Things We Wish We’d Known Before Physician Assistant School: A Physician Assistant Student Survival Guide

Ashley Thrasher, MMS, PA-C; Sarah Bumgarner; Angela Darket; Liz VanWieren; Krista Warner, Wake Forest School of Medicine Physician Assistant Program, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Newly accepted physician assistant (PA) students are understandably anxious about what PA school will be like. To help ease the transition into school, we’ve put together these valuable tidbits of information that would have made our lives easier had we known them beforehand. Good luck as you enter one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, experiences of your life!

Before School Starts

• Take a nice vacation. Relax for a week or two before the first day of school so you can hit the ground running.

• Give yourself plenty of time between moving in and starting school so you can get settled.

• Make sure you live somewhere that is safe and nice to come home to. If you have roommates, make sure you get along with them. You need to be able to relax at home.

• Visit your PCP for a physical exam. Make sure you’re healthy so you can do your best.

• Take care of any unfinished business — bills, vehicle, conflicts, etc.

• Talk to your family about the upcoming demands on your time.

The First Few Weeks

• Don’t buy every book you can get your hands on — you will have access to your school’s online library resources, which are also informative and obviously less expensive.

• Buy used equipment to save money — just make sure it works.

• An overly competitive attitude can cause undue stress on yourself and your classmates — forget about making better grades than everyone else and concentrate on making yourself a good PA.

• Buy a board review book at the beginning of PA school. It is helpful for ensuring that you know the highlights of diseases, and it gets you used to the blueprint of PANCE.

The Didactic Year

• Don’t allow anyone from your school to read your Facebook. No, really, just don’t.

• Dating your classmates: Bad idea. You and your classmates don’t need the drama.

• You can learn infinitely more from collaboration than isolation.
• Have friends outside of PA school.

• You will not be able to learn every little detail of everything. Focus on the big picture.

• Have hobbies outside of PA school.

• You are responsible for how much you learn. You cannot depend on faculty, preceptors, or a book to teach you everything you need to know. This is nothing like undergraduate education.

• There is a lot of memorization involved with medicine, but you also have to be able to apply that information.

• Keep all of your notes about one specific disorder together (whether it be in a single file on your computer or on papers in a three-ring binder). This will help when it is time to study for PANCE.

• Don’t procrastinate on anything.

• Exercise and eat well. You will feel better and have more energy.

• Get plenty of sleep.

The Clinical Year

• Always be on time and be professional.

• There is a lot of leeway in medicine — there are lots of correct ways to do something and there is rarely a hard and fast right answer.

• Working hard on your rotations really pays off and brings the textbook knowledge to life. Trust the process during didactic year — it will make more sense during clinicals.

• Don’t take yourself too seriously. Have balance and enjoy your time off so you can work hard when it counts!

• You may have more free time than you did during didactic year but don’t forget to study. Remember, you have to take the PANCE.

• Don’t hesitate to let your faculty know if you’re having a problem with anything in your rotations.

• Be assertive, especially if there are lots of other students or residents on your rotations.

• Always send a thank you note to your preceptors at the end of each rotation.

• Carry snacks in your white coat. You may not always have time to eat.

• Start the process of applying for licensure as soon as possible. It can take months for everything to be approved.

In General

• Join your local, state, and national PA organizations. These will help with networking and keep you up to date on issues within the profession.

• Understanding issues facing the profession and advocacy are responsibilities of any good PA student.

• The Student Academy of the AAPA offers many opportunities to get involved. Send them an email at students@aapa.org for information.

• Time flies when you’re having fun! At times it will seem like school will never end, but when it does, you will look back and be amazed at how fast these years went.

• Watch your spending — the less you spend in school, the easier it will be to repay your student loans.
Applicants to physician assistant programs should have a bachelor’s degree and high grades in prerequisite courses like human anatomy and physiology, biology, chemistry, and mathematics. Many schools require applicants to have several hundred hours of experience working or volunteering in health care. The structure of a physician assistant program is similar to the structure of medical school. After they finish their preclinical studies, students complete rotations in hospitals and other health care facilities. Required rotations may include pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, family practice, general surgery, and emergency medicine. What does a physician assistant earn? The median yearly pay for physician assistants in the United States was $90,930 in 2012. What are Physician Assistants Schools? Individuals who wish to create awareness about how to avoid maladies and all forms of ailments, yet do not possess all that is required to attend a medical school; can become Physician Assistants. Majorly, physician assistants are medical professional who operates under a doctor’s supervision. Generally, getting into a Physician Assistant School is quite hard. This can easily be attributed to the low acceptance rate for PA programs. Some PA school acceptance rates can be as high as 20% or as low as 0.8%. Before applying to a PA school, students should take courses in anatomy and physiology, review medical terminology, and medical shorthand. A physician assistant in the United States, Canada and other select countries or physician associate in the United Kingdom (PA) is an Advanced Practice Provider (APP). PAs are medical professionals who diagnose illness, develop and manage treatment plans, prescribe medications, and often serve as a patient’s principal healthcare provider. With thousands of hours of medical training, PAs are versatile and collaborative. PAs practice in every state and in every medical setting and specialty, improving