COMMENTARY

Considering Retention and Curricula in Reframing Pharmacy Enrollment Challenges

Evan T. Robinson, PhD, a Gayle A. Brazeau, PhD, b, c

a Creighton University, School of Pharmacy and Health Professions, Omaha, Nebraska
b Marshall University, School of Pharmacy, Huntington, West Virginia
c Editor, American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education

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Enrollment in pharmacy education has been a topic of extensive discussions as the number of applications has declined. Some pharmacy programs have either not met enrollment goals or decreased incoming class sizes. This Commentary poses two questions that we must ask ourselves as an Academy. First, is it possible to realistically do more to recruit our way out of this situation in the next three to five years and beyond. Second, how, if possible, will pharmacy colleges and schools avoid the significant and transformative forces that could impact higher education in the future. Forces that are impacting higher education include changing demographics, transitioning from an industrial-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, and the continuing advances in technology with increased globalization as a component of all three of these forces. To address these questions, the concepts of student retention and success as well as considerations for reframing current curricular and pedagogical models and beliefs are challenged. In that pharmacy enrollment challenges are not likely to be easily resolved in the next few years, the Academy must place additional emphasis on issues related to student success and the design of our educational models and programs.

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The Canadian journalist Michelle Dean provides great insight into our current challenges in recruiting students to the profession of pharmacy when she reminds us that “crisis forces commonality of purpose on one another.”1 A key collective focus for pharmacy colleges and schools, professional pharmacy organizations, and employers is to increase student interest and applications to Doctor of Pharmacy programs. The importance of the profession to patients and health professions colleagues necessitates our commitment to this undertaking. Recruiting efforts have required colleges and schools to spend more time, effort, and resources to generate interest in pharmacy among students and, more importantly, motivate them to submit an application. We also see pharmacy programs offering more scholarships and tuition discounts, which subsequently decrease net tuition revenue and increase the cost of filling each seat. Yet, despite these Herculean efforts, pharmacy applications since 2013 continue to trend downward or flatten, with many programs not attaining their class size target goals.2,3

As seen in other industries that experience demand fluctuations and changes due to competitive landscapes, pharmacy education is also experiencing a natural correction by decreasing the number of seats available for students in our professional programs.2 Some argue this decline coincided with a decreased trend in college applications because of the COVID-19 pandemic4,5; however, both interest in pharmacy programs and the number of pharmacy applications were declining well before this time. Further complicating pharmacy school enrollment is the forecasted “enrollment cliff” in the number of high school graduates and the changes in the demographics of pharmacy students in years to come.5,6 There are two questions that we must honestly ask ourselves as an Academy. First, is it realistically possible to do more to recruit our way out of this situation in the next three to five years? Second, if possible, how will pharmacy colleges and schools avoid the significant transformative forces that could impact higher education in the future.6 Levine and Van Pelt suggested that there are three forces that will be driving higher education and have the potential to fundamentally change our approaches from a fixed time, credit-hour, course, grade-focused, and just-in-case curriculum (where students take courses appropriate to their specific educational
Student Retention and Success

Higher education has been altered in ways large and small over the last 10 to 15 years as we experienced significant changes in student demographics, financial aid support, academic preparation, and social and disability issues. These higher education changes have filtered down to our colleges and schools of pharmacy since preprofessional programs and undergraduate students are a large part of the matriculation pipeline. During the pharmacy boom of the early 2000s, programs could recruit and enroll students who were able to navigate the curriculum with limited academic and personal support. This is not the same today when we are seeing students who require more academic and non-academic support than in previous years. One only needs to reflect on the number of students who have more complex life situations, struggle with social, financial, and psychological-social issues, and require additional considerations and accommodations. We have students who seem less academically prepared, need to take prerequisite courses one at a time to achieve a satisfactory grade, have to take a greater number of prerequisite courses at the last minute to successfully matriculate into a PharmD program, and who took prerequisite courses less recently (several years before) than previously seen. We experienced the same challenges with previous pharmacy applicants, as the number of students in the pharmacy pipeline has declined, we see a larger percentage of students needing assistance, and consequently requiring more faculty and staff support to navigate successfully through our programs. Moreover, the magnification of these student issues has become more prevalent as we have become more aware of and better at identifying these issues, thus enhancing our attentiveness to providing these students with the necessary guidance, advising, mentoring, and assistance. We must question whether we have the resources and expertise to continue to provide the level of support necessary. Furthermore, do we subsequently have the commitment to create avenues to enhance retention, progression, and graduation during a time of continued financial challenges in colleges and schools of pharmacy? Student progression and retention issues in a time of a declining applicant pool, combined with an enhanced focus on student success and progression, are more important than ever. Students, and perhaps some faculty, still have the commonly held belief that when they admit a student to their program, their college or school has the necessary supportive environment and resources to enable student success and graduation. We partner with our students with the understanding that they will do their part to be successful and progress through the curriculum.

Specific to student progression challenges, the student who struggles can and often does experience an array of emotional, physical, and psychological issues that can subsequently impact the student’s close friends and loved ones. Consider how we feel when a family member or friend is struggling with a professional or personal challenge, and how it impacts us. We need to remember that the struggles of the one may not be isolated to the one. There are also potential impacts to the program reputation or even the Academy as our students struggle...
through the curriculum. Our admission efforts must always be cognizant of the possibility that an individual who is required to leave the pharmacy program will share their story and possible negative attitude with other students on social media, which could subsequently discourage others from applying to the program.

