Commentary

A Student’s Nontraditional Path to Pharmacy School

Sarah Vreeburga,⁎, Shadi Doroudgara,b

a Touro University California College of Pharmacy, Vallejo, CA, USA
b Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, CA, USA

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ABSTRACT

Although professional pharmacy programs tend to require and focus heavily on applicants’ grade point averages and pre-admission test scores, there is noted value in the matriculation of students exhibiting strong leadership and soft skills. Such attributes are advantageous to a pharmacist, particularly when considering the current need to develop trailblazers prepared to adapt to the ever-changing demands of our healthcare system. Pharmacy school applications and enrollments have been declining across the nation for the past decade. Pharmacy job prospects, particularly in community pharmacies, are projected to decline over the next decade, but inpatient and clinical roles are projected to increase in demand. To accommodate this role shift, schools may consider engaging with and recruiting students with unique skill sets from less traditional backgrounds. This commentary explores one student’s pharmacy school experience via the lens of a nontraditional background and postulates that pharmacy schools may benefit from altering their admissions approach.

1. Introduction

As I pondered the possibility of pharmacy school, I envisioned that a successful pharmacy student would be young and fresh out of college with an unblemished transcript, majoring in Chemistry or Pharmacology—not like me: married, five-plus years out from completing most of my prerequisite courses, and having worked for years in education and hospitality, two seemingly unrelated fields. My initial response to the application’s requirements and expectations was a list of reasons I would not be successful if I somehow managed to get accepted. Although some people can adeptly harness the power of fear to propel themselves to succeed, I fell into the camp of those who constantly doubt themselves and operate as their own worst critic. Nevertheless, I overcame my qualms long enough to connect with a recruiter at the campus nearest me, and his exceptionally optimistic support ultimately convinced me to apply.

Upon my acceptance and matriculation, I relentlessly questioned my seat in the class of 2023. The dense subject matter, personal lifestyle changes, and a general fear of the unknown were overwhelming and led to excessive insecurity. Since my undergraduate degree was not directly aligned with a pharmacy degree, I rushed to take several prerequisite courses prior to officially enrolling. I hoped that the prerequisite classes would help me to feel more prepared, but instead I entered the school year feeling unsettled and frantic. Although I had always been a strong student, I began to wonder if perhaps I had been too emboldened by past academic success and the lack of a pharmacy pre-admission test score requirement from my selected school. A tearful talk with a treasured faculty member helped me to trust that I was enrolled by design and that I already had the attributes I needed to succeed. After I aced my initial set of exams, I began to realize that my trajectory would not exclusively rely on the specific science or pharmacy knowledge I had coming into school, but more so on the mindset and personal characteristics I possess and employ. At first glance, my prior work experiences might easily have been overlooked and considered irrelevant when gauging my preparedness for pharmacy school; however, as my journey through school continued, I noticed that my past experiences were not detrimental—instead, they were formative and foundational to my success, and I have found myself well-prepared to enter the expanding field of pharmacy.

2. Discussion

As the field of pharmacy continues to grow and evolve, pharmacy schools should serve as conduits for a trailblazing generation of pharmacy students. Some of the demand for innovation stems from the ever-changing world of healthcare and the search for novel practices to best

⁎ Corresponding author.
E-mail address: svreebur@student.touro.edu (S. Vreeburg).

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serve our patients; it also stems from a projected decline of pharmacy jobs over the next decade. A 2% drop-off in pharmacy positions is primarily expected to impact retail pharmacists, although it is believed that hospital- and clinic-based pharmacists will be in higher demand. Correspondingly, the professional identity of pharmacists is shifting from that of community-based “medicine suppliers” to more patient-centered clinical practitioners and public health leaders. To ensure future pharmacists are able to meet the demands of their expanding roles and responsibilities, multiple studies have called for the inclusion, evaluation, and development of more broad, non-cognitive characteristics like empathy, leadership, critical thinking, communication skills, integrity, and motivation in pharmacy students.

