



Embracing the Future:

A Practical Guide to Transition PA Programs to “Physician Associate”

Introduction

While state legislation to update PA practice acts will take time, momentum for PA professional title change continues to grow. Many state organizations have adopted the new title, and the profession is already utilizing “physician associate” in non-clinical settings such as media and program materials.

Irrespective of changes in state practice acts, PA programs are free to initiate the process of an internal name change.

This guidance draws on the experiences and insights of leaders from PA programs that have incorporated “physician associate” in program branding and department/degree terminology. These programs represent a spectrum of adopters; some have recently transitioned their official program name, while others have used physician associate as the profession’s title historically without a formal change. By learning from their successes and challenges, leaders from PA programs considering name and branding changes can gain practical strategies to secure a successful transition.

Why Make the Change?

Academic programs transitioning to this terminology demonstrate forward-thinking leadership and position themselves at the forefront of the profession’s future.

- **Modernized Identity**

The new title underscores research showing that PAs are leaders in healthcare and experts in medicine, not merely assistants. This shift helps students recognize their critical role and deep commitment to delivering exceptional care to patients.

“Our experience in the early adoption of the Physician Associate title reflected confidence in the collaborative role of the PA. Adoption of this new title can help in efforts to educate others about the outstanding capabilities and contributions that PAs can make in the provision of care to patients and to the healthcare team.”

— Yale Physician Associate Program

- **Institutional Leadership**

Policymakers look to PA programs as leaders. If PA programs are using the appropriate title of “associate” then policymakers are more likely to support regulatory and statutory change. Programs with longstanding histories are uniquely positioned to lead by example.

“As the first PA program in our state, we felt a sense of responsibility to pioneer this change and encourage others to follow suit.”

– Wichita State University Physician Associate Program

- **Enhanced Recruitment and Student Success**

Programs have reported increased applicant interest and strengthened alumni pride following the transition. Use of the appropriate title sets students up for success as future PAs because it builds patient trust and fosters greater confidence as future practitioners.

“We’re attracting applicants who align with the profession’s future and appreciate the significance of the title change.”

– Wichita State University Physician Associate Program

When Should Programs Make the Change?

- **Enhancing Program Branding through Title Change:**

Changing the program title offers a unique opportunity to refresh branding and marketing efforts, showcasing leadership and alignment with the PA profession. Programs can also take advantage of broader institutional initiatives, such as new logos or marketing campaigns, to reduce costs and ease the transition.

- **Forming New PA Programs:** PA programs undergoing initial accreditation should consider adopting “physician associate” from the start to avoid the logistical and financial challenges of rebranding later.

“If a program is in development, I would highly recommend to move forward with the new profession name right away if you find this to be acceptable in your state. There are multiple considerations for costs with a degree name change down the road that can be mitigated by beginning with the Physician Associate name in the degree. Additionally, many institutions have a long process that can take years for any change in the Catalog, etc., so you would also prevent significant delays in the future.”

– The Chan Family Master of Science in Physician Associate Studies at Keck Graduate Institute

- **Supporting State Title Change Efforts:**

Embracing the title change for your PA program demonstrates critical support to policymakers and state PA organizations advocating for statutory title changes. Aligning with these efforts positions PA programs as leaders in the transition, amplifies program visibility, and underscores commitment to the PA profession, students, patients, and healthcare advocacy efforts.

- **Incremental Changes to Lay the Groundwork:** For programs not yet ready to fully transition their PA program name, consider starting with smaller updates. Revise web pages, marketing materials, and resources about the PA profession to incorporate “physician associate” terminology where appropriate. These incremental changes help familiarize stakeholders with the new title and prepare for a smoother transition in the future.

“Programs with long-standing histories are uniquely positioned to lead by example and inspire others to follow suit.”

– Wichita State University Physician Associate Program

Navigating the Transition to “Physician Associate”

Careful planning and collaboration across multiple levels should be considered when transitioning to physician associate. Below are common considerations and practical steps:

1 Understand Institutional Requirements

Each institution has its own processes for academic program name changes. Key considerations include:

Approval Processes

- Changes often require internal approvals from the originating department, program leadership, and governing bodies (e.g., faculty senate or curriculum committees). Institutional administration should be consulted prior to undertaking a name change initiative.
- Universities may require formal proposals, including detailed justifications and administrative forms.
- Approval processes may differ between public and private institutions.

Logistical Updates

- Name changes can impact tuition codes, course registration systems, and student records.
- Materials such as diplomas, syllabi, and online platforms will need updates.



Costs and Timelines:

- While many digital changes may be cost-effective, physical updates (e.g., signage, promotional items) require careful budgeting and prioritization.

Example: “We deferred updating high-cost items like building signage until our planned move to a new facility in three years.”

– Wichita State University Physician Associate Program

2 Coordinate Across Departments

A successful transition relies on collaboration across key departments, including:

Registrar and Academic Affairs

- Ensure updates to institutional records, billing systems, and catalogs.

Marketing and Communications

- Align program messaging and maintain consistency across all platforms.

Admissions and Outreach Teams

- Communicate the change effectively to prospective students and external audiences.

“The rebranding process revealed just how deeply a department’s name is embedded in every aspect of its operations.”

– Wichita State University Physician Associate Program

3 Develop a Comprehensive Plan

Designate a Champion

- Assign a faculty member or administrator to lead the process and act as a central point of coordination.

Create a Material Checklist

- List all items requiring updates (e.g., nameplates, business cards, class schedules). This minimizes oversights and ensures consistency.

Leverage Milestones

- Tie the transition to significant events, such as anniversaries or accreditation milestones, to enhance visibility and support.

Phase it in

- Everything does not have to be completed at once, and there may be period of overlap as the name is implemented. Develop a manageable plan to minimize disruption to program operations.



“We leveraged our 50th anniversary to frame the name change announcement as part of our program’s evolution.”

– Wichita State University Physician Associate Program

4 Address Challenges Proactively

Programs may encounter obstacles during the transition, but these can be addressed with strategic planning and clear communication:

Distinction between academic and legal titles

Programs should educate students and stakeholders on the distinction between academic and legal titles, clarifying that this transition reflects the profession’s evolution while maintaining compliance with all licensing requirements.

Help stakeholders understand the facts

- Programs can adopt “physician associate” as their program name even in states where the title has not yet been updated in the licensing statutes.
- PA student diplomas can reflect “physician associate,” and graduates remain fully eligible for state licensure, credentialing, privileging, and the NCCPA certification process. (Note: AAPA is actively working to identify and address states where legal or regulatory challenges may exist.)

“We encountered no issues reconciling our new degree name, ‘Master of Physician Associate,’ with the licensing title, ‘physician assistant.’”

– Wichita State University Physician Associate Program

- **Administrative Hurdles:** Internal processes and governance may vary widely between institutions. Programs should anticipate the need for multiple layers of approval and prepare a well-documented proposal to streamline the process.
- **Consistency in Communication:** Use events, social media, and internal meetings to ensure that all stakeholders are informed about the name change and its rationale. Clear messaging helps to address potential confusion and fosters buy-in.

Tip: Anticipating these challenges and fostering collaboration can help ensure a smooth process.

Looking Ahead

Adopting the “physician associate” title is more than a name change — it’s a commitment to advancing the profession and fostering a collaborative identity for PAs. Programs that plan strategically, engage faculty champions, and align with institutional processes can position themselves as leaders in this important evolution.