



American Academy of
Physician Associates

PAs in Leadership: What do they do?

A report from the 2022 PA Practice Survey

10/24/2023 • 2022 PA Practice Survey

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Abstract

PA leaders are an important part of healthcare systems across the country. However, little is known about the leadership roles PA are performing within their organizations. In this second brief in a three-part series on PAs in leadership, we examine these leadership tasks.

Methodology

Data were collected in the PA Practice survey fielded quarterly over 2022, sent to approximately 30,000 PAs in the United States (U.S.) who had not opted out of AAPA research surveys for which AAPA had a valid email address. A series of questions related to PAs actions in a leadership role were included within the AAPA's PA Practice Survey. A total of 29,711 emails were delivered, 4,087 responded (response rate 13.8%) to the invitation, and 3,645 completed the full survey. The overall survey margin of error is +/- 1.42% at a 95% confidence level. Response rates and margins of error vary by section and breakout. "N" refers to the number of respondents and is generally the first column in the data tables. Totals do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

This research is exempt from IRB approval in accordance with US Department of Health and Human Service's Policy for Protection of Human Research Subjects listed at 45 C.F.R. §46.104(d)(2)(ii). The author has no conflicts to report.

About PAs

PAs (physician associates/physician assistants) are licensed clinicians who practice medicine in every specialty and setting. Trusted, rigorously educated and trained healthcare professionals, PAs are dedicated to expanding access to care and transforming health and wellness through patient-centered, team-based medical practice. A PA's specific duties depend on the settings in which they work, their level of experience, and state law. There are approximately 159,000 PAs in the United States, who engage in more than 514 million patient interactions each year. To learn more about PAs, go to aapa.org.

About AAPA

Founded in 1968, the American Academy of Physician Associates is the national professional society for PAs (physician associates/physician assistants). It represents a profession of more than 159,000 PAs across all medical and surgical specialties in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and the uniformed services.

AAPA advocates and educates on behalf of the profession and the patients PAs serve. We work to ensure the professional growth, personal excellence, and recognition of PAs. We also enhance their ability to improve the quality, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness of patient-centered healthcare.

How to Cite

PAs in Leadership: What do they do? 2023. American Academy of Physician Associates. Alexandria, VA.

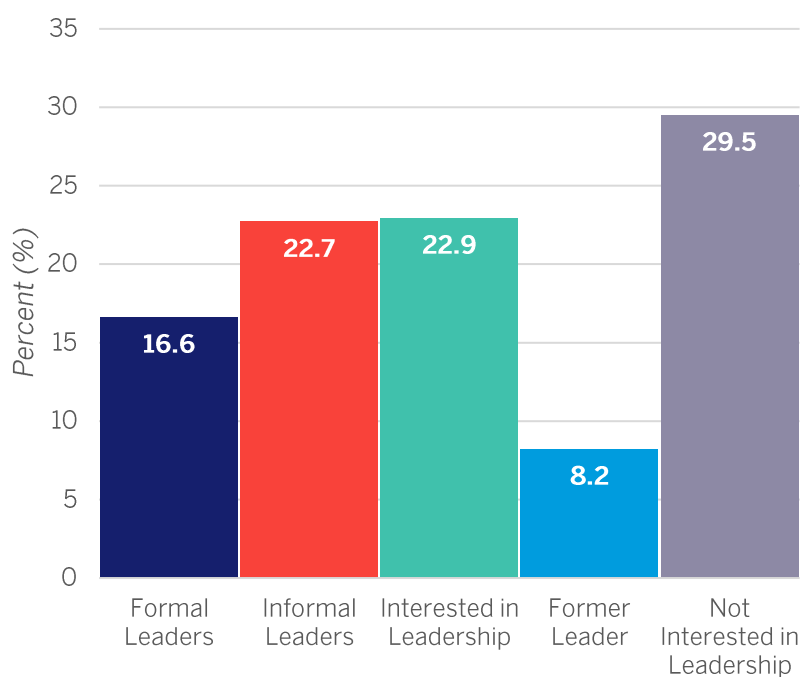
Executive Summary

Within the PA profession, leadership roles can function as a pathway for career advancement, opportunity for workplace task diversification, and a chance to mentor the next generation of practitioners. Despite the importance of PA leadership, few studies examine the demographic characteristics of PA leaders, how they get into leadership roles, or what they do within these positions. To fill this gap, AAPA has developed a series of data briefs to serve as a primer for those interested in learning more about PA leadership. In our second report of the series, we examine the tasks performed by PAs serving in leadership roles.

