

INTRODUCTION

The University of Kentucky Physician Assistant (UKPA) program, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2025, has been a key contributor to the PA profession both locally and nationally. As the oldest PA program in Kentucky, its 1,768 graduates have made significant impacts across diverse healthcare settings. This research aimed to explore the experiences of UKPA alumni to identify key factors in the program that influenced their clinical practice. By reflecting on these alumni perspectives, this study seeks to identify areas for growth and improvement, ensuring the program's continued success as the PA profession evolves to meet the demands of modern healthcare.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to identify common influential themes among UKPA alumni regarding their experiences during the program and in clinical practice, allowing the program to implement meaningful improvements to better prepare future physician assistants (PAs) for the evolving healthcare landscape.

METHODS

- Qualitative exploratory study using semi-structured oral interviews conducted via audio Zoom calls.
- Participants (n = 5): UKPA alumni from the past 50 years, selected through convenience sampling from the UKPA Alumni Association Database.
- Eligibility: Alumni who practiced as PAs post-graduation, English-speaking, and 18 years or older.
- Interviews: Approximately 30 minutes, audio-recorded for accuracy and data collection.
- Thematic analysis conducted to identify recurring patterns and primary themes.

"The faculty really pushed us to do our best. Bob Wildman, Doris Rapp, Glenn Combs—they were always there, motivating us."

"... (my preceptor) taught me more about patient care than just medicine—he showed me the importance of truly caring for people."

RESULTS

1. Why PA:



60% mentioned shorter training compared to other medical professionals.



40% stated that their motivation stemmed from a desire to help others through medicine.

1. UKPA Experience:



60% identified community with classmates as their most fond memory.



40% of respondents wished for more interprofessional interactions.



40% wanted more hands-on skill training incorporated into the curriculum.



80% recalled specific names/moments that had a lasting impact on them.

1. Practicing as a PA:



40% noted rotations emphasized patient-centered care beyond the medical aspect, and 40% expressed their rotations helped them feel capable of treating patients independently.



