



PA Students' Career Interests

A report from the 2022 AAPA Student Survey

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Methodology

From January 27 to February 28, 2022, data were collected in a survey sent to all PA students and pre-PA students in the United States (U.S.) for which AAPA had a valid email address who had not opted out of AAPA research surveys. A total of 2,462 PA students and 977 pre-PAs completed the survey. The overall survey margin of error is +/- 0.91% at a 95% confidence level. Response rates and margins of error vary by section and breakout.

Measures

On the tables that follow:

“N” refers to the number of respondents and is generally the first column in the data tables.

“Median” earnings are those at the 50th percentile, i.e., half of responses are equal to or above the median and half are equal to or below the median.

“Percent (%)” refers to the proportion of the respondents who selected a response option.

Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

Acknowledgement

This research is exempt from IRB approval in accordance with US Department of Health and Human Service's Policy for Protection of Human Research Subjects listed at 45 C.F.R. §46.104(d)(2)(ii). The author has no conflicts to report.

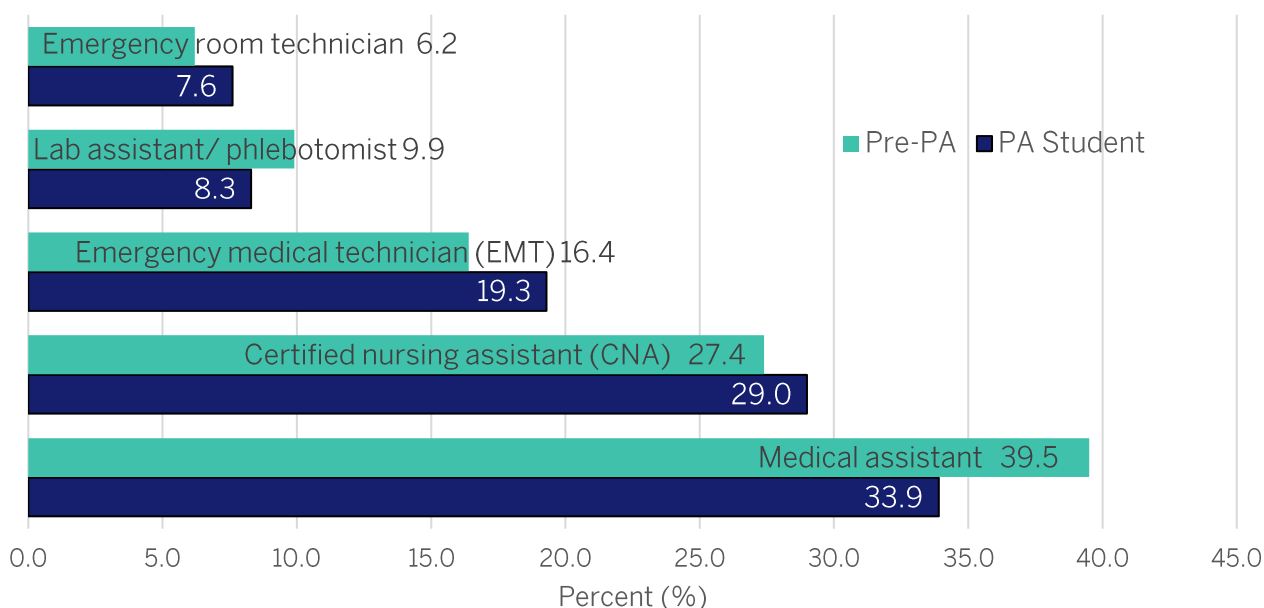
About PAs

PAs (physician associates/physician assistants) are licensed clinicians who practice medicine in every specialty and setting. Trusted, rigorously educated and trained healthcare professionals, PAs are dedicated to expanding access to care and transforming health and wellness through patient-centered, team-based medical practice. A PA's specific duties depend on the settings in which they work, their level of experience, and state law. There are approximately 159,000 PAs in the United States, who engage in more than 514 million patient interactions each year. To learn more about PAs, go to aapa.org.

Executive Summary

Almost 97% of PA students and pre-PAs previously worked in a healthcare related field before beginning their PA training (Table 1). The medical career reported most frequently was medical assistant. One in three PA students (34%), and 2 in five pre-PAs (40%), previously worked as medical assistant (Table 1). Other jobs making the top five were certified nursing assistant, emergency medical technician, emergency room technician, and lab assistant/phlebotomist (Figure 1). While working in a medical field is important for aspiring PAs developing their program applications, understanding the prior experience of PA students and pre-PAs can shine a light on the post-graduation career interests of the next cohort of PAs. For example, our preliminary findings suggest PAs who were a certified nursing assistant (CNA) prior to their PA program are more interested in primary care and medical subspecialties than surgical subspecialties. However more research is needed to identify the interaction between prior jobs and post-graduation specialty preferences.

