alone. After you finish an accredited program you must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination, administered by the NCCPA, before the State Medical Board of Ohio will license you.
- Most programs expect science courses with labs, substantial hands-on patient care experience, volunteer and shadowing hours, and a strong academic record. Patient care hours are the requirement students most often underestimate.
- Start planning in your first year. Prerequisites, certifications, testing, and application materials all take longer than students expect, and several of them have to happen in a particular order.
- You do not have to figure this out alone. Your academic advisor, faculty mentors, the health professions advising office, and career services can help address different parts of this process.

GRADES AND GPA: WHAT THE NUMBERS ACTUALLY MEAN

Students often hear that a 3.0 science GPA is the requirement for PA school. However that simple rule of thumb can be misleading.

There is no universal minimum

Program minimums vary. Some set 3.0, some set 2.75, some publish no minimum at all. Some evaluate cumulative GPA, some evaluate science GPA, and some look at your last sixty credit hours. Nothing in the centralized application prevents you from applying below a stated minimum, though most programs screen on it.

A minimum is a floor, not a target

Nationally, students who matriculate into PA programs carry science GPAs well above 3.0, typically in the 3.6 to 3.7 range. If your GPA is significantly below that average, you have simply met a screening threshold but perhaps not much more. Build your plan around being competitive, not around being eligible.

Repeated courses are counted differently than you expect

The centralized application service recalculates your GPA using its own rules and includes every attempt at a repeated course. Retaking a class does not remove the original grade from that calculation, even if OWU's repeat policy handles it differently on your transcript. Plan accordingly.

A note on AP credit: Many PA programs do not accept Advanced Placement credit toward prerequisites, and others accept it only if you completed a higher course in the same sequence at your college. If you arrived at OWU with AP chemistry or biology credit, check this early.

PATIENT CARE EXPERIENCE

This is the part of the application that most often separates admitted students from the rest, and it is the part that takes the longest to build.

How many hours

Program minimums commonly fall between 500 and 2,000 hours. National data on students who actually matriculate indicate the median entering student brings roughly 3,200 hours of direct patient contact, with the twenty-fifth percentile near 1,750 hours and the seventy-fifth percentile near 5,600. A program's stated minimum tells you the floor for consideration, not the profile of the students who receive seats.

Know the categories

Programs count these separately, and students routinely lose credit by logging an experience in the wrong place. Learn the distinctions early and track them separately from the beginning.

- **Patient care experience:** Direct, hands-on care for which you are responsible, usually paid. This carries the most weight.

- **Healthcare experience:** Work in a healthcare setting without direct responsibility for patient care, such as many administrative or laboratory roles.
- **Shadowing:** Observing a provider at work. Valuable and often required, but it is not patient care experience.
- **Volunteering:** Unpaid service, medical or otherwise. Programs want to see it, but it does not substitute for patient care hours.

Medical scribing is the common gray area. Some programs count it as patient care experience and others count it only as healthcare experience. Check the programs on your list before you commit a year to it.

Common roles, and the lead time they require

Most competitive applicants work as an EMT, medical assistant, patient care technician, certified nursing assistant, phlebotomist, or emergency department technician. Every one of those requires a certification course, and several require a state exam. Those courses take weeks to months and often run in the summer or evenings. If you want meaningful hours by the end of your third year, you need to be certified by the end of your first or second.

PREREQUISITE COURSEWORK

The table below sorts prerequisites by how commonly programs require them. Use it to prioritize, not to finalize. Build your actual list from the websites of the specific programs you intend to apply to.

Required by nearly every program	Required by many programs	Required by some programs
General Biology I with lab General Biology II with lab Human Anatomy with lab Human Physiology with lab Microbiology with lab General Chemistry I with lab General Chemistry II with lab Introductory Psychology Statistics or Biostatistics English Composition	Medical Terminology Biochemistry Organic Chemistry I with lab Genetics Lifespan or Developmental Psychology	Organic Chemistry II with lab Abnormal Psychology College-level mathematics beyond statistics Additional upper-level biology Sociology or Anthropology Nutrition

Organic chemistry

Organic chemistry sits in the middle column deliberately. A minority of PA programs require it, and many of those accept a single semester while some accept biochemistry in its place. At Ohio Wesleyan, organic chemistry is a prerequisite for biochemistry, however. Two semesters of organic chemistry is a significant commitment in an OWU schedule. Confirm that the programs on your list actually require it before you plan for both semesters.

Matching OWU courses to program requirements

Course names and numbering vary between institutions, so compare your OWU schedule against each program's published prerequisite list. Most programs describe a two-semester Anatomy and Physiology sequence. At OWU the equivalent is BIOL 329: Human Anatomy in one semester and BIOL 325: Human Physiology in another. Take anatomy first where your schedule allows, since some programs expect the sequence in that order.

Two additional things to verify with your advisor and with individual programs. First, confirm that OWU's microbiology offering satisfies the microbiology requirement at your target programs, since a number of programs specify an upper-level course. Second, ask whether programs impose an expiration window on science prerequisites, commonly five to ten years. This rarely affects traditional-age students but it matters if you transferred credit or plan an extended gap.

If you cannot get into a class

Second-year students sometimes cannot get seats in upper-level courses such as Human Anatomy or Human Physiology. Taking those courses in your third year usually keeps you on track. Many programs also allow applicants to have some prerequisite coursework outstanding at the time of application, provided it is finished before matriculation. The number of outstanding courses allowed varies, and a few programs allow none, so confirm the rule at each program rather than assuming.

