RESEARCH BRIEF

Promoting Professional Socialization Within the Experiential Curriculum: Implementation of a High-stakes Professionalism Rubric

Kim Tanzer, PharmD, BSP, Matthew Dintzner, PhD

Western New England University College of Pharmacy, Springfield, Massachusetts

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Objectives. To describe the implementation of a high-stakes rubric to assess student professionalism in introductory and advanced pharmacy practice experiences (IPPEs and APPEs) to promote the professional socialization of students in the doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) program at Western New England University (WNE).

Findings. A professionalism rubric was adapted from the literature to assess the professional behavior of students enrolled in experiential courses based on evaluation of the following criteria: appropriate communication skills with patients and providers, appearance and dress code, timeliness, and initiative. The rubric was implemented in the fall semester of 2013 as a high-stakes component of the assessment within all experiential courses. Students were required to meet expectations for each of the four criteria in order to pass the practice experience, independent of their performance in other course components. Students were assessed by their preceptors at the midpoint and end of each practice experience using the appropriate evaluation tool. Each of the IPPE and APPE evaluation tools included the professionalism rubric as a requirement for assessment. Use of the Professionalism Rubric as a high-stakes assessment tool highlighted professionalism as an important component of the program, making expectations explicit to students and providing leverage to preceptors for holding students accountable.

Summary. The Office of Experiential Affairs at WNE has raised awareness of the importance of professionalism and promoted the professional socialization of PharmD students with the use of a high-stakes professionalism rubric.

Keywords: professionalism, experiential education, evaluation, professional socialization

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the “White Paper on Pharmacy Student Professionalism” highlighted the importance of professionalism in pharmacy education due to the expanding role of the pharmacist.¹ It was suggested that this shift would result in the public’s expectation of higher levels of professionalism from pharmacists, necessitating the intentional inclusion of professionalism in pharmacy education. In 2003, Hammer and colleagues addressed the critical need to promote professionalism in pharmacy, reiterating its importance due to the change in the practice standard, and adding the opinion that a decline in professionalism had been observed among students and society in general.² In 2007, Boyle and colleagues echoed this concern, stating that there was an “erosion of values and civility within the society at large, potentially resulting in unchecked impulses and

irresponsible behavior” and that this behavior may influence our current and future pharmacists.³ This trend in the literature prompted many pharmacy programs to enhance their curricula with more intentional approaches to the professional development of pharmacy students, and in 2011 the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) created a Professionalism Task Force charged with assessing the status of initiatives by colleges and schools to build programming and assess effectiveness in developing student professionalism.⁴ In 2015, the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) approved Standards 2016, which included the key elements of self-awareness, leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship, and professionalism as Standard 4, “Personal and Professional Development,” thus adding an accreditation component to the support for a more defined approach to student professional development in PharmD curricula.⁵

In order to understand the challenge of developing our students’ professionalism, it is important to understand that the concept of professional socialization, defined by Hammer and colleagues as “the process by which

Corresponding Author: Kim Tanzer, Western New England University College of Pharmacy, 1215 Wilbraham Road, Springfield, MA 01119. Tel: 413-796-2032. E-mail: kim.tanzer@wne.edu

students learn and adopt the values, attitudes, and practice behaviors of a profession,”⁶ involves a transformation from student to professional. While this cannot be taught in a single course or assessed through an examination, it is impacted by a variety of influences throughout the program, including didactic and experiential courses, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, and the modeling of behaviors by faculty members and preceptors. Although the curriculum at Western New England University (WNE) includes many components that support the professional socialization of students, the work reported here focuses on the contribution of the experiential component of the program. This brief describes our adaptation and implementation of a professionalism rubric within the experiential curriculum, and how the high-stakes, longitudinal use of this tool supports the professional socialization of our students.

FINDINGS

After nearly 20 years of discussion in the literature, the fact remains that it is imperative for PharmD programs to prepare their students to be professionals. Whether it is important because of the increased scope of pharmacy practice, ACPE accreditation requirements, or some combination of these or other factors, the question remains the same: how do PharmD programs ensure that every student develops into a professional? At the most basic level, the challenge begins with the task of defining professionalism and devising a way to assess it. Further blurring well-defined outcomes are the higher level concepts of professional socialization and the affective domain. However, it is clear that there is a behavioral component to it all, and this is the target of the experiential curriculum at WNE College of Pharmacy. The experiential curriculum includes one IPPE during each of the first three professional years, each running the length of the semester, during which the student attends the site for one full day each week. Fourth professional year (PY-4) students complete six APPEs, each 6 weeks in length. All practice experiences are evaluated on a pass/fail basis.

Prior to the implementation of the Professionalism Rubric, students were evaluated using a rubric in which there were seven objectives pertaining to professionalism, worth 21% of the total grade for the course. With the use of this grading tool, a student could effectively receive a failing grade for each of the seven professionalism objectives and still receive a passing grade for the course. Embedded into the evaluation tool as a whole, the importance of professional behavior was not being highlighted.

