

October 2021

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John Ansiaux PA-C

Texas Children's Hospital, jaansia2@texaschildrens.org

Carly Farrell PA-C

Texas Children's Hospital, cmfarrel@texaschildrens.org

Kathryn Hess PA-C

Texas Children's Hospital, kdhes1@texaschildrens.org

Aubrey White PA-C

Texas Children's Hospital, admeissn@texaschildrens.org

Charlotte Peeters PA-C

Texas Children's Hospital, cpeeter@texaschildrens.org

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### Recommended Citation

Ansiaux, J., Farrell, C., Hess, K., White, A., Peeters, C., Schulten, J., & Krasnosky, R. (2022). Retention of Physician Assistants within a Specialty after Completion of a Postgraduate Training Program. *Journal of Nursing & Interprofessional Leadership in Quality & Safety*, 4(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/uthoustonjqualsafe/vol4/iss1/8>

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## Retention of Physician Assistants within a Specialty after Completion of a Postgraduate Training Program

### Abstract

**Background:** The advantages of a specialized training program have led to over 84 postgraduate training programs for Physician Assistants (PAs) covering over 25 specialties. Employee lateral mobility is more prevalent within the PA profession, which allows PA providers to switch between medical specialties. The versatility of PAs promotes higher turnover rates compared to physician counterparts. These high turnover rates can result in increased institutional burden. Postgraduate PA programs provide pre-employment exposure to more in-depth medical training, enabling a well-rounded knowledge base of the PA's roles and responsibilities, minimizing turnover rates.

**Purpose:** The goal of this survey study is to identify PA graduates' perceptions of their retention rate, job satisfaction within a given specialty, factors influencing a PA's decision to change their specialty, and specialty preparation provided by postgraduate training programs and specific educational training.

**Methods:** A mixed method design was utilized to survey both program directors and graduates of PA postgraduate training programs.

**Results:** Of the 398 postgraduate program graduates, 196 (49%) accepted a job within the institution where they trained. Across all postgraduate training programs, 87% of graduates have not changed their specialty since program completion. Ninety-six percent of respondents felt their postgraduate training gave them an accurate preview of employment in their specialty of interest, and all postgraduates would recommend a postgraduate training program to a new PA graduate.

### Keywords

physician assistant, physician assistant postgraduate training, physician assistant retention

### Authors

John Ansiaux PA-C; Carly Farrell PA-C; Kathryn Hess PA-C; Aubrey White PA-C; Charlotte Peeters PA-C; Jill Schulten PA-C; and Ryan Krasnosky MPAS, PA-C, DFAAPA, DrPH

## Introduction

Since its inception in the United States' healthcare system in 1965, the Physician Assistant (PA) profession has become a highly competitive career. U.S. News and World Report ranked the PA profession number 1 in 2021 and number 2 in 2022 for the Best Health Care Job (American Academy of PAs [AAPA], 2021; AAPA, 2022). In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2019) identified the PA profession as the seventh fastest growing profession in the United States. PA education condenses the medical school model into two to three years of training, predominantly focused on primary care knowledge and skills. During PA school, students obtain a varied amount of training in core specialties including general surgery, emergency medicine, family medicine, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, internal medicine, and behavioral health. This educational model relies on the concept of newly graduated PAs receiving specialized training on the job. While this does promote career flexibility and versatility, it can prove a challenge when it comes to retaining PAs within specialties.

Employee lateral mobility is more prevalent within the PA profession, which allows PA providers to switch between medical specialties. The versatility of PAs promotes higher turnover rates compared to physician counterparts. One survey found that PAs who have practiced for more than ten years tend to switch specialties at least twice (Pittman, 2014). These high turnover rates can result in increased institutional costs associated with recruitment, training resources, reduced efficiency, and loss of patient continuity (Schwartz, 2013). Postgraduate PA programs provide pre-employment exposure to more in-depth medical training, enabling a well-rounded knowledge base of the PA's roles and responsibilities, minimizing turnover rates.

