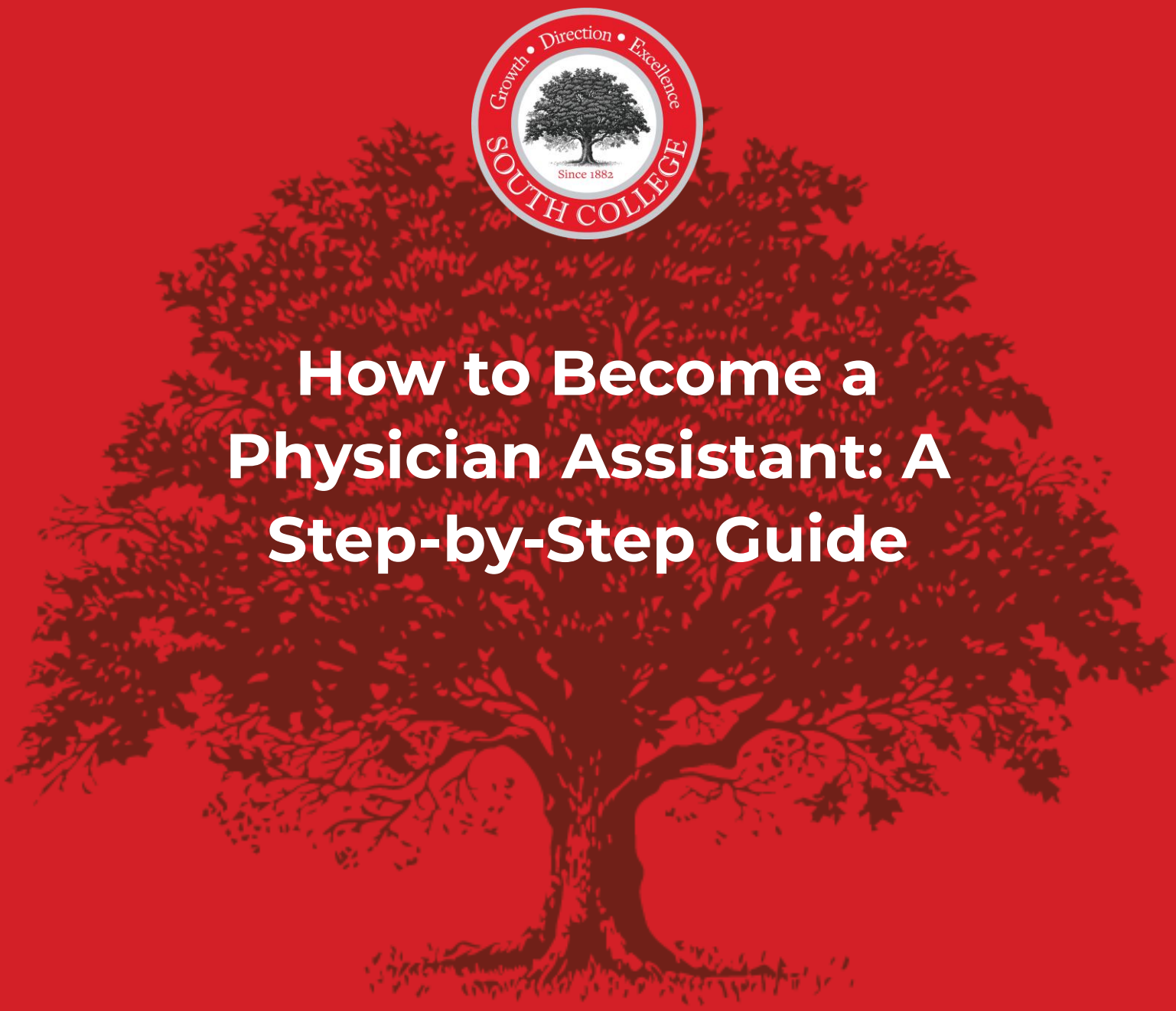


How to Become a Physician Assistant: A Step-by-Step Guide

Where Dreams Find Direction™

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A Step-by-Step Guide

If you're considering pursuing a career as a physician assistant (PA), you may already know that PAs play an important role in delivering patient care. But understanding what a PA does and knowing how to become one are two different things.

What degree do you need? Which prerequisite courses should you take? Do you need patient care or shadowing experience? How do you apply to PA school? And what happens after you graduate?

The path can seem complicated when you're first researching PA programs. Breaking it into individual steps can make the process much easier to understand.

Step 1: Complete Your Undergraduate Education

For many prospective PA students, the journey begins with earning a bachelor's degree.

There isn't necessarily one undergraduate major that every future PA must choose. Students may come from biology, health science, exercise science, psychology, or other academic backgrounds.

More important than the name of the major is whether you complete the prerequisite coursework required by the PA programs where you plan to apply.

That makes researching PA programs early particularly important. Knowing what programs expect can help you make more informed decisions about your undergraduate coursework.

