

Exploring an Entry-Level PA Doctorate: Perceived Benefits, Limitations, & Implications

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BACKGROUND

The discussion regarding the appropriate degree for Physician Assistants/Associates (PAs) has been visited and revisited since the profession transitioned to the Master's level in 2003.¹ A summit took place in 2009 which resulted in the profession opposing the entry-level doctorate degree for PAs and reaffirming the Master's as the entry-level and terminal degree for PA practice.² At the time, they also did support individual universities' decisions to offer post-graduate doctorates. Currently, there are more than 10 accredited universities that offer PA-specific doctorate degrees. The conversation has regained traction as a second doctoral summit sponsored by the PA Education Association commenced in March 2023 to revisit the topic. This review seeks to explore the perceived benefits, limitations, and implications of an entry-level PA doctorate. Additionally, this project discusses the perceived impact an entry-level PA doctorate may have on workforce diversity.

METHODS

A search was performed on PubMed using search terms "physician assistant" and "doctorate," which yielded 67 results. Articles were excluded that did not include topics relating to both ("physician assistant" and "doctorate"). Thirteen articles were found to meet the specifications for inclusion in this systematic review. Additionally, expert interviews were conducted at the 2022 AAPA national conference in Indianapolis, Indiana to discuss PA doctorate-related research. Fourteen relevant articles sent by advisors were also included.

RESULTS

Benefits

- Competitive edge for employment
- Access to leadership opportunities
- Increased compensation potential
- Cost-benefit of entry-level doctorate degree compared to postgraduate programs.^{18,8,5}

Limitations

- Potential impact on PA/physician relationship
- Increased financial burden
- Unclear clinical impact
- Lack of doctorate-trained faculty
- Increased time in school^{8,10,24}

Impact on Diversity

Since 2002, there has been a 200% increase in the PA workforce but a 40% decrease in URM PAs.² This coincides with the transition from the Bachelor's to the Master's level PA degree. The chart below represents the enrollment of Black and Latino/a/x students into health professions programs since 2014. Regarding doctorate transition, Fleming et al. found a statistically significant negative correlation regarding Black PA student enrollment as the academic degree increases.¹⁸

Black student enrollment as academic degree increases	R	R ²	P-Value
Occupational Therapy	-0.71515	0.511442215	0.492715024
Physical Therapy	0.428686	0.183771679	0.164382158
Pharmacy	0.406192	0.164992	0.149542
Nursing	0.93524511	0.874683	<0.01**
PA	-0.86642	0.750683	<0.01**

Hispanic/Latinx student enrollment as academic degree increases	R	R ²	P-Value
Occupational Therapy	0.978684	0.95782155	0.131682103
Physical Therapy	0.428686	0.183771679	0.164382
Pharmacy	0.406192	0.164992	0.149542
Nursing	0.92335917	0.852592	<0.01**
PA	0.72124	0.520187	<0.01**

DISCUSSION

Overall, studies were mixed on the definitive benefits of the degree transition, but highlighted the barriers that currently exist in implementing a transition at this time. There are varying results regarding the perceived impact on underrepresented minorities (URMs). According to a recent survey, approximately two-thirds of respondents felt that an entry-level doctorate would negatively impact the recruitment of URMs as a decline in Black and Latino/a/x student enrollment was seen after the Master's transition.^{8,9,22} There are more uncertainties regarding the benefits of an entry-level PA doctorate than absolutes. PA education may not be currently equipped to transition to an entry-level PA doctorate. Further research is needed to determine if a future transition can achieve the perceived benefits discussed or whether other avenues exist that can provide similar outcomes.^{8,10} Additional research is needed to investigate methods to facilitate a degree change that addresses limitations, downstream implications, and to avoid negatively impacting the recruitment of URM students.

IMPLICATIONS

- Parity and leadership opportunities were the most cited benefits for a doctorate degree transition.
- PA curriculum currently has enough credits to qualify for awarding a doctorate degree.
- Raising academic minimum requirements to include a doctorate degree would further exacerbate PA faculty staffing issues.
- The data from other health professionals are mixed regarding the impact doctorate level credentials have on the recruitment of diverse applicants.
- The PA profession has seen a decline in URMs since the transition to a Master's level degree.

