Commentary

Strengthen Academic Pharmacy by Protecting Self-Expression

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ABSTRACT

Pharmacy, including academic pharmacy, is affected by several important issues. Additionally, we deal with these issues in a society that is increasingly polarized in beliefs and siloed in interactions. Within this important juncture, pharmacy faculty may be prone to employ restrictions on freedom of expression, particularly around viewpoints they do not endorse. This tendency will likely have unintended effects and inhibit the ability of the profession to find solutions to its current challenges. We implore the Academy to actively work to increase viewpoint diversity, open inquiry, and academic freedom.

1. Introduction

Pharmacy academia faces many serious issues. How can we improve the pipeline for student enrollment? How can we prepare pharmacy students for a challenging career, where innovation and interpersonal skills are key? How can we ensure wellness and inclusion in a society that is increasingly unwell and polarized? Answering these complex questions requires an open and free exchange of ideas, even those that seem controversial or uncomfortable. In our efforts to find answers, curiosity is key. In “Curiosity U,” Tomasi\(^1\) proposes that curiosity is the most important value in academia that “stimulates the pursuit of understanding” and “is prior to truth and knowledge alike.” Beyond scholarship and learning, curiosity is beneficial to our social lives and collegiality. Tomasi\(^1\) explains that “each expression of curiosity is an invitation to connect. When we see curiosity in another, we recognize in them a place for ourselves. It is a place to enjoy an intellectual adventure with another.”

Being curious requires us to embrace viewpoint diversity. Table 1 lists key terms and definitions. It is critical in advancing research and education and in understanding our patients and peers. It is a cornerstone of intellectual humility needed to avoid complacency and seek better solutions. In many ways, an academic culture that promotes freedom of expression is similar to the culture of safety utilized in medication safety initiatives. In such an environment, healthcare workers are encouraged to speak out without fear of retaliation or ostracization. But what happens in an environment where individuals are afraid to speak up?

A culture of fear and intimidation limits our ability to advance healthcare and solve challenges. Pharmacy should seek to actively reverse this culture, not contribute to it. Pharmacy faculty can lead the effort to maintain focus on advancing practice and educating the next generation in ways that stimulate curiosity and encourage thoughtful discourse for the benefit of our students and patients.

2. The Importance of Viewpoint Diversity to Faculty

Faculty rights to academic freedom and self-expression are essential to a healthy academic culture. According to the American Association of University Professors, faculty members have the freedom to pursue scientific inquiry of their choosing and engage in classroom discussions of unpopular or controversial ideas within their disciplines\(^3\). Importantly, these freedoms allow faculty to question the status quo, consider alternative viewpoints, and challenge students to reflect on their own understanding and beliefs.

These statements were developed well in advance of our modern digital town square. The nature of social media presents the possibility of controversial posts going viral and presenting legal, political, and financial troubles for the institution. We suggest that the opinions and social media interactions of faculty members do not require a response from the university. If the university does respond, we believe it is paramount to the institution’s academic culture that such statements refrain from shaming and instead express support for faculty members’ rights to communicate their opinions, no matter how controversial. An exceptional response to such a situation is the one offered by Syracuse University.

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University leadership in 2021. These administrators, while acknowledging that a professor’s controversial social media comments likely offended others, refused calls for sanctions and stood strongly behind the faculty member’s right to free speech as a “key value” of the university. Similarly, the University of Michigan Medical School refused to disinvite a white coat ceremony keynote speaker because of her personal beliefs, specifying that diversity of opinion is “foundational to academic freedom and excellence.”

Although credit should be given for protecting rights in these instances, Syracuse University and the University of Michigan, like many others, are not consistent and will violate these rights in other instances, leaning on restrictive or vague policies. As a result, faculty commonly self-censor politically charged or controversial opinions and hesitate to engage in teaching, research, or service they consider risky. Ceci and colleagues’ report that untenured assistant professors and tenured associate professors are less likely than full professors to author papers on controversial topics. Even high-level administrators self-censor, with 83% of college presidents unwilling to comment on political issues to avoid controversy. This results in a diminished intellectual environment where students are not challenged, and scholarly inquiries are discontinued to prevent a negative impact on faculty members’ professional or social reputations. This self-censorship is not surprising when one considers the criticisms faculty receive for their personal views, scholarship, and teaching content. In 2021, 537 incidents of targeting were identified. The majority resulted from faculty members expressing personal opinions on social issues, with some resulting from scholarly pursuits (18%) or teaching (24%). Cases were initiated by students (46%), other faculty (20%), and administrators (22%). Importantly, sanctions such as formal investigation, suspension, and termination more frequently resulted from cases involving female faculty (75% vs. 57% of male faculty) and non-White faculty (70% vs. 60% of White faculty).

