# The Influence of COVID-19 on PA Student Utilization of Emotional Intelligence Competencies

**University of Kentucky** College of Health Sciences

Cheryl Vanderford, MSPAS, PA-C, Lisa Williams, MSSA, ACC, Shelley Irving, MSPAS, PA-C, Leslie Woltenberg, PhD, MS Ed

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study aims to introduce a tool developed by researchers at the University of Kentucky Physician Assistant (UKPA) Program to assess PA student utilization of various EI competencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This tool identifies gaps in the application of certain competencies and illuminates potential challenges and opportunities that exist to foster student success in these areas. Such data can be used to inform development of EI curricula for PA programs.

## INTRODUCTION

Preparing future Physician Assistants (PAs) for practice in a healthcare landscape that is everchanging poses challenges under usual circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced uncertainty and complexity in all arenas, including education. PA students were required to quickly transition to social distancing and remote learning. Adapting support systems and utilizing emotional intelligence (EI) became essential. Building confidence and demonstrating competency in core EI domains is a vital component to support PA students and prepare them for practice. Exploring these competencies can help inform integration of EI into PA curricular design.

## METHODS

This single-institution study conducted from 2020-2022 included students across five cohorts, including didactic and clinical, in a graduate-level program in PA studies. Data were gathered via an exploratory, mix-method survey conducted anonymously through Qualtrics. Participation was voluntary. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Kentucky's Institutional Review board and was granted Exempt status.

The 17-item electronic survey employed a mixed-method design, to include a combination of Likert-type scale items and open response items across 11 core EI Competencies: confidence, empathy, effective communication, emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, growth mindset, collaboration/teamwork, adaptability/openness to change, trustworthy/reliable, conscientiousness, and resilience. Descriptive statistics were conducted on quantitative items and qualitative data were examined via thematic analysis.

## RESULTS

A total of 130 students participated in the study (47.8% response rate). Thematic analysis revealed EI competencies particularly valuable during the COVID-19 pandemic included adaptability to change, resilience, emotional self-awareness, and growth mindset. Students acknowledged formal in class lectures, hands-on training, in-class simulations, and reflection activities fostered the development of EI competencies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Figure 1: "Emotional Intelligence Competencies Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic" Evaluation Instrument

1. Which of the following do you believe are emotional intelligence (E.I.) benefits for PAs?
2. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, how would you have evaluated your emotional intelligence competencies? *[response scale: Highly Effective (10) → Not Effective At All (0)]*
3. As a result of navigating the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, do you feel your emotional intelligence competencies have: *[response options: Strengthened (3), Remained the Same (2), Weakened (1)]*
4. Did your awareness of the <u>need</u> for emotional intelligence change as you navigated the COVID-19 pandemic? *[response options: Awareness increased (3); Awareness remained the same (2); Awareness decreased (1)]*
5. During this time of the COVID-19 pandemic, how do you rate your effectiveness in demonstrating your emotional intelligence skills as a PA student? *[response scale: Highly Effective (10) → Not Effective At All (0)]*
6. *As you navigate the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic as a PA student, in which of the following emotional intelligence competencies have you noted change?
7. *During the COVID-19 pandemic, which emotional intelligence competencies have you expressed most frequently?
8. Why did you express those competencies more frequently?
9. *During the COVID-19 pandemic, which emotional intelligence competencies have you expressed least frequently?
10. Why did you not express those competencies as frequently?
11. As a PA student, where are you finding support in managing the complex challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic?
12. As a PA student, what is preventing you from adapting to changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
13. In what ways did the PA program foster the development of your E.I. competencies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
14. What are the most helpful ways the PA Program has fostered your emotional intelligence growth?
15. How often are you using emotional intelligence skills during the COVID-19 pandemic? *[response scale: Frequently/Daily (3), Occasionally (2), Rarely (1), Never (0)]*
16. *Which five of the following emotional intelligence competencies do you most hope to enhance during your PA training?
17. What is the most helpful way you feel the PA Program can help your emotional intelligence competencies grow?