2.1. Enrollment Trends & Challenges

By understanding the valuable traits a pharmacist needs to be effective, programs can tailor their admission processes and curriculums accordingly to find and develop the most suitable candidates. Pharmacy school applications have been on the decline since 2013. With 139 Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education-accredited schools, pharmacy schools struggle to meet their enrollment quotas, a concern that has compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the downward trend in applicants and enrollment can be seen in other health disciplines besides pharmacy, medical schools conversely saw an unprecedented increase in applications for the 2021 school year, with credit widely attributed to veneration for Dr. Anthony Fauci’s COVID-19 response. The medical school numbers have since returned to typical pre-pandemic levels, but experts worry that an overall decrease in undergraduate enrollment will ultimately reduce the number of qualified candidates for future matriculation. Because many healthcare fields, including medical school, share similar prerequisite coursework and desired personal attributes, the applicant pool for each discipline will likely continue to shrink and pharmacy schools will thus have to employ an admissions strategy that appeals to a wider audience.

During the application process, many pharmacy programs have historically relied on well-studied, quantitative measures to rank their candidates. Math and science grade point averages and pre-admission tests correlate with student success in pharmacy school and on the national board exams. However, studies are needed to determine if these parameters correlate with leadership and innovation. While math and science proficiency remains fundamental to preparing students for a career in pharmacy, pharmacy programs are exploring new ways to identify and attract qualified candidates, with an increasing focus on extracurriculars including leadership, community service, and work experience. As pharmacy schools continue to adapt admissions processes during these dynamic times, it is of the utmost importance that they strive to find and develop future pharmacists capable of transformative change.

2.2. Qualities of a Nontraditional Student that Drive Success

I have confirmed firsthand the advantages that can accompany a nontraditional journey. My Master of Education degree and teaching experience were particularly helpful during my didactic years. My master’s program ingrained in me the value of group work, which I carried into my pharmacy school study group. My comfort in the classroom, both as a learner and previous instructor, proved invaluable as I dissected lectures, delivered presentations, visited office hours, and called to mind test-writing and -taking techniques during assessments. The countless lessons I gave to my high school students solidified my ability to parse through mountains of information and create concise, digestible presentations based on clear learning objectives; they also bolstered my confidence when speaking in front of a crowd. These experiences have empowered me as a student pharmacist to complete such undertakings as preparing and delivering a full lecture to first-year pharmacy students, tutoring a peer in effective patient consultations and, efficiently garnering the key takeaways from informative resources such as presentations and journal articles.

My background in hospitality and marketing strengthened my interpersonal skills ranging from relationship-building to problem-solving to networking. While pharmacy students will need to succeed in the classroom, perhaps a greater emphasis should be placed on the development of future pharmacists who are comfortable with all facets of patient care, including interpersonal interactions. The general belief that pharmacists are intellectual but not necessarily emotionally intelligent has been reported, and I have seen how critical soft skills are while completing my Advanced Practice Pharmacy Experiences (APPEs). In addition to my communication skills and critical thinking, my professional demeanor and work ethic have undoubtedly bolstered my resolve during pharmacy school. While many students felt overwhelmed or worn down by six hours of daily lecture or 12-hour hospital shifts followed by more hours of studying, I was already accustomed to long hours and professional expectations. The skills that I gained while working have benefited my approach to patient-centered care in which I am comfortable communicating, empathizing, and building relationships founded upon trust and understanding.

I believe that my organizational skills and time management were primarily established during my work experiences leading up to pharmacy school. As an employee, I practiced daily how to prioritize assignments, multitask, and interact with professional colleagues. I garnered an appreciation for both positive and constructive feedback, along with the drive to continually improve my skill sets. To avoid burnout I learned to incorporate work-life balance, which I still strive to practice in my current life as a pharmacy student. These qualities have been and will very likely continue to be advantageous in my endeavors. Ward and colleagues attempted to identify personal attributes of successful pharmacists in various sectors, finding that five overarching themes seemed to prevail: motivation, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, core competencies (knowledge and specialization), and work-life balance. Their resumes similarly incorporated education, leadership, and a proclivity to focus on patient care. Although the pharmacists did report a lack of confidence as one of their primary hurdles, their purported resolution was ultimately reliance on their communication and relationship-building skills, a strategy I know well. Nyman et al. list professionalism and communication skills among the most important, identifiable markers of APPE-readiness and student success, and as a pharmacy student currently on APPE rotations, I concur.

