Job Hunting Strategies and Trends Among Pacific University School of Physician Assistant Studies Graduates For the Years 1999-2002

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Abstract
Objectives: to fill the knowledge void by: gathering objective data from a substantial number of Pacific University PA graduates about why graduates made their job decisions, how they worked out, how differently (if at all) they made later decisions, and whether revised strategies were more successful; and to make the data available to future students. To provide a data base on which Pacific University can build in the future, increasing the amount of information, thereby improving the reliability of the conclusions and ultimately improving the quality of decisions made by future graduates in their job searches.

Methods: Graduates of the classes of 1999-2002 were contacted via e-mail and were asked to complete a survey consisting of 18 multiple choice questions. The survey was posted on-line on the World Wide Web at www.surveymonkey.com. A post card was also sent out in order to contact people whose e-mail addresses did not appear to be valid. In total, 48 surveys were collected. The data was then collected and analyzed.

Results: Study participants who began searching for jobs at least four months prior to graduation were 16% more likely than those who started later to have a job or job offer by graduation. Those who relocated were 15% more likely than those who didn't to have their first jobs for >2 years. While those who made the location of their job the top priority in general were 27% more likely to have that job for more than two years. Graduates were most likely to find their jobs either through a clinical rotation or a personal connection. Of those who have had more than one job, 18% left their first job to work in a different city. One-third of participants decided to work in a particular field based on experience prior to PA school, with the next highest percentage being based on a good rotational experience. The third largest group said they wanted to work in family practice in order to get a good medical background before specializing. Thirty eight percent of participants took jobs in primary care. The next highest groups were surgery or surgical sub-specialties and emergency medicine and urgent care.

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First Advisor
Keir Todd, PA-C

Subject Categories
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Comments
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Job Hunting Strategies and Trends Among Pacific University School of Physician Assistant Studies Graduates For the Years 1999-2002

A Clinical Research Project Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Physician Assistant Studies

Pacific University

Forest Grove, OR

For the Masters of Science Degree August 2, 2004

Advisor: Keir Todd, PA-C
BIography

Jeremy Lane grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He moved to Colorado to attend college at Colorado State University. He graduated with a Liberal Arts degree with an emphasis in social sciences. After graduating he moved to Vail, Colorado where he lived for three years. While in Vail he worked as a physical therapy aide. Besides skiing his heart out, he also met his wife and discovered the PA profession. He then moved to Denver, Colorado to finish his prerequisite coursework and get more medical experience as an EMT in the emergency departments at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Swedish Medical Center.

Jeremy is an avid outdoorsman who enjoys windsurfing, mountain biking, kayaking, golf, skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, and spending time with his wife Megan and yellow lab Dallas.

After graduation, he plans to move back to Minneapolis to pursue a career in orthopedics.
Abstract:

Objectives: to fill the knowledge void by: gathering objective data from a substantial number of Pacific University PA graduates about why graduates made their job decisions, how they worked out, how differently (if at all) they made later decisions, and whether revised strategies were more successful; and to make the data available to future students. To provide a data base on which Pacific University can build in the future, increasing the amount of information, thereby improving the reliability of the conclusions and ultimately improving the quality of decisions made by future graduates in their job searches.

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Results: Study participants who began searching for jobs at least four months prior to graduation were 16% more likely than those who started later to have a job or job offer by graduation. Those who relocated were 15% more likely than those who didn’t to have their first jobs for >2 years. While those who made the location of their job the top priority in general were 27% more likely to have that job for more than two years. Graduates were most likely to find their jobs either through a clinical rotation or a personal connection. Of those who have had more than one job, 18% left their first job to work in a different city.

One-third of participants decided to work in a particular field based on experience prior to PA school, with the next highest percentage being based on a good rotational experience. The third largest group said they wanted to work in family practice in order to get a good medical background before specializing.

Thirty eight percent of participants took jobs in primary care. The next highest groups were surgery or surgical sub-specialties and emergency medicine and urgent care.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my entire family for their support over the years as I pursued my dream of becoming a Physician Assistant. I would like to especially like to thank my wife Megan for her continued support and willingness to drop everything to come on this adventure with me and move to Oregon to pursue this dream. I would also like to thank my dog Dallas for always being there with a wag of the tail or a lick of my face right when I needed it.