Figure 1. Top 5 Prior Healthcare Careers of Pre-PAs and PA Students



Post-Graduation Specialty Preference

One in five PA students (22%) and three in 10 pre-PAs (28%) are interested in working in primary care after graduating from their PA program (Table 2). The specialty area with the fewest PA students and pre-PAs expressing their interest was pediatrics, with approximately 2% of both groups indicating their desire to practice in this specialty after graduation. PA student interest is aligned with the current profession. In 2022, about 21% of PAs were currently working in primary care and 2% in pediatric subspecialties.¹ When the major specialty areas are collapsed into three broad categories - primary care, surgical subspecialties, and medical subspecialties - medical subspecialties became the area with the

¹ 2022 AAPA Salary Report.

most pre-graduation interest. Two out of five pre-PAs (41%) and PA students (44%) would be interested in working in this specialty area (Table 3). With healthcare shortages in a variety of specialties and locations², there is an opportunity for new PAs to contribute to closing those gaps; 19% of PA students and 16% of pre-PAs have either no specialty preference or have not decided what area they would like to practice in post-graduation.

*44% of PA Students, and 41% of pre-PAs,
are interested in Medical Subspecialties*

Interest in Career Opportunities

PA students and pre-PAs were given an opportunity to select career areas they would be interested working in at some point in their future career. Seven out of 10 (69.5%) PA students were interested in working in education at some point during their career and 49.5% were interested in leadership opportunities. PA students and pre-PAs did differ slightly in their degree of interest in some career opportunities. Specifically, pre-PAs were interested in leadership, healthcare policy, and research at a higher rate than PA students (Table 4). With the continued growth of PA programs, there be an ever-increasing need for PAs to serve as faculty whether on staff or as adjunct.³ There is an opportunity to get PA students interested in PA education during their education and to continue to keep them engaged after they graduate and become PAs.

50%
Of PA students
are interested in
leadership
opportunities

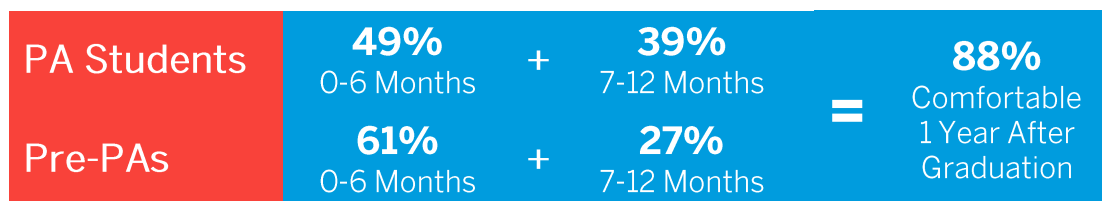
Comfort Making Treatment Decisions After Graduation

In the 2022 AAPA Student Survey, we asked PA students and pre-PAs to tell us how long they perceived it would take to feel comfortable autonomously making decisions about managing and treating patients as a new PA. A vast majority of respondents expressed they would feel comfortable as a new PA by the end of their first year (88%, Figure 2). Only 3% did not believe they would be comfortable making decisions after more than 24 months (Table 5). Overall, pre-PAs and PA students reported similar levels of confidence. However, there were proportionally more pre-PAs believing they would be comfortable autonomously making decisions within the first six months of their new PA career (Table 5, Figure 2).

² Source: Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Health Workforce Projections. Available at <https://bhwh.hrsa.gov/data-research/review-health-workforce-research>.

³ ARC-PA anticipates a 23.4% increase in the number of PA programs in the US from 2020 to 2024, rising from 264 (PA History Society) to 300 by 2022, and project to 326 by 2024 (ARC-PA).

