Methods:
A qualitative IRB-approved two-part focus group study utilizing a purposive group of ten second-year PA students resulted in reflections on their medical education experiences during their didactic year. Digital recordings were analyzed using a systematic manifest content analysis process. Individual meaning units, or quotations, were grouped into categories with content commonalities in order to identify keywords and critical themes.

Results:
Students described an overarching experience that included a beginning, a middle and an end - mirroring the three-stage models of human change theories from other disciplines. The subthemes highlighted a pattern of corresponding emotional aspects including excitement, Imposter Syndrome, culture shock, stages of grieving, isolation and guilt, loss of competence, demoralization and the potential for psychological distress. These subthemes also align with other 3-stage models and likely represent the experience of human transformation.

“I can remember the beginning of the year when everyone was giddy and excited about being in school and totally happy to be here . . . . then reality set in.”

“Because everything that you used to know and be is gone and the things that you’re trying to know and be are not quite there yet so you don’t really have anything to grab onto and say, “I am good at this.” So for that brief time when you don’t know anything . . . you really do feel down and you (wonder) “What is my role?”

“I remember the low point in the middle …. then it felt like everyone picked up at the end of the year and barreled through. It was like we picked up some momentum .”

“This is the end of who I was and the beginning of who I will be.”

Discussion:
This study describes the lived didactic experience of a cohort of PA students and identifies stages-of-change patterns that elucidate opportunities for programmatic improvements designed to ameliorate student challenges. Further research is needed to determine if students in other programs share these patterns.

References:

Introduction:
There is a dearth of information on the experience of PA education - a professional identity journey undertaken by thousands of students each year who undergo the role transformation process to become physician assistants. The aim of this study was to explore the experience of PA education at an academic health center on the West Coast while simultaneously giving students a voice in the educational process in which they are engaged.

Research Questions:
What is the student experience of a didactic medical education process designed to prepare future physician assistants? Answers to this question during the first focus group session drove the question development for the second session, which included the emotional nature of the process, loss of confidence and the feeling of incompetence, of feeling “different” while assuming a new identity and the importance of the cohort in individual and group successes.