

**Submission date:** February 10, 2020

**Program/s in this review :** Physical Therapist Assistant (PTA) AAS

**Specialized accrediting agency (if applicable):** Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE)

**Campuses where the program is delivered:** Anchorage

**Members of the program review committee:**

- Leah Wilsey, Program Director, Anchorage
- Terese Swayman, Academic Coordinator of Clinical Education, Anchorage
- LeeAnne Carrothers, SAH Director, Anchorage

**1. Centrality of Program Mission and Supporting Role (700 words or less)**

Program Relevancy

The mission of the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) is to discover and disseminate knowledge through teaching, research, engagement and creative expression. Located in Anchorage and on community campuses in Southcentral Alaska, UAA is committed to serving the higher education needs of the state, its communities and its diverse peoples. The University of Alaska Anchorage is an open access university with academic programs leading to occupational endorsements; undergraduate and graduate certificates; and associate, baccalaureate, and graduate degrees in a rich, diverse and inclusive environment.

The mission of the UAA School of Allied Health is “to educate and develop allied health professionals to serve all Alaskans,” while the College of Health’s mission is “Advancing the health and well-being of people and communities.”

The mission of the UAA PTA program is “to prepare knowledgeable, competent, and caring individuals as entry-level PTAs. Graduates of the PTA program will meet the diverse needs of patients and clients, and become responsible, productive, ethical, and effective members of the health care community and society at large.” This directly supports the College of Health mission of “Advancing the health and well-being of people and communities.”

Partnerships

The program works in concert with local clinics and therapy professionals to determine the area needs for PTAs in the workforce. Local facilities partner with the program for clinical site placement as well as guest lectures and field trips as needed in the curriculum. The PTA program enjoys a close relationship with the Alaska Physical Therapy Association, who offers continuing education courses twice a year and monthly meetings with educational in-services. This allows our students, local physical therapists and PTAs to participate in a variety of continuing education opportunities, including the clinical education credentialing course. This connection to our local clinicians is vital in the growth of the program, student and faculty professional development, and community partnerships.

Support of Other Academic Programs

The PTA program also supports other programs and departments within the =, such as Medical Assisting (MA) and Biological Sciences. Students have two prerequisite MA classes (MA A101 Medical Terminology and MA A104 Essentials of Human Disease) and two classes in Biology (BIOL A111/L and BIOL A112/L Anatomy and Physiology I and II).

Workforce Development/Employment Opportunities

The State of Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development projects PTA employment growth to be robust, with 13 average position openings a year through 2026.

**2. Program Demand (including service to other programs), Efficiency, and Productivity (7 year trend; 1400 words or less)**

The UAA PTA Program accepts 12 students in each cohort. As a relatively new program (the initial cohort began the program in AY 2016), it does not have a 7-year history. It is supported by the College of Health through tuition and student fees. With the exception of TVEP support for the program director salary, it does not have other external financial support. Increasing cohort size to increase program revenue would exceed industry demand, so cohort size has been capped at 12 and will be reevaluated as needs change. That said, while the program is currently meeting industry demand, most graduates work in urban areas, so has thus far made no impact on workforce needs in rural areas. An opportunity to address this need would be to change current program delivery to offer program didactics both on-campus and via online delivery method, which would allow students from rural Alaska to stay in their communities while they participate in the majority of the program, as opposed to having to move to Anchorage for the program. This scenario could use a hybrid model in which students complete didactics via synchronous/asynchronous online learning, followed by intermittent on-campus clinical intensives to teach and practice hands-on skills. As workforce vacancies are more prevalent in rural AK communities, this model would enable the program to educate students where they live and has less potential to impact competition for jobs in the urban areas.

Another opportunity for program expansion exists in degree completion for individuals who completed their training while in the military. While they are eligible to work as PTA in the military, that training does not translate to the civilian environment. To assist with transition from military to civilian practice, UAA could potentially offer a degree-completion program which would enable them to earn credits for prior learning, complete a degree from a CAPTE-accredited program and become eligible for the national licensing exam and licensure. The program is currently exploring the possibility of participating in a consortium to address this specific need.

Since UAA's is the only physical therapy education program in the state, the number of years to degree is longer than the minimum amount of time to complete the program, i.e., two years. This is true for a few different reasons. Students in the program have often initially set out to be physical therapists, for which a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree is required. Admission requirements for DPT programs include an earned bachelor's degree. If students were unable to gain admission into a DPT program or changed their mind about pursuing that degree, they may have already completed all or part of a bachelor's degree prior to starting our program. This is consistent with 5-year data published in the CAPTE 2018-2019 Physical Therapist Assistant Education Programs Fact Sheets, which report that 30.5% of students enter PTA programs with a bachelor's degree (Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education, 2019). Furthermore, many PTA students are considered non-traditional students and enter the program after a change in careers, being discharged from the military, or having raised their children. These other life circumstances necessitate completing the prerequisites part-time over several semesters/years, thus increasing the time required to complete the degree and the number of total credits earned by graduates.

Data currently included in the seven-year majors or program enrollment trends do not match program records for 2015, 2016 or 2017.

- Fall 2015 data reflect 8 enrolled majors. The program had not started.
- Fall 2016 data reflect 15 enrolled majors. The program had 11 students enrolled that semester. The four extra students counted as majors had not yet been admitted to the program.
- Fall 2017 data reflect 14 enrolled majors. The program had 12 students enrolled that semester. The two extra students counted as majors had not yet been admitted to the program.

The discrepancies between program and IR data may be due to some students having been enrolled as full majors when they had not yet been admitted to the program. A Banner search of PTA majors revealed that one such student was counted as a PTA major in four separate years (2015, 2016, 2017 and 2019), but was only enrolled in the program one of those years.