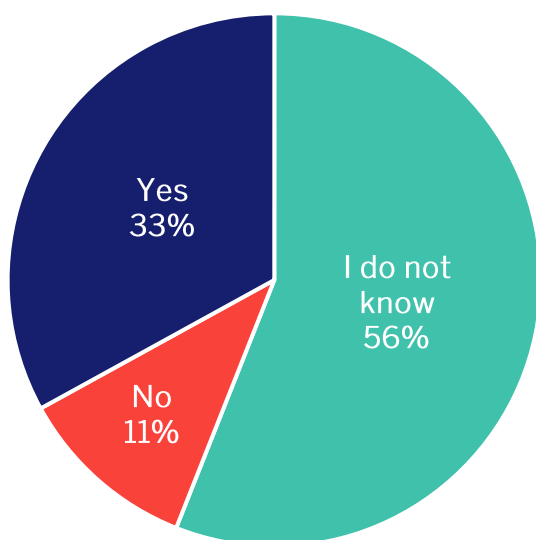
Figure 2. Percent of Pre-PAs and PA Students Who Believed they would be Comfortable Autonomously Making Decisions as a PA



Anticipating Specialty Change

PA students were asked whether they anticipated changing specialties at any point during their PA career. While 56% expressed they did not yet know (Figure 3), about one-third of PA students believed they would make a specialty change (Table 6). Those who did anticipate making a specialty change were asked an additional question to identify how long they would practice before changing specialties.

Figure 3. Percent of PA Students Who Anticipate Making a Specialty Change During their Career



About three out of every 10 PA students (27%) who anticipated making a specialty change would make a change within 5 years of starting their practice, 21% anticipate changing within three years of starting their practice, and 17% would make a switch at some point between 6 and 10 years into their post-graduation PA career (Table 7). However, one in 10 PA students (13%) were not sure when they would make a specialty change (Table 7). Recent research supports these findings. Looking at seven cohorts of PAs over a 10 year time span, researchers found that one-third of PAs made a change in their specialty at least once, with 3.4 years on the job before the first change.⁴

Comparing Anticipated and Actual Earnings

We asked PAs to share their anticipated post-graduation earnings during the 2022 AAPA Student Survey. Overall, their responses were similar to the actual compensation received by PAs during 2021 (Table 7). Most of the PA students interested primary care, surgical subspecialties, and medical subspecialties believed they would be earning between \$100,000 and \$129,000. However, the specific proportion did vary slightly by each specialty

⁴ Quella AK, Hooker RS, Zobitz JM. Retention and change in PAs' first years of employment. JAAPA. 2021;34(6):40-43. doi:10.1097/01.JAA.0000750972.64581.b0

area. In primary care, where new graduates typically earn between \$89,000 and the median compensation of \$110,000, approximately 48% of future graduates believed they would be earning between \$100,000 and \$129,000 while 45% thought their compensation would be closer to a range of \$99,999 to \$70,000. Students interested in surgical and medical subspecialties were more likely to believe their compensation would be between \$100,000 and \$129,000 (59%, 55%, Table 7). The lower range of actual 2021 PA compensation for surgical and medical subspecialty PAs generally mirrored these ranges. Surgical subspecialty PAs had a median compensation of \$118,000 and a 10th percentile compensation of \$95,000 while medical subspecialties earned \$92,500 at the 10th percentile and \$115,000 at the median.

Data Tables

Table 1. Percent of PA Students and Pre-PAs with Prior Direct Patient Care Experience

Healthcare Field	PA Students		Pre-PAs	
	N	Percent (%)	N	Percent (%)
Medical assistant	1,003	33.9	450	39.5
Certified nursing assistant	857	29.0	312	27.4
Emergency medical technician	570	19.3	187	16.4
Lab assistant/phlebotomist	246	8.3	113	9.9
Emergency room technician	226	7.6	71	6.2
Paramedic	71	2.4	17	1.5
Surgical tech	43	1.5	18	1.6
Medic or medical corpsman	42	1.4	14	1.2
Other	1403	47.4	515	45.3
None	97	3.3	36	3.2
Total	2,957		1,138	

Source: 2022 AAPA Student Survey.

Note: Respondents were allowed to select all categories that applied. Totals do not equal 100%. Most "Other" responses were from respondents who worked as a scribe, or performed duties related to scribing.

Question: What healthcare experience did you have prior to starting your PA program?

Table 2. PA Students' and Pre-PAs' Major Specialty Preference

Major Specialty Area	PA Students		Pre-PAs	
	N	Percent (%)	N	Percent (%)
Primary care	643	22.1	315	28.3
Surgical subspecialties	449	15.5	166	14.9
Medical subspecialties	1,266	43.6	459	41.3
Emergency medicine	434	15.0	139	12.5
Internal medicine subspecialties	299	10.3	97	8.7
Pediatric subspecialties	67	2.3	19	1.7
Other specialties	466	16.1	204	18.3
No preference/Have not decided	545	18.8	172	15.5
Total	2,903	100.0	1,112	100.0

Source: 2022 AAPA Student Survey. Data based on year 2021.

