



## So, You Want to be a Surgical PA?: Be a “Resourceful” Student

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I recently had the privilege of completing a surgical rotation with a very experienced surgical physician assistant (PA) of 27 years. In addition to gaining surgical experience and learning how to care for surgical patients, the most valuable lesson that I learned from the rotation was learning how to be “resourceful.” So, what does this mean and how does it apply to being a surgical physician assistant? I am glad you asked! In this student corner, I will share what I learned from observing an exemplary PA and what it means to be resourceful in the surgical setting.

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines “resourceful” in the following way: “1) able to meet situations; 2) capable of devising ways and means.” The word summarizes a key concept which is essential to the success of developing physician assistants. In our everyday life, the idea encompasses those skills which enable an individual to meet daily challenges and accomplish life goals; skills such as critical thinking, time management, and the ability to draw from past learning experiences and apply it to new situations. It comprises the skills that helps us accomplish our dreams.

What does this look like in the surgical field?

### 1) Able to meet situations

What it means: Surgeons and surgical PAs confirm that you must be adaptable for countless situations which often arise suddenly and without warning. Flexibility is one way in which you survive these situations. You must be “able and flexible” to meet the unexpected! It is imperative that you use critical thinking and take from previous knowledge and experiences to address the situation at hand.

Good time management skills also benefit you and those around you tremendously. There is often the unexpected surgery that gets scheduled and you are faced with the need to juggle additional responsibilities with your other daily responsibilities that still need to be accomplished. Using good time management in surgery will help prevent you from becoming overwhelmed and ensure that your other patients are still being cared for when the emergent situation arises.

Application 1: As a student, this may be more difficult as you often do not have the years of experience like your mentors. However, it may mean that you take extra time to read about the medical conditions your patient has or the surgery about to be performed. You are ready and prepared to assist your preceptor when asked. You are ready to play your “A” game at all times!

Application 2: Good time management means that you do not wait to do tasks, but are proactive in taking care of tasks yourself and doing them immediately when the need arises. Do not be the student that comes late for rounds every morning! Do be the student that arrives on time and is ready to be a team player.

### 2) Capable of devising ways and means

What it means: Taking initiative and not waiting for someone else to do work will carry you far as a student and also as a future PA. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that “someone else will take care of it”! Be the one to step



forward and take the initiative! I must clarify that I am not saying to step outside your responsibilities as a student, nor am I saying that you should be doing all the work as a PA and not balancing the load with your colleagues.

Application 1: As a student, being “capable” may be in the form of offering to grab the patient’s chart when needed, being proactive in doing your responsibilities of note-writing, and not waiting to be told to pre-round on your assigned patients. Similarly, as a PA, this may look like staying on top of documentation, anticipating the needs of your surgeon, or being diligent to round on your patients and address their needs when they are your responsibility before passing it to your colleague.

Application 2: As another example, instead of being the frustrated student who gives up when you cannot figure out how to do something, devise a way and figure out who you can ask and obtain the information without expecting it to be handed to you.

As simple as they may sound, these two principles are vital to the surgical setting. We each have the opportunity to develop these skills of being able to meet situations and becoming capable of devising ways and means. I would encourage you to begin working on these skills as a student so that you become the future PA that benefits the PA profession as a whole and contributes to the name of surgical PAs! There is much to learn from those who have gone before us and have years of experience to share. Consider joining the American Association of Surgical Physician Assistants Pre-PA program and learn about the unique mentorship opportunities that come with membership.

In conclusion, I will share the piece of advice that I learned from a very successful surgeon, “Trust no one, do it yourself, do it now, and write it all down.”