### 3. Program Quality, Improvement and Student Success (1500 words or less)

#### Specialized Accreditation

Graduation from a CAPTE-accredited program is required for eligibility for the national licensing exam and licensure in all 50 states. The program achieved initial five-year CAPTE accreditation in 2015 and is scheduled for the next onsite accreditation visit in summer 2020, with a self-study due in June. The program director and School of Allied Health Director participated in a workshop in preparation for completing the self-study document.

#### Program Student Learning Outcome Assessment

Program data is collected through formal and informal means and includes the following: admissions data, discussions with students and faculty, course evaluations, graduate surveys, student scores on the clinical performance instrument, graduation rates, licensure exam pass and employment rates, and performance on practice licensing exam. Information gathered from these sources enables the program to evaluate achievement of program student learning outcomes (PSLOs), to determine which current practices are successful, and to identify areas that need improvement. A benefit of having a small program with few faculty is the ability of faculty members to meet frequently to discuss issues as they come up, and also in retrospect. This allows the program faculty to make both “just in time” and future adjustments to meet the needs of the students.

While the program is successfully meeting PLSOs and graduates are meeting other program goals (graduation, licensure exam and employment rates), feedback from students and faculty has consistently included student and faculty stressors, particularly in the summer (second) semester. The program has been working to address this feedback, and has implemented a number of changes to reduce stresses associated with the program. These have included increasing the number of weeks over which the summer semester is offered, using adjunct (vs. core) faculty to reduce teaching loads during the “off” semester, hiring a lab assistant, and most recently, the development and implementation of curricular changes to improve the efficiency of the program and reduce student need to be on campus while completing clinical rotations (please see next section for curriculum changes).

Another area of concern for students and faculty has been the difficulty associated with placing students on clinical rotations, a source of stress for all parties, and of potentially increased costs to students. When the program began in 2015, the program policy was set to require that students complete one inpatient and one outpatient 7-week rotation. This requirement is more stringent than CAPTE’s requirement (Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Accreditation, 2017) that students have clinical experiences that “encompass management of patients/clients with diseases and conditions representative of those commonly seen in practice across the lifespan and the continuum of care; practice in settings representative of those in which physical therapy is commonly practiced; involvement in interprofessional practice; participation as a member of the PT and PTA team; and other experiences that lead to the achievement of the program’s defined expected student outcomes.” The program’s self-imposed policy has made placing students more difficult, and has resulted in missed opportunities for clinical rotations at rural facilities that have a wide variety of patients and settings available to students, but perhaps not the patient census in one setting to count as a full “inpatient” or “outpatient” experience. The program is currently exploring options to soften this requirement.

#### Curriculum, Program Design, And Distance Education

The curriculum and program undergo regular formative and summative review. In preparation for program reaccreditation, a more rigorous review has been undertaken. Potential changes are informed by data

collected in outcome assessments. The advisory committee meets on an average of twice per year to review the program as a whole, and offer feedback on clinical performance of students and the needs of industry. Students participate in graduate surveys where they offer feedback on topics that are connected to the program, board exam, and physical therapy as a profession. This information is then utilized to address areas of future change. The continuous program review and improvement has resulted in overall student success moving in a positive fashion.

In response to feedback from former students, faculty and advisory committee members, the program recently revised curriculum to transition one summer and one fall course to online delivery. This change decreased the on-campus time commitment for students and faculty. For the 2020 academic year, a new course (PTA A102) has been developed, which combines two 2-credit courses (from the summer and spring semesters) into a single 3-credit online course. Faculty have also aligned course content in each semester to maximize student learning and carryover of information.

Didactic courses are offered primarily on the Anchorage campus, with two online courses, one in the spring and one in the fall (starting in 2020). Students complete two seven-week clinical rotations in the final semester in facilities throughout the state.

### **Student Success**

Students participate in a range of high-impact service learning practices, including community service events, the APTA Day of Service, field trips to specialty clinics, volunteer work, and clinical practicum courses.

A variety of student support systems have been implemented. Office hours for faculty, midterm student meetings, as well as a small class ratio affords faculty and students a close connection throughout the program. For incoming or interested students, faculty are available for advising to guide these students toward their educational goals.

The program's success is demonstrated in many ways, to include:

- 98% program completion, compared to an 83.65% national rate;
- 98% licensure exam pass rate (one student who graduated in the first cohort did not pass the examination), compared to 92.3% national rate;
- 100% employment among graduates eligible for licensure/employment, compared to 98% national rate (Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education, 2019).

Each of the above measures of success significantly exceed CAPTE's minimum requirements of a 60% graduation, 85% licensure exam pass, and 90% employment rates (Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Accreditation, 2017).

#### **4. Program Duplication / Distinctiveness (300 words or less)**

The UAA PTA program is the only one in Alaska. The nearest other PTA program is in the state of Washington.

**5. Summary Analysis (500 words or less)**

A strength of the program is the diverse faculty members that are able to present the course material in a relevant fashion for student comprehension. As previously stated, program graduates perform well above national average with program graduation rates, and performance on the national board examination (see above). Employment rates are consistent with the national average. Since the program's inception in 2015, graduates currently represent 23% of AK PTA licentiates, which reduces the need for more expensive and transient traveling therapists. While graduates are currently working in difficult to fill practice settings (acute care and skilled nursing), the program has not yet produced graduates in rural Alaska, where critical needs still exist.

Potential areas for improvement include faculty and student stressors in the summer semester, and difficulty placing students on clinical rotations. Both areas are currently being addressed, and the program will assess the benefit of changes made.

UAA's PTA program is the only program in the State of Alaska to meet a workforce demand projected to have robust employment growth through 2026. With this demand and the program's exceptional success rate, this review committee recommends program **continuation and enhancement** for rural expansion through distance delivery and military degree-completion programs.