

STATEMENTS

Four Rights of the Pharmacy Educational Consumer

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Professional students and their families invest a significant amount of time and finances to obtain a degree. While education is not a typical consumer good and should not be treated as such, there are certain expectations that colleges and schools should be prepared to meet. This article contrasts academic entitlement issues with 4 fundamental rights underpinning colleges' and schools' fiduciary responsibilities to students. The authors submit that students, in their roles as higher education consumers, have the following rights: (1) to have the opportunity to learn, (2) to learn from faculty members dedicated to best teaching practices, (3) to learn within a curriculum designed to prepare them for the profession, and (4) to have access to resources necessary to succeed.

Keywords: academic entitlement, student consumerism, academia, higher education, student rights

INTRODUCTION

Rising tuition costs and diminished college affordability¹ have forced most individuals and families to view higher education as a significant economic investment. Although the "students as consumers" model of higher education has been widely admonished as detrimental to graduates, faculty members, and the workforce,^{2,3} colleges still have fiduciary responsibilities to honor with regard to their students. As an extension to the previous work in the area of academic entitlement,⁴ we examine what students should rightfully expect from a college or school in return for their financial and time investment. Specifically, we delineate entitlement-laden requests from appropriate and reasonable expectations that colleges and schools should be prepared to meet. Although the differences are sometimes subtle, the recognition is important so that student needs are not summarily dismissed.

While Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) guidelines⁵ dictate processes to ensure quality education, the authors look beyond the actual statements to discuss the underlying principle of providing appropriate value to students. Value is provided in terms of transactional and educational interactions, both

of which should be considered by families and students during the school selection process. Regardless of the extent of finances invested by families toward higher education, the authors advocate that students have 4 fundamental rights that should be honored by their college or school. In this paper the term "rights" is not used in the legal sense, but rather as a moral obligation to be met by educational institutions. These 4 rights are what we believe to be fundamental to colleges' and schools' fiduciary responsibilities to students.

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

At the very core, students enrolled in higher education should be provided with every *opportunity to learn*. Opportunity is the key term in this concept, with the realization that colleges and schools cannot simply provide learning to students who are unmotivated or ill equipped to do so. A consumerist-minded student feels that an education is purchased, whereas in reality, the opportunity to learn is the consumer good acquired in that transaction.⁶ Education is the proverbial 2-way street, with both students and instructors actively involved in the process of learning.

It is incumbent upon schools and faculty members to ensure that multiple and sufficient opportunities to learn are readily available to students. Learning occurs through various means inside and outside of class, including lectures, reading, writing, homework assignments, studying with other students, discussions with professors, the "unofficial curriculum," professional assimilation, etc. Students choose the extent to which they take advantage of these opportunities. Many students eagerly seize every opportunity they can accommodate, while others are content to complete

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minimum requirements. Regardless of individual student interest, faculty members should carefully develop multiple and varied learning opportunities and encourage students to participate.

INSTRUCTORS COMMITTED TO TEACHING VIA BEST PRACTICES

In spite of the various pressures to increase institutional revenue through research or clinical activity, it is the faculty's responsibility to demonstrate commitment and dedication to educating students.⁷ It is incumbent upon faculty members to devote sufficient time and interest to teaching despite heavy research, administrative, and/or clinical roles. The disgruntlement and frustration by students who sense that instruction they receive is secondary to faculty members' other duties and obligations are valid.⁸ Furthermore, professional students should expect that their faculty members and instructors are committed to lifelong learning and continuing education within their field or specialty, as well as continuous focus on improving teaching skills. Although best teaching practices are difficult to define and evaluate,⁹ generally agreed upon principles include: promoting a structured environment of learning that is stimulating and contemporary; making oneself accessible outside of class, whether in person or through other means of communication; providing supplemental instruction and/or resources to assist students who take the initiative to enhance their education; and maintaining an interested and caring attitude. Instructors also have a tremendous amount of influence on, and therefore responsibility for, promoting learning and maintaining order within the classroom.¹⁰ It is perfectly reasonable for students to expect a respectful relationship with faculty members who adhere to class schedules, control the classroom environment in an organized and assertive manner, and teach using methods promoting constructive thinking rather than superficial memorization of facts. A common and valid criticism from students frustrated with the learning environment is faculty members reading straight from Microsoft PowerPoint slides, which is a rudimentary form of teaching.^{11,12} Although there are many outstanding lecturers, some educators have questioned the traditional teaching style of lecturing as passive and non-contributory to critical thinking and problem-solving skills.^{13,14} Students enrolled in professional programs should expect instruction requiring active participation and to be immersed in a culture of scholarship that promotes creativity, productivity, and exploration.¹⁵