TWO PATHS

There are two realistic routes into PA school. Neither is better than the other, but they place different demands on your four years, and you should choose deliberately.

Applying as a third-year student (no intervening year)	Applying as a fourth-year student (one intervening year)
You submit your application in the spring or summer after your third year and matriculate the summer after graduation. The demanding part is patient care hours. You have two summers and part-time semester work to accumulate them, which is difficult to reconcile with competitive hour totals. Choose this route only if you are certified and working in a clinical role early, and if the programs on your list have hour requirements you can realistically meet.	You finish coursework, apply during your fourth year, and matriculate the year after graduation. This is the more common path nationally. A gap year gives you a full year of full-time clinical work, time to strengthen your application, and time to confirm that PA is the right fit. If you intend to raise your GPA during a gap year, understand that this requires enrolling in additional coursework. Time alone does not change your GPA.

Suggested four-year sequence

The plan below assumes you are applying as a third-year student, which is the tighter of the two timelines. If you plan a gap year, the coursework shifts later and you get some breathing room. Course numbers reflect OWU offerings and should be confirmed against the current catalog with your advisor.

Year	Coursework and milestones
First	Fall: General Chemistry I (CHEM 110), Introduction to Cell Biology (BIOL 120), Introductory Psychology (PSYC 110), and general education coursework. Spring: General Chemistry II (CHEM 111), a second biology course, and general education coursework. Avoid stacking three lab sciences in a single semester. Outside the classroom: begin shadowing, start volunteering, and research certification programs for a clinical role. Aim to complete a certification course during the summer.
Second	Fall: Statistics (MATH 105), Genetics (BIOL 271), and general education and/or major coursework. Organic Chemistry I (CHEM 260) only if your target programs require it. Spring: Microbiology (BIO 125) and general education and/or major coursework Outside the classroom: work in a paid clinical role during the summer and during the semester if your schedule permits. Begin logging hours in a single spreadsheet as you go, not in retrospect.
Third	Fall: Human Anatomy (BIOL 329), Biochemistry (CHEM 340), and remaining prerequisites. Draft your personal statement this semester, not in the spring. Spring: Human Physiology (BIOL 325), general education and/or major coursework, request letters of recommendation, and prepare for the GRE, PA-CAT, or CASPer if your programs require them. Note that Medical Terminology (HHK 347) is offered only in summer, which places it after the application opens.

Year	Coursework and milestones
	Outside the classroom: the centralized application opens in late April. Submit as early in the cycle as you can, especially for rolling-admission programs.
Fourth	Complete your major requirements and maintain your GPA. Programs review final transcripts. Prepare for interviews and continue accumulating patient care hours, which many programs will let you update. Stay in contact with health professions advising and career services while you wait for decisions.

THE APPLICATION ITSELF

How the centralized application works

PA programs use a centralized application service, commonly known as CASPA. You complete one application, and it distributes to the programs you select. Three features of it are relevant for your timeline:

- The cycle opens in late April. Program deadlines run from September through January, but the opening date is what matters.
- Verification takes weeks. Your application is not sent to programs until transcripts are received and coursework is verified.
- Many programs admit on a rolling basis. An application submitted in May is evaluated against a full class of open seats. The same application submitted in September is not. An early, solid application is important.

Letters of recommendation

Most programs want three letters, and many specify who they should come from: a practicing physician assistant, a science faculty member, and a supervisor from your clinical work. The PA letter is the one students most often cannot produce, because they shadowed only physicians. Build a relationship with a PA early. Ask all recommenders at least six weeks before you need the letter, and give them your resume, your hour log, and a short note about why you want to become a PA.

Testing

Requirements vary widely. Some programs require the GRE, some require the PA-CAT, a growing number require CASPer, and many require none of these. CASPer in particular has fixed test dates that fill up. Determine what your programs require by the fall of your third year, register early, and leave room to retest.

Checklist

- Build a spreadsheet listing every program you are considering, with its prerequisites, GPA thresholds, hour requirements, testing requirements, and deadlines. Update it each year.
- Track patient care hours, healthcare hours, shadowing, volunteering, and leadership in that same spreadsheet, with supervisor names and contact information. You will need those details on the application.
- Monitor your science GPA every semester rather than at the end. Trends matter to admissions committees, and an upward trend is worth explaining.

- Draft your personal statement in the fall of your application year so you have a full semester of revision and feedback.
- Request letters well in advance, and follow up politely.
- Register early for any required exam, leaving time to retake it.
- Order transcripts as soon as the cycle opens, then submit as early as you can.

ADVICE FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

- Do not wait until your third year to ask questions. Early advising saves time, money, and semesters you cannot get back.
- Keep one folder, physical or digital, with unofficial transcripts, your resume, your hour log, certification records, and notes on each program you are considering.
- Learn the vocabulary. Prerequisite, patient care experience, healthcare experience, personal statement, rolling admission, centralized application, matriculation, and verification all have precise meanings in this process.
- Ask about cost directly. PA programs commonly run between \$70,000 and \$150,000 in total. Ask programs about scholarships, and ask about loan repayment programs tied to service in underserved areas.
- Use campus resources. Advisors, faculty, health professions advising, the writing center, and career services are all useful for different parts of this process. None of them expects you to arrive already knowing the answers.
- Not knowing everything at the start is normal. Asking early is preparation, not evidence that you are behind.

Final reminder: This guide is a starting point, not individualized advising. Requirements change, programs change, and your situation is specific to you. Confirm course sequencing, graduation requirements, and PA program expectations with your academic advisor and with the health professions advising office before you make final decisions.