

Physician Assistant Education



Since the first three PAs graduated from Duke University in 1967, the profession has grown dramatically. In 2009, there are 145 accredited PA programs in the United States, which together graduate more than 5,000 new PAs each year. Federal support has been critical to the development of the profession at several key points.

The continuing growth of the profession looks strong, with more than 20 new programs in the pipeline and a robust applicant pool that has grown by more than 10% each year. Challenges faced by PA programs include recruitment of qualified faculty, shortages of preceptors and clinical sites, and increasing the diversity of faculty and applicants.

PA EDUCATION AT A GLANCE

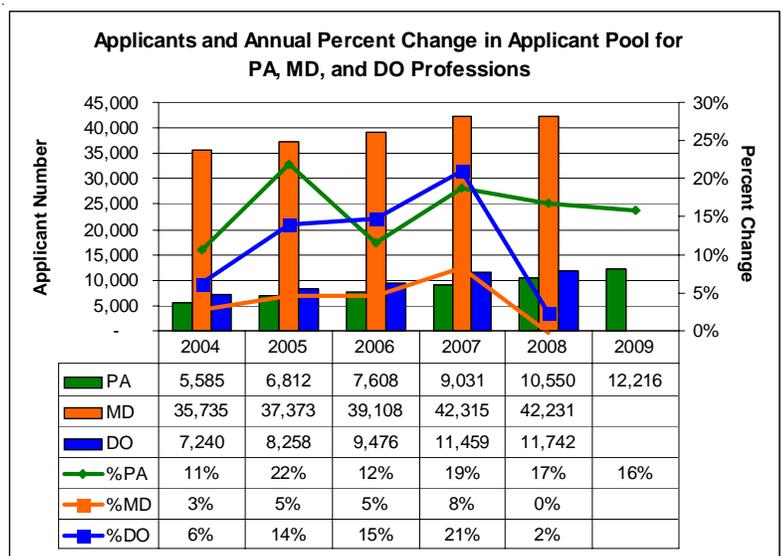
- PAs are educated as generalists in medicine; their flexibility allows them to practice in more than 60 medical and surgical specialties.
- The average PA program is 27 months long: one year of classroom study and 15 months of clinical rotations.
- Curriculum includes 400 hours of basic sciences and nearly 600 hours of clinical medicine
- More than 80% of programs award a master's degree.
- More than 80% of programs are housed at a university or college; 14% in academic health centers.

PA GRADUATES

- PAs are licensed health professionals who practice medicine as members of a team with their supervising physicians.
- PAs exercise autonomy in medical decision making and provide a broad range of medical and therapeutic services to diverse populations in rural and urban settings.
- More than one third of graduates practice in primary care.
- PAs practice in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and in virtually all health care settings, including hospitals, physicians' offices, HMOs, nursing homes, public health agencies, and community clinics.

THE PA APPLICANT POOL

- Eighty percent of applicants have a baccalaureate degree, most commonly in biology
- Applicants average 3.7 years of health care experience
- Average overall undergraduate GPA is 3.25; average science GPA is 3.13
- Nearly one third of applicants are non-white (31%)
- Mean age of applicants is 26.9 years old
- Three quarters (74%) of applicants are female



The majority of applicants to PA programs apply through the Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA). Over the past five years, CASPA's applicant pool has grown by an average of more than 15% (see chart). The profession's rapid growth is expected to continue, driven by the projected shortage of physicians and other health care professionals, the growing demand for health care services from an aging population, and the continuing strong applicant pool. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 27% increase in the number of PA jobs over the 10-year period, 2006-2016.

With its relatively short initial training time and the flexibility of generalist-trained PAs, the PA profession is well positioned to help fill projected shortages in the numbers of health care professionals.