

Abstract

Pathologists' assistants are integral components of the pathology department, fulfilling many essential roles and duties. One critical responsibility included in the American Association AAPA Scope of Practice (2024-2025) is the education and supervision of learners. Although this is an established role for pathologists' assistants, there is a somewhat common sentiment of hesitancy to fulfill the role of an educator. The goal of this project is to investigate to what extent practicing pathologists' assistants act as educators to resident doctors in pathology, pathologists' assistant students, and to the overall pathologists' assistant community. Other topics investigated include evaluating the confidence of pathologists' assistants in fulfilling these roles and identifying the factors contributing to positive and negative relationships with residents and pathologists' assistant students. A survey was sent out to the Pathologists' Assistants Facebook group, as well as by email to select individuals, where practicing pathologists' assistants were asked about their occupational duties involving the education of others, as well as their relationships with those students.

Introduction

The Pathologists' Assistant Scope of Practice (2024-25) states that the education of others is an essential function that all pathologists' assistants (PAs) should be able to perform. These duties include:

- Educate and train pathology residents, new employees, students, and technical staff.
- Participate in the development of a didactic curriculum for educational processes.
- Perform formal evaluation of residents, Pathologists' Assistant students, and medical students.
- Educate nursing and hospital staff on best practices in pathology, including proper specimen collection procedures and triage.
- Present at academic conferences.
- Conduct community outreach, educating colleagues and the public about laboratory medicine.
- Participate in professional organizations.

While not every position will include all these duties, it is important for pathologists' assistants to be prepared and confident to fulfill these responsibilities. While many people have confidence to do this, a not uncommon sentiment among pathologists' assistants is an unwillingness or hesitation to teach others. Common statements might include "I hate working with residents" to "I have no interest in teaching pathologists' assistant students". While it is perfectly acceptable (and up to personal preference) to not want teaching as part of everyday job duties, the animosity towards students and a lack of confidence in teaching abilities might contribute to a reluctance to teach others.

The goal of this project is to survey active pathologists' assistants to identify how many are involved in teaching others, evaluate their confidence in their ability to teach others, and identify commonalities and potential factors that lead to both positive and negative relationships between pathologists' assistants and the groups they are responsible for educating, specifically pathology residents and pathologists' assistant students.

- Pew Research Center. Writing Survey Questions. Pew Research Center. Published 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/writing-survey-questions/>
- Guides to Survey Research. Harvard.edu. Published 2024. <https://psr.iq.harvard.edu/book/guides-survey-research>
- What is a PA? - American Association of Pathologists' Assistants (AAPA). www.pathassist.org. https://www.pathassist.org/general/custom.asp?page=What_is_a_PA

Materials and Methods

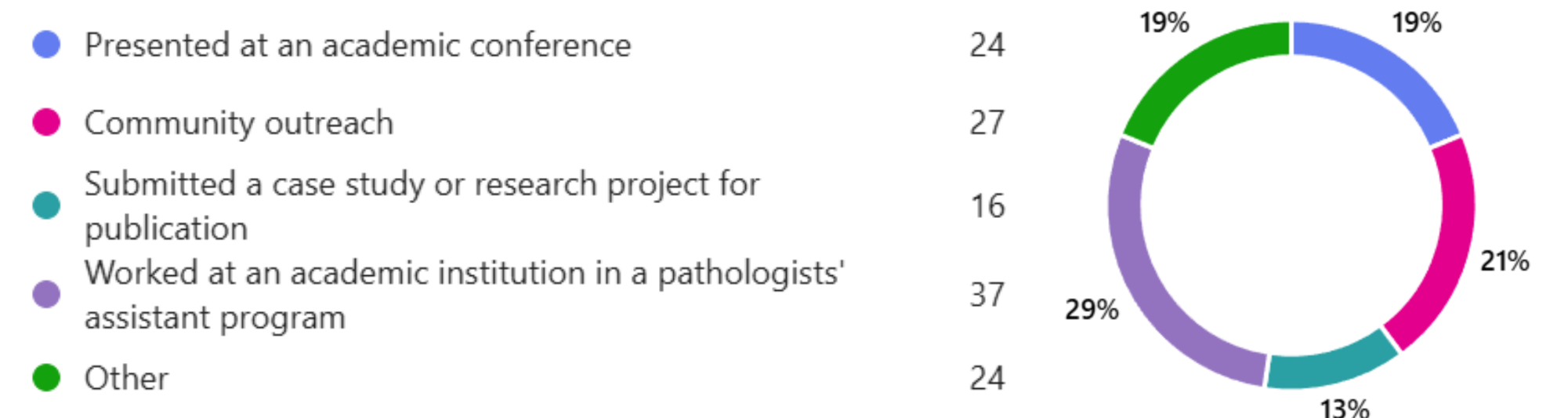
A Microsoft Forms survey was created with the three goals in mind. Survey questions were constructed using guidelines from established survey design protocols. The survey was 18 questions long and included yes/no, multiple choice, scale, and short answer responses. The survey was posted in the private Pathologists' Assistant Facebook group and spread through email by practicing pathologists' assistants to other pathologists' assistants. In total, 75 responses were received. Answers were converted into graphs, and short answers were summarized into common themes. A list of complete responses can be provided upon request (ecooney@quinnipiac.edu).