PA postgraduate training programs were established in the early 1970's to address the need for PA specialized training in the surgical field (Physician Assistant History Society, n.d.). For this paper, the term postgraduate training program refers to a PA residency or fellowship program that can be found on the Association of Postgraduate PA Programs (APPAP) website. These programs provide PAs with advanced postgraduate learning opportunities and training experiences. A formal accreditation is not required, but many programs follow the guidelines of the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA) or APPAP (Pasquini, 2019). The perceived advantages of having a specialized training program have resulted in over 84 postgraduate PA programs nationwide, covering 25 specialties (Pasquini, 2019). Some of the most common specialty training programs include acute care, cardiothoracic, critical care, trauma, emergency medicine, hospitalist, orthopedics, psychiatry, pediatrics, and surgery (Pasquini, 2019). On average, postgraduate programs last 12 months and aim to provide the specialized, hands-on training required to adequately address specialty patient needs and develop experience that would otherwise take years on the job to acquire. Authors hypothesized that specialty exposure from a postgraduate training program results in higher job satisfaction and overall retention within the specialty of training.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development and implementation of a PA Retention Survey.

### Purpose

The goal of this survey study is to identify PA graduates' perceptions of their retention rate, job satisfaction within a given specialty, factors influencing a PA's decision to change their specialty, and specialty preparation provided by postgraduate training programs and specific educational training. Additionally, this study sought to determine whether PAs who completed an Association of Postgraduate Physician Assistant Programs (AAPAP)-endorsed postgraduate training program were more likely to be retained within their specialty of training and to ascertain their level of job satisfaction.

## Methods

### Methodology

A mixed method survey design was utilized to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Two surveys were created, one for program directors of PA postgraduate training programs and one for graduates of these

training programs. Data was collected via Survey Monkey, a free, public online survey website. URL links were provided through email to access the anonymous and voluntary surveys.

### **Program Director Survey**

#### ***Participants***

Authors identified the program directors of the 79 APPAP-designated postgraduate PA programs (APPAP, 2019) and formulated a three-question quantitative survey regarding participation in their PA postgraduate program and retention of PA graduates after program completion.

#### ***Procedure***

The 79 program directors were emailed with research information, a participation consent form, and a link to the three-question survey. Additionally, the email contained a disclosure stating that study participation was voluntary and that no incentives would be given. The survey asked participants to respond to three fill-in-the-blank questions about their specific PA postgraduate training program (referred to as a “fellowship” in the survey):

1. How many physician assistants have attended your fellowship program?
2. How many physician assistants have completed your fellowship program?
3. How many physician assistant postgraduates accepted a job at your institution after completing their fellowship program?

#### ***Sample Size***

A total of 79 physician assistant postgraduate program directors were emailed the survey, and 15 directors completed the survey. However, one program director was unable to comment on retention of program graduates. Therefore, this program was excluded, leaving 14 programs included for data analysis within this study.

### **Physician Assistant Postgraduate Survey**

#### ***Participants***

The inclusion criterion for participation in the PA postgraduate survey was graduation from a PA postgraduate training program that met APPAP criteria. Participants were excluded if they did not complete a postgraduate training program in its entirety.

#### ***Procedure***

In the initial email to the 79 program directors of APPAP-designated postgraduate PA programs, the authors requested that program directors provide their PA postgraduates with the enclosed research information and a link to a 15-question mixed method survey regarding their experience with their postgraduate specialty training (referred to as a “fellowship” in the survey) and with working within their chosen specialty after graduation. Survey questions were a mix of Yes/No and multiple-choice answers. Five questions included an optional comment box for free response answers to elaborate on why they chose the answer they did. Appendix A shows the survey questions.

#### ***Sample Size***

While it is unknown how many surveys program directors emailed to postgraduates, 85 respondents completed the PA postgraduate survey and were included in the data analysis.

### **Analysis**

Survey Monkey software was utilized to store survey responses and analyze quantitative data from both surveys. Access to survey responses was protected with a username and password, only accessible on approved

desktops. There were no identifying factors on the PA postgraduate survey. Study authors reviewed qualitative commentary and presented overarching participant themes.

