An Analysis of Motivation Factors for Students’ Pursuit of Leadership Positions

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Objective. To identify factors that influence student involvement and leadership within organizations and to assess the impact of involvement in organizations on professional skill development.

Methods. A printed survey was administered to fourth-year pharmacy students at one college of pharmacy (N=202).

Results. Most students (82%) indicated they were involved in at least one organization during pharmacy school and 58% reported holding a leadership position at some point. Factors with the largest impact on involvement in organizations were desire to present a well-rounded image to employers, ability to network, and interest in the activities sponsored by the organization. Involvement in professional organizations had a strong influence on their leadership, teamwork, confidence, and time-management skills.

Conclusion. That presenting a well-rounded image to employers and having the ability to network with mentors and peers drove student involvement in professional organizations may be reflective of increasing competition for residencies and jobs.

Keywords: leadership, students, organizations

INTRODUCTION

Professional skills, which include communication, relationship-building, decision-making, and leadership, are essential to advocating for and advancing the pharmacy profession. Thus, the development of professional skills among pharmacy students is important. One opportunity for students to begin developing professional skills is through involvement with professional pharmacy organizations. Being involved with such organizations offers many benefits for students such as gaining experience in areas not included in didactic experiences, developing social networking skills, meeting potential mentors, and participating in leadership roles within the organization. These experiences can foster the development of well-rounded professionals equipped with the skills to advance the profession and practice of pharmacy. Research has shown a positive correlation between involvement in professional pharmacy organizations and self-reported professionalism.1

In a 2004 survey of pharmacists, managers, and students, White predicted a major gap in pharmacy leadership.2 When White and Enright repeated the survey in 2013, they found that although the leadership gap was narrowing, strategies were needed to avoid a leadership crisis in the next 10 years.3 One recommendation for doing so was to encourage colleges and schools of pharmacy and residency programs to make an effort to ensure the development of basic leadership skills in their graduates.3 Traynor and colleagues promoted 12 guiding principles for student leadership development, one of which was that leadership could be learned in a variety of settings, including didactic and experiential curriculum, as well as in extra-curricular activities.4

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Pharmacy organizations have addressed the issue of leadership as well. Both the American College of Clinical Pharmacy (ACCP) and the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP), have endorsed the concept that leadership skills are necessary for all pharmacists, not just those in leadership positions.\textsuperscript{5,6} A report issued by the American Association for Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Argus Commission in 2009 recommended that pharmacy schools strengthen the emphasis on leadership development within the curriculum and increase efforts to collaborate with professional pharmacy organizations.\textsuperscript{7}

The literature describes a variety of strategies that schools of pharmacy use successfully to foster leadership development among their students, including elective courses, retreats, and leadership development programs with both curricular and cocurricular components.\textsuperscript{8-11} A telephone survey conducted by the AACP Task Force on Preparation of Pharmacy Faculty and Students to be Citizen Leaders and Pharmacy Advocates reported that many colleges implemented both curricular and cocurricular opportunities for leadership development.\textsuperscript{12} The task force noted that several colleges from the survey commented on the positive role that student organizations played in fostering students’ leadership skills.

Some research has attempted to identify predictors for student involvement and leadership. Kiersma et al determined that students with higher pharmacy school admission interview scores and overall application scores were more likely to be involved and hold leadership roles in organizations, and students with higher GPAs were less likely to be involved in organizations.\textsuperscript{13} They also reported that most students (62%) had held at least one leadership role in an organization during pharmacy school.\textsuperscript{13} Schuh and Laverty analyzed how being a student leader affected students’ lives 30 years after graduation; they surveyed students from 3 diverse institutions (a private, all-female school, a private, all-male school, and a public co-ed school).\textsuperscript{14} The authors found that regardless of the type of institution the student attended, the perceived effects on skills were the same, suggesting that the experience of being a leader had more impact on skill development than the institution at which the student was a leader.\textsuperscript{14}

These studies identified patterns of student involvement in professional organizations and perceived benefits; however, the motivation for pharmacy students to get involved in organizations was not explored. By identifying reasons for student involvement, recruiting strategies can be improved, and this may lead to more student involvement and an increase in the percentage of students with basic leadership skills. The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence student involvement and leadership within professional organizations and to assess students’ perception of the impact being involved in organizations has on their professional skill development.