Characteristics of PAs in Leadership

Leadership comes in many forms. Within PA leadership, PAs may serve in a formal leadership role which traditionally includes a formal title, additional compensation, and/or a greater number of leadership responsibilities. PAs in leadership roles may have titles such as Director, Manager, Vice President but may also have a title of Physician Associate or Assistant. In 2022, 40% of PAs indicated they were currently in a formal or informal leadership role. Almost 30% of PAs were not in, or not interested in, leadership (Figure 1, Table 1). Seven in 10 PAs who were interested in leadership have less than 10 years of experience. Most of the PAs in formal leadership had over 10 years of work experience (70.8%, Table 2). More information on the demographics of PAs in leadership can be found in [PAs in Leadership: Who are they?](#)

Figure 1. PAs by Leadership Role



Almost half (46.2%) of the formal leadership PAs were in primary care or “other specialties”, 21% reported working in a surgical subspecialty, and approximately 1 in 10 indicated practicing in “no medical specialty” (11.2%, Table 3). The two settings with the most leadership PAs, across all leadership roles, were Hospitals and Outpatient clinic or physician office/college clinic. One key area of difference was the proportion of formal

leaders working in universities as educators (Table 4). Here, almost 1 in 10 (9.4%) of the PAs who reported working in formal leadership were educators in a university. PAs who were not

in, or not interested in, leadership were more likely to work in an outpatient clinic or physician office (57.9%) than formal leaders, informal leaders, or those interested in leadership.

In the 2022 AAPA Salary Survey, we asked PAs in informal leadership positions to describe the leadership activities they performed within their organization. Three prominent themes emerged from these descriptions (Figure 2). First, informal leadership can involve educating, onboarding, or training of new PAs. Second, it may include serving on committees, such as being a member of a hospital wellness or DEI committee. Finally, unofficial supervisory duties in a medical team, such as in a short-staffed department, were also considered informal leadership tasks.

Figure 2. Example Quotations Illustrating PAs in Informal Leadership Role Descriptions

Educating, Onboarding, & Training	Service on Committees	Unofficial Supervisory Duties
<i>“The ‘go to’ person to answer questions ... I have been called ‘the glue’ that holds the team together”</i>	<i>“Chairperson of Center-wide APP committee, but no admin time or compensation.”</i>	<i>“Supervising staff but not their direct supervisor and no ability to hire or fire.”</i>

We aimed to better understand the tasks PAs in informal leadership, and all forms of leadership, reported performing during the 2022 PA Practice Survey. Roughly 3 in 10 PAs supervising or managing non-clinical staff or onboarding new PAs regarded themselves as informal leaders (Table 6). This may be because 45.9% of the PAs who are helping with onboarding PAs were informally assigned this task, compared to 35.1% being formally assigned the task (Table 9). In the following sections, we take a closer look at the distribution of tasks across formal and informal PA leaders as well as PAs who are interested in leadership.

Leadership Tasks

Educating others in your practice (not including precepting) was the most frequently cited leadership task that PAs were currently performing in their place of work. A majority (51.6%) of PAs were performing this task. Similarly, many tasks related to mentoring and educating such as serving as a mentor (45.4%), precepting PAs (43.9%), and helping onboard PAs (43.6%) were also frequently selected. Two in 5 PAs (40.7%) were serving on a committee, rounding out the top five most cited leadership tasks. Many of the least cited leadership tasks were related to administrative roles. Only 1.2% of PAs were currently serving as union representatives or stewards. However, slightly more PAs were managing budgets (8.6%), participating in PA credentialing (12.5%), chairing a committee (15.1%), or making hiring and firing decisions (15.4%; Table 5).