## Results

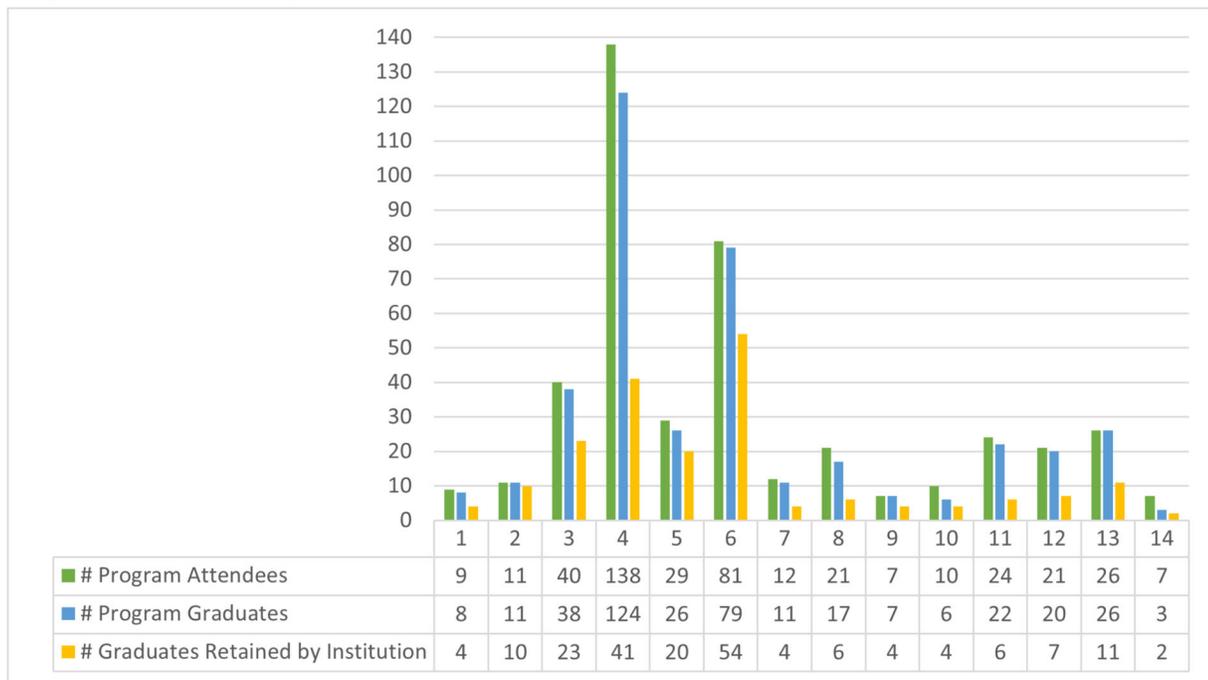
### Program Director Survey Data

This study utilized a sample size of 14 for the Program Director Survey analysis. A total of 79 APPAP-endorsed postgraduate programs were emailed, making the Program Director Survey response rate 17.7%. Director surveys provided rates of program attendance, graduation, and employment retention.

Directors from the 14 programs reported a combined total of 436 physician assistant attendees, of which 398 were reported as having graduated from their respective program, making the average program completion rate 91.3% for the 14 programs evaluated. The completion rate varied from a minimum of 43% (3 out of 7) to a maximum of 100% (11 out of 11). Of the 398 program graduates, 196 accepted a job within the same institution. Therefore, the combined average retention rate was 53% (53.3% ± 19.2%), with retention rates ranging from a minimum of 27% (6 out of 22) to a maximum of 91% (10 out of 11). Director survey data per program is reported in Figure 1.

Figure 1

### Program Director Survey Results



### PA Postgraduate Survey Data

Eighty-five graduates completed the PA postgraduate survey and were included in data analysis. Figure 2 shows the specialty areas of the PA postgraduates who completed the survey.