Results

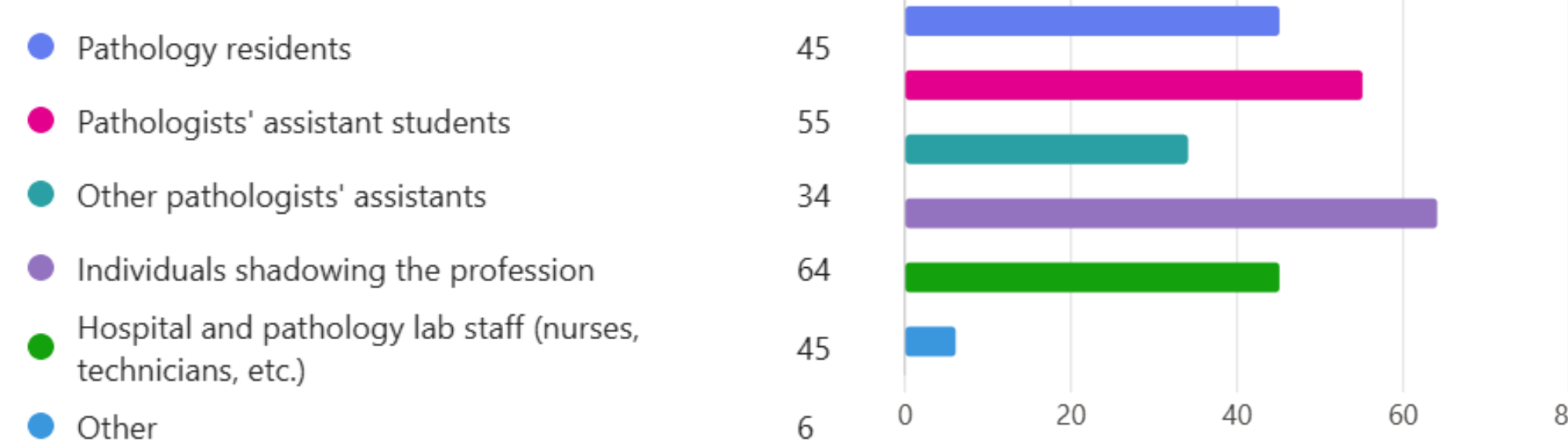
- Question 1: In your current position as a pathologists' assistant, do you consider yourself to be an educator?



- Question 2: As a pathologists' assistant, have you contributed to the education of others in any of the following ways? Select all that apply.



- Question 3: In your current position, are you responsible for the education and/or training of any of these individuals? Select all that apply.