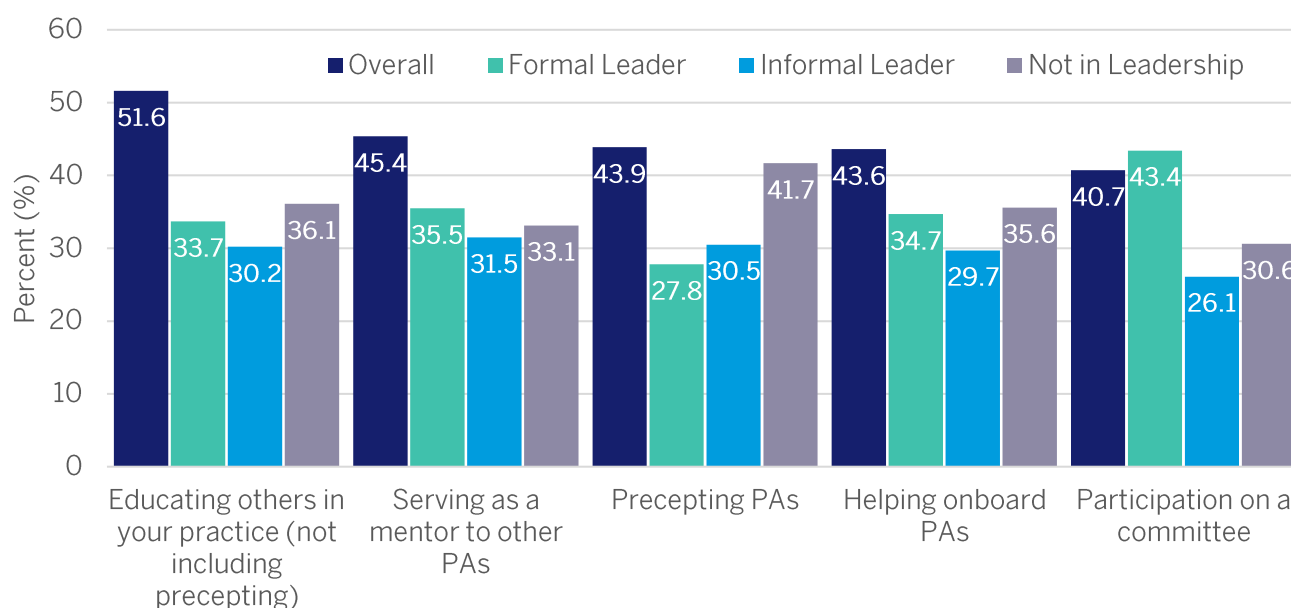
Tasks by Leadership Role

To gain additional insights, we examined the leadership tasks by the self-reported leadership role (formal, informal, and not currently in leadership) PAs were in at the time of the survey. Formal leaders (33.7%), informal leaders (30.2%), and those not in leadership (36.1%) had similar levels of involvement in educating others in their practice. Additionally, PAs in each group reported serving as a mentor to other PAs at similar levels (Figure 3). However,

PAs in formal leadership roles often handled administrative duties like competency assessments (61%) and budget management (80%).

administrative tasks like leading quality improvement activities (51.8%), completing competency assessments of PAs (60.5%), and managing a budget (80.0%) were more likely to be completed by formal leaders. PAs who were not in a leadership position were more likely to report they were currently precepting PAs (41.7%). Interestingly, there was no specific leadership task that PAs who were in informal leadership indicated they were currently performing at a higher rate than PAs in formal leadership and/or PAs who were not in leadership. However, 3 in 10 (31.0%; Table 6) PAs who reported supervising or managing non-clinical staff were in informal leadership. The leadership tasks held by PAs also varied based on their work setting. A vast majority of PAs who supervised or managed clinical staff other than PAs (59.8%) or non-clinical staff (61.5%) worked in outpatient clinics or physician offices. However, supervising or managing PAs (44.0%), hiring and firing PAs (43.3%), and participating in PA credentialing (45.2%) was more likely to occur in hospitals (Table 8).

