Impact of Program Support on Faculty Job Stress and Retention

Abstract

Purpose: Most physician assistant (PA) educators are recruited into PA education directly out of clinical practice, so they are essentially entering a new career. This transition to academia is a high-stress time for new faculty, with high stakes for PA programs that put considerable resources into recruitment and training. Retention of PA educators is also critically important to the profession as a whole, since with the huge growth in the number of programs, finding and retaining faculty can be very challenging. This project explores stressors impacting PA educators, and whether program support can alleviate stressors and increase faculty retention.

Methods: De-identified data from the 2017 Faculty & Directors Survey were obtained from the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), including variables addressing gender, stress from the promotion process (rated as “not at all,” “somewhat,” or “extensive”), perception that their program provided adequate support for transitioning to academia (rated from “completely untrue” to “completely true”), and variables measuring intent to leave the institution or academia. PAEA initiated the online survey in March 2017 to all 226 member programs. Individual response rate was estimated at 60.3%, N = 1114. Program level response rate was 89.4%. SPSS v-25 was utilized for data analysis.

Results: Respondents were 65% female; 95.7% identified as core faculty of a PA program. Over half the respondents (53.6%) reported being stressed by the promotion process, and 41.5% had considered leaving academia during the past 2 years. Faculty who agreed that their program, “had provided adequate support and resources to help me transition from clinical work to academia” were significantly less stressed by promotion (Pearson chi-square, p = .001), and were also less likely to report having considered leaving their home institution or academia in the previous two years (Pearson Chi-Square, p < .0005 for both).

Discussion: Minimizing faculty turnover is a challenge for PA programs especially in light of the current shortage of experienced faculty. PA faculty who perceive that they were strongly supported and given adequate resources to navigate the transition into academia are less likely to report considering leaving their home institutions or leaving academia altogether. Therefore, it appears to be a good investment of program resources to prioritize supporting junior faculty, as well as faculty dealing with the promotions process. Examples of such support might include formal mentoring programs, travel for faculty development workshops, and guaranteed set-aside time for scholarship.
The 2017 PAEA Faculty & Directors Survey provides a rich source of data for exploring common stressors impacting PA educators. This project focuses on the transition to academia as a source of stress, and whether lack of program support impacts faculty intention to leave their home institution or to leave academia altogether.

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**References:**