

Introduction

With the increased demand for physician assistants (PAs) in the healthcare community coupled with the financial benefit for higher education institutions, the number of PA programs in the country has skyrocketed. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the PA profession is expected to grow 31% between 2018 and 2028 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The national professional organization representing PA faculty members, Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), released data in October 2020 stating one to two full-time PA faculty members per PA Program choose to leave their positions annually with the majority returning to clinical practice (Physician Assistant Education Association, 2020).

In 2010, there were 154 accredited PA programs in the United States (Hooker et al., 2011). Today, there are 317 (ARC-PA, n.d.). Recruiting and retaining PA faculty, many of whom transition to higher education from clinical practice, will be essential for the success of PA programs and the higher education institutions sponsoring these programs nationwide.

Communities of practice (CoP) are grounded in the concept of social learning where life experiences are contextualized into effective and manageable techniques for success through group discussion and encounters (Smith et al., 2019). The communities of practice approach and mentorships networks had been used as a pedagogical device for the development of leadership practice since the late twentieth century.

The purpose of this action research study was to determine the perceptions of PA faculty on how a community of practice approach can help improve PA faculty retention rates. This study also evaluated PA faculty perceptions on the factors contributing to PA faculty retention, burnout, and job satisfaction.



Review of Literature

- Beltyukova and Graham (2017) concluded that the lack of recognition by administration, support for scholarly work, a fair promotion process, a sense of institutional community, and support of the PA program by administration were factors correlated with PA faculty intent to leave academia and return to clinical practice.
- Coniglio and Akrovd (2015) concluded that organizational support, role conflict, and age were noteworthy contributors to PA faculty intent to leave their positions.
- Burnout refers to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment due to defined circumstances (Forister & Blessing, 2007). Little research has been conducted to understand PA faculty perceptions on burnout for PA faculty members specifically.

Methods

Methodology included qualitative data collection through two cycles of action research.

- **Research Design:** Action research with 2 iterative cycles
- **Cycle 1 – Data Collection:**
 - *Method:* Semi-structured individual interviews
 - *Participants:* New and experienced PA faculty members
 - *Purpose:* To explore perceptions on faculty retention, burnout, and job satisfaction
- **Cycle 2 – Intervention and Evaluation:**
 - *Intervention:* Development and facilitation of a **Community of Practice (CoP)** session for PA faculty
 - *Purpose:* To assess the potential of a CoP approach to enhance retention and support among faculty
- **Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis of qualitative data to identify key themes and patterns across interviews and the CoP session

Results

The findings of this action research study confirmed that faculty perceptions on PA faculty retention, burnout, and job satisfaction are multifaceted. The major themes identified were:

- **Faculty Retention is Multifactorial:** Participants emphasized that no single factor determines retention; it involves workload balance, support systems, and alignment with institutional values.
- **Formal Mentorship is Desired:** Both new and experienced faculty expressed a strong need for structured mentorship to support professional development and career longevity.



- **Burnout is Variable:** Experiences with burnout varied, often influenced by administrative support, workload, and departmental culture.
- **Job Satisfaction is Complex:** Satisfaction was shaped by leadership quality, institutional recognition, workload equity, and opportunities for growth.
- **Community of Practice (CoP) is Beneficial:** The CoP session fostered a sense of belonging, offered peer support, and facilitated resource sharing, which participants identified as critical to retention and morale.



Discussion

Recommendations from Participants:

- Strengthen PA program and institutional leadership
- Foster supportive and inclusive departmental cultures
- Implement formal mentorship programs
- Encourage ongoing participation in CoP

Recommendations for Managers and Leaders:

- Focus on ways to support and mentor new and experienced PA faculty
- Consider implementing the CoP approach towards PA and other allied health faculty, especially for those in near peer roles
- The impact of a strong departmental and institutional organizational culture cannot be understated in terms of retention rates
- The CoP model could include faculty in similar roles across the country and across organizations
- Strong leadership includes effective decision-making, clear communication of expectations, innovative approaches to difficult situations, and an empathetic understanding of PA challenges.

Further Research:

- Investigate the long-term impact of CoPs on PA retention rates.
- Determine the most effective structure, schedule, and participant demographics for the CoPs.

Conclusion

The PA education community is at a crossroads with the expansion of PA programs nationwide. Retaining PA faculty is a key component of the success of both new and established PA programs.

The CoP approach provided a sense of community and an opportunity for resource sharing for the participants. This research suggested that improved PA faculty mentorship, strong leadership at the PA department level and institutional level, and a supportive departmental and organizational culture were all key components related to PA faculty retention, burnout, and job satisfaction.

PA and other allied health program directors, higher education institutional leaders, and profession-specific professional organizations can use this research to create CoP models and help support and mentor faculty initially upon hire and throughout their careers.

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