PROJECT: WHAT’S WORKING? A NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF BEST PRACTICES IN DIVERSIFYING THE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT WORKFORCE

Can you tell us about your research question for this project and its significance to the field of PA education?

PAEA has identified diversity as one of its top priorities. Our study specifically addresses two important questions:

1. Which PA programs are considered top performers in contributing to the ethnic and racial diversity of graduates to the PA workforce?
2. What characteristics and strategies do PA programs attribute to their success in contributing to a diverse PA workforce?

How do you define diversity?

In this project we adopted the HRSA federal definition for diversity, which refers to a multiplicity of human differences among groups of people or individuals.

What makes a population diverse?

Diversity in the health care workforce requires recognition of many dimensions, e.g., sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, cultural background, socioeconomic status, disability, and language. For the purpose of this project, our research will specifically target racial and ethnic diversity, as this area is lagging behind in the PA profession.
Your proposal draws attention to the lack of resources currently available for programs to measure diversity and inclusion. Why do you think there is such a dearth of good information?

Despite all the documented benefits of diversity in both the didactic and clinical settings, we believe diversity research and scholarship has not been prioritized. There are very few funding agencies that support diversity and inclusion research in PA education.

Why should programs prioritize recruiting underrepresented minority students?

The rapidly changing health care environment and shifting demographics in our country calls for urgent attention in diversifying the workforce. Additionally, more diverse students bring in different viewpoints, which creates a robust learning and clinical environment for both trainees and clinicians. In general, greater diversity of students promotes cognitive diversity. Cognitive diversity is reflecting differences in knowledge, including beliefs, preferences, attitudes, thinking styles, problem-solving strategies, and perspectives; member characteristics that increase the capacity of cognitive resources of the team.

What kinds of new information or understandings do you hope this research will provide?

Our goal is for this study to provide the needed evidence regarding diversity best practices. We hope to provide resources to aid PA programs actualize their diversity missions, create inclusive environments, and enhance educational excellence for the students and faculty.

In what potential ways do you see the results impacting PA education?

We anticipate that our findings may impact future admission policies and program resources.

Do you see any policy or practice implications for your research?

Findings from our study have potential to impact national policies on PA workforce development.
What do you think are the most pressing topics for research in the PA profession now? This can either be in education or workforce.

Diversifying the PA workforce is one of the most pressing topics for research. Recent CASPA data shows that underrepresented groups continue to matriculate at lower rates. Clearly, there is an urgent need to innovate and develop interventions to solve these long-standing disparities and create a more diverse workforce.

What are your goals as a PA researcher?

One of our goals is to be part of the solutions in providing evidence on what works to improve diversity among PA students and professionals.

How will receiving this year’s Faculty-Generated Research Grant help advance those goals?

The grant will provide us with the needed resources to conduct both quantitative and qualitative research, while engaging PA programs to understand what practices work best.

You’ve assembled a team of researchers for this project hailing from four different institutions. What strengths and expertise will each of you bring to this study?

The research team brings over 30 years of combined research experience involving quantitative and qualitative analysis, and members are highly experienced in project implementation, data analysis, and dissemination of study results. The investigators are located in various regions in the U.S. and will bring different perspectives to diversity. Additionally, the investigators will bring different networks allowing for easy access and engagement of PA programs. All of the investigators have a history of collaboration throughout their professional careers.

*The principal investigator would like to recognize the efforts of her research team, consisting of Dr. Gerald Kayingo, Dr. Vanessa Bester, Dr. Sumihiro Suzuki, and Ramona Dorough. Dr. Nicole Burwell was also an initial contributor to the beginning stages of the proposal.
What was the most challenging part of designing your study and writing this proposal and how did you and your team address it?

The most challenging part was deciding which aspect of diversity to focus on. We decided that demographic diversity was lagging behind. It is easier to measure racial than ethnic data points that can easily be tracked from already existing data bases, such as the PAEA matriculation and CASPA data bases. Another challenge was the identification of a single data base to provide student demographic data for secondary analysis. Originally, we debated using state medical board licensure data sources. After discovering data variability from state-to-state, it was decided to utilize a more consistent data source from PAEA.

Your project aims to use a mixed-methods design. Why did you choose to do this, rather than following a mainly qualitative or quantitative methodology?

The project has two major aims, one is to find the top performing PA programs and the other is to identify which aspects of the PA programs contribute to their success. We proposed quantitative methodology to address the first question and will use the qualitative interview to gain and understanding of what aspects of their program they ascribe to their success.

Do you have any advice for faculty who may be considering applying for this grant opportunity in the future, whether it’s about developing a research question, assembling the right team of collaborators, or submitting a successful proposal?

Future researchers should investigate topics that they are very passionate about. We attribute our success to having a diverse group of people with different viewpoints and backgrounds, however with similar ethos.