

Merger of the Academy and College

Benn P. Joseph, MLS, and Reginald Carter, PhD, PA

INTRODUCTION

The American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA) held its 34th Annual Conference in May 2006 in San Francisco, California. Thirty-four conferences is quite a few, and the physician assistant (PA) profession has come a long way since the first conference on New Health Practitioners was held in Wichita Falls, Texas, in April 1973. Over the years, the Academy has become a cohesive organization representing a diverse constituency of PAs. But this was not always the case. In 1973 there were several organizations claiming to represent physician assistants and vying for recognition by the American Medical Association (AMA) and the federal government.

The Academy, known at that time as the American Academy of Physician's Associates, and the National Association of Physicians' Assistants (NAPA) were beginning to emerge as two well-represented PA organizations, but there were also two other organizations waiting in the wings: the American Association of Physicians' Assistants (AAPA) and the Midwest Association of Physicians' Assistants, which later changed its name to the American College of Physicians' Assistants (ACPA).¹ Each claimed to represent PAs to varying degrees and had differing requirements for membership based primarily on experience and education.

Three of the four organizations were founded by graduates and students of formal PA educational programs. The Academy was founded by

Duke University PA program graduates and students in Durham, North Carolina; the National Association by graduates of the US Public Health Service PA Program in Staten Island, New York; and the College by graduates of the Cincinnati Technical College Surgical Assistant Program in Cincinnati, Ohio. The American Association, which had offices in New York, was founded by Paul Palace to register mostly proprietary-trained PAs who had little or no formal education. However, the American Association was interested in adding formally educated PAs to its ranks and intensified recruiting efforts to do so.²

Each organization wanted a seat at the bargaining table to help write accreditation and certification standards and to promote the enactment of state enabling legislation. Each felt pressured to consolidate efforts and to expand its membership to include both generalist and specialist trained PAs. To become the recognized spokespersons for PAs, the leaders of these organizations knew that they had to eventually merge with another organization.

In a letter to Academy members dated December 12, 1971, President Thomas Godkins noted that he had appointed Paul Moson to chair a special committee "to investigate making the Academy more inclusive, making necessary bylaw changes to do so, and exploring the feasibility of merging with the American College."³ On January 24, 1972, John Braun, then president elect of the AAPA, met with representatives of the National

Feature Editor's Note:

The American Academy of Physician Assistants was not always the only organization representing practicing PAs. In this article, the authors explore the pressures that forced the early PA professional organizations to consider a merger and how the Academy was able to reshape itself without giving up its growing academic power base and influence. Will the Academy be able to maintain its central role as the organization representing clinical PAs as its membership becomes even more diversified? Only time will tell.

— Reginald Carter, PhD, PA

This feature publishes articles on all aspects of PA history. Much of the material comes from the PA History Center, which is dedicated to the study of the history and legacy of the physician assistant profession. Additional information can be found on the Society for the Preservation of Physician Assistant History at <http://pahx.org>. Authors desiring to contribute to PA History should forward submissions to:

Reginald Carter, PhD, PA
Physician Assistant History Center
1121 Slater Road
Durham, NC 27703
Phone: 919-941-9325
Fax: 919-479-9726
Email: pahx@mc.duke.edu

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Thomas Godkins, 1971 President, American Academy of Physician's Associates

Association: Burt Lanpher, Bill Armstrong, and Max Condiotti. Common goals were discussed and suggestions made that National Association members become associate members of the Academy, not fellow members since their formal education was not long enough. It was agreed to continue to explore linkages. On January 26, 1972, Paul Moson and John Braun met with representatives of the American Association, Frank Norton and Paul Palace. The meeting was not as informative, but it was apparent that the American Association had significant financial support and had a vigorous, large-scale public relations program. The goals of the American Association were unclear to the Academy representatives, but Braun reported that "there is some force behind the organization and it should be dealt with."⁴

To bolster his position, Burt Lanpher, the director of the National Association, described the American College as a "small, fractionated splinter group"⁵ in his June 14, 1972, letter to the Academy requesting a merger. In retrospect, it is hard to say whether merging these two organizations would have been beneficial at this time. It is also unclear whether

Thomas Godkins, then president of the Academy, took this offer seriously. Godkins, who had just assumed this position with the Academy after the resignation of John Braun, declined this offer, stating that "things are still in a flux nationally and that the [Academy] Board felt the membership is not yet ready to accept such a move."⁶ Another concern was that most of the members of the National Association were trained as maritime PAs who were closely aligned to a labor union, the AFL-CIO.^{7,8} At the time, most physicians were self-employed. Those who were employed by health systems were not inclined to join labor unions or participate in collective bargaining activities with their employers.

Despite the Academy's hesitance to merge with the National Association, they were quite interested in merging with the "fractionated splinter group" that was the American College of Physicians' Assistants. Just two days before turning down the National Association's offer, Gregory Gilreath, president of the College, had called Godkins to suggest that the two organizations meet to discuss their "mutual interests and perhaps the possibility of some form of merger in the future."⁹ Godkins agreed that the two organizations should meet.

