

Becoming a PA: Reflections from Johnson & Wales University Students

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INTRODUCTION

This collaborative student-authored piece features the perspectives of four different students in both the didactic and clinical years of the Johnson & Wales University (JWU) PA program. These student vignettes present a snapshot of life as a PA student. Ariana Africo grew up in North Providence and earned her B.S. in Biology from the University of New England. She is a first-year student in the PA program. Matthew J. DaCosta is a second-year PA student and a National Health Service Corps scholar. Originally from New Bedford, MA, he gained experience in mental health and emergency medicine before PA school; he holds a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. Kayla Denis is a second-year student who spent much of her childhood as a competitive gymnast. Born and raised in Swansea, MA, Kayla graduated from Northeastern University, and worked as a medical assistant in her hometown for five years, where she developed a passion for medicine and patient care. Alysse Pazienza, a first-year PA student, is a native Rhode Islander who graduated from the University of Maryland with a B.S. in Kinesiology.

FIRST YEAR: ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

ARIANA AFRICO, BS

To me, becoming a Physician Assistant is more than just getting to wear the white coat at the end of my program. It is about improving the gap in access and quality of healthcare for all. Physician Assistants are trained to provide high quality care to patients. We are able to perform a comprehensive history and physical, order and interpret lab tests and imaging, and prescribe medication. I take pride in our curriculum at Johnson & Wales University where we are taught to not only be well-versed and empathetic providers, but also how to take a humanistic approach to medicine. This is looking at our patients as more than just their ailments. It is treating the whole patient, not just the disease itself. It is about forming good relationships between the patient and provider as well as being sensitive to the values and beliefs of our patients to overall improve their care.

Being a PA is about taking a team-based approach to improve patient care. We must collaborate with our supervising physician and communicate well with our colleagues. While doing so, we must not forget to recognize that all health professionals play important roles on our healthcare team. This team-based approach optimizes patient care and improves outcomes.

PA school helped me find where my passion lies in the medical field. At the start of PA school I had my heart set on becoming a surgical Physician Assistant. During my second year, however, other specialties such as endocrinology and pediatrics also piqued my interest. At JWU, our clinical rotations can help solidify where our passion really lies by exposing us to several specialty areas.

We must never forget that medicine is a realm of endless possibilities. With so many intriguing specialties in the medical field, at some point in my career I want to be able to switch to a new specialty to further my knowledge and training. The beautiful thing about the Physician Assistant profession is that it is extremely versatile and will allow me to make the switch to a new specialty without additional schooling. Instead, we train extensively on the job to become proficient in the field. This aspect of the Physician Assistant profession is what made it stand out from other health professions to me. If doctors desire to switch specialties, they would have to get additional training through a fellowship or residency. Even if nurse practitioners desired to switch to a specialty that did not fall into the scope of their education, they, too, would have to supplement their education through additional schooling. Becoming a Physician Assistant not only gives me the ability to choose, but also the ability to change and grow. When I finally get to wear that white coat, I will wear it with pride because it will mean more to me than just the conclusion of my program. It will symbolize my career and passion coming together while I make a difference in the lives of my patients.

FIRST YEAR: COLLABORATION AND VERSATILITY

ALYSSE PAZIENZA, BS

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" was the million-dollar question when I was in high school. It wasn't until I started college that I felt a compelling urgency to make a decision about what I wanted to do; yet, at that point in my life, I had no specific career aspirations. I just knew that I had an interest in science and helping people. It wasn't until my freshman year of college that I heard the job title "Physician Assistant (PA)." I did a quick Google search and found that PAs have the ability to see, diagnose and treat patients under a doctor's supervision. PA school would only require an additional 2-3 years of education following my undergraduate degree, and I would have the ability to switch specialties throughout my career. This lateral mobility and the flexible schedule that I would have as a PA seemed to fit

my goal of one day starting a family while maintaining my career. As I looked further, I found that PAs have a fundamental focus on the patient care aspect of medicine. I would be able to spend quality time getting to know my patients while effectively taking care of their medical needs.