Thanks finally to my classmates for being such a great class and making my job as class representative an easy one.
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Introduction

Graduating from Physician Assistant (PA) School represents the culmination of many years of hard work and the entry into an exciting new career. The American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) estimates that there were approximately 50,121 people in clinical practice as PAs at the beginning of 2004. The AAPA also reports that there are currently 133 programs accredited by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA), with about 10,000 students enrolled in PA programs. The number of new graduates in 2003 was approximately 4,415. While this sounds like a large number of new PAs flooding the marketplace, the outlook of the PA profession looks bright. According to the findings published in AAPA's Information Update: Projected Number of People in Clinical Practice as PAs as of January 1, 2004, 90 percent of 2002 PA program graduates were estimated to be in clinical practice as PAs in 2003. Additionally, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that the number of PA jobs will increase by 53 percent between 2000 and 2010, compared to overall job growth of 15 percent over this 10-year period.

In another encouraging study, the AAPA found that 86% of physician assistants (PAs) would become a PA if they had to choose their career over again. When asked whether they would become PAs if they were to choose their careers today, 50 percent of the respondents reported that they “definitely would” and 36 percent indicated that they “probably would.” Only 9 percent thought they “definitely would not” or “probably would not.”
While the future of the PA profession certainly looks bright, the task of finding not just a job but a job that one will be happy with for many years still remains an arduous one. While some students may be fortunate enough to find jobs during their clinical year, others may take months after graduation to secure their first job.

It should be a goal of PA programs to push satisfaction rates of their graduates up and dissatisfaction rates down. PA programs should therefore search for information and processes that will increase the success ratio of the initial job search/choice.

**Problem Statement**

Students entering the PA job market in a fast-expanding profession for the most part have only their own limited experience to draw on regarding what are important factors and what are successful (and unsuccessful) strategies to use in the job-seeking and decision-making processes. In the absence of objective data to inform their choices, students and new graduates will act on factors such as their own insecurities or the possibly aberrational experience of a friend or colleague. Decisions based on inadequate data, or none at all, are less likely to be successful.

**Background**

Pacific University surveys former students on a limited basis. Information gathered does not currently include data about why graduates entering the market made the choices they did, how successful those choices were, whether they used different
strategies for later choices, and how successful those later choices were. As a result of the absence of usable data in this area, a choice with important consequences for both the graduate and the university is not as well-informed as it could be, and the success rate is likely to be less than optimal.

**Purposes**

1. to fill the knowledge void by: (a) gathering objective data from a substantial number of Pacific University PA graduates about why graduates made their job decisions, how they worked out, how differently (if at all) they made later decisions, and whether revised strategies were more successful; and (b) making the data available to future students.

2. to provide a data base on which Pacific University can build in the future, increasing the amount of information, thereby improving the reliability of the conclusions and ultimately improving the quality of decisions made by future graduates in their job searches.

**Significance**

(1) Individual graduating PAs entering the job market will be able to draw on the experiences of over 100 of their predecessors as they make choices about job options, search strategies and priorities. Decisions will be better-informed and therefore better.

(2) Pacific faculty will have more quantitative data to support advice to students entering the job market.
(3) Pacific will have the foundation for a data base about successful and unsuccessful job strategies and choices by their graduates. By replicating the survey annually or biennially, Pacific can provide a growing body of knowledge about what works and what doesn’t. By extending the survey (e.g., by re-surveying graduates in another two or three years, Pacific can strengthen the statistical basis for conclusions drawn, and can develop a data base from which to identify possible changing trends in the professional experience of its graduates. This will serve the interests of the graduates by increasing the likelihood of a long-term successful first job placement. It will also serve Pacific’s interest because a high initial success rate for job placements benefits employers, thereby improving the university’s reputation within the medical profession and opening more doors to future graduates. The lower the turnover rate for P.U. graduates, the more desirable those graduates will be to employers.

**Design of Study**

**Research Design:**

This is a retrospective study designed as a self-report survey based on the World Wide Web at www.surveymonkey.com. The survey is comprised of 18 questions including primarily close-ended multiple-choice and Q-Sort questions.

