COMMENTARY

Carpe Diem! Seizing the Rise of Co-Curricular Experiences

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Requirements for colleges and schools of pharmacy are continuously evolving in manners that encourage the expansion of opportunities for the development of students into holistic practitioners who provide patient-centered care. This is evident in each rendition of the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standards for the Doctor of Pharmacy degree, but especially so in the 2016 version.1 In this version, the Standards stipulate requirements for increased emphasis on co-curricular activities. In the most basic sense, co-curricular activities are meant to be an extension of learning experiences associated with the formal didactic curriculum.2 These activities should solidify learning objectives through practical experiences, should at least be in part compulsory, and should augment the overall student learning experience associated with the degree program. In order for the activities to effectively meet requirements of the Standards it is necessary for colleges and schools of pharmacy to understand what these activities entail and how they should be implemented.

A significant challenge in the development and implementation of these activities is the lack of a standard or universal definition. Without a true understanding of what is involved, it may be arduous to build co-curricular programs that will provide students with the experiences necessary to become holistic practitioners. One way of remedying the absence of a guiding description for pharmacy schools is to structure the definition to include factors such as the purpose of co-curricular activities, types of activities classified as co-curricular, potential personnel involved in developing and managing these activities, and assessment strategies.

Another significant challenge involves the process (es) by which co-curricular activities are incorporated into existing curricula. Most existing un-official curricula are already inundated with numerous student-led extracurriculars and thus, faculty and administrators may need to become creative in designing and including additional or mandated activities. Pharmacy schools have two options when implementing co-curricular activities: develop a program that meets the institution’s specific needs or modify existing extracurricular activities to fit the desired model. In the first option, an institution may opt to prospectively develop a co-curricular program which allows for complete autonomy. However, the development, implementation, and execution of authentic programming can be challenging, especially with limited time and resources. New activities may unintentionally overshadow student-led activities thus potentially eliminating their need and collaterally removing the inherent learning and leadership development associated with these activities. A second option is to modify existing extracurricular structures to meet the requirements of Standards 2016. In this way, pharmacy schools have the opportunity to enhance not only the activity but also the student learning component through the addition of objective-based design. The challenges associated with this methodology include developing mechanisms to standardize extracurricular activities, incorporating those mechanisms into the existing activity systems utilized by student leaders, and managing the numerous individuals involved in the execution of the activity. Although both options have strengths and weaknesses, they offer significant opportunities for growth in meeting the co-curricular requirements outlined in Standards 2016.1

Regardless of the process(es) involved with implementation, co-curriculars may serve as a best practice for higher education by enhancing learning through the inclusion of processes that involves a multitude of professional and personal changes. In this sense, co-curricular activities strengthen pharmacy students, the academic system, and the profession as a whole as they allow an
individual to learn how to manage the challenges of practicing within a discipline. These activities authentically prepare students to serve as holistic practitioners. They allow students to better learn how to effectively utilize time and resources within professional settings and with external organizations, and also allow students to gain experiences that lead to professional and personal development. Co-curricular activities advance academic systems and learning experiences by bridging practical opportunities that reinforce the didactic curriculum and encourage the development of individual practice styles. These activities also promote clinical and professional engagement from future generations of pharmacists, thus ultimately fostering a professional culture that improves patient care and increases contributions to the advancement of the profession.

Academic programs universally endeavor to develop professionals who possess strengths that reach beyond the confines of the classroom. Colleges and schools of pharmacy aspire to develop alumni who are confident practitioners, strong leaders, and active communicators who will utilize their foundational and experiential knowledge to provide patient-centered care. While the initial introduction of co-curricular activities has led to many inquiries and frustrations, they do serve as an avenue to restructure the learning and development of students through undertakings with a streamlined purpose. These activities will provide pharmacy education with the opportunity to directly complement students’ didactic curricula through practical application, will allow students to gain a wide array of experiences while building connections, and will encourage self-evaluation through assessment.

REFERENCES