Figure 3. Participation in Leadership Tasks/Activities



Past and Future Tasks

PAs also indicated which leadership tasks they previously held, were interested in, or were not interested in. In line with the previous tables, many PAs who had formerly performed a leadership task indicated they had previously precepted PAs (41.4%) and served as mentor to other PAs (32.7%).

Administrative tasks such as supervising or managing non-clinical staff; ensuring compliance with federal, state, and accreditation requirements; managing a budget; and serving as a union representative or steward were the tasks that were both least likely to be held previously and had the highest level of PAs indicating they were not interested in performing. Among the leadership tasks PAs were not currently performing, but were interested in, the highest rated were serving as a mentor to other PAs (44.9%), helping to determine how many PAs are hired (43.5%), and helping to onboard PAs (40.6%; Table 7).

Overall, 81.0% of PAs indicated they were supporting efforts to onboard PAs and/or APRNs either formally or informally. Less than half (41.5%) of PAs were participating in tasks outside of the tasks they were hired to complete. However, only a quarter (24.0%) of PAs were serving as a representative for other PAs, or PAs and APRNs, to management. Almost three in four (72.9) PAs are serving as a mentor for PAs and/or APRNs. Within that group, 49.0% were informally assigned to this activity (Table 9).

In the November 2022 fielding of the PA Practice Survey, we asked additional questions regarding the utilization of mentors within PAs' organizational leadership pathways. Here, we found more than a fifth (21.7%) of PAs currently have a mentor who supported them in their pursuit of additional leadership opportunities. Moreover, an additional 24.3% were mentored in the past, with almost one third (31.4%) of PAs interested in being a leadership mentee in the future. Comparatively, while a quarter (24.5%) of PAs were not interested in being a leadership mentor, 38.3% were interested in becoming one, 13.4% had been one in the past, and 23.9% were currently serving as leadership mentors (Table 10). Additional insights on pathways to PA leadership are presented in the third brief of this leadership series "PAs in Leadership: How do they get there?".

Conclusion

PAs are currently serving in leadership roles within their workplaces, even if they do not have a formal leadership title. Moreover, there is a considerable proportion of PAs who are not currently in, but are interested in, leadership taking on additional opportunities within their employers. The most frequently cited leadership related tasks performed by PAs were often related to workplace education and mentorship. Fewer PAs reported performing more administrative leadership tasks, such as hiring and firing of PAs, chairing a committee, and/or managing a budget; those that did were more likely to be in formal leadership positions. PAs are also taking an opportunity to mentor new PA leaders through the challenges of leadership. Regardless of their professional setting, most PAs are actively seeking opportunities to become involved and engaged in their workplace.

22%

of PAs currently have a mentor who supported their path into leadership.

Data Tables

Table 1. Leadership Role, by Type

Measure	N	Percent (%)
Yes, in a formal leadership role	615	16.6
Yes, in an informal leadership role	840	22.7
Not in the past year, but I am interested in one in the future	845	22.9
Not in the past year, but I have been in one in the past	304	8.2
No, and I am not interested	1090	29.5
Total	3,694	100.0

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: Are you in a leadership role at your primary employer, either formally or informally?

Table 2. Leadership Role by Career Experience

Measure	Formal leadership	Informal leadership	Interested in leadership	Not in, or interested in leadership
	Percent (%)			
0 to 1 year	0.5	1.6	9.3	3.9
2 to 4 years	8.1	18.4	35.3	20.3
5 to 9 years	20.7	24.5	28.9	22.9
10 to 14 years	22.0	16.9	13.9	15.8
15 to 19 years	18.4	14.3	4.9	12.4
20 or more years	30.4	24.3	7.7	24.7
Total (N)	615	838	841	1,391

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: What year did you graduate from your PA program?

Question: Are you in a leadership role at your primary employer, either formally or informally?

Table 3. Leadership Role by Primary Specialty

Measure	Formal leadership	Informal leadership	Interested in leadership	Not in, or interested in leadership
	Percent (%)			
Other specialties	23.4	24.7	23.4	27.6
Primary care	22.8	24.3	20.6	22.6
Surgical subspecialties	21.1	27.8	27.8	25.4
Internal medicine subspecialties	11.7	12.2	15.0	13.1
Emergency medicine	8.8	5.3	8.9	7.3
Pediatric subspecialties	1.0	2.4	2.0	1.7
No medical specialty	11.2	3.3	2.3	2.3
Total (N)	615	838	841	1,391

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: Please indicate your primary employer type.