Question: What specialty do you intend to practice after completing your PA studies?

Table 3. PA Students' and Pre-PAs' Career Interests

Career Interest	PA Students		Pre-PAs	
	N	Percent (%)	N	Percent (%)
Clinical	2,582	87.3	1,032	90.8
Education	1,836	62.1	687	60.4
Leadership	1,463	49.5	679	59.7
Healthcare policy	632	21.4	460	40.5
Research	610	20.6	400	35.2
Business	384	13.0	192	16.9
Other	40	1.4	13	1.1
Total	2,957		1,137	

Source: 2022 AAPA Student Survey.

Question: Which of the following areas do you have an interest in pursuing at some time in your career?

Note: Respondents were given the option to select all areas of interest. Totals do not equal 100%

Table 4. Number of Months PA Students and Pre-PAs Anticipate Passing Until They Will Be Comfortable Autonomously Making Decisions as a New PA

Months	PA Students		Pre-PAs	
	N	Percent (%)	N	Percent (%)
0 - 6 Months	1,454	49.2	185	60.9
7 - 12 Months	1,154	39.0	82	27.0
13 - 18 Months	144	4.9	11	3.6
19 - 24 Months	122	4.1	16	5.3
More than 24 months	83	2.8	10	3.3
Total	2,957	100.0	304	100.0

Source: 2022 AAPA Student Survey.

Question: How many months do you anticipate it will take you to become comfortable with autonomously making decisions about managing and treating patients as a new PA?

Table 5. Percent of PA Students Who Anticipate Changing Their Specialty

Measure	N	Percent (%)
Yes	982	33.3
No	319	10.8
I do not know	1,652	55.9
Total	2,953	100.0

Source: 2022 AAPA Student Survey.

Question: Do you anticipate changing your specialty at some point as a PA?

Table 6. Percent of PA Students Anticipated Timing of First Specialty Change

Measure	N	Percent (%)
I am not sure	129	13.3
Within 1 year	9	0.9
Within 2 years	123	12.6
Within 3 years	201	20.7
Within 4 years	64	6.6
Within 5 years	259	26.6
Within 6 to 10 years	164	16.9
After more than 10 years	24	2.5
Total	973	100.0

Source: 2022 AAPA Student Survey.

Question: After graduation, how long do you anticipate you will practice before changing your specialty?

Table 7. PA Students Anticipated Post-Graduate Compensation and 2021 PA Compensation, by Specialty

PA Student Anticipated Compensation	Primary Care		Surgical subspecialties			Medical subspecialties			
	N	Percent (%)	N	Percent (%)	N	Percent (%)			
\$130,000 to more than \$160,000	11	1.8	12	2.8	31	2.5			
\$100,000 to \$129,999	299	47.6	257	58.9	677	54.6			
\$99,999 to under \$70,000	284	45.2	146	33.5	463	37.3			
I do not know	34	5.4	21	4.8	70	5.6			
2021 PA Compensation	10th Percentile	25th Percentile	50th Percentile	10th Percentile	25th Percentile	50th Percentile	10th Percentile	25th Percentile	50th Percentile
Compensation (base salary, annualized hourly, productivity pay combined) (\$)	89,000	97,000	110,000	95,000	105,000	118,000	92,500	102,000	115,000

Source: 2022 AAPA Student Survey, 2022 AAPA Salary Survey.

Student Question: What is the total compensation you anticipate earning in your first full-time PA position?

Salary Question: What is your base salary/hourly wage/ minimum guaranteed compensation/ compensation based on productivity in 2021?

Note: Base salary is the base salary for those respondents who indicated they received a salary. Hourly wage is the base hourly wage for those respondents who indicated they were paid hourly. Compensation reflects base salary, annualized hourly wages, and respondents who received productivity pay. Bonus is the total bonus for all respondents who indicated that they receive a bonus. Only those who indicated they received a bonus were asked to provide this information. Respondents who were paid with an hourly wage or by RVUs also reported their bonus. The data reflect PAs who worked full-time as well as part-time in 2021. Full-time is defined as working 32 hours or more per week. Part-time is less than 32 hours per week.