

LETTERS

Curricular Conundrum: How Specialization Cripples Adaptability

To the Editor. I served on the curriculum committee in our college for the past 3 years and in the role of chair this past year. We were challenged to consider what changes were needed in our doctor of pharmacy prerequisites and program of study to prepare graduates for roles in the evolving health care environment.

As I served in the role of chair, I wanted to be wise in the eyes of my fellow colleagues. I thought back to when I first entered academia – about 17 years ago. During my first year of “academic indoctrination” by faculty colleagues at another institution, I learned that there were 2 groups of faculty members: the researchers and the teachers. It was critical for the researchers to increase their specialized knowledge so that they could bring acclaim to the college and garner grants that funded their work and subsidized college operations. This group was required to do some teaching but many of them didn’t really like teaching. The teaching faculty members were asked to bring their real world experiences to the classroom and challenge students to “think critically.” They were not expected to complete formal research nor bring in grant money per se. However, they were encouraged to develop their clinical practice sites and specialization in particular areas so that they might also gain national acclaim for their work. Many of them didn’t really like research. While thinking about this dichotomy one morning during one of my long commutes to work, I had an epiphany: we have created a barrier for success through the infrastructure that currently supports us.

We are engaged in the “business of education.” Deans in colleges and schools of pharmacy are acutely aware that their “businesses” must earn money and be successful or they will close. “Student customers” pay for the classroom

courses and unique experiences that pharmacy colleges and schools offer so that they can earn a degree, become licensed, and eventually earn their own living. Businesses must constantly appraise their external environments, consider market forces, evaluate and outpace the competition, and reengineer their processes on short notice if they are to survive and thrive. If we truly are engaged in the “business of education,” as some argue that we are, then we have problem: a curricular conundrum.

The committee at our college finished its “market analysis” and developed a proposed plan for prerequisite changes and new courses. We felt a great sense of pride about our work and were eager to present our findings to the rest of the faculty. Then it happened. A member of the committee posed a troubling question: Who is going to teach these new courses? I sat quietly thinking, “Huh? Is this a trick question?” It really wasn’t. Although we have a functional and able-bodied faculty, our college has prized specialization above all else because specialization usually leads to recognition, favor, and funding. Faculty members have spent countless hours testing hypotheses, developing clinical practice sites, gaining national reputations, and becoming specialists. While many businesses require cross training of their employees to maintain the employees’ agility and the company’s viability, this approach is frowned upon in academia. As I considered the question about our innovative courses, I realized that many have become so specialized that they are unable to teach the content we now need. In his book, *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins advises us to “get the right people on the bus and get the wrong people off the bus” to accomplish strategic initiatives. If our committee developed innovative courses that are critical for our graduates but none of our faculty members would or could teach them, do we have the wrong faculty or the wrong courses?

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