

PRE-PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PROGRAM AT CALVIN COLLEGE

A Physician Assistant (PA) is trained and licensed to practice medicine under the supervision of a licensed physician. The practice may be located in a hospital, clinic, physician's office, nursing home, or related area. The PA can record medical histories, perform physical examinations, perform diagnoses, counsel patients, order and interpret laboratory tests, assist in surgery, set fractures, and in all states and the District of Columbia, write orders for prescription drugs. Because of the nature of the work, the PA interacts with patients on a personal level and can meaningfully demonstrate Christian caring and commitment. Employment opportunities are excellent, and the demand for PA services is expected to increase.

Begun in 1965, the practice of Physician Assistant originated with the realization that there was a shortage of or uneven distribution of primary care physicians, and that some levels of medical care did not require the full expertise of physicians. So, Physician Assistant programs were initiated to supply trained medical personnel to fill that gap in medical care needs. The first classes consisted mostly of former members of the military medical corps who were then trained to give civilian medical care. The very first program was at Duke University Medical Center and the first class was comprised of former members of the Navy medical corps. The clinical training programs are now typically about two years in duration (if they include summer courses) and are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs. There are currently about 140 accredited programs, some offering Baccalaureate Degrees, most offering a Master of Science degree. Graduates from either are qualified to sit for the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA) examination. Once a PA is certified, he/she must earn and log 100 Continuing Medical Education hours every two years and sit for the Physician Assistant National Recertifying Examination every six years to retain the credentials, "Physician Assistant - Certified." Almost all states require NCCPA certification and regulate PA practice through state medical boards.

In order to apply for acceptance into a particular clinical training program, an applicant must complete the prerequisite course work required for the program. For Master of Science programs, an applicant must have a B.S. or B.A. degree in addition to the completion of the prerequisite courses.

The **prerequisite courses** differ somewhat from program to program, but some courses are common to many programs. Courses required by at least 75% of 23 sampled programs include:

- two semesters of general chemistry (*Chemistry 103 and 104*)
- organic chemistry (*Chemistry 253 or 261 and 262*)
- one semester introductory biology (*Biology 141*)
- anatomy (*Biology 205 or 323*)
- physiology (*Biology 206 or 331, some programs specifying a 300 or higher level course*)
- microbiology (*Biology 207 or 336*)
- introductory psychology (*Psychology 151*)
- a college math course (*Mathematics 110 or 132*)
- GRE General Test

In addition, some programs require one or more of the following courses (the list includes courses required by 25% – 50% of the programs):

- biochemistry (*Chemistry 323 or 303*)
- medical terminology (*Offered as an independent study course through the HPERDS Dept.*)
- lifespan development (*Psychology 201*)
- statistics (*Mathematics 143 or Psychology 255*)
- nutrition (*Health 254*)
- sociology (*Sociology 151*).

Since there is variability of prerequisites among different programs, it is advisable for the student to contact either Dr. Peter Tigchelaar or Dr. Richard Nyhof (Department of Biology) soon to ensure that the appropriate courses are taken to allow qualified application for the programs of interest to the student. A complete listing of the educational programs is available on the web site for the American Academy of Physician Assistants, www.aapa.org/pgmlist.php3 (or, www.aapa.org for the home page and click on the *About AAPA & PAs* button on the top menu bar, then on *PA Programs*, then on *PA Educational Programs*).

In addition to completion of specific academic courses, admission requirements include considerable **health care experience**, sometimes requiring at least 1,000 hours of direct patient care experience. This experience can be achieved either through employment or through volunteer activity in such areas as athletic trainer, hospital orderly, hospital aide, hospice aide, nurse, nurse's aide, nursing home aide, pharmacist, x-ray technician, phlebotomist, or emergency medical technician. Volunteer experience can be arranged through the Service-Learning Center on the Calvin College campus. Some programs value paid positions more highly: restrictions with maintaining patient confidentiality due to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) have restricted activities of health care volunteers.

Over 120 PA programs now participate in the Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA). Information can be found at www.caspaonline.org. To apply to any of the participating programs, you need to complete the generalized application which CASPA will then distribute to the various programs to which you are applying. CASPA recommends that you begin the application at least four weeks prior to the first deadline among the programs to which you are applying. Letters of recommendation are to be submitted online, so be sure to request these in plenty of time for them to be completed in time for your application deadline. While the formal request for the recommendations is sent by e-mail to the indicated people directly from CASPA, you should have approached the individuals personally before listing their names. They can then expect the online recommendation request. Since faculty members are occasionally off campus for a semester or two on sabbatical leave, it is a good idea to ask them during the semester prior to your application deadline. Some programs require a supplemental application form to be sent directly to the program, so be sure to carefully read the information on the Web site for each program to which you are applying. Programs beginning in May often have application deadlines in October, so plan well in advance of deadlines.

The Herbert H. and Grace A Dow College of Health Programs at Central Michigan University (CMU) has signed an articulation agreement with Calvin College whereby CMU will hold 2 of their 44 yearly positions open for Calvin students. Calvin applicants with an overall GPA of 3.3 or higher and completion of the prerequisite courses will compete only with other Calvin applicants. CMU will even waive the application fee for Calvin students. If there are more than 2 Calvin applicants, the remainder will be placed into the general applicant pool. Opportunities to shadow Physician Assistants in various areas of Michigan can be obtained by contacting the Director of Admissions for the CMU program, Clint Fitzpatrick at fitzp1tc@cmich.edu. He maintains a database of CMU PA graduates who have offered the opportunity to shadow them in their work.

Most programs require your score on the Graduate Record Exam General Test. You can obtain information and preparation guides for this at www.gre.org. This online test is offered at selected locations many times throughout the year, but you will have to register in advance to be certain of securing a position at the time and location of your choice. In Grand Rapids, it is offered at the Prometric Testing Center (Sylvan Learning Center), 3910 Burton St. SE. To prepare for the test, you can use the materials found at the GRE Web site or at area bookstores.