A recent academic paper retraction illustrates that scholarly journals should this paper have been retracted after concerns were voiced online about its impact on the careers of women scientists? Or should other actions have been taken, such as publishing letters to question the claims of the paper or pursuing subsequent research to challenge the results? This situation highlights the importance of academic freedom and the right of the faculty member to pursue knowledge, even if it produces controversial conclusions. The editorial warns researchers to consider unintended effects on certain groups and recommends authors contextualize their research results. We interpret these statements to mean that a paper could be deemed dangerous even if such interpretation was unintended and unanticipated by authors, peer reviewers, and editors. Authors cannot control how their work is propagated, and in our opinion, this should not be their concern or responsibility. Their concern is to produce and interpret rigorous findings that advance what is known about the topic. Whether intended or not, this editorial creates the opportunity for methodologically sound work to be rejected or retracted not because of the science but because of the potential interpretations by readers. We fear that encouraging such practice creates a dangerous precedent where research is not valid unless it aligns with popular public opinion.

3. The Importance of Viewpoint Diversity to Students

Students also experience the impact of restricting viewpoints, especially as it relates to teaching and learning. In current higher education, 63% of college students admit their campus restricts “people saying things that they believe” and 87% want their campuses to welcome students and professors representing many different points of view. Eady describes how restrictions on academic freedom and freedom of expression can lead to 4 issues within an educational institution: dogmatism, groupthink, crusader mentality, and anti-intellectualism. These issues reinforce self-censorship and can influence how faculty interact with students in the classroom, how and what students learn, and eventually how students provide patient care.

One example of how these issues can affect student learning involves dialogue around vaccines and vaccine hesitancy, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many consider this discussion of why patients may be resistant to vaccines important to teaching about immunizations. However, imagine these patient concerns are never discussed because we as healthcare professionals adhere to the widely accepted safety and efficacy of vaccines as something that cannot be questioned no matter the intentions of the patient (dogma and groupthink). Imagine that anyone who discusses potential safety or efficacy concerns, regardless of intention, should be decried as an “anti-vaxxer” and students are responsible for pointing this out (crusader mentality). How would this affect a student’s ability to change their practice as evidence evolves (anti-intellectualism)? How would it affect the students’ reflection on their own knowledge, beliefs, or biases?

Let’s take this scenario into practice. Imagine a patient came to the pharmacy to ask about a vaccine and expressed concerns based on

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Key Terms and Definitions related to Freedom of Expression and Faculty Self-Censorship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-intellectualism</td>
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<td>Crusader mentality</td>
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<td>Dogmatism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom of self-expression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Groupthink</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open inquiry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-censorship</td>
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<td>Targeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional neutrality</td>
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<td>Viewpoint diversity</td>
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4. Conclusion

Faculty seek academic freedom in their teaching and scholarly pursuits; however, faculty self-expression, when done in a professional and respectful way, is also critical to role-modeling professional conduct for pharmacy students. In addition to imparting factual knowledge and skills, faculty are charged with developing in students the skills needed to engage in life-long learning and patient-centered care. Students need to learn how to ask tough questions, thoroughly consider patients' perspectives by reflecting on core concerns, expressing empathy, and reframing reasoning to support patient behavior change. Embracing viewpoint diversity is critical to this process of developing pharmacists who are able to communicate across differences and establish relationships with patients who are different from them.

References


Table 2

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Readings and Resources related to Freedom of Expression and Faculty Self-Censorship</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. American Association of University Professors. 1940 statement of principles on academic freedom and tenure with 1970 interpretive comments. AAUP.</td>
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