Audio file

AA_Episode9aymk.mp3

Transcript

00:00:03 Casey Ellis

Welcome to the Pre-Professional Playbook Podcast where preparation and hard work come together.

00:00:08 Casey Ellis

This podcast explores pathways in the health and law professions to help you format your future.

00:00:13 Casey Ellis

I'm your host, Casey Ellis, an advisor in the University of Georgia's Pre-Professional Advising Office.

00:00:18 Casey Ellis

Whether you're just starting out, considering a career shift, or just wanting to know more,

00:00:23 Casey Ellis

This episode is your guide to navigating the various educational and professional options available.

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Today, we're suiting up for an inside look at the fast-paced and high-stakes field of anesthesiologist assistant.

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Let's discuss a winning game plan to help you break into the profession.

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Certified anesthesiologist assistants, or CAAs, are highly trained healthcare professionals who work under the supervision of licensed anesthesiologists to provide anesthesia care.

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They're an essential part of the anesthesia care team, which is a model supported by the American Society of Anesthesiologists.

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To become a CAA, you need a bachelor's degree that includes strong foundational science courses, and then you complete an intensive graduate program that covers both classroom learning and hands-on clinical training.

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CAAs are experts in delivering anesthesia, monitoring patients during surgery, and managing advanced patient care technologies.

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The whole goal of CAA education is to take motivated students and turn them into skilled advanced practice providers who are ready to work in anesthesia care teams.

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Certified Anesthesiologist Assistants are highly skilled medical professionals who play a crucial role in anesthesia care, working within the anesthesia care team to ensure patient safety and comfort.

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The anesthesia care team is designed to provide a patient-centered approach, bringing together a team of experts under the supervision of an anesthesiologist to deliver the safest and most effective anesthesia care possible.

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CAAs take on a wide range of responsibilities before, during, and after surgery.

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They begin by eliciting a patients pre-anesthesia health history and conducting a thorough physical examination to assess any potential risk.

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Once in the operating room, they establish patient monitoring devices, gain intravenous access, and apply advanced monitoring techniques to track vital signs and responses to anesthesia.

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Throughout the procedure, CAAs participate in all phases of anesthesia care, including induction, maintenance, and emergence, helping to ensure a smooth and controlled experience for the patient.

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In addition to these tasks, CAAs are trained to secure a patients airway using techniques such as mask ventilation, endotracheal intubation, or laryngeal mask airways.

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They interpret and record the patients physiological and pharmacological status, making adjustments as necessary to maintain stability.

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The role doesn't end in the operating room CAAs also provide continuous care into the post-operative period, monitoring recovery and addressing any anesthesia-related concerns.

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anesthesiologist assistants or CAAs can work in a bunch of different specialties depending on what interests them.

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For example, they might focus on cardiac anesthesia, where they provide anesthesia care for heart surgeries, including open heart procedures and cardiac catheterizations.

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Or they might focus on neuroanesthesia, which deals with brain and spine surgeries requiring precise management of cerebral blood flow and intracranial pressure.

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If they enjoy working with kids paying special attention to their unique physiological needs, they can

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pediatric anesthesia, or if they prefer working in fast-paced environments, they might go into trauma anesthesia, which specializes in rapid response anesthesia care for critically injured patients in emergency and trauma settings.

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There's also obstetric anesthesia for pain management during labor and delivery, orthopedic anesthesia for musculoskeletal surgeries including joint replacements and fracture repairs, and even transplant anesthesia for organ transplants.

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Some CAAs work in pain management clinics to provide interventional procedures, nerve blocks, and chronic pain therapies, while others focus on outpatient or ambulatory anesthesia for quick, same-day procedures in surgery centers.

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And in certain settings, they can even assist in critical care units, helping manage sedation and airway procedures for ICU patients.

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There are so many paths CAAs can take depending on what excites them most.

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It's like having a playbook with plenty of winning plays.

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No matter which route they choose, CAAs have a lot of options to create a fulfilling career.

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CAAs can work in a variety of clinical settings.

