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Physician Assistants/Associates with Doctoral Degrees: Where Are They Now?

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Introduction

- Despite the efficacy of the master's degree in training PAs to provide excellent patient care and satisfaction, there is **debate regarding a potential transition to entry-level and terminal doctoral degree credentials**.
- The PA profession is largely divided regarding the potential move to a doctoral degree and **few research studies** have been conducted surrounding the topic of adding or requiring a doctoral degree for PAs (1).
- As the U.S. becomes an increasingly multicultural and diverse society, the PA workforce must reflect that diversity to best serve patient, particularly given that increased diversity in healthcare professionals is associated with positive healthcare outcomes (2,3).
- The potential for leadership opportunities is among the top three positive impacts a doctoral degree may have for the profession (4-6)
- The practicing settings and specialties PAs with doctoral degrees is currently unknown (7).

Objectives

- The purpose of this study was **to describe demographic characteristics and practice patterns of PAs who have doctoral degrees**.
- We hope this work may shed more light on the potential impacts of doctoral degrees for PAs and provide needed evidence for the ongoing debate on whether the PA profession should move to doctoral level training.

Methods

- Secondary analysis of data
- 2021 Salary Survey of the American Academy of PAs
- 13,865 PAs responded to the survey (13.3% estimated response rate)
- We examined the relationships between holding a doctoral degree, demographic characteristics, and work-related variables
- Descriptive bivariate statistics and chi-square tests

Results

- Significant differences** in multiple demographic factors and work-related factors between PAs with and without doctoral degrees.
- Table 1 and Table 2

Conclusions

- PAs with doctoral degrees have higher frequencies of men and PAs of color
- May be associated with upward mobility at workplaces.
- Most PAs with doctoral degrees in the sample were holding informal or formal leadership positions, which may be influenced by the fact that most doctoral credentialed PAs have been PAs and at their current positions for longer lengths of time
- The study also has implications for the PA profession's ongoing debate regarding **terminal doctoral credentials** = attract more males to pursue the profession due to the title, rank, and potential leadership potential

Limitations and Future Research

- This was a descriptive study, without controlling for individual variables.
- Recommend that future researchers examine the order of credentialing as well as motivating factors for doctoral degrees
- Low response rate (however, large national dataset and representative of PA profession based on other data sets)

Table 1. Demographic factors by doctorate degree

	Does Not Have a Doctorate Degree		Has a Doctorate Degree		p
	n	%	n	%	
Age					< 0.001
Under 30	2,897	26.0	19	6.4	
30-39	4,628	41.6	70	23.6	
40-49	1,996	17.9	88	29.6	
50-59	1,019	9.2	68	22.9	
60 or older	584	5.2	52	17.5	
Gender					< 0.001
Male	3,310	26.5	149	45.0	
Female	9,186	73.5	182	55.0	
Race/ethnicity					< 0.001
Non-Hispanic White	10,092	82.3	226	70.4	
Non-Hispanic Black/African American	263	2.1	24	7.5	
Hispanic or Latinx	738	6.0	36	11.2	
Non-Hispanic Asian	847	6.9	24	7.5	
Other and multi-racial	319	2.6	11	3.4	

Table 2. Work-related factors by doctorate degree

	Does Not Have a Doctorate Degree		Has a Doctorate Degree		p
	n	%	n	%	
Primary Role^a					< 0.001
Clinician	12,366	99.2	300	90.4	
Educator	95	0.8	32	9.6	
Leadership Role					< 0.001
Formal	1,325	10.5	98	28.9	
Informal	3,072	24.4	102	30.1	
None	8,178	65.0	139	41.0	
Primary Setting					< 0.001
Outpatient Clinic	6,791	54.0	158	46.4	
Hospital	4,557	36.2	119	35.1	
Urgent Care Center	666	5.3	23	6.8	
Other	563	4.5	39	11.5	
Specialty					< 0.001
Primary Care	2,699	21.5	71	20.9	
Internal Medicine Subspecialties	1,582	12.6	54	15.9	
Surgical Subspecialties	3,506	27.9	57	16.8	
Emergency Medicine	1,065	8.5	37	10.9	
Other Specialties	3,502	27.9	109	32.2	
No Medical Specialty	223	1.8	11	3.2	
Length of time as a PA					< 0.001
0-4	4,774	38.0	57	16.8	
5-9	3,095	24.6	62	18.3	
10-14	1,793	14.3	86	25.4	
15-19	1,213	9.6	39	11.5	
20 or more	1,702	13.5	95	28.0	
Years at current employer					< 0.001
0-1	3,437	28.0	52	15.5	
5-9	4,691	38.2	124	36.9	
10-14	2,413	19.7	79	23.5	
15-19	864	7.0	45	13.4	
15-19	475	3.9	18	5.4	
20 or more	388	3.2	18	5.4	
Estimated annual salary^a					< 0.001
Median or below	7,460	60.0	126	37.7	
Above median	4,965	40.0	208	62.3	

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