VIEWPOINTS

Fail Fast

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A novel concept has been circulating in the computer systems and business fields for a few years, most often called “fail fast.” The term “fail fast” refers to identifying early system failures and taking corrective action to fix the failures. “Fail fast” has been described by other, and perhaps more broadly applicable terms, as “fail smart,” “fail cheap,”¹ and “fail fast, succeed faster.”² At first blush, most of these words do not seem encouraging; however, in the computer and business worlds these terms refer to system designs that report early when breakdown is impending or has occurred to prevent prolongation of malfunction and increased cost. It is important not only for entrepreneurs to recognize failing enterprises and to minimize related investment and expense, but also for a pharmacy education enterprise to identify failures and address them quickly and appropriately. “Fail fast” is not inherent just to new projects or enterprises, but is relevant to all – the new and the old. Many long-standing organizations have adapted “fail fast” concepts instead of strictly adhering to the traditional way of doing business or legacy mannerisms. For example, the National Institutes of Health has applied this concept to clinical trials. By designing small clinical trials for medications to treat illnesses, expenses can be reduced, greater knowledge and success may be gained, and more trials can be conducted.³ Higher education, including pharmacy education, can learn from and apply “fail fast” principles to become more efficient and maximize opportunities for success.

The term “fail fast” has appeared in higher education, but failure is not a concept that we in higher education readily admit to or accept as part of the process of achieving and sustaining success.⁴ We do not have a culture that is comfortable admitting failure. Yet, failure is a normal and expected part of our experience. Additionally, unlike fast-paced technology or corporate environments, academia is not known for moving fast; in fact, many postsecondary educational organizations may

be considered sluggish. The resistance to and fear of failure coupled with the lack of swift movement comes at a cost. As many studies of industry and behavior reveal, the majority of successful people and organizations have more failures than others partly because they create more opportunities for innovation, tend to be risk takers, are proactive, and are timely in their responses. One does not have to dig deep to find examples demonstrating this. Take for example Apple, which was plagued with early failures such as the first commercial PC, Apple Lisa (1983-1985), that was slow and expensive, and the Macintosh Portable (1989-1991) with its heavy weight and limited battery life.⁵ Today, Apple is deemed the most innovative company in history with its creation of the iPod, iPhone, iPad, and let’s not forget about the Apple Store and iTunes which provide innovative shopping experiences and product/service deliveries. Apple is so innovative, timely, and responsive with their “succeed faster” practices that it designs what people want before they know what they can’t absolutely do without. The iPhone is not going away soon. Likewise, if it does not meet standards, Apple “fails it” and moves on.

A closer look at successful people and organizations that operate under “fail fast” principles reveal that they are not only risk takers, but they are not afraid to go against the norm or legacy to improve effectiveness. In fact, they are motivated by the opportunity to progress and their ability to learn fast. “Fail fast” does not imply lack of commitment to a mission or goal, but to the contrary, indicates a willingness to experiment in the process, learn quickly from the results, and make adjustments to better achieve mission and vision. It does not downplay the value of a well thought-out plan, but rather facilitates continuous quality improvement.

How does “fail fast” apply to pharmacy education? In pharmacy education and in much of higher education in general, once we are committed to a course of action, we tend to keep doing it without sufficient ongoing assessment of its current value or how it can benefit the organization, profession, or other stakeholders in the future. We are caught up in tradition and, when asked why we are doing something, the response is often “this

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is the way we have always done it” with no regard to assessment or outcomes. Our organizations, like many large enterprises, are resistant to change, and when faced with change, most lean toward legacy as change disrupts established power structures and ways of getting things done. This *Journal* is filled with enthusiastic examples of courses and programs, but few describe a careful assessment of benefits and costs leading to a course or program discontinuation. Why do our colleges and schools of pharmacy continue to offer elective courses year after year that attract few students or required courses that consistently have poor ratings and outcomes without making adjustments to improve? These examples suggest that our colleges and schools may not be learning what does or does not work or responding appropriately to evolving markets and demands.

If this concept is to have any meaning in our field, then it should begin with recognition that failure is not the opposite of success but is instead part of the path to achieving success. It requires a spirit of experimentation, risk taking (as always balancing the benefits with an acceptable level of risk), and innovation. Furthermore, determining whether an activity is a success requires rigorous assessment with performance measures to separate enthusiasm and ego from reality. It also requires the

realization that all programs require time to evolve, continuous quality improvement, market adjustments, and periodic rebalancing for the “right” fit – none of which means failure. A “fail fast” or the more encouraging term “learn fast” approach is important in our current era of limited resources to maximize the chance for programmatic success.

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