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These include hospitals and surgical centers where they may assist in procedures such as endoscopies, conscious sedation, abdominal surgery, orthopedic surgery, cardiac surgery, neurosurgery, transplant surgery, and trauma surgery.

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Additionally, CAAs can work in specialized environments like pain management clinics, providing critical support in the administration and monitoring of anesthesia.

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Right now, certified anesthesiologist assistants can practice in 19 states plus Washington, D.C.

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and that number is continuing to grow.

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These states include Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Indiana, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin.

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In these states, CAAs are fully recognized as part of the anesthesia care team and can work under the medical direction of an anesthesiologist.

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Then, there are a few states that follow a different system known as delegatory authority.

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In these states, Kansas, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, CAAs can still practice, but their ability to do so depends on specific delegation rules set by the state's medical board or individual hospital.

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The good news is that the field is expanding.

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Just in 2024, Washington State passed a new law to officially license CAAs, and in 2023, Nevada and New Mexico expanded opportunities for CAAs through new licensure and practice laws.

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With continued advocacy from the American Society of Anesthesiologists, more states are considering allowing CAAs to practice, making this an exciting and growing profession.

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You might be wondering the difference between certified registered nurse anesthetist, CRNAs, and CAAs.

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CRNAs are registered nurses who have critical care experience before going to nurse anesthesia school.

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They earn a doctorate in nurse anesthesia and are trained to deliver anesthesia independently.

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In many states, CRNAs can practice without any physician supervision, especially in rural or underserved areas.

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They can work in all kinds of settings, from big hospitals to small clinics and even in the military.

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On the other hand, CAAs take advanced level science courses throughout their bachelor's degree, then complete a master's level program focused solely on anesthesia.

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The key difference is that CAAs always work as part of an anesthesia care team under the direct supervision of an anesthesiologist.

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They're not trained to practice independently, but they're highly specialized in anesthesia care.

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How do you know if the field of anesthesiologist assistant is right for you?

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Do you like to work in a team?

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CAAs work in healthcare teams, often with nurses, surgeons, anesthesiologists, and other healthcare professionals to make sure the patients are safe and comfortable.

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Each team member has a specific role, and success depends on communication, trust, and quick decision making.

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The key is understanding that while the surgeon is focused on the procedure, the anesthesia team is focused on the patient's overall stability, things like breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure.

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If there's a sudden anesthesia-related issue, like a drop in oxygen levels, that becomes the top priority because the patient's life could be at risk.

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On the other hand, if the surgical team encounters unexpected bleeding, that might take precedence.

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It's like being in a huddle during a big game.

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You assess the situation, listen to each other, and make the best call for the team, which in this case is the patient.

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At the end of the day, it's not about who's in charge.

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It's about working together, staying calm under pressure, and always keeping patient safety as the top priority.

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What is your preferred autonomy level?

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CAAs work under the supervision of a licensed anesthesiologist as part of the anesthesia care team.

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It's a bit like a well-coordinated team on the field, where each player makes quick, crucial decisions while staying in sync with the coach.

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While CAAs can perform a wide range of tasks independently, like managing airways, administering anesthesia, and monitoring vital signs, they do so within the framework of a care plan created with the anesthesiologist.

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They have the freedom to act quickly in situations where

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Immediate decisions are needed, but there's always that built-in team dynamic for support and guidance.

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How do you envision your work-life balance?

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The number of hours a CAA works can vary depending on the job setting, but on average it's around 40 to 50 hours a week.

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Some CAAs work traditional Monday to Friday schedules, while others might have shifts that includes nights, weekends, or even on-call hours, especially if they're in hospitals that handle emergency cases or trauma.

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As for lifestyle, it really depends on the type of setting in which CAAs practice.

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In outpatient surgical centers, the hours are more predictable with little to no on-call duties, which gives a great work-life balance.

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In contrast, hospital-based CAAs, especially those in trauma or transplant teams, might have longer shifts or rotating schedules.

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Due to the growing demand for CAAs, there's plenty of options to choose jobs that fit their desired personal and family life.

