

Pre-Physician Assistant

What is Pre-Physician Assistant?

Pre-Physician Assistant (Pre-PA) is a pre-professional program at Cornell College for students interested in pursuing a career as a physician assistant. The program is designed to help students identify both prerequisites for admission and meaningful co-curricular experiences in and out of the medical field. The program is coordinated by Dimensions: The Center for the Science and Culture of Healthcare. Pre-PA students are expected to meet regularly with the Associate Director of Dimensions and are strongly encouraged to attend pre-health events sponsored by Dimensions on and off campus.

Professional Resources

The following resources offer extensive, reliable information on preparing for the healthcare field, in addition to those found throughout the Dimensions Guide to Pre-Physician Assistant:

- [Dimensions: The Center for the Science and Culture of Healthcare](#)
- [ExploreHealthCareers.org](#)
- [American Academy of Physician Assistants \(AAPA\)](#)
- [Accreditation Review Commission on Education for Physician Assistants, Inc. \(ARC-PA\)](#)

Pre-Physician Assistant Guide Outline

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What is a Physician Assistant?

Physician Assistants (PAs) practice medicine on a team under the supervision of a licensed physician. They are formally educated to examine patients, diagnose injuries and illnesses, and provide treatment (Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2015). PAs are trained to provide diagnostic, therapeutic, and preventive healthcare services. They take medical histories, examine and treat patients, order and interpret laboratory tests and x-rays, make diagnoses, and prescribe medications. They also treat minor injuries by suturing, splinting, and casting. Most states allow physician assistants to prescribe medications. In many rural and inner city areas, PAs practice independently with supervision from a physician 1-2 days per week.

PAs must satisfy all of the requirements of a Physician Assistant program (usually a Master of Science degree in Physician Assistant Studies) and pass board examinations in order to practice as a licensed Physician Assistant.

Most PA programs are two to three years in length and are full time master's programs. Students ultimately graduate with a Master of Physician Assistant Studies. Before a PA can begin practicing, they must pass the Physician Assistants National Certifying Examination administered by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) and open to graduates of [accredited PA education programs](#).

[Physician Assistant Education Association \(PAEA\)](#)

Cornell College Health Professions Committee (HPC)

The [HPC](#) assists current students and alumni applying to professional programs in healthcare. The HPC process results in a Committee Letter of Recommendation sent to each school the student applies to, along with all other letters of recommendation. The Committee Letter of Recommendation is signed by the 4 members of the HPC:

- Barbara Christie Pope, PhD
- Craig Tepper, PhD
- Associate Director of Dimensions
- 1 Cornell College faculty or staff member of the student's choosing

The [HPC Committee Guide](#) is updated annually and should be reviewed by applicants before applying for the HPC. Students can find the most up-to-date version of the HPC Committee Guide on the Dimensions HPC website. Dimensions hosts workshops every year during 3rd or 4th block on the HPC and healthcare program application processes.

Applications are due to the HPC the summer before the intended application cycle begins. (For example, students hoping to start a PA program in fall 2017 will submit all application materials to the HPC in summer 2016.) Visit the Dimensions website to learn more about the HPC application process.

[Centralized Application for PA Programs](#)

[Central Application Service for Physician Assistants \(CASPA\)](#)

[Accredited PA Programs](#)

[ARC-PA Accredited PA Programs](#)

PA Program Prerequisites

A specific major is not required for admission into a PA program. Students are advised to major in a discipline they are both most interested and able to excel in.

The following courses are required for admission to most PA programs:

<i>Prerequisite (PAEA 2015)</i>	<i>Prerequisites for the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine (2015 Cycle)</i>	<i>Course Equivalent at Cornell College</i>
2 English courses	2 English courses	ENG 111 (1 st Year Writing Course) & 1 additional writing course within the English department
2 Introductory Biology courses with labs	Introductory course in Animal Biology or General Zoology and at least 3 upper-division level courses in Biology or Zoology, one of which must be animal, human, or exercise physiology.	BIO 141 (Foundations: Cellular Biology),& BIO 142 (Foundations: Organismal Biology), BIO 329 (Anatomy & Physiology I), BIO 330 (Anatomy & Physiology II), & BIO 205 (Cellular and Molecular Biology)
3-4 Upper Level Biology courses	Examples of Upper-Level Courses: Cell Biology**, Immunology**, Microbiology**, Anatomy, Embryology, Endocrinology, Histology, Neuroscience, Pharmacology **Highly recommended	BIO 327 (Immunology) BIO 326 (Microbiology) KIN 207 (Systems Physiology) BIO 328 (Neurobiology)
2 General Chemistry course with lab	Series of introductory courses in Chemistry followed by upper-level courses in Organic Chemistry and Introductory Biochemistry.	CHE 121 (Chemical Principles I) & CHE 122 (Chemical Principles II) CHE 225 (Organic Chemistry I Lecture) CHE 326 (Organic Chemistry II Lecture) CHE 327 (Organic Chemistry Laboratory) CHE 334 (Biochemistry)
Organic Chemistry course sequence with lab		
1 Statistics course	Statistical Sciences – 1 course	STA 201 (Statistical Methods I)
1 Biochemistry course	X	BIO 334 (Biochemistry)
Humanities/Social Science courses	X	Suggested: PSY 161 (Fundamentals of Psychological Science) PSY 282 (Abnormal Psychology) SOC 101 (Sociological Thinking)

The following courses at Cornell College are prerequisites for some of the aforementioned PA prerequisites and/or are recommended for students pursuing PA programs:

BIO 315 (Genetics)

Note: Each PA program has a specific list of prerequisites you must complete to be considered for admission. Most PA programs require additional courses than those specified in the table above. Visit both the [PAEA Program Directory](#) and PA program websites regularly to explore program-specific prerequisites to ensure you've satisfied courses needed before applying. Be sure your Faculty Advisor is aware that you are Pre-PA. It is strongly recommended that you meet with your Faculty Advisor and [Dimensions staff](#) regularly to ensure you are meeting the requirements for both your major and PA programs in the proper sequence.

AP Credit

PA programs have different rules when it comes to accepting AP credit as fulfillment of a prerequisite. If you enter Cornell College with AP credit, closely check the requirements of the PA programs of which you intend to apply.

Community College Credit

Most PA programs prefer that applicants take all prerequisites at a 4-year institution. Students interested in earning credit at a community college should meet with their Faculty Advisor and the Associate Director of Dimensions *before* registration.

What makes a competitive applicant for PA programs?

PA programs are incredibly competitive, with many more qualified applicants applying each year than there are spots available. PA programs today are looking for well-balanced applicants. Most PA programs offer a [holistic review](#) of applications meeting the minimum GPA and [Graduate Record Exam \(GRE\)](#) score. Holistic review is an individualized way of assessing an applicant's capabilities by which balanced consideration is given to experiences, attributes, and academic metrics and, when considered in combination, how the individual might contribute value as a PA student and future Physician Assistant.

Becoming a competitive applicant for PA programs is a marathon, not a sprint. Students should not rush into a PA application cycle. The "right" time to apply for a PA program is unique for each applicant and representative of their individual aptitude for the sciences, experiences, and level of personal readiness to commit to the health profession. All PA programs have a minimum requirement for direct patient health care hours. *The minimum is usually between 1,000 and 3,000 hours of direct patient health care experience before applying.* Students usually obtain these hours through the following roles: medical assisting, emergency medical technician, paramedic, registered nurse, emergency room technician, certified nursing assistant, and surgical tech.

Most students have about 3 years of healthcare experience before entering a PA program (AAPA, 2015).

