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POSITION PAPER ON STUDENT LEADERSHIP

**STUDENT ACADEMY
OF THE
AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS**

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of the 1997-1998 Student Academy of the American Academy of Physician Assistants' (SAAAPA) Board of Directors was "Leadership is for Everyone," and this sentiment was put into action throughout the year. Also, the position of Student Diversity Committee Representative was created at the student society level, allowing for greater involvement of individual students to promote diversity. Finally, through the SAAAPA homepage, PA students from around the nation are showcased for their leadership skills and involvement within the PA profession.

These efforts at promoting student leadership have been a great success and the concept of leadership for everyone has firmly taken root at the student level. At the 1998 AAPA annual conference, the Assembly of Representatives (AOR) of the Student Academy charged the incoming Student Board of Directors with creating a position statement that supports the leadership development and professional involvement of students. This document is the realization of that resolution. It has been fully endorsed by both SAAAPA and the Association of Physician Assistant Programs (APAP).

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Simply defined, leadership is the process of envisioning where a group is going and then guiding that group in getting there. However, ask anyone who has ever been in such a position and they will tell you that nothing about being a leader is ever simple. On the contrary, it takes a great deal of vision, dedication, and hard work to survive and prosper at leadership. Yet, all around us are the success stories -- both great and small -- of leadership in practice. Several components, represented by the acronym PERFORM, best summarize the behaviors necessary for effective leadership.¹ Taken as a whole, these components serve to clarify the definition of leadership in a more global and practical sense. The components are: purpose, empowerment, relationships, flexibility, optimal productivity, recognition, and morale.

- **Purpose.** Leaders have a clear view of the group's purpose. They develop mutually agreed-upon and challenging goals that clearly relate to this vision. All members of the group are invested in and share a common sense of this purpose, and each member understands his/her individual role in fulfilling the purpose.
- **Empowerment.** Leaders are confident about the group's ability to overcome obstacles and to realize its vision. A sense of mutual respect enables members to share responsibilities, ask for help, and take initiative to meet challenges. Clearly defined expectations enable leaders to do their jobs easily. Because they embody collective as well as personal power, leaders can provide opportunities for group members to grow and learn new skills.
- **Relationships.** Leaders take the time to make a relationship with all group members and also encourage group members to form relationships with one another. There is an atmosphere of trust, acceptance, and a sense of community. Group cohesion is high, and open communication is practiced by all. Effective leaders consider listening as important as speaking. As such, they encourage group members to share their thoughts and opinions.
- **Flexibility.** Leaders are flexible and perform different tasks as needed. The strengths of each group member are identified and utilized, and leaders work to coordinate individual efforts. The group is open to all ideas. Most importantly, leaders recognize the inevitability and desirability of change and then adapt to changing conditions.
- **Optimal Productivity.** Leaders work with their group to produce significant results. Inherent to this is the ability to delegate responsibilities. Effective leadership involves giving group members important tasks and then allowing those members to get the job done. Leaders are committed to high standards and quality results and are

¹Blanchard-K, "Creating Top Teams," *The Toastmaster*, June 1993, pp. 8-10.

able to encourage the same in their members. This requires effective decision-making skills and problem-solving methods to be in place before beginning a project. Successful leadership includes a strong ability to produce results.

- **Recognition.** Leadership thrives on recognizing individual and team accomplishments by celebrating milestones, achievements, and events. Members feel highly regarded within the group and experience a sense of personal success in relation to their group contribution.
- **Morale.** Leaders are confident, committed, and optimistic about the future. They convey to the group excitement about individual as well as group accomplishments. Leaders instill a sense of enthusiasm and pride in belonging to the group. This is an invaluable element, as it translates into a high degree of satisfaction in working with the group.

Of these components, two are essential to successful leadership: optimal productivity and morale.¹ To achieve results and enjoy doing it, specific behaviors are necessary. Leaders can either provide direction (to increase productivity) or provide support (to increase morale).

Providing direction can be accomplished in three forms: structure, control, and supervision.¹ **Structure** is necessary to make progress. This can come from an agenda, asking questions to clarify roles and specifically outlining goals and objectives. **Control** can be used to help a group stick to an accepted plan. This involves helping the group to focus and limit its activities. **Supervision** allows for monitoring and evaluating how the group is doing in reaching its goals. Leaders may provide additional information, make a suggestion, or recast assignments.

Providing support is integral to a smoothly functioning team and can best be given in three ways: praising, listening, and facilitating.¹ **Praising** in a sincere, specific manner has been proven time and again to be one of the most effective means of positive reinforcement. Praise should be focused on a particular skill or accomplishment. This positive feedback also encourages others to be involved in the group. **Listening** is an invaluable behavior for a leader. It is imperative for effective communication and can be demonstrated by using verbal cues such as paraphrasing and nonverbal cues such as head nods. **Facilitating** is necessary to help group members in interacting. This can be accomplished by either leading a discussion or encouraging quiet members to contribute. Facilitating moves the group toward its goal in a way that maintains high levels of participation and commitment.

