

BRIEF REPORT

MATRICULATING STUDENT SURVEY 2013 Education, Admissions, and Choice

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INTRODUCTION

The 2013 Matriculating Student Survey (MSS) collected data from first-year physician assistant (PA) students about their academic background and application and admission experiences. The survey was administered by the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) in September 2013 and adapted from the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) and PAEA Matriculant Survey.

This report compares students who were directly admitted into a PA program and those who entered a pre-professional program prior to their entrance into the PA program. Pre-professional programs (i.e., pre-PA programs) are intended for high school graduates or students who have some college credits but no degree. These programs offer students a comprehensive undergraduate curriculum, including core prerequisites tailored to the university's PA program. The professional phase typically begins in the fourth (senior) year (3+2) or after graduation (4+2).

For the purpose of this report, the terms “matriculants” and “students” will be used interchangeably. Students who participated in a pre-PA program prior to matriculation into the professional phase of the PA program will be referred to as “pre-PA students.” Students who were directly admitted into the PA program will be referred to as “direct admission students.” Over 92% (n = 3,862) of the 4,197 students who responded were direct admission students; 7.6% (n = 317) were pre-PA students.

EDUCATION

Eighty-six percent of direct admission students reported having a bachelor's degree (67.8% Bachelor of Science, 18.1% Bachelor of Arts) prior to entering their respective PA program, compared to 36.3% of pre-PA students (32.7% Bachelor of Science, 3.6% Bachelor of Arts). Some PA programs do not require a bachelor's degree prior to admission into the professional phase but, instead, focus on completion of pre-requisites and a certain number of credits. Ten percent of direct admission students held a master's degree or higher.

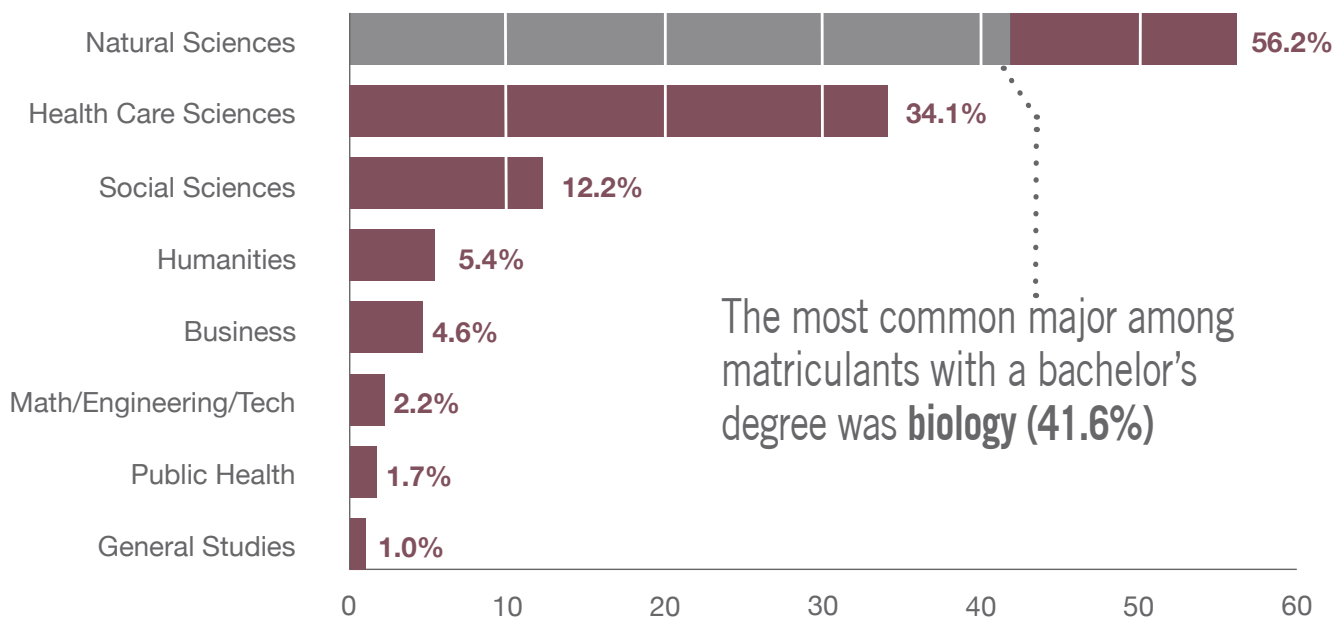
86% of direct admission students reported having a **bachelor's degree** prior to entering their respective PA program.

Over half of the responding pre-PA students indicated having held a high school diploma/GED or some college credit but no degree (19.1% and 37.9%, respectively). Greater than 36% of pre-PA students reported having a bachelor's degree. Variation in responses may be attributed to misinterpretation of the question.

Students who held a bachelor's degree or higher (both direct admission and pre-PA students) were asked to indicate their area(s) of study during their undergraduate education. The results, displayed in Figure 1, were categorized into the following areas of study: natural sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry, and physics), health care sciences (e.g., health sciences, kinesiology, and applied professional degrees such as radiology and nursing), social sciences (e.g., sociology, political science, and psychology), humanities (e.g., literature, philosophy, and religion), business, mathematics/engineering/technology, public health, and general studies.