Finally, students should expect faculty members to show interest in the scholarly development of their students. Depending on the personality of the instructor, this

may be expressed in a variety of ways including verbally encouraging students to excel, providing constructive feedback on homework and examinations, reflecting on and applying constructive criticism from performance evaluations, and being respectful toward and allocating time to assist students. This does not mean that instructors should coddle students, placate unreasonable requests, or overstep professional boundaries; but empathy and compassion, when warranted, significantly contribute to students' motivation, performance, and desire to learn across almost all learning styles.¹⁶

There are subtle yet important differences between expecting instructors to demonstrate professional responsibility and concern toward student development and expecting them to fulfill all requests to make students' academic lives easier and convenient. ACPE Guideline 11.1 requires that colleges and schools encourage and assist students to assume responsibility for their own learning⁵ (including assessment of learning needs, assessment of current skills, and development of learning plans). While some students may perceive this as "teaching themselves" and voice opinions that that is not what they are paying for, the ability to learn on their own will become ever more necessary throughout their professional careers.¹⁷ Colleges and schools would be doing students a disservice by not providing the opportunity to develop these self-learning skills. In designing instructional activities, faculty members should concentrate not only on teaching content, but simultaneously moving students from being dependent learners to being independent learners.¹⁸

As an element of best teaching practices, faculty members frequently ask students to provide feedback regarding curricular and teaching practices through mechanisms such as course evaluations, exit evaluations, and student focus groups. In turn, students should have valid expectations that their constructive feedback will be examined and considered by faculty members and administrators. There should not, however, be an expectation that all suggestions will be implemented and/or implemented immediately. Refusing to honor certain student requests and/or placing students in uncomfortable and challenging learning scenarios may in fact demonstrate that faculty members have students' best interests in mind and are choosing to teach and/or interact with them in a way that has long-term rather than only short-term benefits. Although students may sometimes feel overwhelmed with the rigor of pharmacy school and prefer a reduced workload, easier examinations, and/or absence of challenging assignments in class, this may ultimately be harmful to their overall academic and professional progression. Acquiescence by faculty members in these situations in effect, devalues the educational opportunity that has been purchased.¹⁹

A CURRICULUM DESIGNED TO PREPARE FOR THE PROFESSION

Students should expect that accredited doctor of pharmacy programs have been sufficiently vetted and meet the Standards outlined by the ACPE. Accreditation processes and standards are established to ensure that academic programs adhere to minimal expectations in terms of degree granting.²⁰ Colleges and schools are expected to do more than simply execute an “official” curriculum. They must also prepare graduates for careers within the profession while adhering to best practices. This is often collaterally accomplished through an institution’s “unofficial curriculum,” which may include student-based professional organizations, leadership development, community-based service, and service-learning activities. The “unofficial curriculum” may especially play a significant role in developing and refining “soft skills,” including but not limited to empathy, communication abilities, self-efficacy, and adaptability.