“Let’s start an IV... Get the family on the phone... Hold compressions and check the rhythm.” I was now standing in a trauma bay at Rhode Island Hospital, watching as the trauma team worked diligently to save a patient’s life. Amongst the chaos, I felt a sense of admiration. It was evident that the patient was the central focus of the team’s work. While the attending physician called out instructions, the PA completed the exam and helped manage the patient’s airway while the nursing staff continued compressions and administered medications. This shadowing experience solidified my decision to become a PA. Whether in a trauma bay resuscitating a patient or in a primary care office creating a care plan, I would have the opportunity to be an integral part of a team and impact many lives.

During my shadowing experiences, I observed PAs perform an array of duties from reassuring patients and their families, to completing lumbar punctures, assisting with cardiac catheterizations and surgery. I realized that a PA’s abilities are far-reaching and encompass endless possibilities to be both autonomous providers and essential team members.

The PA profession encompasses everything I am already passionate about: medicine, humanism, and versatility. I am truly humbled to have the opportunity to be whatever my patients need during times of vulnerability. Whether adjusting a patient’s medications to enhance comfort, reviewing labs and imaging to confirm a diagnosis, or holding their hand while giving difficult news, I feel honored to join this profession. All of these values are also so intricately woven into the Johnson & Wales PA program, which made it an easy decision for me to pursue my education there. Each day, I am reminded of how important my role as a PA will be, not only as a member of the healthcare team, but as a human being who cares deeply for others.

SECOND YEAR: WE ARE HUMBLLED

MATTHEW J. DACOSTA, BA

The transition into the clinical phase of PA training mimics a grayscale. The black and white hues of didactic medicine transform into real-patient scenarios, often muddled with gray areas. Amidst the novelty, we are humbled.

The challenges of clinical practice require a new mode of critical thinking. Independent of science and medicine, the human element can exhibit an unfamiliar variability. As echoed by our faculty, there is certainly great wisdom in the phrase “diseases don’t always read the book.”

Fortunately, all PA students possess a foundation of knowledge that improves with each encounter. Through independent study, preceptor guidance, and carefully listening to our patients, we begin to find some clarity.

During our journey of lifelong learning, we continue to derive lessons from the gray areas of medicine. Its ubiquity partially motivates clinical excellence. Regardless of what lies on the grayscale of our training, we truly find solace in the one aspect that underlies it all: the sacred relationships we share with our patients.

SECOND YEAR: DRINKING WATER FROM A FIRE HOSE

KAYLA DENIS, BS

There are many paths to choosing a career in medicine. I was drawn to the PA profession for many reasons, but particularly for the collaborative nature of PA practice. I thrive in team-based environments where the ideas and actions of many are stronger than that of one. This especially spoke to me given the evolution of modern medicine, where the idea of collaborative care via an inter-professional team of providers is of utmost importance. I was also intrigued by the fluidity in choosing a specialty and the option to change specialties without additional training. With my background as a competitive gymnast, I’ve always had a passion for orthopedics, but I loved the notion that I was not limited to a choice I made fairly early in my professional journey. Lastly, and most important for me, was the patient-centered and humanistic care that resides at the center of the PA profession.

Life as a PA student is difficult. There is just no other way to put it. My favorite analogy comes from one of my professors, who said, “PA school is like drinking water from a fire hose.” The amount of information presented in such a short period of time is intimidating and overwhelming, and despite all of our best efforts, some of it will pass by unabsorbed. But that is a key element of the medical profession in general. There really is no way to know everything about every disease or diagnosis. This is not only humbling but truly is the beauty of medicine. It takes a team of passionate, dedicated individuals to provide the type of care we all hope to provide. I think the same can be said about the path through PA school, where your friends and family are the essential support system helping to hold you up when the task ahead is daunting. I am forever thankful for the countless loads of laundry, grocery store trips, ready-to-bake meals, and family game nights that left me with one less item on my to-do list during late nights reading ECGs, and which also provided the mental decompression essential for success.

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