**METHODS**

A printed, 32-question survey was administered to all fourth-year pharmacy students (N=202) at a large college of pharmacy in the Midwest during a mandatory campus visit day. Eleven questions on this survey pertained to leadership experiences, 6 questions assessed demographic information, and the remaining 15 assessed postgraduation plans. Students who were on distant practice experiences (n=39) were e-mailed an electronic version of the survey and given 4 weeks to respond; a reminder was sent 3 weeks after the initial e-mail. Survey questions were developed using published literature and author consensus. Questions were piloted on 1 third-year and 3 fourth-year pharmacy students, and their feedback was used to modify the questionnaire. Survey questions were assessed for face validity by 2 faculty members. The primary objective of this survey was to identify student perceptions of the value and role of student organizations in professional skill development. This study was reviewed by the IRB at Midwestern University and designated as exempt.

Respondents were asked to identify involvement in pharmacy or non-pharmacy related organizations prior to pharmacy school and since matriculation into pharmacy school. A leadership position was defined in the survey as an executive board position (eg, president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary), committee chairperson, or task force leader. Respondents were also asked to identify hours per week spent on organization-related activities; reasons for noninvolvement or less involvement (if applicable); factors that influenced decision to become a member; factors that influenced decision to pursue a leadership role (if applicable); extent to which being involved affected key professional skills; and desire to continue to be involved postgraduation. Descriptive data was used to summarize frequency of responses in the survey. The chi-square test was used to compare student involvement before and during pharmacy school.

**RESULTS**

The survey had a response rate of 78% (n=158). One hundred thirty respondents (82%) indicated they were involved in at least one organization during pharmacy school, and 75 of these (58%) reported that they had held a leadership position at some point. More students were involved in organizations during pharmacy school compared to prepharmacy school at both the membership...
level (82% vs 72%, respectively, \( p = 0.0004 \)) and the leadership level (58% vs 41%, respectively, \( p = 0.0171 \)).

The number of organizations students reported being involved in ranged from 1 (22%) to more than 4 (26%), with involvement in 2 organizations being the most common response (34%). Sixty-four percent of students spent 2 hours or less per week on organization-related activities (Figure 1).

Table 1 depicts students’ reported reasons for getting involved in organizations during pharmacy school. The reasons that had the largest impact on involvement were desire to present a more well-rounded image to employers (n = 62, 48%), ability to network with peers and mentors (n = 57, 44%), and interest in the activities sponsored by the organization (n = 53, 41%). Table 2 depicts students’ reported reasons for pursuing a leadership position during pharmacy school. The reasons that had the largest reported impact on pursuit of a leadership position within a student organization were interest in developing leadership skills (n = 43, 57%), enjoyment of the feeling of giving back (n = 36, 48%), and the ability to include it as an accomplishment on a CV (n = 32, 43%). Work obligations and distance from campus were the top reasons students chose for not being involved in organizations. For those who were involved, course load, work obligations, and family obligations were the top reasons chosen for being less involved than they wanted to be. (Table 3). Students indicated that being involved in professional organizations had a strong impact on their leadership abilities, teamwork, confidence, and time-management skills. (Table 4). Most respondents (83%) indicated they would like to be involved in professional organizations after graduation.