Question: Are you in a leadership role at your primary employer, either formally or informally?

Table 4. Leadership Role by Primary Setting

Measure	Formal leadership	Informal leadership	Interested in leadership	Not in, or interested in leadership
	Percent (%)			
Outpatient clinic or physician office, College clinic	44.4	55.4	54.5	57.9
Hospital	34.1	30.9	37.8	31.1
Urgent care or convenient care clinic	4.6	3.8	4.3	6.2
University (Educator)	9.4	2.5	1.0	0.7
Other	7.5	7.4	2.5	4.1
Total (N)	615	838	841	1,391

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: Please indicate your primary setting in which you practice as a PA.

Question: Are you in a leadership role at your primary employer, either formally or informally?

Table 5. Percent of PAs Currently Participating in Leadership Tasks, by Task

Measure	N	Percent (%)
Educating others in your practice (not including precepting)	992	51.6
Serving as a mentor to other PAs	874	45.4
Precepting PAs	845	43.9
Helping onboard PAs	839	43.6
Participation on a committee	782	40.7
Leading quality improvement activities	529	27.5
Supervising or managing clinical staff other than PAs	512	26.6
Supervising or managing non-clinical staff	454	23.6
Ensuring compliance with federal, state and accreditation requirements	436	22.7
Performance assessment of PAs	428	22.3
Competency assessment of PAs	390	20.3
Helping to determine how many PAs are hired	385	20.0
Supervising or managing PAs	352	18.3
Hiring and firing of PAs	297	15.4
Chairing a committee	290	15.1
PAs credentialing participation	241	12.5
Managing a budget	165	8.6
Serving as a union representative or steward	24	1.2
Total	1,923	100.0

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: Which of the following tasks do you currently have, or would like to have, responsibility for at your primary employer?

Table 6. Percent of PAs Participating in Leadership Tasks, by Leadership Role

Measure	N	Formal	Informal	Not in Leadership
		Percent (%)		
Educating others in your practice (not including precepting)	991	33.7	30.2	36.1
Serving as a mentor to other PAs	874	35.5	31.5	33.1
Precepting PAs	844	27.8	30.5	41.7
Helping onboard PAs	839	34.7	29.7	35.6
Participation on a committee	782	43.4	26.1	30.6
Leading quality improvement activities	529	51.8	29.3	18.9
Supervising or managing clinical staff other than PAs	509	40.9	30.8	28.3
Supervising or managing non-clinical staff	451	41.7	31.0	27.3
Ensuring compliance with federal, state and accreditation requirements	435	49.9	23.0	27.1
Performance assessment of PAs	428	57.9	22.2	19.9
Competency assessment of PAs	390	60.5	22.3	17.2
Helping to determine how many PAs are hired	385	57.7	25.2	17.1
Supervising or managing PAs	352	73.3	21.0	5.7
Hiring and firing of PAs	297	71.7	17.8	10.4
Chairing a committee	289	67.1	19.7	13.1
PAs credentialing participation	240	62.1	17.1	20.8
Managing a budget	165	80.0	12.7	7.3
Serving as a union representative or steward	24	58.3	12.5	29.2

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: Are you in a leadership role at your primary employer, either formally or informally?

Question: Which of the following tasks do you currently have, or would like to have, responsibility for at your primary employer?