Having outlined a clear and concise discussion of the necessary components and behaviors of leadership, it is also helpful to list some characteristics that are detrimental to leadership. The "**Seven Deadly Sins of Leadership**" are as follows:¹

- Trying to be liked rather than respected
- Not asking members for their advice and help
- Not developing a sense of responsibility in team members and not expecting it from your peers

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- Emphasizing rules rather than skills and thwarting personal talent
- Not keeping criticism constructive
- Ignoring complaints
- Keeping people uninformed -- not respecting their right to know

Truly, leadership is for everyone. With practice, the timing of these components and behaviors will improve and become routine for all leaders. When this happens, the group can easily **PERFORM** and will be well on its way to being another leadership success story. However, it is clear that this necessary practice of developing leadership skills is time-consuming. Students, especially physician assistant students, are already pressed for time, but the benefits they will reap through professional leadership and involvement will contribute significantly to their role as PA students and finally as PAs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT

There are many advantages for PAs and PA students who get involved with their professional association. In a broad sense, involvement develops and promotes their professional "identity." What does it mean to be a physician assistant and what does it mean to be a physician assistant student? These questions have different answers for different people, but the framework of the profession has been laid out by the AAPA -- including a mission, a vision, and a code of ethics that is enforced through its members. Membership and involvement in one's professional society send a message to employers, patients, and fellow PAs of pride and respect for what a physician assistant is and does. It has the added benefit of providing visibility and recognition for those outside our profession. Although the number of PAs is growing every day, the term physician assistant is not yet a household word -- but we are drawing closer to that goal.

SAAAPA is based on the graduate Academy, so the tenets cited above apply to both students and graduates. Those students who get involved early tend to stay involved. They take the necessary responsibility for their own future and the future of their peers by taking charge not passively waiting for it. The activities available to students through the AAPA are an invaluable part of their education and provide rewards that are sometimes surprising. In addition to clinical medical education, the student gains very practical benefits such as networking skills and employment development. The people one meets at conferences can be the source of a wonderful new job -- perhaps not today, but somewhere down the road.

In today's volatile health care climate, changes take place swiftly and not always in a very obvious way. It is difficult to stay on top of all issues when one is trying to keep current on clinical issues and do well as a student. There is safety in numbers, however. The AAPA has staff whose job it is to keep their fingers on the pulse of these issues. This, combined with members across the nation, gives us a shared responsibility and pooled resources so that our eyes and ears are constantly alert to the nuances of today's medical climate. There is a much greater impact when trying to influence those in Washington or even on the board of directors at your community hospital when you have the backing of many. We as physician assistants have an enormous advantage in our numbers as well. Our Academy speaks with "one voice," although there are many individual members, which means that our impact is not diluted by different factions. When change is necessary, it is imperative to have solidarity; through the AAPA, PAs achieve that goal.

With all the advantages of membership, there is one other aspect that is very important: professional responsibility. As we take from the pool of benefits and information, so must we put back. Each voice is important and all members of this profession have a responsibility to speak to issues that are important to them. In the next 5 to 10 years, there is a potential for more than half the total Academy membership to be made up of new graduates. We have made great strides for physician assistants and physician assistant students in all settings, but to keep the profession going in the right direction,

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we need to hear from all the diverse groups that make it up. Who best to bring forward the unique talents and fund of knowledge that each student has than the students themselves?

The importance of professional involvement cannot be underestimated during these changing times in the health care industry, and the best opportunity to convey the importance of this involvement to PAs is while they are students. The benefits of involvement, however, are reaped not only by the profession as a whole but also by the individual PA student leaders in all aspects of their professional training. SAAAPA believes that the primary responsibility of the PA student is to focus first and foremost on their PA education, including both didactic and clinical phases of training. SAAAPA also believes that leadership can play an important role in high scholastic and clinical achievement for PA students.

HOW STUDENT LEADERSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT CAN ENHANCE SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT AND CLINICAL SKILLS

The leadership skills that PA students develop through professional involvement on many levels contribute positively toward their function and role as a student. Leadership skills can be displayed in a variety of settings, not just while the student is fulfilling professional responsibilities. A student can be a leader in scholastics as well as a leader in multiple clinical settings. Fostering leadership skills in PA students only serves to create better PAs. Being a student leader on any level of the professional organization and attending organizational activities is a privilege. This privilege can serve to further increase the student leader's performance, both clinically and scholastically. A PA student leader is more likely to work harder to achieve high standards in academics and on clinical rotations in order to keep such a privilege.

PA student leaders feel compelled to set the example of high scholastic achievement. This stems from the skills that are developed through actual leadership experience. Scholastic achievement should be a prerequisite to participation as a student leader in the professional organization. Maintaining acceptable standards for scholastics helps to ensure that extracurricular leadership activities will not interfere with PA education and training. Being a PA student leader at any level of the organization does entail increased responsibilities, but this will benefit those students who take on this responsibility. Students develop efficient time management skills to fulfill their roles as PA student, organization leader, and multiple other roles specific to each student leader.