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The daily routine of a certified anesthesiologist assistant can vary depending on the hospital, surgical center, or state regulations.

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But one thing remains constant: CAAs always work under the medical direction of a qualified anesthesiologist.

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CAAs play a vital role in making sure that the patients receive safe and effective anesthesia care.

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Their responsibilities extend across all stages of the surgical process.

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A typical day for a CAA often begins with meeting patients before surgery, regardless of their age or medical history, to gather a pre-anesthetic health history and perform a physical examination.

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They assess each patient's condition, document key findings, and ensure the anesthesiologist has all the necessary information before administering anesthesia.

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Once in the operating room, CAAs help set up and manage monitoring equipment, ensuring that vital signs and other critical data are continuously tracked.

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Depending on the case, they may assist with advanced monitoring techniques, such as pulmonary artery catheterization, echocardiography, and more.

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Throughout surgery, CAAs play an active role in inducing, maintaining, and adjusting anesthesia levels while also administering necessary adjunct treatments.

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They also assist with advanced life support techniques, such as high-frequency ventilation and intra-arterial cardiovascular assist devices.

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After surgery, CAAs continue to monitor patients during the recovery phase, recording progress, transcribing orders, and ensuring a smooth transition out of anesthesia.

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Their expertise isn't limited to the OR.

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CAAs may also work in intensive care units, pain clinics, and other specialized settings.

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You may take on administrative roles, help train medical staff in the use of monitoring equipment, or even participate in the clinical instruction of future anethicists.

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To become a CAA, you'll first need to earn a bachelor's degree.

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While there's no single best major for pre-AA students, choosing a field that aligns with your interests and strengths will help you excel.

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You should prepare for a career as an anesthesiologist assistant by building credentials in scholarship, leadership, humanitarian and community service, and by shadowing in the various settings of the profession.

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Remember to consult a pre-health advisor about your individual plan.

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It is true that certain science majors require the necessary prerequisites and therefore complete your plan on Degree Works more efficiently, but that does not mean that is the best choice for you.

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Before applying to an anesthesiologist assistant program, you'll need to complete several prerequisite courses.

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While requirements can vary by school, most programs expect a strong foundation in science and math.

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Here's a general breakdown of the courses you'll need.

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Please make sure you do not take labs online.

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One year general biology with lab, Biology 1107 and Biology 1108, one year general chemistry with lab, Chem 1211 and Chem 1212, and one semester of organic chemistry with lab, Chem 2211, and some schools require O Chem 2 with lab, Chem 2212.

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One year of physics with lab, you can either do Physics 1111 and Physics 1112, or Physics 1211 and Physics 1212.

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One semester of calculus, MAT 2250, and one semester of STAT, STAT 2000, at least one course in biochemistry, BCMB 3100, or BCMB 4010 and 4020, one year of anatomy and physiology with lab, CBIO 2200 and CBIO 2210.

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Some programs offer flexibility with anatomy and physiology requirements.

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For example, CBIO 3010 plus an upper-level physiology course, such as V5 3107 with lab, may be acceptable depending on where you apply.

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Some AA programs have additional requirements, so it's important to research each school individually.

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Here are a few notable differences among popular programs.

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Case Western Reserve University requires a higher-level STAT course, STAT 3110,

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or Biostat 3000 or Biostat 7010 and does not accept online courses for prereqs.

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Via College Edwards School of Medicine, known as VCOM, also requires a higher level stat course if you haven't taken calculus, but they do allow online prerequisites.

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Emory University requires an extra physiology course beyond anatomy and physiology, typically B53100, and a medical terminology course, CLAS 1030, or an equivalent through Emory's AA program on their website.

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Since requirements can change and vary by school, make sure to double-check with each program before applying.

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Planning ahead will help ensure you're on the right track.

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When it comes to applying to CAA programs, GPA definitely plays a role, but the requirements can vary.

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Some schools have minimum GPA cutoffs while others don't.

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That's why it's important to check each program's website or attend open house sessions to see how your GPA stacks up against other applicants.