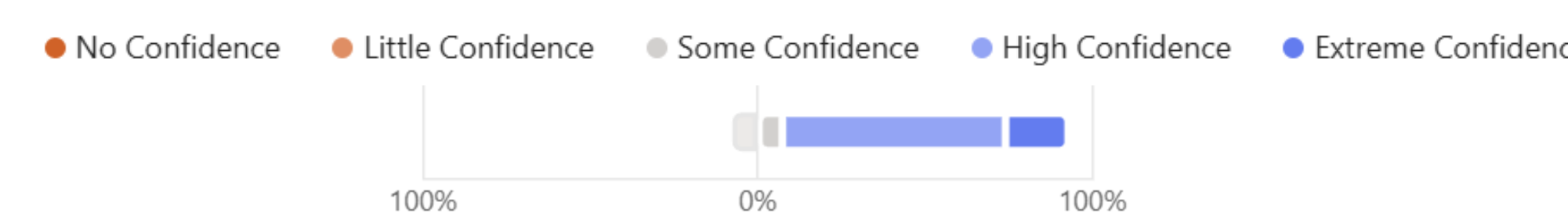
- Question 4: How often do you work with these individuals?



- Question 5: Please briefly describe your roles and responsibilities regarding the education and training of these individuals.

- Common responses: teaching grossing techniques, teaching residents, teaching medical students, teaching pathologists' assistant students

- Question 6: How would you rate your confidence in your ability to teach others effectively?

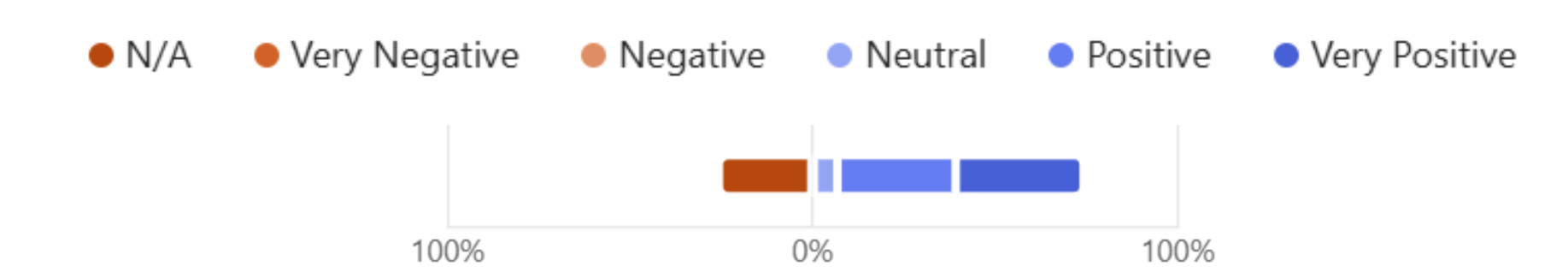


Results (cont.)

- Question 7: Have you ever taken advantage of CE credits related to teaching and education?



- Question 8: Overall, how would you rate your relationship with the residents you work with?



- Question 9: Please describe your favorite parts of working with residents.

- Common responses: seeing them grow and gain confidence, learning from each other, nothing, forming positive relationships between pathologists and pathologists' assistants.

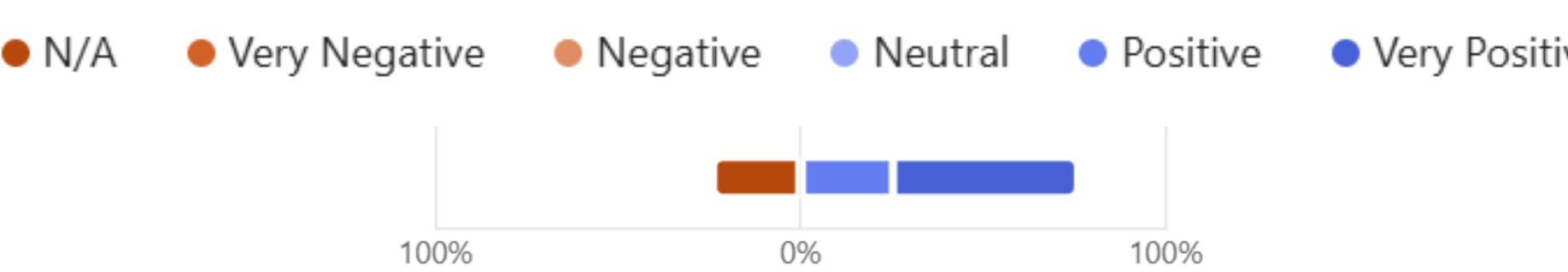
- Question 10: Please describe your least favorite parts of working with residents.