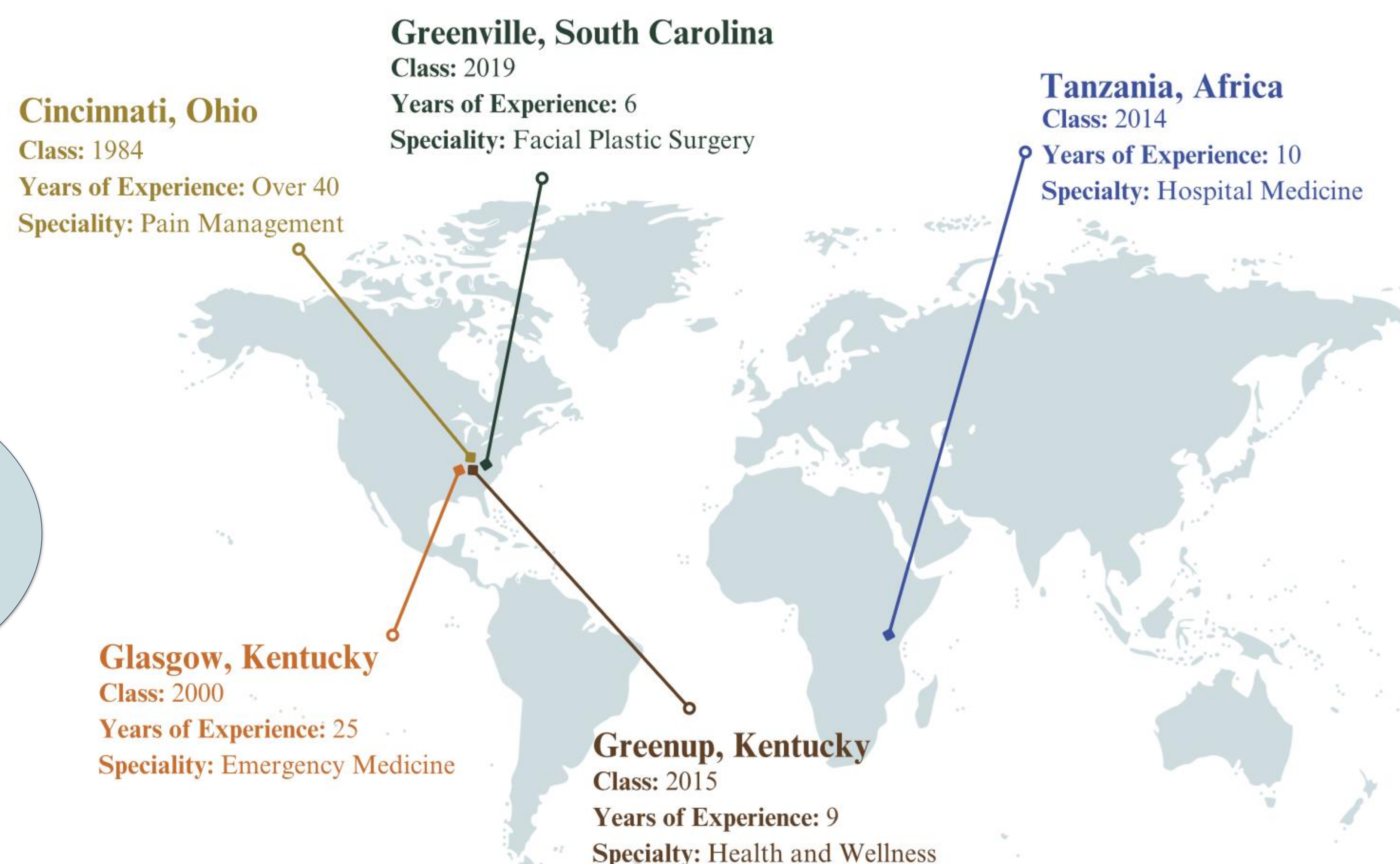
60% secured their first post-graduation job through a clinical rotation site, and 60% prioritized a supportive learning environment.



60% now experience a team-based dynamic with their attending physician, and 60% reported having a social and professional relationship with their current attending.



40% emphasized the importance of advocacy for PA laws and professional rights.



DISCUSSION

1. Community & Camaraderie:

- Strong peer and faculty relationships provide academic and emotional support.
- Fosters a collaborative mindset that carries into professional careers.
- Alumni suggest increasing interprofessional collaboration in the curriculum.

1. Advocacy for the PA Profession:

- Alumni highlight challenges in professional recognition, legislation, and reimbursement.
- Advocacy is key to securing autonomy and proper utilization of PA skills.
- Restrictive supervision and limited reimbursement hinder full professional potential.

1. Hands-on Training:

- Clinical rotations and lab training build confidence and competence.
- Exposure to patient care and independent decision-making is crucial.
- Alumni recommend expanding structured skill development opportunities.

Areas for Growth

- Need for stronger advocacy training to empower PAs in healthcare policy.
- Expanding hands-on training will better prepare students for clinical demands.

Program Strengths

- Supportive learning environment enhances student and professional success.
- Strong sense of community and camaraderie among faculty and students.

CONCLUSION

Implications for PA Education:

- Expanding hands-on training opportunities can better prepare students for clinical practice.
- Integrating advocacy education will help equip future PAs with the skills needed to navigate policy and professional challenges.
- Collaborative learning environments can enhance peer and faculty support

Contributions to the Literature:

- This study provides long-term insights into how PA education influences professional practice.
- It extends beyond traditional studies on PA preparedness, offering a more comprehensive evaluation of training efficacy.

Study Limitations:

- The study utilized a convenience sample, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all UKPA graduates.
- Certain graduating decades were not represented and the small sample size limits generalizability.

Future Research:

- Expanding the sample size to include a wider range of alumni for a more representative understanding of long-term educational impact.
- Comparing UKPA alumni experiences with those from other PA programs could identify best practices for PA education.

REFERENCES