*= items with response options per provided list of core Emotional Intelligence competencies (confidence, empathy, effective communication, emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, growth mindset, collaboration/teamwork, adaptable/open to change, trustworthy/reliable, conscientious, and resilience), in addition to options for "none of the above" and "other" with text entry.

### Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Summary

| Item # | Rating Scale | Mean, SD | Median | Min, Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | Highly Effective (10) - Not Effective At All (0) | 6.87, 1.49 | 7.00 | 3.00, 10.00 |
| 3 | Strengthened (3); Remained the same (2);Weakened (1) | 2.44, 0.71 | 3.00 | 1.00, 3.00 |
| 4 | Awareness increased (3); Awareness remained the same (2); Awareness decreased (1) | 2.68, 0.56 | 3.00 | 1.00, 3.00 |
| 5 | Highly Effective (10)… Not Effective At All (0) | 7.08, 1.49 | 7.00 | 1.00, 10.00 |
| 15 | Frequently/daily (3); Occasionally (2); Rarely (1); Never (0) | 3.31, 0.80 | 4.00 | 1.00, 4.00 |

*"It is an important time to step up and to support the need for certain changes. Communication is more important than ever. It is also important now, as always, to evaluate ourselves and understand how our actions are affecting others. I recognize there is attention on me being in the healthcare field and/or in leadership, so I have to lead by example, unwavering and confident."*
**-UKPA Student**



As a Physician Assistant student, what is preventing you from adapting to changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
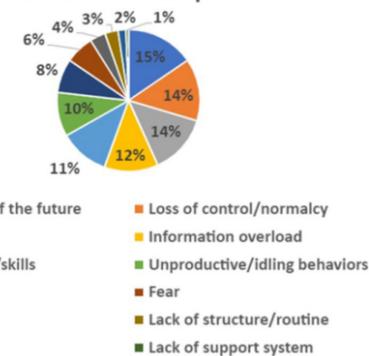
15%, 14%, 14%, 12%, 11%, 10%, 8%, 6%, 4%, 3%, 2%, 1%

Legend:
- Uncertainty of the future
- Distractions
- Doubt of self/skills
- Avoidance
- Denial
- Other
- Loss of control/normalcy
- Information overload
- Unproductive/idling behaviors
- Fear
- Lack of structure/routine
- Lack of support system

**Figure 2: Thematic Analysis of Challenges to Adapting**

### Table 2: EI Benefits for Physician Assistants - Frequencies

| Which of the following do you believe are emotional intelligence benefits for Physician Assistants? Response options: | Frequency (n) |
|---|---|
| Enhanced communication and teamwork | 110 |
| Stronger relationships with others | 100 |
| Improved pt health outcomes | 93 |
| Deeper expression of emotions/empathy | 91 |
| Decreased risk of burnout | 89 |
| Increased happiness and fulfillment | 86 |
| Better regulate emotions/ improved emotional resilience | 81 |
| More realistic goal-setting plans for pts | 77 |
| Awareness of stress triggers | 75 |
| Recognition of motivational drivers | 68 |
| Recognition of stress triggers | 67 |
| Enhanced confidence when making decisions | 56 |
| Stronger academic success | 47 |
| I don't know what EI is | 1 |
| None of the above | 0 |

## DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is but only one example of "change" in a PA's career and thus illuminates the need to foster the growth of PA students' EI competencies. Limitations of the study include variability of EI training among participants and small sample size (single institution study limits generalizability). As such, implications for future study include replication at other programs to further examine instrument utility and consistency. Utilization of this evaluation instrument by other PA programs can serve as a springboard to propel data-driven EI curricula designed with material and delivered in a modality to support students as they navigate future planned and unplanned changes.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding the emotional intelligence core competencies most impacted by change resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic help us understand growth opportunities for PA students. Identifying gaps in domains provide valuable information around challenges and opportunities to foster student support. Further exploration of emotional intelligence using this tool is needed to help inform curricular design for PA education.