Physicians Assistant

(Masters of P.A.)

Modern Medicine is becoming increasing team-oriented. Largely gone are the days of a single physician in practice with a nurse and an office manager. Physicians work in large practices and are often under tremendous pressure to serve as many patients as possible as quickly as possible. In an effort the decentralize the delivery of high-order medical expertise, Physician’s Assistant (P.A.) programs were developed in the 1970s. Today, P.A.s have a central role in mid-to-large practices in delivering much of the patient-centered care once the sole purview of Physicians.

Physician Assistants (PAs) are medical professionals that provide services under the supervision of physicians. PAs are trained to provide diagnostic, therapeutic, and preventive healthcare services, as deemed necessary by a physician. Although PAs are educated as generalists in medicine, many PAs work in specialty fields, including cardiovascular surgery, orthopedics, and emergency medicine. Most PAs work in the primary care specialty areas of family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics and gynecology.

For professionals who are people-oriented and looking for a more flexible, family-friendly, lifestyle, a P.A. is an attractive and lucrative path to consider. Increasingly, P.A.s work in under-served communities, often hundreds of miles away from their attending physician. P.A.s can have significant autonomy.

In the U.S., 190 programs enroll approximately 7,000 students from a pool of about 20,000 applicants; upwards of 70% of which are female. Georgia is fortunate in having 4 programs, which mix public/private and rural/urban settings.

The employments and salary outlooks are quite good. Recent statistics suggest that average graduate debt is a comparatively low $115,000. Recent data on median starting salaries was in the range of $100,000.

**Masters of Physician’s Assistant:** There are about 190 schools internationally awarding the M.S.P.A. credential.

**P.A. School costs**: Cost for attending P.A. school are comparatively low. The latest information for Georgia’s P.S. programs cites a total cost of $71,000 for a 27-month program. Like any post-graduate professional program, loans and scholarships are readily available, greatly reducing the stress associated with the necessity of “making ends meet” over the course of the 2-year program.

**Veterinary Programs in Georgia**:

M.S.P.A.- South University (Private; Savannah); Augusta University (Public; Augusta); Emory University (Private; Atlanta); Mercer University (Private; Atlanta).

**Admissions**: Applicants are most likely to be admitted to P.A. school in their state of residence. Acceptance rates to P.A. programs tend to be lower than other post-graduate professional schools; roughly 35% by one recent estimate.

Most applicants are *not* recent graduates. The ethos of programs is to encourage older applicants and most programs require a sizable number of hours working in a healthcare setting as a prerequisite for application. This forces the overwhelming majority of applicants to work (often full-time) in other areas of healthcare before they can apply.

Successful admission to a P.A. program requires demonstrated ability and experience in multiple areas. Excellence in one (e.g. grades), but the omission of another (e.g. experience) will almost certainly result in disappointment; *all* are important.

1. **Grades (and major)**: As is the case with many other healthcare professional schools, a very high G.P.A. is important, but not as vital as most believe. Admissions counselors often use the word “holistic” in how they approach the evaluation of candidates. National data suggest that applicants averaged a GPA in the 3.4- 3.5 for those accepted and enrolled.

As with other healthcare professional programs, schools are looking for intelligent, motivated and compassionate students. Unlike these other professions, P.A. programs also tend to look for older, experienced applicants. With respect to pre-requisites, they look for students with the basic background knowledge (i.e. “pre-requisites”) and are expecting to “teach the rest”. That is, the selection is major is not as important as most would assume. So long as a student has the pre-requisite courses (regardless of whether they are part of their major or not), P.A. programs are satisfied.

**Your major at Oglethorpe**: Traditionally, students accepted to P.A. school have majored in Biology, BioPsychology or Chemistry. This is largely out of convenience-- the pre-requisites for most Veterinary programs are largely covered by these majors. However, OU has had students with other majors have successfully applied. These successful students have spent 1- 2 “gap” years after Oglethorpe working as healthcare Office Managers, EMTs (Emergency Medical Technician) and one even entered a program after a two-year tour in the Peace Corps, where she focused on health education for underserved South African communities.

1. **Pre-requisites/Coursework**: Academic preparation requires successful completion of several items. First and foremost is a bachelor’s degree. Veterinary school is a post-graduate (i.e. post- B.A. or B.S.) education.

The choice of major is not very important (see A), above). The UGA program requires the following:

General (Inorganic) Chemistry- 2 semesters/1 year

Biology- 2 semesters/1 year the introductory level (including Anatomy, Physiology, Microbiology and Cell Biology)

Physics- 1 year at the introductory level (i.e. non-Calculus)

English- 1 year (e.g. Core 101/102)

Other humanities coursework

The reality is that the more coursework preparation, the better. Unlike most other post-graduate professional programs, Anatomy, Physiology, Cell Biology, Molecular Biology, and/or Genetics are a required prerequisite rather than just a suggestion.

As with any programs, whenever you have identified a specific program to apply to, it is strongly suggested that you review and prepare for any and all specific program requirements.

1. **Standardized Testing**: P.A. programs usually require the Graduate Record Exam (G.R.E.) with the Analytical Writing portion. A recent set of M.C.A.T. are often acceptable, but rarely required.

Sitting for the G.R.E. does not necessary require preparation. However the taking of a short course, such as Kaplan and Princeton Review, that provide reviews of test-taking strategies and banks of practice tests is strongly urged.

1. **Experience: Internship, Shadowing and/or Work**: A critical portion of the admissions process for P.A. programs is the requirement of upwards of 2,000 hours of meaningful experience in a healthcare setting. (Just for reference, that is the equivalent of a full year of full-time employment.) Historically, students have worked (for pay) for upwards of 3 years. There are many ways that this requirement can be fulfilled, but is does need a dedicated and organized approach to being accomplished. 2,000 hours cannot be accumulated with casual volunteering or nights and weekends work. This experience, whether for pay or not, must be documents and carefully accounted for in a successful application.
2. **Letters of Reference (LORs)**: Internships, shadowing and/or work experience also provides the opportunity for a Healthcare practitioner to provide extensive and substantive comments of your professional initiative, demeanor and abilities in the form a “letter of reference” required for P.A. school applications. The more in-depth their experience with you, the more in-depth and supportive of your desire to enter medical school will be their letter.

Typically, programs solicit up to 5 letters of reference that can include course instructors (such as professors), healthcare professionals familiar with your interests and promise, work supervisors and character witnesses.

With respect to the former (Professors), students often ask Oglethorpe Professors for letters. Unlike larger Universities that formulate a consensus “Pre-Health Committee” letter, Oglethorpe University instructors write individual letters tailored for each applicant. The small class sizes and close and extensive interactions between instructors and students means letters can be honest, extensive and rich in detail and anecdotes- exactly what P.A. school admissions committees are looking for. Students are encourage to cultivate a positive and productive relationship with each of their instructors in anticipation of asking for an honest (and confidential) evaluation of their academic abilities and promise for success in the Veterinary sciences.

1. **CASPA (https://paeaonline.org/caspa/)**: The PAEA (Physician’s Assistant Education Association) administers the centralized application service for most U.S. P.A. schools. CASPA simplifies the applicationprocess by allowing applicants to complete one standardized application rather than fill out multiple applications. The service opens for the generation of applicant accounts and for the acceptance of data on July 1st of every application cycle. The site calculates applicant GPAs in a standardized format, organizes the acceptance and distribution of Letters of Recommendation (LORs), and the distribution of materials to programs.

**For Further Reading:**

The BEST place to start—“Explore Health Careers”: <https://explorehealthcareers.org/>

“American Association of P.A.s”: https://www.aapa.org/what-is-a-pa/