**Subjects:**

There were a total of 86 eligible students who graduated from the Pacific University School of Physician Assistant Studies from 1999 through 2002. Contact
information was obtained from the Pacific University School of Physician Assistant Studies. Using that information, an e-mail was sent to each graduate inviting them to participate in this study. Of those 86 e-mails sent out, 22 were returned immediately as invalid. Based on that, I assumed that the remaining 64 individuals received the message. After two weeks another email was sent to those who had not responded yet. Finally, a post card was mailed out in an effort to contact those whose emails were out of date and those who had not completed the survey yet. Of those 64, 48 actually participated in the survey for a 75% participation percentage.

Each graduating class was well represented. 35.4% (n=17) were from the class of 2002, 31.3% (n=15) were from the class of 2001, 20.8% (n=10) were from the class of 2000, and 12.5% (n=6) were from the class of 1999.

These numbers represent the following percentage of each class:

- 1999: 6/14 = 43%
- 2000: 10/18 = 55%
- 2001: 15/25 = 60%
- 2002: 17/29 = 59%
Figure 1:

When Did You Graduate?

Figure 2:

Percentage of Class Participating
Inclusion Criteria:

In order to be eligible, participants must have graduated from the Pacific University School of Physician Assistant Studies between 1999 and 2002 and have taken a job working as a physician assistant.

Procedure:

The e-mail sent to eligible participants contained a hyper-link to the survey that was available at www.surveymonkey.com. Once there, they were able to log on and complete the survey. Participants were only allowed to take the survey once and Survey Monkey automatically kept track of those who had taken the survey and those who had not. The survey was available on the internet for a period of one month. It was then closed and the data was collected and analyzed.

Results:

When to begin looking?

When asked when they began their job search, 33% (n=16) of respondents said they began their search 6-8 months prior to graduation. Of those 16, 75% (n=12) had a job or job offer at the time of graduation. 18.8% (n=9) began their job search 4-6 months prior to graduation. Of those, 77.8% (n=7) had a job or job offer at the time of graduation. 20.8% (n=10) began their search 2-4 months prior to graduation. Of those, 60% (n=6) had a job or job offer at the time of graduation. 10.4% (n=5) began their
search 0-2 months before graduation and 60% (n=3) of them had a job or job offer at the time of graduation. The remaining 8 subjects began their search after graduation.

Figure 3:

![Bar chart showing when subjects started looking for a job with the following categories: 6-8 months prior, 4-6 months prior, 2-4 months prior, 0-2 months prior, and after graduation.]

The statistics seem good for all groups; however, those who began their job search more than 4 months prior to graduation had a 16% greater chance of having a job or job offer at the time of graduation.
The duration of the job search was also variable. 54.2% reported that the job search took 1-2 months while 33.3% reported that it took 3-4 months.

Participants found their jobs in a variety of ways. 33.3% found their job through a clinical rotation, 31.1% through a personal connection, 13.3% on the internet, 11.1% from a medical journal, 11.1% through previous employment or professional affiliation. No one found their job through a job placement agency.
Figure 5: How did you identify your first job?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Connection</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Journal</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Experience</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The internet</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical rotation</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What specialty?

52.1% of respondents said they were focused on working in a particular specialty. Reasons given were as follows: 32.5% said experience prior to PA school, 20% said good rotational experience, 10% said they wanted to work in family practice in order to get a good medical background prior to specializing, and 7.5% said recommendation of a friend or colleague. The specialties people worked in varied, and can be seen in Figure 7.
Figure 6:

Reasons for working in a specific field

- Wanted Primary Care Experience: 10%
- Experience prior to PA school: 32%
- Good rotational experience: 20%
- Recommendation of friend/colleague: 8%
- Other (please specify): 30%

Figure 7:

Specialty of First Job

- Primary Care: 38%
- Emergency Medicine/Urgent Care: 17%
- Surgery or Surgical Subspecialty: 23%
- Other: 11%
- Internal Medicine: 11%
Relocation:

Relocation is often a concern for new graduates. 56.3% of participants said they were willing to relocate for their first job. Of those, 35.4% did relocate. Statistics comparing relocation and length of time at their first jobs can be seen in Figure 9.