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To be competitive in the field of AA, aim for at least a 3.7 overall and science GPA.

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When it comes to standardized tests for AA programs, most schools will accept either the GRE or the MCAT.

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Unless you're applying to one of the few programs that specifically require the MCAT, the GRE is often the better option.

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It's less expensive, $220 versus $335 for the MCAT, and generally easier to prepare for.

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But at the end of the day, it's all about choosing the test that plays to your strengths.

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The GRE is more straightforward with three sections, verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing.

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There aren't any required courses to prepare for it, so you can focus on general test strategies.

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The MCAT, on the other hand, is much more content-heavy, covering 4 sections: biological and biochemical foundations, chemical and physical foundations, psychological and social foundations, and critical analysis and reasoning skills.

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Because of this, there are several courses that are strongly advised before taking the MCAT, including biology, general and organic chemistry, physics,

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biochemistry, and stat.

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Some additional recommended courses like physiology, genetics, psychology, and sociology can also help boost your performance.

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As of 2024, if you're wondering what kind of test scores are considered competitive for CAA programs, here's the inside scoop.

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For the GRE,

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Aim for scores above the 55th percentile in both the quantitative and verbal sections.

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If you're taking the MCAT instead, a score of 500 or above is generally considered competitive.

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If you've taken these exams more than once, you might be curious if schools super score, meaning they combine your best section scores from different test dates.

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The tricky part is that this policy varies by program, and schools don't always publish that info publicly.

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So it's a good idea to reach out directly to admissions offices if you're unsure.

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Also, don't forget that some programs require the CASPER evaluation or the Wonderlic exam, which are online situational judgment tests that assess things like ethics, professionalism, interpersonal skills, and quantitative skills.

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So if you're trying to decide which test to take, consider your academic background, study preferences, and the schools you're applying to.

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Either way, solid preparation is key to scoring well and strengthening your application.

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If you're thinking about becoming a CAA, shadowing is a must.

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You can shadow a CRNA, an AA, or an anesthesiologist, and while most programs require at least 8 to 10 hours, I'd recommend aiming for 20 to 30 if you can.

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Plus, those shadowing hours aren't just for your own benefit.

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Most programs require you to log them and get them signed off.

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So the more experience you rack up, the better.

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Finally, it gives you insight into the rapid and critical decisions CAAs make every day and demonstrates how classroom learning translates into real-world practice.

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Observing an AA will give you a unique perspective and understanding of the responsibilities and routines that the role entails, including pain management, developing anesthetic plans.

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and working as part of a surgical team.

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Shadowing will also provide the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the complex medical procedures involved in anesthesiology, helping to confirm a student's interest and commitment to this specialty.

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It is no secret that applying to AA school is competitive.

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Schools often get close to 1,000 applications each cycle with program sizes that are usually around 40 students.

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When it comes to applying to AA programs, clinical experience is a total game changer.

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While it is not technically required, it is extremely helpful to have during the application process.

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Clinical experience not only helps in crafting a compelling statement of purpose and performing well in interviews, but it also gives applicants a competitive edge.

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Additionally, it fosters empathy, builds confidence in healthcare settings, and provides valuable exposure to the healthcare system as a whole.

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In short, clinical experience is more than just checking a box.

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Patient interaction shows admissions committees that you understand the way the healthcare system works and can communicate with patients from all different walks of life.

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It gives you a real-world edge.

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Being a CAA is definitely a fast-paced job.

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You're working in high-stakes environments like operating rooms, trauma centers, and critical care units, where quick thinking and rapid decision-making are part of the daily routine.

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Some paid roles you might consider include medical assistant, phlebotomist, patient care tech, EMT,

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certified nursing assistant, scribe, and more.

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If you're in the Athens area and looking for volunteer opportunities, there are some great options to explore.

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You could get involved with places like the University Cancer and Blood Center, Piedmont Hospital College Program, Mercy Health Center, SHIFA Clinic, Athens Neighborhood Health Clinic, Athens Wellness Clinic, or even the Athens Mobile Clinic.

