

## A Theory on the Development of Professional Identity in Physician Assistant Students

Statement of the Problem: Professionalism is a core competency of the physician assistant (PA) profession<sup>1</sup> and a growing area of concern in medical education.<sup>2</sup> There has been a recent and dramatic surge of papers in medical education literature regarding definitions and assessments of professionalism in medical students,<sup>3</sup> although only two articles have been published on the subject in PA education literature.<sup>4,5</sup> Concern over medical provider professionalism escalated when Papadakis et al.<sup>6</sup> demonstrated that practicing physicians with documentation of unprofessional behavior in medical school were three times more likely to undergo subsequent disciplinary action by the medical board. A formalized theory regarding professional development of PA students may help to stimulate conversation, direct curriculum development, and guide research.

Theory: As more students enter PA school directly from undergraduate education in their early twenties, we will be forced to accept the fact that we are dealing with students who have not completely developed psychosocially. Because of this, Chickering and Reisser's<sup>7</sup> seven vectors of college student psychosocial development provide a theoretical framework for the development of a professional identity in PA students. This theory also draws on Coulehan's idea of the compassionate and responsive physician identity<sup>8</sup> and on Epstein's idea of mindful practice.<sup>9</sup> After stating basic assumptions, the theory is defined by four vectors: developing professional competence, developing empathy, moving through autonomy to interdependence, and developing integrity. Strengths and weaknesses of the theory are identified.

Theory to Practice: This theory of the development of professionalism in PA students provides a framework from which to begin research and establish interventions in PA education. The four vectors of PA student professional development can be used to develop a professionalism curriculum that is continuous throughout the PA program. An example of how this theory can be implemented will be presented.