Step 2: Complete PA School Prerequisites

PA programs establish their own prerequisite requirements, which means required coursework can vary from one program to another.
Depending on the program, prerequisite coursework may include subjects such as:

- ***Anatomy and physiology***
- ***Biology***
- ***Chemistry***
- ***Microbiology***
- ***Statistics***
- ***Psychology***
- ***Other science or health-related courses***

Programs may also establish requirements regarding minimum grades, GPA, laboratory coursework, or when prerequisite courses must have been completed.
PA Applicant Pro Tip: Don't wait until you're ready to submit applications to compare prerequisites. Research several programs well in advance and keep a list of the requirements for each.

Step 3: Gain Healthcare and Patient Care Experience

One of the most common questions prospective students ask is: *"How many patient care hours do I need for PA school?"*

There isn't one number that applies to every PA program. Some programs may require a specific amount or type of healthcare experience. Others may recommend it or consider the quality and amount of an applicant's experience as part of the admissions process.

Relevant experience may help applicants develop a better understanding of patient care and healthcare environments before entering PA school.

Depending on the requirements of the programs you are considering, experience could potentially come from roles such as:

- ***Emergency medical technician (EMT)***
- ***Paramedic***
- ***Certified nursing assistant (CNA)***
- ***Medical assistant***
- ***Patient care technician***
- ***Phlebotomist***
- ***Respiratory therapist***
- ***Nurse***
- ***Other patient-facing healthcare roles***

Not every healthcare position is evaluated the same way by every PA program. Before assuming an experience that will meet an admissions requirement, review the specific program's criteria.

Step 4: Learn About the PA Profession Through Shadowing

Shadowing a practicing PA can provide an opportunity to see the profession from a perspective that isn't possible through a website or textbook.

Depending on the setting, shadowing may allow you to observe how PAs communicate with patients, collaborate with other healthcare professionals, approach clinical decision-making, and manage the daily responsibilities of their role. Shadowing requirements differ among PA programs. Some may require or recommend shadowing, while others may evaluate it differently as part of the admissions process.

Even when it isn't required, learning directly about the profession can help you make a more informed decision about whether becoming a PA aligns with your interests and goals.

Step 5: Research PA Programs

Not every PA program is the same.
As you compare programs, consider factors beyond simply where the school is located.
Important questions may include:

- ***What are the admissions requirements?***
- ***Which prerequisite courses are required?***
- ***Is healthcare or patient care experience required or recommended?***
- ***Is PA shadowing required or recommended?***
- ***What is the program's curriculum and length?***
- ***What clinical education opportunities are included?***
- ***What are the program's accreditation details?***
- ***What are the application and supplemental application requirements?***
- ***What resources are available to students?***

Creating a simple comparison document or spreadsheet can make it easier to track requirements and deadlines across multiple programs.

Step 6: Apply to PA School

Many PA programs participate in the Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA). CASPA allows applicants to submit information used by participating PA programs through a centralized application process.
Depending on the programs you're applying to, your application process may involve items such as:

- ***Academic history and transcripts***
- ***Prerequisite coursework***
- ***Healthcare and patient care experience***
- ***Shadowing experience***
- ***Personal statement***
- ***Letters of recommendation***
- ***Program-specific information***
- ***Supplemental applications or materials***

Because requirements and deadlines vary, applicants should carefully review the instructions for each PA program.
And don't underestimate the amount of time involved. Gathering transcripts, documenting experience, requesting recommendations, preparing a personal statement, and completing program-specific requirements can take time.
Starting early can help make the application process more manageable.

Step 7: Prepare for PA School Interviews

For programs that include an interview as part of the admissions process, receiving an interview invitation is an important milestone. PA school interviews give programs an opportunity to learn more about applicants beyond their academic record.

Applicants may be asked about topics such as:

- ***Why they want to become a PA***
- ***Their understanding of the PA profession***
- ***Healthcare or patient care experiences***
- ***Challenges they have encountered***
- ***Communication and teamwork***
- ***Ethical or situational scenarios***
- ***Why they are interested in a particular program***

Preparation doesn't mean memorizing answers. Instead, spend time thinking about your experiences, your motivation for pursuing the profession, and what you've learned from working with or observing patients and healthcare professionals.

Step 8: Complete an Accredited PA Program

Once admitted, students begin the intensive academic and clinical education required to prepare for PA practice. PA education generally includes both classroom-based instruction and supervised clinical education.

Students may study subjects such as clinical medicine, pharmacology, physical diagnosis, anatomy, pathophysiology, and patient assessment before applying that knowledge during clinical experiences. Clinical education can expose students to multiple areas of medicine and different patient populations as they develop their skills.

Program structures and curricula vary, so prospective students should review individual programs when comparing their options.

Step 9: Pass the PANCE

Graduating from PA school isn't quite the final step.

Graduates of eligible PA programs must pass the Physician Assistant National Certifying Examination (PANCE) administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) to earn the PA-C credential.

The examination assesses medical and surgical knowledge needed for entry into PA practice. After passing the PANCE, graduates can use the PA-C credential, subject to applicable certification requirements.

Step 10: Meet State Requirements for Practice

PAs must also meet the requirements of the state in which they intend to practice for licensure. Because licensing and practice requirements can vary by jurisdiction and can change over time, graduates should consult the appropriate state licensing authority for current requirements.

Completing these requirements allows newly certified PAs to move from education into professional practice.