**DISCUSSION**

Although some students’ competing priorities, such as work obligations and living too far from campus, kept them from being involved in professional organizations, the majority of students reported they were involved in such organizations (82%), and 58% indicated they had held a leadership role at some point. Students reported being more involved in organizations during pharmacy school than before pharmacy school and many students chose to be active in more than one organization. Although this study did not compare trends to historical data, the authors were surprised at the high percentage of students involved in organizations. That students selected “representing a well-rounded image to employers” and “ability to network with mentors and peers” as the top reasons for being involved may be reflective of increasing competition for residencies and jobs. Roulin and Bangerter’s survey of 197 undergraduate and graduate students suggested that external motivation for involvement (e.g., resume-building) became more important than internal motives (e.g., passion) as students came closer to entering the job market. A large number of respondents seemed to be interested in the activities sponsored by the organization, suggesting that organizations with more appealing opportunities associated with involvement may be more likely to recruit members.

More than half of the students (58%) indicated they had held at least one leadership position during pharmacy school. Although this percentage is similar to results reported by Kiersma in 2010, the class size at our college was much larger, suggesting more students were involved. In our study, most students with leadership roles (64%) reported spending 2 hours or less per week on organizational activities, with some (36%) reporting...
spending less than 1 hour per week and the remainder (36%) reported spending more than 2 hours per week. Whereas in Kiersma’s study, 49% of students in leadership roles spent less than 2 hours per week, 19% reported spending less than 1 hour per week, and 51% reported spending more than 2 hours per week. One potential explanation for these differences may be that more leadership positions—in the form of committee chairs or task force leaders—are being created by student organizations, perhaps to share in the governance activities of the group and to allow more students to gain leadership experience. While this certainly may result in more exposure to leadership positions, it is unclear exactly how much exposure is needed to secure the basic leadership skills needed to help close the leadership gap. Until that is determined, it may be prudent for residency directors and employers to ask more questions about students’ roles and responsibilities, rather than relying on the number or type of positions held, to get a better understanding of their leadership experience. The majority of respondents were interested in continued involvement in professional organizations after graduation. Thus, organizations may want to not only marketing the above skills when recruiting prospective members to their organization, but also targeting postgraduates as potential members.

Even though the results represent a single class from one pharmacy school, the results may be generalizable to other colleges of pharmacy with similar class sizes and numbers of student organizations. The sampling frame would need to be expanded to fourth-year students from other colleges of pharmacy to enhance the external validity of the results. Although the sampling frame was small, the response rate of 78% suggests that the results are representative of this class of pharmacy students. The timing of the survey administration may not have been ideal given that many students in their fourth professional year are less involved with student organizations due to their APPE commitments. Moreover, during their fourth year, they may have forgotten aspects of student organization involvement. Administering this questionnaire at the end of the third professional year or at the end of each professional year to track longitudinal growth may provide different insight.

Students may not be in the best position to assess the impact of their involvement in student organizations on professional skill development. Faculty advisors or preceptors may be in a better position to assess skill development. In addition, students may not be able to differentiate between the effects that student organizations have on skill development and effects from other learning experiences such as activities within the curriculum or even maturation as a professional student. Use of a rubric to assess these skills at baseline prior to student organization involvement and then at one time point or multiple time points during or after student organization involvement would be a more rigorous way of determining the effects of participation in student organizations on professional skill development.

Students who participated in leadership roles may naturally have had more opportunities than those only involved at membership levels to develop their professional skills. Since 58% of respondents indicated they had leadership experience in pharmacy school, this may have unintentionally shifted the overall perception of the positive effects of student organization involvement on professional skill development. That is, if there were fewer students with leadership roles, the perceptions of positive influence of student organization involvement on skill development may have been diminished.

**CONCLUSION**

Holding leadership positions as a pharmacy student appears to have a positive impact on professional skill development.
development. Motivation for pursuing a leadership role seems to be the result of a desire to present a well-rounded image to employers and its ability to increased networking opportunities. Continued involvement in professional organizations after graduation was of interest to the majority of respondents. Further studies at other schools of pharmacy may be needed to substantiate these findings and increase external validity. Knowing the motivations for students’ pursuit of leadership positions can help organizations market more effectively when recruiting for members or student leaders.

REFERENCES