**Figure 2**

*Specialties of PA Postgraduate Survey Respondents*

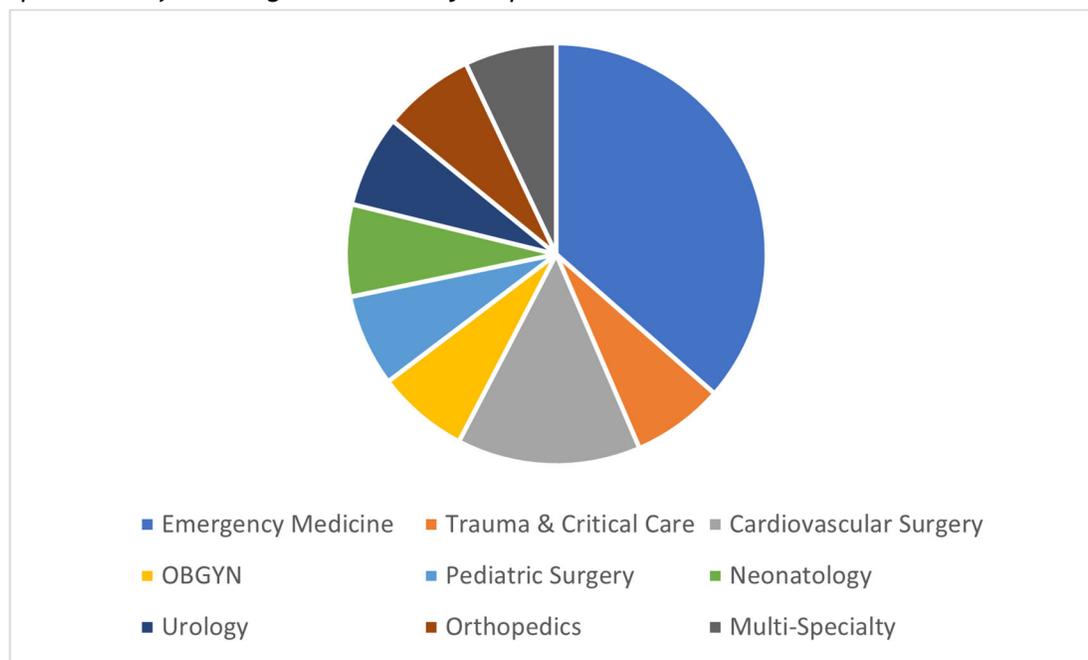


Table 1 shows the quantitative results of responses to the PA postgraduate surveys.

**Table 1**

*Responses to PA Postgraduate Survey*

Prior to starting your fellowship, were you interested in working in a specific specialty?	Yes	87% (n=74)
	No	13% (n=11)
Are you currently working in the field you were most interested in prior to starting your fellowship?	Yes	72% (n=61)
	No	28% (n=24)
When considering a career in a specialty, what factor most determined that decision for you?	Interest in Specialty	78% (n=66)
	Level of Autonomy	13% (n=11)
	Patient Population	7% (n=6)
	Schedule/Hours	3% (n=2)
	Salary	0%
If you changed specialty since completing the fellowship, what was the main reason why you changed?	Did Not Change Specialty	87% (n=74)
	Personal Reasons	8% (n=7)
	Lack of Autonomy	2% (n=2)
	Satisfaction with Salary/Benefits	2% (n=2)
	Lack of Training	0%
Do you feel your fellowship provided you the opportunity to assess these career-determining factors?	Yes	99% (n=84)
	No	1% (n=1)
How many years have you been working in your specialty?	0-5 years	64% (n=54)
	5-10 years	27% (n=23)
	>10 years	10% (n=8)
Are you satisfied with your specialty?	Yes	100% (n=85)
	No	0%

How many times have you changed specialties since completing your fellowship?	0	87% (n=74)
	1	7% (n=6)
	2	1% (n=1)
	3 or more	2% (n=2)
Do you think your fellowship prepared you well enough for your post-fellowship position in that specialty?*	Yes	98% (n=83)
	No	2% (n=2)
If you accepted a position outside of the specialty of your fellowship, do you think your fellowship prepared you well enough for that position?*	Yes	54% (n=30)
	No	32% (n=18)
Was completing a fellowship program your first choice coming out of graduate school?	Yes	69% (n=59)
	No	31% (n=26)
If you could go back in time, would you still choose to complete a fellowship?*	Yes	98% (n=83)
	No	2% (n=2)
How likely are you to recommend a fellowship to a new PA graduate? (10-pt Likert Scale)	Average response	8.5/10
	Minimum response	1/10
	Maximum response	10/10
Do you feel your experience during your fellowship was an accurate depiction of that specialty?*	Yes	96% (n=82)
	No	4% (n=3)
Do you feel your fellowship gave you a career advantage compared to advanced practice providers who did not complete a fellowship?*	Yes	95% (n=81)
	No	5% (n=4)

Note: Total number of respondents was 85

\*These questions allowed for additional commentary

## Discussion

The average program graduation rate across all programs was 91%, confirming that the majority of individuals accepted into a postgraduate program obtain the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfill graduation requirements.

Approximately half of those who successfully completed a postgraduate program found a job within their institution of training. Presumably, an advantage of completing a postgraduate program is having approximately a year to learn institutional policies, develop networks, and become more familiar with institution-specific patient populations. There may be a combination of contributing factors that hinder postgraduate retention, including, but not limited to, postgraduates from out of state with intent to practice elsewhere upon program completion, lack of job openings at time of graduation, lower salaries within academic institutions, and competing against individuals with additional years of experience for specialty jobs.