Of responding matriculants, 56.2% indicated majoring in a natural sciences discipline during their undergraduate education, whereas 34.1% indicated majoring in a health care sciences discipline.

Figure 1. Matriculants' Undergraduate Area(s) of Study



n = 3,337

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one area of study; thus, percentages do not total to 100%.

Table 1 shows the similarities in grade point averages (GPAs) between pre-PA and direct admission students. Respondents who reported having at least “some college but no degree” were asked to provide their GPAs for undergraduate education.

Table 1. Undergraduate Grade Point Averages, by Pre-PA and Direct Admission Status

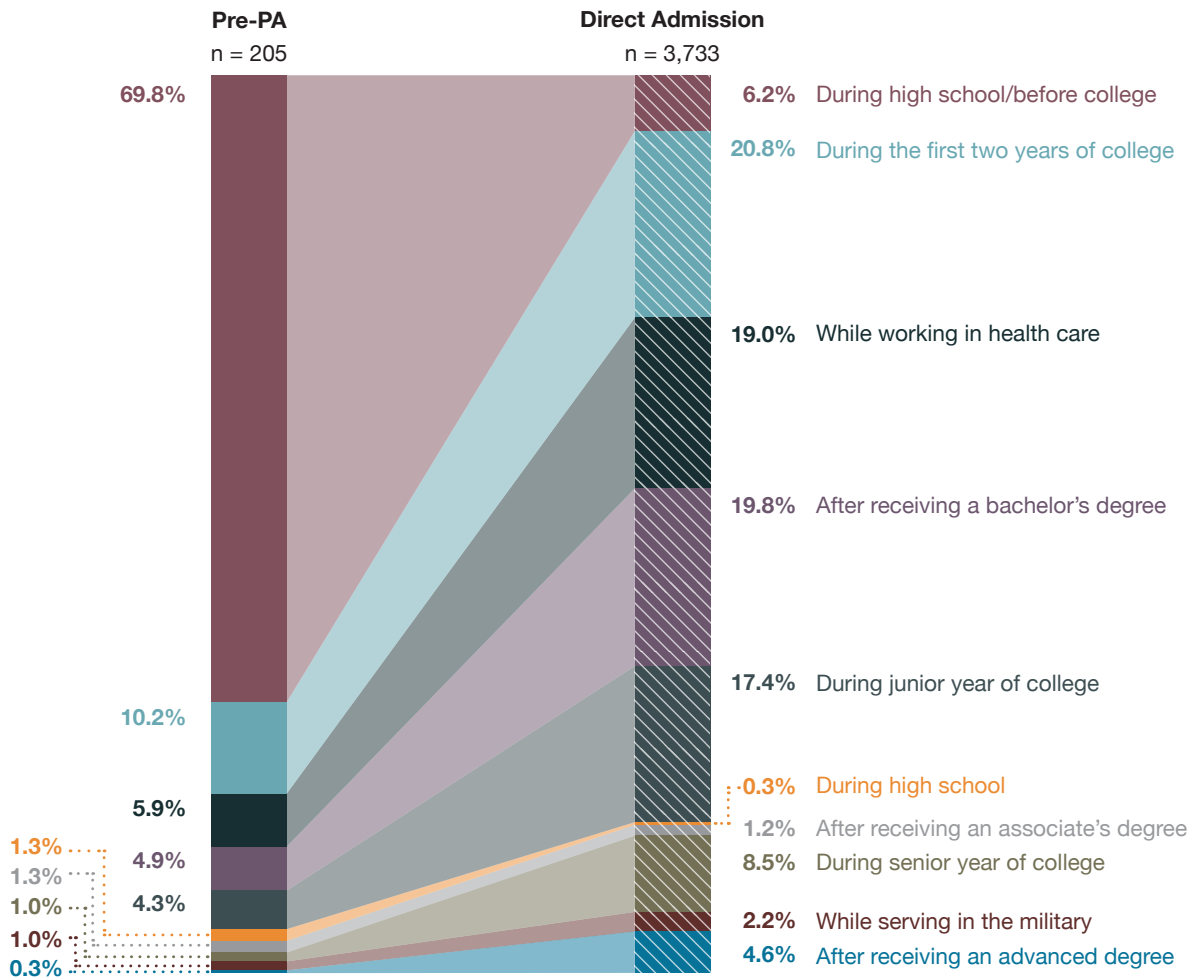
	n	Mean	STDEV	Median
Pre-PA	238	3.61	0.26	3.60
Direct Admission	3,629	3.58	0.27	3.60

APPLICATION AND ADMISSIONS

The 2013 MSS collected information from matriculants about their application and admission experiences. Respondents were asked to indicate the time at which they decided to become a PA. Figure 2 compares the results between pre-PA and direct admission students.