Figure 8:

Did you relocate for your first job?
We asked participants why they took their first job in an effort to see if there was any correlation between those reasons and the longevity of the first job. Four people took jobs because it was their first offer. Seventeen people took jobs because the job was in the particular specialty they wanted. Eleven people took jobs because it was in the location they wanted.
Figure 10:

Why did you take your first job?

Licensing Issues:

When asked how long it took graduates to obtain all of the necessary licensing such as NCCPA certification, DEA licensing, state licensing and all hospital credentialing, four respondents said it took 0-1 months, 28 said it took 2-3 months, four said it took 3-4 months, eight said it took 4-6 months, two said 7-8 months, and two said it took greater than eight months.
First Job Experience:

Overall, 6.4% (n=3) of respondents had their first job for 1-6 months, 19.1% (n=9) for 7-12 months, 19.1% (n=9) for 1-2 years, and 55.3% (n=26) for more than two years. The correlation between reason for taking the job and longevity of that job can be seen in Figures 12 and 13. It can be seen that 55% of those who took their jobs because of the location had their jobs for more than two years, while only 28% of those who took a job primarily because it was in a particular field kept their jobs for more than two years.
For those who have had more than one job, the following reasons were given for leaving their first job: 6.1% (n=2) left to work in a different specialty, 18.2% (n=6) left to work in a different city, 6% (n=2) left for financial reasons, 9.1% (n=3) were dissatisfied with the hours they were expected to work, 3% (n=1) left due to inadequate mentoring, 9.1% (n=3) left due to professional issues.

Figure 14:

Reasons for leaving first job

Finally, participants were asked to rank what things were most important to them regarding job satisfaction. They ranked salary, practice size, mentoring, hours, and benefits. Five points were given for most important and one point for least important. Good mentoring received the most points with 179, salary was next with 152, hours worked received 148, benefits 118, practice size 85.
Discussion:

According to the data collected in this survey, those who began searching for jobs at least four months prior to graduation were 16% more likely to have a job or job offer by graduation. Those who relocated were 15% more likely to have their first jobs for >2 years, while those who made the location of their job the top priority in general were 27% more likely to have that job for more than two years. Graduates were most likely to find their jobs through either a clinical rotation or a personal connection. Other sources include the internet and medical journals. No one found a job through a job placement agency.
Approximately one-third of participants decided to work in a particular field based on experience prior to PA school, with the next highest percentage being based on a good rotational experience. The third largest group said they wanted to work in family practice in order to get a good medical background before specializing.

38% of participants took jobs in primary care. This is slightly higher than the national average of about 26%. The next highest groups were surgery or surgical sub-specialties and emergency medicine and urgent care.

One of the most significant findings coming out of this study is the importance of location. Those who made location their most important factor for choosing a job were 27% more likely to have their first job for more than two years. It could be argued that longevity is not a perfect measurement of career satisfaction, but it is a good indicator. Additionally, of those who have had more than one job, 18% left their job to work in a different city.

To my knowledge this is the first time a study has been done looking at these issues that face new graduates as they prepare to enter the work force. A search on MedLine and the AAPA website came up with no results. I think this study provides a good sampling base and I am pleased with the level of participation from the eligible people whom I was able to contact. This survey, as all surveys are, is a self-report study and this leaves open the possibility for bias and inaccuracy since we are not measuring objective data. I still believe that this study is statistically significant and lays a good foundation for future studies to build on. Another factor that may limit the strength of this study is that there have only been five graduating classes to date; that limits the number of
eligible participants and the longevity of the study. Strength may be added to future studies by recruiting students from multiple schools and, if possible, following them for longer periods of time. Ideally, a prospective study could be done following new graduates over a number of years.

**Conclusions:**

Based on the findings of this study, I would encourage students who hope to have a job by the time they graduate to begin looking at least four months prior. I would recommend they make the location they would like to live in the highest priority. And finally, when deciding on a particular job, they should look for a good mentor most importantly as well as consider the hours they will be expected to work and the salary they will be paid. They should expect the licensing and credentialing process to take at least two to three months, but not be surprised if it takes longer than that. Hopefully, by following these recommendations, they can find a job that they will be happy with for many years to come.
References


