The Professional Development Needs of Faculty of Physician Assistant Programs
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COMMUNICATIONS

INTRODUCTION
The physician assistant (PA) educational community has exploded over the past decade. Since 1998, the number of accredited programs has grown from 110 to 148. In addition to these new programs, many established programs have increased class enrollment; the national median second-year class enrollment increased from 32 students in 2000-2001 to 38 students in 2007-2008.1,2 In order to satisfy the need for faculty, many PA programs have hired instructors directly from clinical practice who have little, if any, experience in teaching, curriculum design, and student assessment.

This is not a new problem. In 1998, Glicken and Blessing coauthored a report, published in the predecessor to this journal, summarizing the results of a faculty needs assessment conducted by the Association of Physician Assistant Programs (APAP), now known as the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA).2 They cited the same challenge in recruiting faculty “directly from clinical medicine.”1

At the time of the original survey, the number of PA programs was also rapidly expanding and little was known about self-identified needs of PA faculty. The results of the Glicken and Blessing survey reinforced the value of in-person workshops covering such topics as classroom teaching, instructional design, assessment and evaluation, and communication skills1 and provided the framework for the eventual establishment of the PAEA Faculty Development Institute (FDI).

The FDI is still in existence and is charged with promoting the professional development of PA program faculty and staff through enrichment, knowledge, and skills in the areas of education, scholarship, management, and leadership. Since its inception, the FDI has offered workshops geared towards PA educators at all levels of experience. Over the years, PAEA and the FDI have evolved to meet the changing needs of PA educators. With the Glicken and Blessing data now 10 years old, FDI decided to conduct a revised survey to identify current needs of PA faculty and to establish future directions.

METHODS
In February 2008, a link to a brief web-based survey was sent to all faculty at PAEA member programs. The instrument was developed with input from PAEA staff, the PAEA Board of Directors, and members of FDI and included standard faculty demographic information (ie, consortium, faculty position, years in position, years in education, and FTE status). Respondents were asked about participation in PAEA faculty development opportunities and any perceived barriers to participation in faculty development offerings. Finally, respondents were asked to rank their level of interest in various topics within 11 categories of faculty development presented (List 1), using a 5-point Likert scale (see List 2 for an example). Space for qualitative data was...
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RESULTS
A total of 1,482 surveys were sent and 269 responses were received, for an overall response rate of 18%. Respondents were fairly equally distributed across all six PAEA consortia (see Figure 1). The survey was completed by a variety of PA program personnel. The largest percentage of respondents (32%) were faculty, followed by program directors and clinical coordinators (19.3% each), and academic coordinators (12.3%). The complete breakdown can be seen in Figure 2. Seventy-five percent of all respondents were employed full-time.

The largest percentage of respondents (35%) had been in PA education between 8 and 15 years. Only 6% had been in education less than 1 year, while 20% and 22% indicated 1-3 and 4-7 years, respectively. Eighteen percent had been in PA education more than 15 years (see Figure 3). Of 269 respondents, 39% had been in their current position for 1-3 years, 25% for 4-7 years, and 18% for 8-15 years (Figure 4).

Responsibilities of respondents were administrative (62%), teaching (48%), admissions (32%), research (26%), budget (14%), and other (10%), such as clinical coordination.

An overwhelming majority of respondents had participated in PAEA faculty development opportunities in the past. The most popular means of participation was attending the PAEA Annual Education Forum (61%) and participating in add-on workshops (see Figure 5).

Respondents identified several barriers to participating in faculty development activities. The primary barrier was taking time away from the program (62%), followed by a lack of financial support from the institution (37%), meeting development needs elsewhere (15%), being unaware of PAEA programs (11%), lack of institutional support (10%), and lack of interest (7%) (see Figure 6).

In terms of the level of interest expressed in various faculty development topics, the topics deemed most important are identified in List 3. The two most important issues PAEA could address at the Annual Education Forum were identified as (1) assessment and (2) accreditation.

DISCUSSION
In general, respondents of this survey were experienced, (54% with at least 8 years in PA education) and were stable in their employment, with 48% having been in their current position more than 4 years. The low response

List 1. Categories of Faculty Development Opportunities
1. Teaching and advising
2. Course/curriculum and research design and evaluation
3. Assessment
4. Research and scholarly activity
5. Principles of education and learning
6. Technology
7. Clinical teaching
8. Ethical understanding and legal awareness
9. Department and university activities
10. Grant activities
11. Accreditation issues

List 2. Excerpt of Survey for the Category, Teaching and Advising
On a scale of 1 to 5, please indicate how interested you are in obtaining faculty development resources on the following topics (1 = ‘not interested at all’; 5 = ‘very interested’)