They met about a month later on August 28, 1972, in Oklahoma City. Gilreath met with Godkins and William Stanhope (the Academy's first president and then secretary), and pleaded his case for the merger, pointing out that "the objectives of the College and the Academy are not too dissimilar and that the College essentially takes only students and graduates from two-year physician's assistant programs."¹⁰ They agreed to discuss the matter further in the future.

Then a strange thing happened.



American College of Physicians' Assistants logo in 1972

On November 24, 1972, the American College sent a letter to every PA whose contact information was available to them, indicating that they had met with the American Medical Association and had been given an indication that "the American College of Physicians Assistants will undoubtedly be the national physician's assistant organization," and then seemingly in reference to the Academy, states that "we must group together now into [an organization of] concrete professional, moral persons as we conceive ourselves to be or be grouped by other authorities who may only patch-work us together out of their compromised concepts of what we are."¹¹ In closing, the letter invites the reader to contact the College for information on how to become a member.

Was this an attempt by the College to increase its membership so that its leadership would be in a better bargaining position during the merger proceedings with the Academy? Godkins thought so. The College immediately received the Academy's response: "You can rest assured that we understand why the letter was written ... your letter has put the merger in a precarious position."¹²

Gilreath promptly apologized for the College's actions in a letter written on New Year's Day, 1973. He also

promised to notify those who had received the letter in question that it was not the College's intent to be misleading. These letters were sent about a week and a half later, on January 12.¹³ Then, on January 22, the College decided to take a step forward with the merger and invited the Academy to prepare a proposed set of bylaws for the new organization. The College proposed that this new organization be called the "American Society of Physicians' Assistants" and suggested that the headquarters for the Society be located in Cincinnati, where the College's offices currently existed.¹⁴ At the time, the Academy had no formal office location, nor an executive director.

The very next day, LM (Mac) Detmer of the AMA sent a letter to both Gilreath and Godkins stating its interest in soliciting as a full collaborating member "a physician's assistant organization that is broadly representative of assistants to primary care physicians."¹⁵ The pressure increased to merge, but it was now becoming evident that the AMA and the federal government were more interested in seeing that PAs were trained to work with generalist rather than specialist physicians. According to minutes of the Academy's board of directors meeting held on February 1, 1973, the Academy had launched a major membership drive to entice students and graduates of AMA-accredited "primary care" programs to become members of the Academy. The minutes also indicate that Bill Stanhope had met with Medex program directors, and the outcome of this meeting was to recommend that "the Academy accept Medex graduates." A motion was made and passed to do so.¹⁶ Thus the Academy had taken steps to become more inclusive of various types of PAs and to be the organization of choice for students enrolled

in AMA-accredited PA programs. Since most of these emerging programs were joining the Association of Physician Assistant Programs (APAP), whose leaders were Academy advisors, a pipeline was in place for a natural flow of student members into the Academy. In 1972 the Academy responded to the rapid growth of student members by appointing a student, J. Jeffrey Heinrich, to its board of directors.

Eventually, Godkins responded to the College's invitation to send a proposed set of bylaws for the new organization. However, his proposal was the opposite of what Gilreath had suggested in his November letter and made it clear that the Academy would have the prominent role in the new organization, with its president remaining as the new organization's president. Godkins informed Gilreath that the Academy had voted on the merger and had decided to go through with it as outlined in the proposed set of bylaws.¹⁷ In an update sent to Academy members the following week, Godkins stated that "the proposed merger with the American College of Physicians' Assistants (a group of urological, orthopedic, and surgical assistants based in Cincinnati, Ohio) had been approved."¹⁸

Naturally, the College was upset with this action, and chided the Academy in a letter for what it called its "attitude of superiority" and "dictatorial organizational posture."¹⁸ Godkins responded by expressing his disappointment at the College's rejection of the Academy's merger proposal. He assured them that the Academy's "willingness to merge with the College is a reflection of our interest to work with *specialty* physicians' assistants."¹⁹ End of conversation. There was no merger and no further talk about merging.

So what happened to the

American College of Physicians' Assistants? Four months later, the Academy (now using the title "Assistants") reported in its August 1973 student newsletter having a "whopping 584 members." The newsletter went on to mention funding of a national office by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to be located in Washington, DC. The office would serve the joint needs of both the Academy and APAP. Near the end of the newsletter it was mentioned that 130 members of the American College of Physicians' Assistants had been absorbed into the Academy without a merger, and the College was now defunct.²⁰

What did Godkins know about the College that made him feel that he had the upper hand in the negotiations? How was he able to position the Academy so effectively and in the end gain the College's members without merging and giving up the Academy's base of power? Godkins' business sense, along with the capabilities of other leaders and advisors, give us some insight into how the Academy became and has endured over time as the organization that represents all PAs working in the United States and its territories.

The Academy's membership is now approaching 40,000, which represents about two-thirds of all PAs who are considered eligible to practice. Over the years, the numbers of PAs working in primary care specialties has decreased to 41%, even though the vast majority of students enrolled in the currently 135 accredited PA programs are educated as generalists and the national recertification examination remains generalist oriented.²¹

As its numbers grow, will the Academy be able to meet the needs of a diverse community of PAs or will it lose some of its clout to fractionation, ie, the formation of independ-

ent specialty groups, such as has occurred in the medical field? Will our future leaders be as savvy as those in the past? Only time will tell.

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