Table 7. Percent of PAs Participating in Leadership Tasks, by Leadership Role

Measure	N	Previously Held Responsibility	Interested in Responsibility	Not Interested
		Percent (%)		
Serving as a mentor to other PAs	2,005	32.7	44.9	22.4
Helping to determine how many PAs are hired	2,486	10.4	43.5	46.1
Helping onboard PAs	2,043	29.8	40.6	29.6
Educating others in your practice (not including precepting)	1,885	27.7	38.9	33.4
Precepting PAs	2,031	41.4	37.2	21.4
Supervising or managing PAs	2,520	11.5	36.5	52.0
Leading quality improvement activities	2,351	15.2	34.7	50.1
Participation on a committee	2,094	18.1	34.6	47.3
Competency assessment of PAs	2,480	11.0	31.0	57.9
Performance assessment of PAs	2,447	12.8	30.2	57.0
Chairing a committee	2,584	8.0	26.5	65.4
Supervising or managing clinical staff other than PAs	2,364	11.2	26.5	62.3
Hiring and firing of PAs	2,582	10.3	23.7	66.1
PAs credentialing participation	2,623	7.2	20.1	72.7
Supervising or managing non-clinical staff	2,422	9.7	19.5	70.8
Ensuring compliance with federal, state and accreditation requirements	2,435	6.5	16.2	77.3
Managing a budget	2,704	4.5	16.2	79.4
Serving as a union representative or steward	2,832	1.0	12.8	86.2

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: Which of the following tasks do you currently have, or would like to have, responsibility for at your primary employer?

Note: PAs who reported they currently have a leadership task were excluded from this table

Table 8. Percent of PAs Participating in Leadership Tasks, by Setting

Measure	N	Outpatient clinic or physician office	Hospital	Urgent care or convenient care clinic	University (Educator)	All Other Settings
		Percent (%)				
Educating others in your practice (not including precepting)	994	49.4	35.3	3.3	4.5	7.4
Serving as a mentor to other PAs	876	43.4	40.5	3.9	6.3	5.9
Precepting PAs	847	46.4	45.3	2.6	2.1	3.5
Helping onboard PAs	841	42.3	43.5	4.5	4.0	5.6
Participation on a committee	784	40.7	40.8	3.2	8.5	6.8
Leading quality improvement activities	530	45.1	35.5	3.0	6.2	10.2
Supervising or managing clinical staff other than PAs	512	59.8	22.9	6.3	3.5	7.6
Supervising or managing non-clinical staff	454	61.5	16.7	7.5	6.4	7.9
Ensuring compliance with federal, state and accreditation requirements	436	45.0	28.4	5.0	11.0	10.6
Performance assessment of PAs	429	40.1	40.6	4.2	8.6	6.5
Competency assessment of PAs	391	35.3	42.7	5.6	11.5	4.9
Helping to determine how many PAs are hired	386	43.8	40.7	3.9	6.5	5.2
Supervising or managing PAs	352	37.8	44.0	4.3	9.1	4.8
Hiring and firing of PAs	298	37.9	43.3	5.1	9.1	4.7
Chairing a committee	291	34.4	33.3	5.2	17.5	9.6
PAs credentialing participation	241	38.6	45.2	2.1	7.5	6.6
Managing a budget	165	40.0	23.6	6.7	16.4	13.3
Serving as a union representative or steward	24	41.7	12.5	20.9	12.5	12.5

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: Please indicate your primary employer type.

Question: Which of the following tasks do you currently have, or would like to have, responsibility for at your primary employer?

Table 9. Percent of PAs Participating in Leadership Activities, by Activity

Measure	N	Not Participating	Informally Assigned	Formally Assigned
		Percent (%)		
Serving as a representative for PAs (or PAs and APRNs) to management	2,863	76.0	14.3	9.7
Serving as a mentor for PAs (or PAs and APRNs)	1,508	27.1	49.0	23.9
Help within onboarding for PAs (or PAs and APRNs)	1,424	19.0	45.9	35.1
Do other tasks outside what was assigned for role I was hired to do	2,851	58.5	27.0	14.5

Source: 2022 AAPA PA Practice Survey.

Question: Do you do any of the following at your primary employer?

Table 10. Percent of PAs Participating in Leadership Mentor Activities, by Activity

Measure	N	Not Interested	No, but Interested	Yes, in the Past	Yes, Currently
		Percent (%)			
I have/had a mentor who has supported me in my pursuit of, or work in, leadership	978	31.4	35.6	24.3	21.7
I have served, or am serving, as a mentor to others seeking, or in, leadership	972	24.5	38.3	13.4	23.9

Source: 2022 PA Practice Survey

Question: Do any of the following apply to you, regarding leadership mentoring?