Initially, I thought my nontraditional path to pharmacy meant that I would be severely underprepared for my training; instead, I found that my mindset and maturity prepared me to approach my journey with a valuable perspective. This notion has been observed in the medical field, with school administrators acknowledging that older, less conventional students tend to be more confident and goal-oriented, with a stronger sense of self and focus. My distinctive experiences and perspectives have served me well thus far. My various career changes have helped me to be adaptable, flexible, and comfortable with change. Roles in leadership, marketing, and management can advance both the pharmacist and the profession, particularly when pondering how to promote pharmacy services and present our patient-focused image. Lebovitz and Rudolph have noted that, more than ever, such skills like networking, relationship-building, communication, teamwork, planning, and problem-solving will be paramount to both the advancement of the field and the ability of students to procure gainful employment. Following graduation, my unique skills may well enhance my marketability in today’s competitive job market. I can envision taking these skills in multiple directions ranging from academia to ambulatory care to industry, where in each I will have the opportunity to touch countless lives. Experience in several different career fields helped me to home in on what is important to me: lifelong learning, leadership, growth opportunities, and perhaps most importantly, helping others. Additionally, because I recognize that my interests develop and change over time, I am comfortable and confident heading into a field that I know will continue to evolve.
3. Call to Action

Prospective pharmacy students generally possess an appreciation for science, a desire to help patients, and aspirations for a fulfilling, esteemed career, but a career in pharmacy should not necessarily be limited to only those who have extensive pre-professional pharmacy experience. As enrollments decline, pharmacy programs should develop and incorporate novel yet tailored admissions processes; rather than fixating on enrollment quotas, administrators should elevate the importance of identifying students who desire to contribute to pharmacy and be leaders while possessing an affective inclusive of strong principles. To rise to the occasion, it may behoove individual pharmacy programs to determine those which might be considered nontraditional but beneficial attributes of their ideal candidates, then adjust their recruitment and engagement strategies accordingly. To incorporate an objective appraisal of such unquantifiable characteristics as soft skills, work ethic, and maturity, programs may consider adding critical thinking assessments, disposition assessments conveying personal strengths, and/or a series of mini-interviews deliberately designed to assess specific characteristics via standardized scenarios and rubrics.1-3,6,20

The humanities and social sciences are of increasing value as pharmacy trends toward more patient-centered care.11 By taking time to understand how an applicant’s background can provide insight into their future accomplishments, a university can be poised to attract and retain students who are better equipped for innovation and adaptability than their more traditional or stereotypical counterparts.6 It is important to note, however, that extra care may need to be granted not just during the admissions process, but also in curriculum design and professional development opportunities; programs will want to ensure that their offerings meet students where they are and provide the most effective support for students who may be presenting with increasingly varied credentials and qualifications.21 I encourage pharmacy school administrators to not only think outside the box during the search for suitable students but to also make those efforts known, as the candidates they encounter just might be the innovators the field needs to suitably students but to also make those efforts known, as the candidates they encounter just might be the innovators the field needs to aptly adapt to the ever-changing times.

For prospective students considering a degree in pharmacy but currently worried that your background might not prepare you well, please use this as an example of how a unique work history and skillset may offer more benefits than you realize. Take the time to reflect on your strengths and how you can apply them to advance the profession, please use this as an example of how a unique work history and skillset may offer more benefits than you realize. Take the time to reflect on your strengths and how you can apply them to advance the profession, please use this as an example of how a unique work history and skillset may offer more benefits than you realize. Take the time to reflect on your strengths and how you can apply them to advance the profession, please use this as an example of how a unique work history and skillset may offer more benefits than you realize. Take the time to reflect on your strengths and how you can apply them to advance the profession, please use this as an example of how a unique work history and skillset may offer more benefits than you realize. Take the time to reflect on your strengths and how you can apply them to advance the profession, please use this as an example of how a unique work history and skillset may offer more benefits than you realize. Take the time to reflect on your strengths and how you can apply them to advance the profession, please use this as an example of how a unique work history and skillset may offer more benefits than you realize. Take the time to reflect on your strengths and how you can apply them to advance the profession.

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