In 2013, we adapted the Professionalism and Behavior Rubric used by the University of Maryland School of

Pharmacy, and renamed it the Professionalism Rubric.⁵ This grading tool was then built into our electronic experiential course management system (CoreElms), and implemented in the fall semester of 2013 as a high-stakes addition to IPPE and APPE evaluation tools (Table 1).

The Professionalism Rubric, which is completed by preceptors at the midpoint and end of each practice experience, consists of four criteria: appropriate communication with patients and health care providers, conformance to dress code, timeliness, and initiative. Each criterion is defined by four learning outcome statements and evaluated as either “meets expectations” or “does not meet expectations.” All of the learning outcomes must be met in order for students to achieve a “meets expectations” for each criterion. Students must receive a grade of “meets expectations” on each of the four criteria on the final evaluation to receive a passing grade for the course. In the event that a student fails the course based on an outcome of the professionalism rubric, the course failure is treated like any other course in the curriculum. The student may appeal the grade based on the college’s grade appeals process. In the event that an appeal is not granted, the Academic Standards Committee may grant remediation, allowing the student to repeat the course. In this case, the failing grade will remain on the transcript.

In addition to providing preceptors with a tool by which to hold students accountable for professionalism, the Office of Experiential Affairs developed a system for orienting both students and preceptors to the new program. Combined, use of the high-stakes rubric and orientations promote the professional socialization of our students by making expectations clear to all.

With the use of our original evaluation tool, for which professionalism comprised only 21% of the total grade, there were no students who failed an experiential rotation due to their inability to accomplish the objectives related to professionalism. Although students often struggled with some of the objectives, the lack of any consequences resulted in minimal impact on the development of their professional behavior. Since the implementation of the professionalism rubric and its use in a high-stakes manner, students have failed an IPPE or APPE because of a lack of professionalism. While the number of students who have failed a practice experience since implementing the professionalism rubric is still low (typically less than 1%), the Professionalism Rubric and orientations supporting its use have served as a consistent platform to make professionalism expectations clear to students and allow preceptors to hold them accountable for their professional behavior. Of note, as preceptors have become more familiar and comfortable with this evaluation tool, the use of the optional

Table 1. The Professionalism Rubric – Learner Meets Expectations or Does Not Meet Expectations

Criteria	Expectations: The learner consistently...
Appropriate Communication with Patients/Health Care Providers	Speaks to patients in a professional manner; Treats patients with courtesy, empathy, and respect; Demonstrates sensitivity and respect toward individual needs, values, beliefs, cultural factors, religious beliefs, language barriers, cognitive abilities, and socioeconomic status; Interacts appropriately with all healthcare professionals.
Conformance to Dress Code	Comments: Wears professional attire as defined by the student handbook, site/preceptor requirements; Is well-groomed at all times; Minimizes the visibility of tattoos and the wearing of jewelry in patient care areas and removes piercings other than earrings; Wears the clean, pressed, white lab coat with the official college of pharmacy insignia on the left arm at all times unless site requirements direct otherwise; Wears the learner nametag on the top left pocket of the lab coat at all times.
Timeliness	Comments: Is punctual; Addresses any delays or absences proactively with the preceptor; Completes all assignments by or before the deadline; Arrives to rotation prepared with references and assignments as required.
Initiative	Comments: Shows initiative in undertaking tasks and completing assignments; Accepts responsibility and demonstrates accountability; Demonstrates a desire to learn; Applies knowledge and skills to the best of his/her ability; Demonstrates the willingness to deliver quality patient care.
	Comments:

comment field to offer formative feedback has increased each year. This personal, formative feedback is valuable for the development of the student's professional socialization.

The design of the experiential program at WNE is such that it provides a backbone for consistent and longitudinal attention to professional socialization and the development of professional behaviors in the students. The professionalism rubric is used to evaluate all practice experiences and clearly delineates the learning objectives and expectations of the students, as well as the outcome for failing to accomplish the objectives. By the time students have completed their APPEs, they will have been evaluated using this tool 18 times, with a mid-point and final evaluation on each of nine practice experiences. This longitudinal continuity reinforces the expectations for student professional behavior, and leads to a state of familiarity and empowerment within the preceptor.

Although considered by our program to be a valuable tool for assessing professional behavior, use of the professionalism rubric is not without its challenges. For example, as students move from preceptor to preceptor, feedback on their weaknesses and strengths may vary. Additionally, some preceptors may still be hesitant to hold students accountable for their actions.

SUMMARY

Since 2013, the Office of Experiential Affairs at WNE has supported the professional socialization of PharmD students with the use of a high-stakes professionalism rubric. The professionalism rubric has been an effective tool for defining professional behavior expectations for students as they mature towards becoming pharmacists. Benefits to using this tool longitudinally include the consistency of the messaging regarding professional behavior as well as the empowerment and development of preceptors to uphold these expectations.

The rubric gives students a construct within which to develop these behaviors, with the possibility of course failure as an outcome should they not comply with the stated expectations.

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