



Accreditation Review Commission on Education  
for the Physician Assistant, Inc.

## ARC-PA Standards Degree Deadline Issue

### **Background**

Aware of the impact that some components of the *Standards*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition may have for some currently accredited PA programs, the ARC-PA is providing clarification about the conferring of the graduate (masters) degree. This document provides details about what PA programs, whether sponsored by community colleges/two year colleges, the military or other sponsoring institutions, need to have in place to demonstrate compliance with the ARC-PA *Standards* requirement that a graduate degree be conferred to graduates that successfully complete the accredited PA program.

### **Developing Programs Eligibility**

Sponsoring institutions applying for provisional accreditation of a new PA program must be accredited by, and in good standing with, an ARC-PA recognized regional accrediting agency and must be authorized by that agency to confer upon graduates of the PA program a graduate (masters) degree.

### **The Standards**

The Accreditation Standards for Physician Assistant, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, require that all currently accredited programs confer graduate degrees to those students who matriculate (register; enroll) into the program after 2020 and successfully complete the program requirements. Specifically the Eligibility section of the *Standards* states:

A single institution *must* be clearly identified as the sponsor of the program and *must* be authorized under applicable law to provide a program of post secondary education. It *must* be accredited by a recognized regional accrediting agency<sup>1</sup> and *must* be authorized by this agency to confer upon graduates of the PA program a baccalaureate or graduate degree.<sup>2</sup>

Sponsoring institutions applying for provisional accreditation of a new PA program *must* be accredited by, and in good standing with, a recognized regional accrediting agency and *must* be authorized by that agency to confer upon graduates of the PA program a graduate degree.

Programs accredited prior to 2013 that do not currently offer a graduate degree *must* transition to conferring a graduate degree, which *should* be awarded by the sponsoring institution, upon all PA students who matriculate into the program after 2020.

The Introduction section of the *Standards*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, includes rationale and supports the change which addresses the requirement that upon graduation students receive, in addition to the professional credential (PA), an appropriate academic degree (masters).

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<sup>1</sup> Programs sponsored by the military branches of the federal government are exempt from this regional accreditation requirement.

<sup>2</sup> Programs sponsored by the military branches of the federal government or accredited prior to 1/1/06 are not required to confer graduates of the PA program a baccalaureate or graduate degree.

The PA profession has evolved over time to one requiring a high level of academic rigor. Institutions that sponsor PA programs are expected to incorporate this higher level of academic rigor into their programs and award an appropriate master's degree.

Within the *Standards*, one specific standard addresses the institutional responsibility to confer the degree:

A1.03 The sponsoring institution is responsible for: c) conferring the credential and/or academic degree which documents satisfactory completion of the educational program.

### **The Footnote**

Within the Eligibility section of the *Standards*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition is a footnote related to the only currently accredited military Interservice PA program and to those programs who were first accredited prior to 2006. The footnote is specifically tied to the select wording: "must be authorized by this agency to confer upon graduates of the PA program a baccalaureate or graduate degree." The footnote reads as follows: *Programs sponsored by the military branches of the federal government or accredited prior to 1/1/06 are not required to confer graduates of the PA program a baccalaureate or graduate degree.*

This footnote originated with the third edition of the *Standards*. It's placement in the fourth edition precedes the paragraph that addresses the requirement which states that "programs accredited prior to 2013 that do not currently offer a graduate degree must transition to conferring a graduate degree, which should be awarded by the sponsoring institution, upon all PA students who matriculate into the program after 2020."

The effective meaning of the section and placement of the footnote is that all programs accredited prior to 2013, including those that are sponsored by community/two year institutions or the military must transition to offering a graduate degree.

### **Clarification Statements**

The ARC-PA *Standards* require that:

1. All students who matriculate into any currently accredited PA programs after December 31, 2020 will be awarded a graduate (masters) degree upon successful completion of their PA curriculum and graduate degree requirements. (The definition of "matriculate" is to enroll or register. Thus, students who matriculate after December 31, 2020 are those who first enroll or register in PA coursework on or after January 1, 2021)
2. Currently accredited PA programs sponsored by institutions that can, but at present are not awarding a graduate degree, will be diligently working toward compliance with the degree requirement, within the institution, state and regional accreditation bodies, as appropriate. The institution should work within its framework to evaluate the PA program curriculum and adjust it as necessary for suitability, such that the institution will be able to confer a graduate degree to PA students who matriculate after December 31, 2020 and successfully complete the PA program.
3. Programs sponsored by institutions that are not able to award a graduate degree (those located in community/two year colleges, the military) will take one of the two approaches below toward compliance with the degree requirement.

- a) Programs and/or their sponsoring institution will develop a formal affiliation with an institution(s) that is/are able to confer a master's degree to PA graduates after assessing the PA program curriculum.
- It is expected that the degree-granting institution will evaluate the content and quality of the PA courses to validate that they meet the quantitative and qualitative requirements typically incorporated in a higher level of academic rigor comparable to other PA graduate level programs sponsored by institutions offering graduate degrees to PA program graduates.
  - Successful completion of the PA program is defined as the student having fulfilled all the requirements for graduation for both receipt of the professional credential and the graduate degree.
- b) Programs take the steps necessary to transfer their PA program sponsorship to an institution which is able to offer a graduate degree to PA students who successfully complete the program. Such institutions must be able to confer the graduate degree to PA students who matriculate after December 31, 2020 and successfully complete the PA program.

Transfer of program sponsorship requires completion of an ARC-PA change in sponsorship form. ARC-PA action on this transfer request must occur no later than September, 2020, to assure that students who begin the program in January, 2021 or later, will be conferred a graduate degree to students upon successful program completion.

Programs that are not in compliance with the degree requirement by **January 1, 2021** will have their accreditation withdrawn. Students who matriculate into such programs will be entering an unaccredited program