

Recently Published Findings in *The Journal of Physician Assistant Education* **Characteristics of Physician Assistant Students Planning to Work in Primary Care: A National Study**

BACKGROUND

Physician Assistants (PAs) are large contributors to the primary care workforce overall and to the provider workforce that cares for rural- and urban-underserved communities. Although the PA profession is growing and PAs enter the primary care specialties of family medicine, general pediatrics and general internal medicine at higher rates than physicians, the proportion of PAs choosing primary care careers has been steadily declining over the last 35 years. The limited literature examining this decline has found that PAs entering specialty fields were more likely to be influenced by financial factors than their counterparts choosing primary care. This study examined the early pipeline of PAs by comparing the characteristics of recently matriculated PA students who, at the beginning of their training, expressed intent to practice in primary care with matriculated PAs planning to enter other specialties.

METHODS

This descriptive study is based on data from the Physician Assistant Education Association's (PAEA) Matriculating Student Survey (MSS) from the years 2013 and 2014. First year PA students were asked to complete the survey as they began their training. Data from the two survey years were combined into a single data file containing responses from 9,283 PA students. Using bivariate and logistic regression to identify significant predictors associated with intention to practice in primary care, we compared matriculated PA students on three dimensions: 1) demographic characteristics, 2) educational and work experiences, and 3) matriculant views of their future practices.

KEY FINDINGS

The following were key study findings published in *The Journal of Physician Assistant Education* (Larson EH, Frogner BK, 2019):

- More than half (58.3%) of PA students indicated intent to practice in primary care. This substantially exceeded the 32.1% of PAs who were in primary care practice as of 2013.
- About 80% of PA students held Bachelor's degrees at the time their PA training began. Students with primary care intentions were slightly more likely to hold Master's degrees than their counterparts interested in other specialties.
- A significantly larger percentage of PA students that intend to practice in primary care had previous experience in an allied health career—nursing assistants, medical assistants, home health aides and emergency room technicians—than PA students who do not intend to practice in primary care (Figure 1).
- In a logistic regression analysis, being married, Hispanic, and Asian significantly increased the odds of PA students expressing intent to practice primary care.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A majority of matriculating PA students in 2013 and 2014 reported, at the beginning of their training, an intent to practice in one of the primary care specialties. The findings of this study indicate that students with primary care intent are more likely to report being driven by a desire to drive social change, serve rural and urban underserved populations, and that they place somewhat less value on high income than other students.

PA students early in their educational process will discover many other facets of medicine as their training progresses, which may draw students to other specialties. At the same time, the attrition away from interest in primary care over the course of training may represent a lost opportunity for PA programs to encourage and support student interest in family medicine, general internal medicine and general pediatrics. Educational programs should consider:

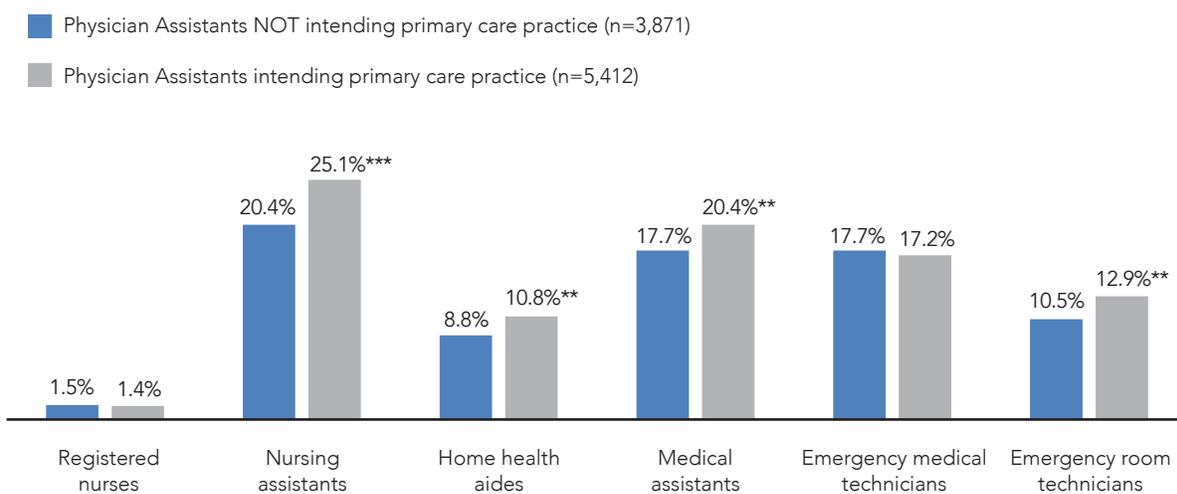
- nurturing students with characteristics and values associated with higher likelihood of intending to practice primary care via admissions policies; and
- increased attention to primary care oriented didactic and clinical curricula.

These steps may substantially enhance the primary care provider output of PA training programs, especially in programs with a mission focus on primary care and/or service to medically underserved populations.

KEY FINDINGS *continued*

- PA students intending to practice in primary care were significantly less likely to indicate that high income was “very important” or “essential” to their careers than their counterparts, and more likely to respond that working for social change was “very important” or “essential” to their careers.
- PA students intending to practice in primary care were significantly more likely to rank rural practice as “very desirable” than their counterparts, and to indicate that working in a medically underserved community was “very desirable.”

Figure 1: Percentage of 2013-14 Physician Assistant Students with Experience in Selected Professions by Intent to Practice in Primary Care



** p < .01, *** p < .001

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