Competitive PA program applicants:

- Earn high grades in prerequisites at a 4-year institution
- Demonstrate (from experience) they are aware of the PA's role in today's healthcare climate and in relation to other healthcare providers
- Apply to PA programs only when they feel they are ready to make a lifelong commitment to medicine and have the strongest application possible
- Research the schools they apply to assess "fit" and review prerequisites *before* applying
- Reflect on and make connections between experiences leading up to applying to PA programs
 - Can discuss what they learned *from* their experiences rather than what they *contributed*
 - Demonstrate how they've applied what they learned in earlier experiences to experiences that followed
 - Are able to easily demonstrate and explain why experiences were personally meaningful
 - Demonstrate they understand the impact and purpose of their responsibilities in each experience
- Have high science and cumulative GPAs
- Earn a competitive GRE or MCAT score (scores vary by program, check to see which examination is preferred by the schools you intend to apply to)
- Balance diverse medical experiences with other activities they are passionate about
- Can speak from experience when asked the question, "What makes a good Physician Assistant?"
 - Can answer the question "Why do you want to be a Physician Assistant?" clearly and easily, demonstrating self-reflection and realistic expectations of the medical field
- Have a parallel plan in mind: They know what they will do to demonstrate interest in and a commitment to medicine if they are not accepted into a PA program in their first application cycle.

Review the [AAPA's Become a PA](#) website to learn more about pursuing PA programs.

Cornell College Pre-Physician Assistant Sample 4-Year Timeline*

Year in School	Cornell College Course Satisfying Prerequisite	Additional Information
First Year	FYS ENG 111 1 additional English writing course BIO 141 BIO 142 CHE 121 CHE 122	Your top priorities are becoming acquainted with your new surroundings, living arrangements, and course requirements. Students are strongly encouraged to get involved in co-curricular activities they are interested in or passionate about. (Activities do not all need to be medical-related.) New students should meet with the Associate Director of Dimensions at least once during their first year on campus. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many students will begin exploring opportunities to shadow healthcare professionals, volunteer in the community, and take part in student organizations. Hours spent in co-curricular activities should be tracked for the PA school application. • Students are encouraged to start thinking about summer as early as October**. • Students should review professional resources from this document and the Dimensions website to familiarize themselves with medicine and the medical field. • Attend relevant Dimensions Pre-Health Workshops.
Second Year	PSY 161 STA 201 CHE 225 CHE 326 CHE 327 BIO 205	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek opportunities to work closely with faculty members on research and other projects outside of class. Narrow down co-curricular involvement to experiences that are most meaningful to you and that you are most passionate about (even if it's not healthcare related.) Move up to leadership positions or take on more responsibility in co-curricular activities. • Start looking at PA programs more closely to identify unique requirements of schools you are interested in. Read in detail about the PA school application cycles, the GRE, and the Cornell College Health Professions Committee. • Attend relevant Dimensions Pre-Health Workshops.
Third Year	BIO 315 CHE 202 PHY 141 PHY 142 BIO 329	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to work up to leadership positions or take on more responsibilities in co-curricular activities. Continue to shadow in the medical field and volunteer in the community. • Be sure you've completed at least the minimum amount of shadowing hours required by PA programs you plan to apply to. • Register for the GRE and prepare by taking several full-length practice exams. (Dimensions can help you identify GRE prep resources.) Students should sit for the GRE in April, May or June of their third year on campus if they plan to apply to start a PA program immediately following graduation. • Prepare for Health Professions Committee if you intend to enter PA school immediately following graduation. Application deadlines should be verified with the Associate Director of Dimensions before the end of your junior year. (Example: Health Profession Committee applications are due summer 2016 if you hope to start medical school fall 2017.) • Attend relevant Dimensions Pre-Health Workshops.
Fourth Year	CHE 334 PSY 282 SOC 101 BIO 326, 327, or 328 BIO 330 Complete graduation major/minor requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete secondary applications and on-campus interviews. • Attend relevant Dimensions Pre-Health Workshops.

*You should always begin with the course most aligned with your current ability. It is better to start a few courses back and earn an "A" than to jump right into the prerequisite course and earn a "B" or "C". This sample timeline includes many required, recommended, and prerequisite courses for PA programs. Always consult specific PA program prerequisites and with your Faculty Advisor before making course selections.

**Pre-Physician Assistant students hoping to enter PA school immediately after graduation are strongly encouraged to use their summers. This includes conducting research, volunteering in the community, shadowing or interning in the field of medicine, and/or working in the healthcare field.