Another positive aspect of student leadership is the fact that student leaders may feel compelled to prove to their PA program directors and faculty that professional involvement will not adversely affect scholastic achievement. Many student leaders are willing to go the extra mile to achieve higher marks in academics. This positive aspect is also apparent in the clinical setting. Student leaders strive to prove to their clinical preceptors that their PA education and skill development on rotations come first. This translates into students working that much harder to gain all the knowledge they can on the rotation and devote significant time outside the rotation studying about that particular area of medicine or surgery.

On clinical rotations, PA student leaders feel compelled to set the example of the proficiency in skills and dedication to learning that has been a cornerstone of the physician assistant profession for decades. Student leaders are a reflection of the AAPA and the PA profession. This responsibility compels them to live up to that reflection and show patients, fellow students, graduate PAs, and other medical professionals that they are dedicated first and foremost to the practice of medicine and that their involvement in the AAPA serves to deepen that commitment.

HOW TO PROMOTE STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Encouraging PA students to become active leaders at all levels of SAAAPA and facilitating that commitment serves to strengthen the student professionally, personally, scholastically, and clinically. By promoting student leadership in the profession, program directors and faculty will enhance the leadership skills of their students in all settings, reflecting positively on the PA profession as a whole.

There are multiple professional levels in which PA students can become involved and develop their leadership skills, including student society, community, state, regional, and national levels. All these levels of involvement are crucial to fulfilling the vision of the AAPA that PAs become worldwide leaders in health care. Program director and faculty support of PA student involvement and leadership is crucial to the success of cultivating student leaders. The following section specifies how PA programs can encourage their students to become leaders at all levels of the profession.

Student Society

Every PA program is allowed a student society. It is a simple process to become a recognized student society. A motivated faculty advisor is the key to the success of the student society. Therefore, the selection of an energetic student advocate is encouraged. A faculty advisor training program has been developed for presentation at APAP meetings. The newly appointed faculty advisor should be encouraged to attend.

The next step is to form a student society in a new program or to facilitate the continuation of a student society in an existing program. To register the student society, a class officer list, a class roster, and student society bylaws must be sent every year to Shannon Faherty at the AAPA, 950 N Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-1552. It is recommended that registration occur as soon as possible after the incoming class starts. SAAAPA also encourages the incoming class to select the Assembly of Representatives (AOR), House of Delegates (HOD), and the Student Diversity Committee Representative (SDCR) by November of the year they start the PA program.

To facilitate an active and strong student society, the faculty advisor should encourage regular class meetings and various fundraising activities. A student society mailbox/slot placed in a central location is highly recommended to place mail from the AAPA, SAAAPA, the regional chair, or a constituent organization. Assistance is available from several sources on setting up a student society. There is a *Student Society Handbook* mailed out every August; copies may also be obtained from the AAPA national office. SAAAPA has a Student Society Mentoring Program in which well-established student societies assist newly forming student societies. As stated earlier, there is a faculty advisor training program through APAP. SAAAPA has developed a presentation entitled AAPA, SAAAPA, and You that may be loaned to a student society. More individual assistance is also available by contacting Shannon Faherty at the AAPA.

Community

PA students should be encouraged to participate in community activities that promote leadership as well as medical knowledge. Examples of community activities include volunteering at homeless shelters, AIDS projects, hospice care, and speaking at health fairs and/or at high schools regarding the PA profession. Another activity would be to promote the AAPA President's Annual Philanthropic Project by linking student community activities with a worthy cause. Community involvement can even be a mandatory part of the class curriculum.

State

PA students should be encouraged if not required to attend their state chapter continuing medical education conference. The PA program could work with the state chapter to allow students to volunteer as moderators, at the registration desk, or in other ways as needed. PA students could be required to write a summary of what they learned at the conference as a class assignment. Other ways to increase involvement in the state is to work with the state chapter to encourage students to become members of committees. In addition, the AAPA has a constituent organization mentoring program to match a student to a state PA leader. Mentoring fosters leadership skills and allows the student to learn in a non-threatening environment. Students possess energy and fresh ideas. They are excited about the PA profession. Students who are encouraged to serve as committee members will be more likely to continue to serve as graduates. They represent the future pool of state leaders, therefore, early involvement leads to retention.

National

As with the state conference, PA students should be encouraged to attend the AAPA's annual conference. They should be encouraged or required to attend and actively participate in the AOR and HOD. PA students with leadership potential should be encouraged to run for office in SAAAPA. As at the state level, they could be required to write a report of what they experienced at the annual conference. As with all meetings, the best way to assure the student is present and active is to fund them. The AOR and HOD representatives are the most crucial students to assist with funding; however, all students could greatly benefit from attending the annual conference.

In conclusion, it is the position of the Student Academy of the American Academy of Physician Assistants that leadership begins the day a PA student is accepted into a program. The earlier this philosophy is incorporated into the future clinician's experience, the more likely it is that the clinician will also be an active participant in this wonderful profession. Our future depends upon the creativity, strengths, ideas, and experience of all who are connected to the physician assistant experience: educators, students, practicing PAs, supervising physicians, lawmakers and others. The more we all work together to promote leadership skills in physician assistant students, the better will be the outcome for the patient -- who is the focus of all of our efforts.