RESEARCH BRIEF

Design and Evaluation of a Longitudinal Faculty Development Program to Advance Scholarly Writing Among Pharmacy Practice Faculty

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Objective. To describe the design and evaluation of a six-month longitudinal faculty development program designed to promote experience and skills in scholarly writing among pharmacy practice faculty.

Methods. Writer's Block uses a scheduled weekly writing time, peer support, and multiple accountability measures to promote progress in manuscript writing. Faculty participation, satisfaction, and manuscript writing progress were used to evaluate the program's success. Demographic data describing faculty participation in at least one of three cohorts of Writer's Block were collected. Satisfaction was determined using an anonymous online survey. Writing progress was determined through reporting of weekly manuscript word counts and submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

Results. Twelve assistant professors participated in one or more program cohorts to develop 20 manuscripts. Twelve (60%) manuscripts were submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. Of these, 10 (83%) have been published or accepted for publication, and one (8%) is undergoing peer review. The majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the program was helpful in starting and advancing manuscript writing. Specific program components meant to encourage writing accountability, such as monthly meetings, reporting word counts, and setting a weekly writing schedule, were highly valued.

Conclusion. This program is the first described writing-focused faculty development program among pharmacy practice faculty. It successfully engaged pharmacy practice faculty members in the scholarly writing process, evidenced by participation in the program, participant satisfaction, and documented progress in manuscript development.

Keywords: faculty development, scholarly writing, manuscript development, writing for publication

INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental responsibilities of a faculty member is to participate in scholarship and disseminate one's scholarly work to scientific and professional communities. Through peer-reviewed publications, pharmacy practice faculty contribute to advancing knowledge, shaping clinical practice, and transforming educational processes. Colleges and schools of pharmacy identify scholarly publishing as a critical responsibility. Glover and Armayor reported that peer-reviewed publications were required by 98% and 100% of pharmacy schools for promotion to associate professor and tenure, respectively.¹ This commitment to scholarship is echoed by the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE)

Standards 2016, which require faculty to actively engage in scholarship.²

Regardless of tenure- or non-tenure-track status, faculty members must carefully balance responsibilities in teaching and service to successfully contribute to scholarly knowledge. Pharmacy practice faculty often find themselves juggling demands of significant teaching loads, time-intensive patient care services, and substantial time commitments to academic and professional service. Additionally, newly hired pharmacy practice faculty often lack skills in scholarly writing. Most were educated in Doctor of Pharmacy degree programs, where students are not taught scholarly writing skills in an in-depth manner. Further, these faculty often go on to complete practice-focused residencies, which offer exposure but limited experience in scholarly writing. Thus, junior faculty members naturally spend large amounts of time establishing their teaching, patient care, and service commitments, only to find themselves lagging in scholarship responsibilities.

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Chisholm-Burns and colleagues revealed an annual publication rate of just 0.51 journal articles per pharmacy practice faculty member during the 2006-2010 time period.³ The authors suggest that many of the publications were contributed by a small number of high-performing faculty members and some faculty do not contribute to this area of scholarship.³

Such challenges in scholarly writing are not specific to pharmacy practice faculty nor pharmacy faculty in general. Most faculty are well aware of the phenomenon of “writer’s block,” defined previously as “an obstacle to the free expression of ideas on paper”⁴ and the “distinctly uncomfortable inability to write.”⁵ Writer’s block results from a number of real or perceived barriers to writing. Related literature has broadly outlined faculty members’ most frequently perceived barriers for scholarly writing, including lack of time, lack of familiarity with the subject or writing process, workload demands and competing priorities, life and family demands, insufficient writing skills, intimidation or anxiety of failure or comparison to others (imposter syndrome), tendency for perfection or grandiose expectations, and sensitivity or resistance to feedback.⁴⁻¹⁵ Faculty also cited environmental distractions (eg, shared workspaces), lack of scholarly projects or ideas for writing, and process-oriented barriers, such as difficulty applying journal authorship guidelines, high rejection rates, and limited readership and recognition.^{4,5,7,10,11} Many of these reported barriers are what Silvia calls “specious barriers” and present opportunities to be overcome with careful strategy.⁸ Formal strategies involving protected writing time, support groups, workshops and other curricular strategies have been successfully employed to help health sciences faculty (primarily medical and nursing) improve scholarly writing productivity.^{6,7,9,11,13,15-21}

Noticeably missing from the literature are initiatives aimed to provide writing-focused professional development for pharmacy practice faculty members. It is unknown whether the above cited programs that were designed for faculty of other disciplines would be generalizable to pharmacy practice faculty members. However, like faculty from other disciplines, pharmacy practice faculty need institutional support for professional development activities meant to develop scholarly writing skills. Such a need for development was identified among pharmacy practice faculty at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) College of Pharmacy, where all faculty are expected to participate in scholarship and publish, on average, at least one manuscript per year of appointment. To address this need, a longitudinal faculty development program was designed to assist pharmacy practice faculty in gaining skills and experience in scholarly writing.