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These experiences can help you build the hands-on skills you need while making a real difference in your community.

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If you have clinical experience, paid, or volunteer, you can show programs that you have the stamina, focus, and motivation to adapt quickly to whatever comes your way.

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When applying through CASA, applicants are required to have three evaluators assess them.

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No more, no less.

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Each evaluator will rate you on a scale of 1 to 5, covering areas like your analytical skills, leadership abilities,

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communication, and professional demeanor, as well as your integrity, judgment, and motivation.

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The stronger the relationship you have with your evaluator, the more helpful their assessment will be.

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Along with the rating, your evaluator will also write a letter of recommendation for you.

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Just remember, you won't be able to see what your evaluator submits to CASA and to waive your rights to see it.

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When it comes to extracurricular activities, focus on what you truly enjoy and find meaningful, rather than trying to guess what the admissions committee is looking for.

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Whether it's a part-time job, intramural sports, or a club related to your interest, make sure it's something you're passionate about.

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One important exception is volunteering.

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It's a must.

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Since you're pursuing a career in healthcare, it's important to show that you care about people, not just your future patients.

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Volunteering with underserved communities in person is essential.

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This doesn't have to be in a healthcare setting.

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You could help out with local food banks, support youth organizations, assist those affected by poverty or homelessness, volunteer to help with the elderly in hospice, or work with individuals with disabilities through programs like ESP, Destination Dogs, or Akoni Therapeutic Riding.

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If you're applying to anesthesiologist assistant programs, you will apply using a system called CASA.

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Some programs will require supplemental application materials and will have you apply to their school directly after using the CASA system.

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The CASA application opens every year in March and technically it stays open until February, but often schools have deadlines where the application closes before then.

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It is a good idea to apply as early as possible while making sure you are turning in a quality application.

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Many program interviews will start early fall, but they may send out interview invites in late summer if you've applied early enough.

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You will want to

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check and see if schools offer early decisions if you have a particular school of interest.

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The key is to stay organized, be mindful of deadlines, and avoid rushing at the last minute to submit your application.

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There are currently 20 AA programs across the country, some of which have multiple campuses in different states.

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On CASA, certain programs such as VCOM or Case Western Reserve University require only one application, allowing applicants to rank their preferred campus locations.

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However,

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Other programs, like Nova Southeastern and South University, require separate applications for each location.

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Many programs kick off in the summer, especially for schools on the quarter system, but don't worry, some do offer fall or spring start dates.

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A typical anesthesia school experience is a blend of labs, lectures, and hands-on clinical practice.

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Your days will be packed, splitting time between lectures and labs, with plenty of intubation practice and studying time in between or however you see fit.

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Expect around 4:00 to 5:00 lectures per day, covering everything from health policy and EKG interpretation to anatomy, physiology, and even physics.

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On top of that, you'll have two to three lab sessions per week.

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It's A rigorous two-year program, so keeping a solid school-life balance is key.

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There are currently 4,000 CAAs across the country.

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CAA salaries now place them in the top 5% of earners in the United States.

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The salary of a CAA depends on the state they work in.

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The average salary is $112K, with the top earners earning $157K.

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Some CAAs also receive additional funding through sign-on bonuses.

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Throughout their career, CAAs will do 50 hours of continuing education credits every two years to stay up to date with their knowledge.

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The CAA profession is on the rise and the future looks incredibly bright.

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With the growing demand for healthcare services and a greater recognition of the critical role CAAs play in surgical and procedural settings, the need for skilled anesthesia providers is only going to increase.

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The surgeon demand is expected to positively impact salaries too, as healthcare institutions compete to attract and keep top talent.

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Choosing a career as a CAA puts you right at the heart of patient care, ensuring safety and comfort during surgeries.

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It's not just a rewarding and respected career.

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It also offers strong financial stability that can support both your personal and professional goals.

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So if you're considering this path, know that you're stepping into a dynamic, impactful field where your skills will be in high demand.

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The future is bright for CAAs and the opportunities ahead are endless.

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Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review, and share this episode with your teammates and colleagues.

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