- Common responses: lack of interest in learning to gross, being blamed for resident mistakes, entitlement and lack of respect, not learning quickly enough.

- Question 11: In your opinion, how does your relationship with residents impact the overall workplace environment and culture?

- Fostering good relationships creates a caring, positive, and encouraging learning and working environment. When bad relationships are allowed to fester, it can create a lasting negative and toxic workplace environment.

- Question 12: Overall, how would you rate your relationship with the pathologists' assistant students you work with?



- Question 13: Please describe your favorite parts of working with pathologists' assistant students.

- Common responses: They are very eager and willing to learn, have a solid foundational knowledge of grossing/autopsy and why it's important, and like shaping the future of the profession for the better

- Question 14: Please describe your least favorite parts of working with pathologists' assistant students.

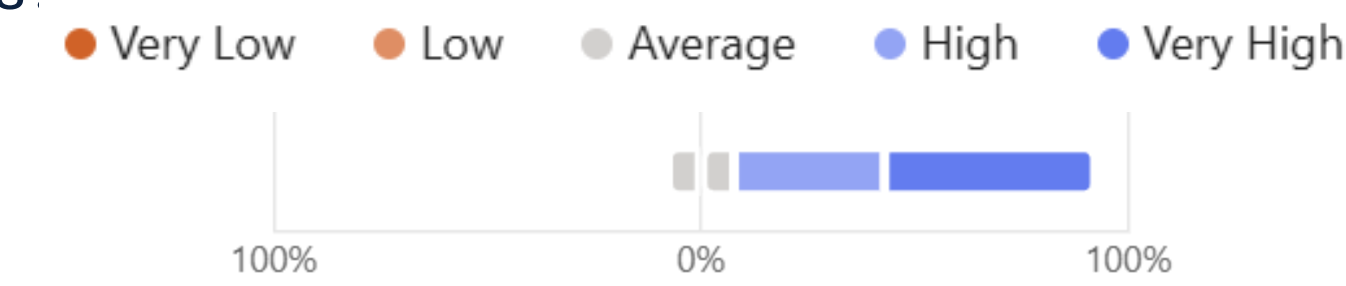
- Being stretched too thin, not enough support from management, not enough time to get own work done, "bad" students, rotation time too short for meaningful education

- Question 15: In your opinion, how does your relationship with the pathologists' assistant students impact the overall workplace environment and culture?

- Overall positive, people want to foster good relationships to establish good practices in the lab and have good relationships with their future colleagues. However, student mistakes can cause a stressful environment

Results (cont.)

- Question 16: How would you rate your ability to build positive relationships with residents and/or pathologists' assistant students?



- Question 17: Do you have any strategies and methods for building positive relationships with residents and pathologists' assistant students?

- Be kind, approachable, and patient, treat them with the same respect you wish to receive, get to know them and share about yourself if you're comfortable, understand that being wrong is a good teaching moment

- Question 18: Do you have any strategies or methods for dealing with more challenging residents and pathologists' assistant students?

- Try to understand their perspective, set firm and clear expectations, try different teaching styles, and document in extreme cases

Summary

Among the pathologists' assistants surveyed, a large majority regularly fulfil the role of educator in their daily occupational duties. Most often, they are responsible for educating residents, pathologists' assistant students, and individuals shadowing the profession. All surveyed have great confidence in their ability to teach, and many do not take advantage of education related CE credits. Overall, the relationships between the surveyed pathologists' assistants and residents/pathologists' assistant students are very positive, with many happy to contribute to shaping the future of the profession for the better through their mentorship. However, several recurring challenges arise during this process. With residents, there seems to be a mindset that they will not need to gross in the future and therefore do not put in adequate effort into learning the process. With pathologists' assistant students, many pathologists' assistants responsible for their education feel stretched thin with little support from lab management to adequately teach the students and manage their own work.

The survey unfortunately did not reach enough pathologists' assistants who disliked teaching, and they are not adequately represented here. Future studies should target these individuals directly to equally represent their perspectives and understand their opinions on education more clearly. This would hopefully shed more light on other reasons pathologists' assistants do not want to teach, as well as any other factors that could be leading to breakdowns in relationships between the educator and their student.

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