Curricular design is often a difficult and arduous task for faculty members and administrators. Colleges and schools have the responsibility of ensuring that graduates are capable of meeting all the demands of a professional and are competent to practice as generalist in different settings. To do this is neither straightforward nor easy. Curricula, both in pharmacy and other specialized professions, must be designed to at least minimally comply with appropriate discipline-specific accreditation standards, while also being dynamic, contemporary, and forward thinking. A particular challenge for professional degree programs is meeting both the current and projected educational needs of students. This requires faculty members and administrators to understand existing forces and societal demands while simultaneously predicting the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will place students in a competitive position to be successful beyond graduation and through a lifetime of practice. Sometime this prognostication may be difficult for some students to accept. Those who cannot immediately find relevance in or apply what they are learning with regard to practice or patient care may quickly become frustrated with what they perceive to be extemporaneous or disingenuous instruction. A contemporary example of this disconnect might have been evident in the late 1990s when smaller numbers of colleges and schools first began formally incorporating training regarding the delivery of pharmacy-based immunizations.^{21,22} At the time, very few state boards of pharmacy had modernized practice acts in order to allow pharmacists to actually administer vaccines, and even fewer pharmacies and pharmacy corporations expressed interest in this clinical service. It was difficult for many to envision the current scope of

pharmacy-based immunization services in the United States, with every state now granting pharmacists the privilege of administering immunizations. Those few colleges and schools with early instructional programs were proactive in their instruction, but at the time may have frustrated a fraction of students who might have perceived a disconnect between curricula and practice. Managing situations where curricular/practice disconnects occur requires colleges and schools to be proactive in terms of the direction and philosophical underpinnings students are provided to explain the inclusion or exclusion of content within a given degree program.

Students should expect that curricular content is timely, practical, and focused on essential information and skills, with a reduction in superfluous coursework. Efforts should be made to reduce curricular redundancy, duplication, and wasted “in-class” time. The delineation between rigor and “busy-work” or superfluous coursework may be interpreted differently by students and faculty members, however. Often students may not realize the full extent of knowledge and skills necessary for successful professional practice until after they have entered the workforce and encountered all aspects of it. For reasons provided earlier, the collective wisdom of the faculty members designing the curriculum should be paramount, with the caveat that student opinions should be heard and not summarily dismissed. Students should expect to be given sufficient time to react, reflect, and integrate material so that information is more likely to be retained over a longer period of time rather than simply for the purposes of assessments. Likewise, curricular assessments should be graded consistently and fairly, reflecting course content in a proportional manner.

Rapid advances in technology have now placed greater emphasis not only on curricular content but also on the delivery of this material.²³ Mobile computing and handheld electronic devices have made the transfer of information simple, rapid, and efficient. At least in terms of data transfer, society is increasingly morphing into a “whatever, whenever” paradigm where quick access to information is expected. Educators must be cognizant of this element of curricular design. Many colleges and schools are struggling with creating and/or implementing a futuristic curriculum that considers the impact of technological advances on future professional practice. Students should expect to be taught through contemporary technology practices, but must also realize that these endeavors may be costly and take time to implement.

RESOURCES NECESSARY TO SUCCEED

Students entering pharmacy school should expect access to all resources necessary to succeed in the program.

There is, however, a difference between expecting availability of resources and expecting that anyone else other than the student is ultimately responsible for academic success. While physical infrastructures and information technology resources are obvious necessities, perhaps the greatest resource expectation that should be met is that of human capital. These human resources, particularly academic and student support personnel, are crucial to pharmacy student success. The numbers of and roles that faculty and staff members play with regard to student support will vary from institution to institution. Support needs may span a wide spectrum, from academic advising and course registration assistance, to tuition billing and financial aid programming support, to study strategy and time management enhancement, to identifying and pursuing specific career options within the pharmacy profession. These support services may be provided within the academic unit (eg, school or college) or larger institution (eg, university), and by faculty members (eg, academic advisors) or high-level professional staff members (eg, academic or career counselors, registrars). The important delineation is that professional students should not expect proverbial “hand-holding” throughout their program, but that some person or group of persons is available and willing to assist students who take the initiative to seek solutions to educational-related issues.

CONCLUSION

The costs to students for obtaining a professional degree can be substantial. Although treating students as customers or clients can be detrimental to the student and to the profession, colleges and schools should ensure they are providing adequate value for costs incurred. This value is manifested through the 4 fundamental rights of an educational consumer. Students should have valid expectations to receive an opportunity to learn from dedicated faculty members in a curriculum designed to prepare them for the profession, and to have access to the resources necessary to succeed.

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