Respondents were asked to indicate the time during which they decided to become a PA (pre-PA students, n = 305; direct admissions students, n = 3,733). Almost 70% of the pre-PA students reported deciding to become a PA while they were in high school or before entering college. Direct admission students' responses were much more varied; their most frequently reported time periods were during the first two years of college (20.8%), after receiving a bachelor's degree (19.8%), and while working in health care (19.0%).

Figure 2. Time of Matriculants' Decision to Become a PA, by Pre-PA and Direct Admission Status



Respondents were asked to indicate the amount of time between when they obtained their most recent degree and the time at which they entered the professional phase of their respective PA program. Slightly more than 75% of pre-PA students indicated they had not yet graduated or had graduated less than a year ago. Eighteen percent of these students said that 1-2 years had passed since they obtained their most recent degree and entered into the professional phase of their PA program. The unexpected time interval for this group of matriculants could be related to the late administration of the survey or misunderstanding of the question item.

Sixty-nine percent of direct admission students reported completing their most recent degree within the last two years. Nearly 18% of these students reported that five or more years passed between obtaining their most recent degree and entering the PA program.

Table 2 displays how students spent their time between obtaining their most recent degree and entering their respective PA program. Direct admission students

most often reported spending time continuing coursework to fulfill PA program requirements (48.8%), working to fulfill PA program requirements (47.1%), and working to improve finances (45.2%). Pre-PA students most often reported having entered the PA program immediately after their undergraduate education (37.2%), continuing coursework (27.0%), and volunteering to fulfill PA program health care requirements. Thirty-five percent of these students indicated “not applicable,” which could be an indicator of the program structure. The survey did not collect information on the time interval between last degree and entering PA school, so it is not clear how much time was actually devoted to the activities listed below.

Table 2. Time Spent Before Entrance into PA Program, by Pre-PA and Direct Admission Status

	Pre-PA		Direct Admission	
	n	%	n	%
Continued coursework to fulfill PA program requirements	82	27.0	1,821	48.8
Worked to fulfill PA program health care requirements	52	17.1	1,756	47.1
Worked to improve finances	50	16.4	1,687	45.2
Worked at another career	21	6.9	1,205	32.3
Volunteered to fulfill pre-PA health care requirements	56	18.4	1,191	31.9
Helped fulfill family obligations	46	15.1	855	22.9
Went straight from undergraduate education to PA school	113	37.2	567	15.2
Took pre-PA courses for the first time	34	11.2	403	10.8
Pursued graduate studies	8	2.6	160	4.3
Other	8	2.6	239	6.4
Not applicable	106	34.9	49	1.3
Total	576	-	9,933	-

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one category; thus, percentages do not total to 100%.

Table 3 displays the average number of programs to which students applied, were granted an interview, accepted an interview, and were accepted. Direct admission students submitted more than twice as many applications as pre-PA students, although acceptance rates are fairly comparable.

Table 3. Number of Programs Applied, Interviewed, and Accepted to, by Pre-PA and Direct Admission Status

	Pre-PA				Direct Admission			
	n	Mean	STDEV	Median	n	Mean	STDEV	Median
Applied	267	2.5	3.18	1.0	3,694	6.0	4.46	5.0
Granted an interview	262	1.4	1.43	1.0	3,687	2.9	2.27	2.0
Accepted an interview	264	1.2	1.07	1.0	3,689	2.2	1.48	2.0
Accepted into the program	270	1.3	1.09	1.0	3,685	1.5	0.92	1.0

PA PROGRAM AND CHOICE

Just over 60% of both pre-PA and direct admission students “considered, but did not apply” to a U.S. medical school. Only 7.4% of direct admission students applied to one or more U.S. medical school. At least 74% of the respondents indicated that they did not consider any other health care professions including nursing, physical therapy, and pharmacy as potential careers.

Students were asked to rate what influenced (positive, negative, or no influence) their decision to become a PA. The three most frequently selected positive influences for pre-PA students were a friend (79.0%), PA acquaintance (73.3%), or family member (67.6%). Direct admission students reported that a family member (78.7%), friend (70.2%), or college admissions department (66.0%) were positive influences.

Students were asked to consider a list of factors and rate the level of influence (positive, negative, or no influence) that each had on their decision to choose their PA program. Conversations with faculty or staff members of the program (81.5%), program location (78.3%), and the program’s clinical curriculum (75.4%) were the top three positive influences on students’ program choice. Negative influences on program choice were the cost of study (27.6%), financial aid (8.0%), and resident tuition status (7.8%).

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

The results of the survey suggest that some differences do exist between pre-PA and direct admission students, particularly in their level of education, when they decided to become a PA, and their application experiences. Many of these differences can be attributed to the structure of pre-PA programs and their integration with undergraduate education. There were no notable differences between each group of students based on their undergraduate GPAs, decision to become a PA, or factors that influenced program choice.

Limitations of the survey may include lack of granular questions regarding students’ experiences in the pre-PA program structure and the potential for respondents to misinterpret questions, which could have led them to answer some questions differently. In addition, this initial MSS was administered to some students after they had spent a significant amount of time in PA school, which may have skewed some results.