

LETTERS

Response to Viewpoint – Point/ Counterpoint: Should a Pharmacy Dean be a Pharmacist?

To the Editor: I would like to respond to the thoughtful Viewpoint, “Should a Pharmacy Dean be a Pharmacist?” by Dean Craig Svensson. I differ with the initial assertion that “pharmacy education represents an aberration of leadership characteristics among health professions programs.” Clearly, Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standard 8 (noted by Dean Svensson to be similar to the corresponding standards for medicine and dentistry) requires that pharmacy deans “be qualified to provide leadership in pharmacy professional education, etc.”

The suggestion that ACPE is not meaningfully enforcing Standard 8 simply because the council has approved a small number of nonpharmacists as deans appears to be a circular argument. Dean Svensson states: “Should exceptional individuals without a pharmacy background who meet unique needs of a given institution come forward, exceptions could be made. But that is not the current state of affairs in academic pharmacy.”

On the contrary, it would seem that this is indeed the current state of affairs, and ACPE does meaningfully enforce the standard, finding that these 17 individuals do meet that standard and that being a pharmacist is not requisite to doing so.

In support of his argument, Dean Svensson relates a number of personal anecdotes. While these may be compelling, they are open to interpretation and do not necessarily apply to all schools of pharmacy. For example, the comment: “But what is not debatable is that these constituents felt a barrier to their engagement due to the fact that my predecessor was not a pharmacist.” However, the motivations of alumni or other constituents in relating to Dean Svensson that they were relieved a pharmacist was in charge are not at all clear, and may have even stemmed from a desire to curry favor with a newly appointed dean. A pharmacy dean will have many constituents, not all of them pharmacists.

Dean Svensson moderates his position when he states: “Assertions that pharmacists possess unique leadership qualifications in the broad sense are indefensible.” Additionally, the success of many nonpharmacist deans indicates the unique experiences of a pharmacist are not absolutely required nor are pharmacy training and practice the only way to obtain sufficient knowledge and experiential foundation. There are a plethora of leadership skills and knowledge that a successful pharmacy dean should have, and in every case, weighing each of these skills is necessary to determine if a specific person is suited for the job. Pharmacy training by itself should not be the overriding consideration. Rather, a deep understanding of pharmacy, pharmacy education, and biomedical/pharmaceutical research should be the paramount criteria.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Dean Svensson appears to be working from the implicit assumption that this is a “one size fits all” issue. If the question were, “Must a pharmacy dean in some schools of pharmacy be a pharmacist?” the answer would be a resounding YES. If the question were, “Must a pharmacy dean in all schools of pharmacy be a pharmacist?” the answer would be an equally resounding NO.

For those schools whose mission is almost entirely focused on training pharmacists, it seems reasonable that their dean should be a pharmacist. The vast majority of that dean’s efforts would revolve around pharmacy education and training. However, for those schools with a more diverse mission, (eg, where biomedical research and other academic programming are major focuses), pharmacy training is only one of many knowledge/skill sets that contribute to the success of a dean. It can easily be that for schools with more diverse missions, the best dean may be the individual who excels in multiple areas but doesn’t happen to be a pharmacist.

In summary, the argument and the evidence suggest that while being a pharmacist is certainly desirable and possibly efficacious for some programs, it is neither a necessary prerequisite nor the only sufficient qualification to be a successful pharmacy dean.

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