

An Open Letter to Canadian PA Educators and Physician Assistants
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DEVELOPING AN INTERNATIONAL PA PROGRAM PARTNERSHIP:
THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

As the Physician Assistant (PA) profession in the United States (US) reaches 50 years it is maturing and facing new challenges. Outside of the US, the PA profession continues to grow with educational programs now in at more than a dozen different countries.¹ In Canada, the first formally trained PAs originated from the Canadian Military and today there are at least four accredited programs.² The PA profession was created to meet the health workforce needs of the population and each country has its own unique needs and challenges it faces in trying to expand this profession and meet these needs.¹ As the PA workforce truly becomes a global entity, it is time that PA educational programs develop formal partnerships to benefit the students, faculty and future of the profession globally. The purpose of this article is to describe the experience of developing a formal partnership between the University of Utah PA program (UPAP) in the United States and HAN University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands.

How To Develop an International PA Program Partnerships

Developing an international PA Program partnership usually begins from a personal relationship and a desire to provide an opportunity for PA students.³ The initial contact and skype call between UPAP and HAN was made through a mutual colleague and stemmed from an accreditation recommendation to HAN University to develop an international collaboration. UPAP has a history of international clinical rotations and faculty who have worked in PA global health so there was faculty interest in the collaboration.

To develop an international partnership, it is recommended to start with regularly scheduled meetings, set a formal agenda and discuss the goals of the partnership and how each institution could help the other. Begin small and plan an initial visit. Determine what is of interest to the visitors which depends on if there are faculty and/or students visiting. And remember to be a good host and make it fun.

Benefits of Developing an International PA Program Partnership

There are numerous benefits in developing an international PA program partnership. The most obvious benefit is the relationship between the two programs and the information exchange that this can provide. UPAP has 50 years of PA education experience to share while HAN can provide knowledge of their new innovative educational model. For faculty, this exchange of information can generate novel methods to educate PA students and provide research

collaborations. For students, this exchange can be formative as it opens their eyes to the global PA profession. For the institutions, this partnership can bring formal University affiliations and Memorandums of Understanding that ensure long term collaborations. Lastly, as the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA) considers accreditation of international programs a formal partnership with a US program may assist international programs interested in this process.

Planning the First and Subsequent Visits

Our first international visit included 3 faculty and 3 PA students visiting the United States from the Netherlands. We developed a five day itinerary that included meeting with University leadership, touring the hospitals and clinics, presentations on the US PA education model and UPAP processes, attending didactic lectures with the PA students, faculty attending a clinic site visit with US faculty member and meetings on mutual topics of interest including admissions processes and diversity and inclusion. Upon request of the students we also arranged for the Dutch students to shadow a PA student for a couple of days in clinic. The itinerary also provided social opportunities where we had meals together in both formal and informal gatherings and we provided time for the Dutch to see the sights of Utah.

The first visit was considered a great success by both HAN and UPAP but it also taught us a few lessons for planning future visits. We quickly learned that 5 days was too long and there was not enough down time in the itinerary. For the next visit we decided to focus on the interests of the faculty and students which included a hospital tour, attending clinic with PA students, time to engage with faculty regarding topics of interest and time to be a tourist.

As one would expect in developing an international partnership, we also have experienced bumps in the road. The second planned visit of UPAP faculty scheduled to go to HAN University was canceled because UPAP needed the faculty to cover courses during that semester due to multiple medical leaves. Instead, one faculty member who was in Europe for a conference visited HAN university with a limited itinerary but enjoyed meeting with faculty, students, riding bikes around Nijmegen and continuing to build our partnership.

The third visit included 2 faculty and 4 students visiting Utah from HAN University. The visit included a three-day schedule with more free time and the addition of the faculty spending half a day in clinic with a PA. At this visit we finalized our Memorandum of Understanding to formalize our relationship and began planning our fourth visit. At the time of writing this our fourth visit may run into another hurdle due to COVID-19 but this is uncertain and has not changed our partnership.

Challenges of Developing an International PA Program Partnership

There are several challenges in developing an international PA program partnership including the logistics, planning and cost. The most obvious logistical issue is the time difference which inherently makes meetings difficult for both sides. Additionally, technology has limitations for meetings, but this is improving with the availability of skype and zoom.

Differences in language can also make communication difficult. It is recommended that all meetings occur via video which will help minimize the language barrier and promote development of the partnership.

Planning a visit of international faculty and students to our already busy schedules is difficult. First, determine a time to schedule the visit that works for both institutions and allows for engagement with students while they are in the classroom. It is critical to determine what the visitors are interested in seeing and doing while at your institution. For example, the HAN faculty and students were interested in seeing the US health system both the hospitals and the clinics with PAs working. The planning of this tour and arrangement to meet PAs working in various settings took significant arrangement and use of personal contacts to arrange. Additionally, with any visit of international guests to a University it is recommended to plan formal meetings to meet University leadership to both welcome the international guests and continue to formalize the relationship. Lastly, plan to arrange a presentation by the international faculty to the host institution faculty. For example, during his visit to UPAP, Geert van den Brink, program director of HAN University presented on the Dutch health care model and there was standing room only as faculty from various disciplines were very interested to learn from our international guests.

Cost must always be considered and discussed when planning international visits. For the UPAP and HAN international partnership we determined up front that there would be no exchange of money. We planned for visits to each other's countries on alternating years and that the cost of these trips would be paid for by those visiting. Both the Dutch and US faculty utilized their educational funds for the cost of the trip and the Dutch students who visited the US covered the cost with their funds from their work at the hospital.

Keys to Success

There are a few keys to the success of developing an international partnership that will endure. First, you need a champion of the project at both institutions. Ideally the champion of the projects will have some leadership role or ability to make decisions to implement the partnership. Next you need to have a mutual interest in each other's programs. This genuine interest in learning from each other is critical to assuring a long term relationship. Another component critical to success is support. This support is needed both formally from the institution and your direct supervisor and informally from your faculty and staff. To assure formal support, it is recommended to assure that this international partnership aligns with programmatic goals and outcomes. To develop informal support from the faculty and staff, it is recommended that you work on obtaining buy in for this project which can be done through collaboration in planning and including individual faculty and staff in the visit itinerary. Finally, the last key to success is completing a Memorandum of Understanding. This formal document helps to solidify the relationship and assure formal support of this relationship for the future.

Conclusion

As the Physician Assistants becomes a global profession the natural next step is the development of international PA program partnerships. The benefits are significant for the PA program, faculty and students. The next generation of PAs desire globalization and PA programs should be playing an active role in development of our professional identity. From our experience, these partnerships take effort but the benefits significantly out weight the challenges.

References

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