### *Preparation for Employment*

Ninety-eight percent (n=83) of postgraduates felt their postgraduate program prepared them well for a job in their respective specialty, and 95% (n=81) stated that graduation from a postgraduate program provided a career advantage over PAs who do not complete postgraduate training. When PA postgraduates were asked to rate their likelihood of recommending a postgraduate training program to a new PA graduate, the average rating was 8.5 out of 10, and, if they were to go back in time, 98% (n=83) of the postgraduates would repeat their postgraduate training. From this response, one can conclude that the specialized training obtained is perceived as not only valuable but as having a direct impact on career opportunities. However, some respondents were compelled to complete a postgraduate training program due to it being a requirement of desired specialty positions. This factor is supported by the study data which shows 31% (n=26) of respondents stated that completing a postgraduate training program was not their first choice after graduating from PA school.

A majority of respondents (96%, n=82) felt their postgraduate training gave an accurate preview of employment, and 72% (n=61) stated they are working in the same specialty as their specialty of interest prior to starting their postgraduate training. This suggests that postgraduate training programs further promote PA interest in their specialty area of choice. The small amount of movement to a new clinical specialty area that was reported occurred for personal reasons (8%, n=7), dissatisfaction with salary (2%, n=2), and lack of autonomy (2%, n=2).

### **Career Advantages**

Additional commentary elaborating on perceived career advantages specifically noted increased salary negotiating power, increased marketability, positive feedback from potential employers, and holding current positions that would have been difficult to obtain without direct specialty experience.

### **Position Satisfaction**

One hundred percent (n=85) of survey respondents were satisfied with their current specialty. This is significantly higher than the satisfaction rates that Physician Assistants reported in the 2010 American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) Census report (2011), in which 66% reported job satisfaction. One explanation for this unanimous job satisfaction is that postgraduate training enables graduates to make well-informed career choices, thereby optimizing job satisfaction.

### **Changes in Specialty**

A majority of respondents (87%, n= 74) had not changed their specialty since completing their postgraduate program. Of those who did change specialties, postgraduates identified personal reasons as the most common catalyst for change (8%, n=7) over lack of autonomy (2%, n=2) and dissatisfaction with benefits and salary (2%, n=2). No graduates identified a lack of training as reason for specialty change. The majority of those who changed their specialty (54%, n=30) still felt their postgraduate training had prepared them well for their current position. Research measuring percentage rates of non-postgraduate PAs who change specialty compared to those that did complete a postgraduate training program could provide helpful insight into how postgraduate training programs increase specialty retention rates.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include small sample size, unknown rate of participation, inability to directly contact the PAs who completed a postgraduate program, lack of ability to ensure that respondents met the criterion of having completed a postgraduate program, program directors providing approximations for program attendance/completion/provider retention rate, no comparison group of PAs who did not complete a postgraduate program, no financial analysis to evaluate the cost secondary to PA turnover rates, and only evaluating postgraduate programs identified by the APPAP.

### **Summary**

The PA Retention Survey identified a number of trends for graduates of physician assistant postgraduation training programs. The majority of postgraduates had not changed their specialty since postgraduate program completion and stated that their program prepared them well for their profession. All respondents were satisfied in their current position as a postgraduate PA. One can conclude that the specialized training obtained through PA postgraduate training programs is perceived as not only valuable in learning one's specialty of interest but also as having a direct impact on career opportunities and career retention.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Physician Assistant Postgraduate Survey Questions**

1. Prior to starting your fellowship, were you interested in working in a specific specialty?
2. Are you currently working in the field you were most interested in prior to starting your fellowship?
3. When considering a career in a specialty, what factor most determined that decision for you?
4. If you changed specialty since completing your fellowship, what was the main reason why?
5. Do you feel your fellowship provided you the opportunity to assess these career-determining factors?
6. How many years have you been working in your specialty?
7. Are you satisfied with your specialty?
8. How many times have you changed specialties since completing your fellowship?
9. Do you think your fellowship prepared you well enough for your post-fellowship position in that specialty?
10. If you accepted a position outside of the specialty of your fellowship, do you think your fellowship prepared you well enough for that position?
11. Was completing a fellowship program your first choice coming out of graduate school?
12. If you could go back in time, would you still choose to complete a fellowship?
13. How likely are you to recommend a fellowship to a new graduate?
14. Do you feel your experience during your fellowship was an accurate depiction of that specialty?
15. Do you feel your fellowship gave you a career advantage compared to advanced practice providers who did not complete a fellowship?