An Open Letter to the PA Profession

The occasion of the 50th anniversary of the physician assistant (PA) profession brings an opportunity for us to reflect on our past and contemplate our future. We have grown and achieved so much in a relatively short period of time; but with growth come challenges. As current and former leaders of the profession, we believe this is an ideal time to collectively share our concerns about the current environment observed within our profession. We draw these observations from the experience of decades of commitment to the profession that we all cherish. Collectively, we have been leaders of state academies, specialty organizations, the American Academy of PAs (AAPA), the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA), the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA), the nccPA Health Foundation (nccPAHF), the Physician Assistant Foundation (PAF), the Physician Assistant History Society (PAHx), and the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA). We have served on Institute of Medicine committees, multiple White House Commissions, the Title VII Advisory Committees, and numerous other commissions, councils, committees, and workgroups that have served the profession and the public over the past 50 years. We have educated tens of thousands of PAs and direct this letter to them as well as our national leaders and colleagues, in hopes that they will read it carefully.

One of the incredible hallmarks of our profession, to date, is that we have formed a single organization for each of the profession’s various missions (AAPA, ARC-PA, NCCPA, nccPAHF, PAEA, PAF, PAHx, Student Society), and we have avoided the splintering that has occurred in virtually every other profession. But today, this unity is in serious jeopardy. We are concerned that, should we fail to work together on the critical issues ahead of us, it will change the landscape of our profession dramatically. When members of our profession come together to debate the paramount issues and reach consensus, it produces tremendous strength, yet when we divide ourselves into opposing groups, our strength is rendered powerless. A singular, unified voice from our profession is particularly important when speaking externally to a lay public and to policymakers who are still struggling to understand the PA profession. We expose ourselves to the probability that other health care professions will capitalize on our current divisiveness for their own political and professional gain. Specifically, we are very concerned about the unprofessional dialogue and personal attacks that have been observed as part of the public discourse posted and published by PAs against fellow PAs in recent months. This troublesome and undesired behavior is unprecedented, and it sets a terrible example for the nearly 9000 new graduates annually who we desire to attract and inculcate into our professional organizations.

The 4 primary PA organizations (AAPA, ARC-PA, NCCPA and PAEA) have a rich and impressive history of working together effectively, even during times when disagreements over central issues have occurred. Those disagreements have always been resolved amicably through civil discourse and debate that was facilitated via effective leadership while keeping an eye on the main prize—the continued growth and evolution of our profession towards an improved state. Collectively we are saddened and disappointed that civility between our colleagues and among some in our organizations is no longer valued. The purpose of our letter is to address this behavior and to call for a venue for a meaningful dialogue, utilizing civil discourse that is intended to prevent further decline of our profession’s celebrated collaboration and communication in order to retain a loud, strong, unified voice for the profession.

The “Competencies for the PA Profession” were initially published and ratified by all 4 organizations in 2005/2006 and subsequently revised in 2012. They include 6 major categories, with an emphasis on professionalism as one of our most important and essential core competencies. These competencies were intentionally designed to follow the typical journey of a PA from student to practitioner, with the expectation that the members of the profession would hold each other accountable. With this letter, we are attempting to do just that. Over the past year, we have observed the level of professionalism among some of our organizations and many of our individual colleagues decline dramatically. Specifically, this has occurred around the issues of recertification, maintenance of certification, and more recently the vision for Full Practice Authority and Responsibility (FPAR) or Optimal Team Practice. While we agree that reasonable minds may disagree about these important topics, it is our opinion that the acrimony between the organizations is counterproductive and has served no one within the profession. Instead, it has been focused on individual or small group agendas rather than on how to best serve our patients and the profession collectively. During the past 50 years, our profession has been well-served by the structure and function of 4 primary independent organizations, each focusing on its unique role and responsibilities while assisting each other by providing insight and feedback in a constructive and professional manner. Five decades of this cooperation and collaboration has resulted in the growth of a unified profession to the extraordinary level that we enjoy today. This
progress must not be compromised through bickering and divisiveness.

Moving our profession forward, now that it has been firmly rooted in the current health care system, should be undertaken with very purposeful planning and consensus building. Deconstructing the foundation of our success is not the path to long-term stability and steady growth. The tens of thousands of PAs and the millions of patients for whom they provide care are dependent upon our strong and unified profession. The vision for our future should be one that is held by the majority of PAs, not just those who project the loudest voices in select social media outlets. It is time to demand civility and a demonstration of professional decorum in the way we debate the critical issues of our profession, on both a personal and professional level. The 4 organizations must come to the table to reestablish mutual respect, trust, and a shared vision for the future of our profession. The individual members of the profession, including students, practicing PAs, and retired PAs, must hold the 4 organizations accountable to our cultural norms of mutual respect, integrity, and patient-centered focus. We must discourage modes of communication that allow for unprofessional personal attacks that are nonproductive and bring dishonor to us all. We must remind each individual who calls themselves a PA of their own commitment to the “Competencies for the PA Profession,” and we must act now to end these public attacks directed at each other or sister organizations and agree to conduct ourselves with decorum and civility as we passionately debate the critical issues facing our profession. The stakes are too high for any of us to be apathetic or give up because of discouragement. We must set aside individual egos and personal agendas and recommit ourselves to developing a shared vision for the next 50 years that is rooted in compassionate and patient-centered care for all patients, and that is achieved through civil discourse and professional conduct.

We the undersigned call on the 4 organizations to commit to come together to develop a unified plan to navigate the still uncharted waters of the national health care environment. The plan must have a primary emphasis on the best interest of patients and, secondarily, focus on the advancement of the PA profession. It will require difficult discussions that should be conducted in venues that are open to our profession, ideally in person and with a commitment to professional decorum. It will require compromise, but should not sacrifice the principles upon which our profession was founded. This is likely to require facilitated mediation with professional approaches designed to solve complex problems through consensus building. We are at a critical crossroads—one that can either lead to a bright future built upon consensus or to the fractionalization of our profession and degradation of the accomplishments of the last 50 years. Continued work and constructive, civil dialogue are necessary if we are to develop and implement a unified strategic plan that is incremental and nimble enough to respond to the shifting sands of the local and national socio-political environments.

We call on individual PAs and the national organizations representing our profession to consider the greater good and to do what will be in the collective best interest of the profession. We offer our individual and collective expertise to assist in any way that we can.

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Disclaimer: This letter was prepared by a group of leaders in their personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this article are their own and do not necessarily reflect the view of any organization they may represent.

REFERENCES