1. Teaching and advising
   a. Incorporating interactive teaching strategies
   b. Counseling students about learning
   c. Academic law
   d. Assisting learning to develop self-assessment skills
   e. Mentoring student research
   f. Using standardized patients
   g. Problem-based learning
   h. Teaching clinical and practical skills
   i. Running a small-group teaching session
   j. Preparing and delivering a lecture

provided at the end of the survey. Responses were submitted directly to PAEA and were kept anonymous and confidential.
rate (18%) is a limitation of this study, and survey respondents were not necessarily representative of the typical PA educator. According to the most recent PAEA Annual Report, in the PA educator population as a whole, 10% of faculty have been in their current position for less than 1 year and 36.3% have been in their current position between 1 and 3 years. Although this sample bias has the potential to affect results, it’s likely that the typical PA educator with less experience has an even greater need in the realm of professional development. Most respondents (61%) had attended the PAEA Education Forum in the past and many had participated in add-on workshops. Eighteen percent indicated they had not participated in any PAEA offering in the past 3 years. The reasons for this warrant further investigation.

PAEA continues to play a major role in the professional development of PA faculty. Only 15% of respondents reported that their development needs are being met elsewhere and 62% reported that being away from the program was a barrier to participation in PAEA activities. Hopefully, the free webinars now offered by the FDI will be attractive to those who see time away from the program as a reason not to participate in PAEA offerings as well as to those who report a lack of financial support from their institution as barriers.

The thematic areas of most interest (defined as having a mean score of greater than 3.6 on the 5-point Likert scale) were in the areas of incorporating interactive teaching strategies; designing educational research; using various assessment strategies; writing effective tests and grading rubrics; standardized patients and skill stations; remediation; using human simulators; and creating balance among service, clinical practice,
Figure 4. Number of Years in Current Position

- Less than 1 year: 15%
- 1 to 3 years: 39%
- 4 to 7 years: 25%
- 8 to 15 years: 18%
- More than 15 years: 5%

Figure 5. PAEA Faculty Development Opportunities Taken by Survey Respondents

- Attended PAEA Education Forum: 61%
- Attended PAEA Semi-Annual Meeting: 36%
- Basic Faculty Skills Workshop: 22%
- Program Director Workshop: 18%
- Research Workshop: 17%
- Basic Clinical Coordinator Workshop: 14%
- Advanced Clinical Coordinator Workshop: 10%
- Academic Law Workshop: 6%
- Leadership Training Institute: 5%
- Enhanced Faculty Skills: 4%
- Web-based Education Scholar: 3%
- Other: 3%

Figure 6. Barriers to Participating in PAEA Faculty Development Opportunities

- Time away from the program: 62%
- Lack of financial support from institution: 37%
- Needs are being met elsewhere: 15%
- Lack of knowledge about PAEA programs: 11%
- Lack of institutional support: 10%
- Lack of Interest: 7%
- Other: 17%
List 3. Faculty Development Topics of Greatest Interest to PA Faculty, By Category

**Teaching and Advising**
Incorporate interactive teaching strategies (3.7)
Counseling students about learning and behavioral issues (3.5)
Academic law (3.5)

**Course/Curriculum and Research Design and Evaluation**
Designing educational research projects to evaluate teaching and learning (3.5)
Designing teaching strategies and content to match outcomes (3.4)

**Assessment**
Using various assessment strategies (3.7)
Writing effective tests and rubrics (3.7)
Assessing performance using standardized patients and skills stations (3.6)

**Research and Scholarly Activity**
Writing an article for publication (3.4)
Understanding qualitative and quantitative evaluation strategies (3.3)

**Principles of Education and Learning**
Remediation (3.6)
Learning styles (3.4)
Using educational research as the basis for adopting teaching and learning (3.4)

**Clinical Teaching**
Enhancing teaching and assessment skills of preceptors (3.5)
Identifying new clinical sites (3.3)

**Ethical Understanding and Legal Awareness**
Disciplinary actions, discrimination, grievance, and hiring/firing procedures (3.5)
Cultural sensitivity (3.2)

**Department and University Activities**
Creating balance between service, clinical practices, research, and teaching (3.6)
Assessing candidates for admission (3.6)

**Grant Activities**
Grant writing and funding options (3.3)
Identifying potential funders (3.3)

**Accreditation Issues**
Interpreting the accreditation standards (3.5)
Maintaining accreditation and/or ongoing curricular evaluation (3.5)

**Technology**
Using human simulators (3.6)
Using web 2.0 technology (3.4)

Note: Topics presented are those with a mean Likert score of 3.6 or higher, or those in the top two within the category. Likert scores are in parentheses.

The FDI intends to administer this survey every 2-4 years in order to identify new needs and follow trends in PA education. The data will also be used to design new initiatives and methods of delivery such as podcasts and other innovative technologies. The next survey will likely inquire about faculty needs in terms of delegation, mentoring, and communication.

**CONCLUSION**
As the number of PA programs continues to grow, many of the Association’s familiar charges, such as providing development opportunities for new faculty members, have not changed. However, issues such as budget constraints and the incorporation of new technologies for teaching and communication pose ongoing challenges and opportunities for growth in the Association’s efforts to respond to the evolving needs of PA faculty.

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**REFERENCES**