

INTRODUCTION

What is a physician assistant (PA)? This is a question that is often asked, yet still highly misunderstood. This IRB-approved pilot study was conducted to resolve the ongoing misconceptions and increase public awareness of the PA profession in the state of Kentucky. In order to gauge current perceptions of the PA profession and how those perceptions were gained, a survey was conducted that included 32 undergraduate students from colleges/universities all over the state of Kentucky. The survey was voluntary but encouraged amongst leaders at each college/university.

The catalyst that became the foundation of our pilot study came from the national PA journal, JAAPA. The 2022 study examined the question of what draws individuals to want to become practitioners. While providing a unique perspective by highlighting the insight of multiple healthcare fields, inspiration was drawn from the ten factors that were used in the study to gauge prospective applicant interest¹. Rather than focusing on already practicing healthcare workers, we sought to shift the focus to Pre-PA students in the state. While there has been research performed previously on pre-PA students, the focus has been program based and tailored to individual schools rather than the profession as a whole².

This study was the first of its kind to consider not only the important factors that draw individuals to the field but also compare demographic information such as when and how the students first heard about the profession as well as home zip codes. Due to almost half of the state being deemed "medically underserved", Kentucky utilizes pipeline programs such as area health education center (AHEC) to partner with educational and professional organizations to promote healthcare vocation opportunities for young people³. Therefore, the correlations drawn from this study can serve as the groundwork for both AHEC, and PA affiliated organizations so that they may gain a perspective on how to recruit and encourage future healthcare advocates and providers. As time progresses, this tool could be used to examine pre-PA students' perceptions in the fast paced and ever-changing medical community⁴.

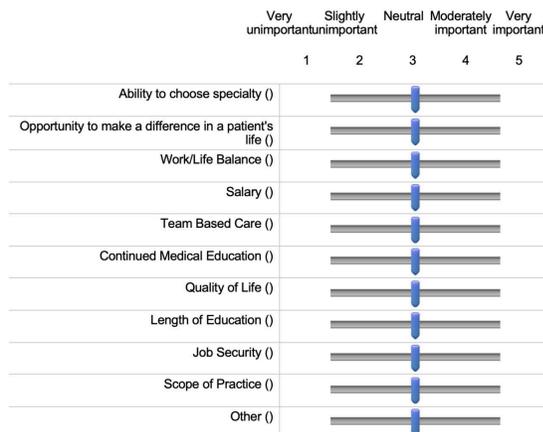
PURPOSE OF STUDY

A survey was used to gather information regarding the research question, and then this information was shared with the Kentucky Academy of Physician Assistants (KAPA) to encourage them to take greater and more specific educational initiatives for the PA profession. In addition, this study sought to enhance knowledge and perceptions of the PA profession itself. An overarching goal was for this study to increase PA retention within Kentucky and eliminate the common question of "What is a PA?" In the future, this pilot study can be utilized by subsequent researchers to gather further data and benefit various aspects of the PA profession such as undergraduate clubs, PA schools, and professional advocacy.



METHODS

Q10 For each of the following items, please select how important these were to drawing you to the PA Profession (5= very important to 1= very unimportant).



- Inclusion Criteria: Undergraduate Pre-PA students attending colleges throughout KY
- Clubs involved: University of Kentucky Pre-PA, Murray State University Pre-PA, and Morehead State University Pre-PA.
- Qualtrics survey via email to Pre-PA club faculty advisors
- 10 factors measured on a 5-point Likert Scale
- Statistical analysis by Stata
- Approved by UK IRB - IRB Protocol #: 83664

An online, voluntary, qualitative survey was conducted in which subjects were asked specific, non identifiable questions to gauge both their knowledge and perceptions of the PA profession. The survey utilized a Likert scale for rating the importance of 10 motivating factors for pursuing the PA profession. The survey also gathered some general demographic information such as age, home zip code (where they grew up), undergraduate major, and whether the participant is a first-generation college student. We added reference links at the bottom of the survey directing students to the AAPA and KAPA website for more information about the PA profession.

RESULTS

There were 32 survey responses, however, only 28 of those 32 were used due to partial completion. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 22. Zip codes were grouped by AHEC region which showed that the data is well-distributed and more generalizable across the state. Undergraduate majors of each survey participant also varied widely, with most majoring in human health sciences or biomedical science, and only one labeled specifically as pre-PA. Additionally, 4 of the 28 participants included in this study were first-generation college students.

A total of 19 participants heard of the profession before and 9 heard about it during their undergraduate careers. Exactly half of students heard about the profession from family or friends and 9 students learned from personal medical experiences. The ability to make a difference in the life of patients was ranked the highest on the Likert Scale for drawing them to the profession, with lateral mobility and work/life balance ranking second. Participants were indifferent to salary and continued medical education.

How did you hear about the Profession?	Count
Advisor/academic advisor	2
Internet/career searches online	2
Class	1
Family/friends	14
Personal medical experience	9

AHEC Region	Count
North	1
North Central	3
Northeast	4
Northwest	1
Out-of-state	7
Purchase	1
South Central	3
Southeast	4
Southern	1
West	3

DISCUSSION

- The three most influential factors for choosing the PA profession were ability to make a difference in the life of patients, lateral mobility, and work/life balance.
- Salary, continued medical education and team-based learning varied most among participants, possibly implying a gap in knowledge of these key components.
- Most participants heard about the profession through word of mouth or having a PA as a provider. This suggests the opportunity for increased marketing and the importance of PAs serving as advocates for the profession.
- Limitations: small sample size, a single participant may not represent the entirety of his/her AHEC region, students may have had bias when completing the survey through the UKPA program
- Implications: AHEC recruiting, pipeline programs, public education initiatives, KAPA/professional advocacy, legislation changes, workforce challenges, PA retention in the state of KY
- Future Research: this reproducible survey format may be utilized by other PA or healthcare associated organizations



CONCLUSION

The findings of this study can be used to make a tremendous difference in the knowledge and perceptions of PAs. Although this study primarily sets the foundation for further research to be conducted, the data collected is noteworthy. The data implies what Pre-PA students value about the profession as well as opportunities for specific educational initiatives. This information can be used to further pipeline programs, expand public awareness, and increase PA retention in the state of Kentucky.

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