Individuals who do not complete the program may also impact the confidence and attitude of other students in the program. For example, can we rule out the possibility that our current students may experience additional anxiety, stress, or decreased confidence as they see others who struggle through or leave the program, and question what this means for them? Faculty and staff members who invested time and effort to help the students succeed can also be impacted, perhaps feeling deflated, disappointed, and frustrated in their roles as educators, advisors, and mentors as they see these individuals having to leave the program or not be successful in obtaining licensure.

Challenges in student progression, retention, and success can also impact other aspects of our programs. Higher education has become much more litigious and, as a result, administrators, faculty, and sometimes staff may find themselves either second guessing their intentions or engaged in litigious activities. It is our impression that over the past five years or more, the need to engage the Office of the University General Counsel seems to have increased as we have confronted challenges with student admission and progression issues and faculty and staff member issues.

Attrition also results in direct and indirect costs, both to the college and students. This lack of financial stability within a program may become more pronounced when online students who, because of different life circumstances, may struggle in or need to slow down their academic journey. Given the challenges associated with pharmacy recruitment and admission, something we can control is to further commit to strong programs that promote successful student retention and progression for the desired learning outcomes combined with stimulation of students’ intellectual growth and curiosity as the foundation of pharmacy programs.

Finally, within our recruitment materials and efforts, have we truly been frank and transparent with our students with regard to their employment prospects? In a rapidly changing job outlook for pharmacists, should we focus less on specific places they could work and more on what they could do with their knowledge and skills in the broader job market?9 We must also ask what other important metrics can be used for evaluating the educational success of our individual pharmacy programs. Should successful licensure of our graduates be only one of several metrics for evaluating our pharmacy programs, particularly if we have students who pursue alternative careers independent of direct patient care and are successful in their career?

Online Educational Offerings

Further complicating current admissions and enrollment challenges is the move by institutions to add either more opportunities for online educational offerings for portions of the curriculum or complete distance pathways to complement on-campus options to attract students. What is important to acknowledge upfront is that moving to online and distance learning does not necessarily result in a cost savings to an institution. Online and distance learning incurs a variety of longitudinal costs and implementation factors, including the important consideration that external development partners will receive a portion of this revenue. Depending on a school’s tuition and fees model, online and distance learning also have the potential to be more expensive for students.10 Distance learning is a powerful and valuable option and can benefit a variety of learners as well as institutions, but it also presents challenges. Distance learners face different challenges than students in face-to-face programs. Some of the issues are unique, others are not, eg, time and location, age, and familial obligations. As such, the current structures for student support and for student, faculty, and/or staff interaction and engagement may need to be reconsidered to ensure parity in students’ experiences across learning pathways.

This is not to denigrate the potential value of distance learning. Enhanced technologies will be the foundation for future educational structures and pathways and will be extremely valuable in addressing changing demographics, attracting a broader array of students, improving educational offerings, and promoting lifelong learning. Pharmacy educators can and must develop alternative pathways to enable all students to successfully progress and complete our programs. This requires programs to commit to advance new and innovative models of student support and engagement, which will likely result in additional costs to the college or school.

Simplifying and Differentiating Our Programs

We are hearing more and more conversations regarding the content, design, and simplification of health professions education, including within pharmacy.11-18 Curricular complexity, density, and hoarding, along with required analytics to meet the accreditation standards, are discussed across health professions education.14,19,20 In some ways, it seems that pharmacy education uses aspects of a “just-in-case” curriculum,” ie, teaching our students everything about every patient and every situation they might encounter in their career. The question we must consider is whether this curricular expansion could be an example of faculty-centric curricular thinking versus student- or practice-centric thinking.
There will not be easy fixes for these challenges at our individual institutions or across the pharmacy Academy. It seems that much of our curricular design may be centered around a "check box" mentality to ensure we have met the increasing competences, processes, and activities required for current accreditation expectations. However, as our future unfolds with new accreditation standards and expectations, other opportunities will become evident, allowing colleges and schools to be genuinely innovative in how we teach, serve our students, and work together to advance the future of pharmacy education. Programs will need to build upon current student-centered learning approaches and outcomes and move towards the next level of educational modeling that is neither time nor credit dependent.

Colleges and schools can use curricular approaches and educational models to further distinguish themselves from other programs in addition to touting their unique vision, mission, goals, and culture. Can we rule out that other organizations or corporations will not compete with the current pharmacy educational structure and system to meet the needs of pharmacy students? Can we rule out that other organizations or corporations will provide the platforms for a competency-based and "just in time" curricular design reducing the cost of a pharmacy education or promoting alternative career opportunities?

The idea of competency-based education and developing models of teaching and learning that are less restricted by time and process-fixed constraints such as courses, credit hours, semester hours, and years of study has been discussed and represents an area worthy of further exploration. How can we move to a system that allows for educational models founded on an industrial-based economy to one that is more dynamic and adaptable to a knowledge-based economy? Further, one that is centered on students demonstrating desired competencies required for pharmacists committed to lifelong learning, intellectual curiosity, entrepreneurship, and a willingness and passion to explore and develop new and novel career pathways?

President John F. Kennedy summarizes the essential importance of change when he reminded us that “Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.” Pharmacy education is currently experiencing the perfect storm as we navigate challenges in our admissions and retention, revisions in the accreditation standards, modifications in our individual college and school curriculums and uncertainty in pharmacy workforce demands. The Academy, in collaboration with the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education and other key pharmacy organizations, must utilize this current recruitment and admissions crisis as an opportunity to critically reconsider the entire nature, scope, and design of pharmacy educational programs and structure. More importantly, we must consider this recruitment and admissions crisis as the alarm for us to come together collectively—colleges and schools, the profession, and our accreditors—to address what is essential to the future of graduating successful Doctor of Pharmacy students who can engage in a broader range of career opportunities.

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REFERENCES