

Connecting in clerkship: reflections on community, geography, and growing a new profession

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Tisser des liens à l'externat : réflexions sur la communauté, la géographie et l'essor d'une nouvelle profession

In 2024, Dalhousie University welcomed the first cohort of students into its newly launched Master of Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS) program—a milestone in the expansion of the physician assistant (PA) profession in Canada. Unlike other health professions with decades of national training frameworks, PA education in Canada is young. Each of the Canadian programs operates within distinct provincial and institutional contexts. In many settings, physician assistants remain a novel—if not entirely unknown—member of the health care team.

Our students are often the first PA students their supervising physicians, and allied health professionals, have encountered. Before they begin learning, they must often explain their role, scope, and training, which is an experience that can be invigorating for some, yet alienating for others.

Geography is an added challenge. Like many Canadian health professions programs, Dalhousie's MPAS follows a distributed model for the clinical year of teaching. Our learners are placed across Nova Scotia in tertiary hospitals, regional centres, and community clinics. Many students complete rotations alone or in pairs, without peers nearby to debrief, decompress, or validate experiences. This contributes to a sense of isolation among students—both from one another and from the program itself.

This experience also highlights the systems in which our students learn. They often rotate in under-resourced environments, under supervision models not yet tailored to their training, and study in cohorts too small to support large-scale institutional wellness infrastructure.

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Published ahead of issue:

Dec 9, 2025

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Conflict of Interest:

These sessions were delivered outside of Dr. Haworth's position as Research in Medicine Unit head for the MPAS program.

Funding:

No funding was received for this work.

Edited by:

Marcel D'Eon (editor-in-chief)

This shared student experience inspired *Connecting in Clerkship*, a student-led, faculty-supported initiative aimed at rebuilding community during clinical training. The concept was simple: monthly virtual check-ins for second-year PA students to connect, reflect, and support one another.

From the outset, the initiative had a distinctly Canadian flavour—not just in its context, but in its values: equity, respect and mutual support. The students collectively selected a trusted faculty member, uninvolved in their supervision or assessment, to moderate sessions. Each session was an opportunity to ask questions, share advice, and speak candidly about the realities of clerkship. Though modest in scale and budget, the initiative was meaningful in impact. It allowed us to address a core challenge not unique to PA students: how to sustain connection and community in programs where learners are physically, emotionally, and pedagogically dispersed.

Connecting in Clerkship also reflects something hopeful about the evolving identity of PA education in Canada. It shows that our students are not only resilient, but capable of identifying gaps, building solutions, and leading change. They are not waiting for perfect conditions; they are creating community within the conditions that exist. Although the first iteration of the initiative was implemented quickly and without formal evaluation, a team of students and faculty is now developing a research project to assess its impact. Through ongoing evaluation and refinement, we aim to enhance the initiative to maximize its benefit for future cohorts.

We share this story not as a blueprint, but as a reflection on the state of PA education in Canada, on the challenges of distributed learning, and on the potential of small, student-driven interventions to make a difference. As new programs emerge and others expand across the country, we hope *Connecting in Clerkship* offers a reminder that community can be cultivated one check-in at a time.