METHODS

Pharmacy practice faculty within the UAMS College of Pharmacy were invited to participate in a new longitudinal faculty development program called Writer’s Block, designed to promote and support the writing and submission of a manuscript for publication in the peer-reviewed literature. Specific components of the Writer’s Block program, including session activities, accountability measures, and incentives, are described in Table 1. To participate, faculty agreed that they were: ready to begin writing a manuscript as lead author; willing to attend a series of monthly meetings; and willing to peer review another participant’s manuscript draft.

Each of the six monthly sessions was facilitated by the author, who was a tenured associate professor and chair of the department. During the first session, the facilitator emphasized the program’s key elements: setting and adhering to a weekly writing time; organizing writing projects according to priorities and timelines; and adhering to group accountability measures. Emphasis was placed on making progress on manuscript development every week, even if manuscript word counts were unchanged (eg, completing additional analyses, literature review, etc). Practical tips for writing were discussed, and the facilitator provided a suggested timeline for writing specific sections of a manuscript over the six-month program. Participants were asked to schedule a weekly closed-door writing time for the remainder of the program. Participants were instructed to prioritize this writing time and asked to eliminate distractions during writing sessions (eg, setting phone to voicemail, closing email inbox, etc.). Each participant then shared the type, topic, and significance of his/her manuscript and identified the target journal for submission. Finally, each participant shared specific writing goals to complete before the next session. Participants’ post-session responsibilities included working toward their self-defined writing goals and reporting their manuscript’s total word count on a shared Microsoft Excel (Redmond, WA) spreadsheet each week. Participants’ weekly word counts were graphically displayed on a timeline, thus providing an additional visual progress report for each participant.

Each subsequent Writer’s Block session began by reviewing the reported weekly word count graph and participants’ descriptions of progress toward the previous session’s writing goals. Participants then engaged in group discussions on timely topics, such as ways to maintain focus during writing sessions, how to perform efficient yet exhaustive literature searches, and managing coauthors. Participants helped each other troubleshoot content during manuscript development and shared resources to assist in the writing process. Finally, each participant shared his/her writing goals to be completed by the next session.

Table 1. Components and Associated Activities of the Writer's Block Program

Program Component	Activities
Monthly Session Activities	Participants reported on manuscript progress and set writing goals for next session Group offered troubleshooting and peer advice Group discussed specific aspects of writing and publishing process
Facilitator Support	Contributed resources to shared electronic folder Scheduled speakers for development sessions on relevant topics Provided suggested writing plan to meet timeline of program
Peer Review of Manuscript (optional)	Peer reviewers were assigned from other Writer's Block participants
Accountability Measures	Reported progress during each monthly group session Scheduled weekly writing time Reported total word count on shared spreadsheet weekly Entered comments into shared diary of progress unrelated to word count Target date of manuscript submission at end of program
Performance Incentives	Modest faculty development funds (\$250-\$500) for achieving program requirements

Several outcomes were used to evaluate the program, including faculty acceptance, satisfaction, and manuscript submission rates. Acceptance of the program was determined by voluntary participation during the initial and repeat program offerings. Demographic data, including faculty rank, years in rank, educational background, and number of presentations and publications were collected through review of curricula vitae. Participants' satisfaction with program was surveyed using a 9-item anonymous online questionnaire (SurveyMonkey, San Mateo, CA). Three items with Likert-based responses asked participants to rate the helpfulness of the program in starting and making progress, and navigating the writing process. One item asked participants to identify from a list each program component (eg, setting writing goals, setting a weekly writing schedule, etc.) they considered helpful. Additional items asked whether participants would recommend the program to others and to provide free-text comments. All participants were invited to participate in the survey, and faculty participating in more than one cohort were surveyed at the end of each program offering. Finally, participants reported the submission of their manuscript to the facilitator at the time of submission. Descriptive analyses were used to characterize all data, and two-sample t-tests were used to examine the associations between manuscript submission and session attendance and increases in weekly word counts. This evaluation was granted exempt status by the UAMS institutional review board.

RESULTS

All pharmacy practice faculty (n=49) were invited to participate in one or more offerings of the Writer's

Block program. Table 2 describes the 12 (24%) pharmacy practice faculty members who participated in one or more cohorts. One additional faculty member withdrew after the first session, concluding more data collection was necessary. On average, faculty participants attended 81% (range 50% to 100%) of monthly sessions. Participants worked on 20 manuscripts, including 10 original research papers, six descriptive or process manuscripts, and four case reports/case series. Participants made steady progress in their manuscript writing during the program as measured by the weekly word count, which increased by an average of 111 words/week across all program weeks. This increase was more substantial when limited to weeks when participants recorded active writing (255 words/week). Participants also described other areas of manuscript progress in the program's shared diary. During the first cohort when the shared diary was first implemented, the 17 entries were limited to information about tasks performed. However, during the third cohort, this diary organically evolved to a mechanism of group support. Participants logged over 100 entries during the program, expressing frustration with delays, excitement about personal progress, and encouragement for colleagues' success. To date, 12 of 20 (60%) Writer's Block manuscripts have been submitted for publication. Ten (83%) have been published or accepted for publication at the time of this writing, and one (8%) is undergoing peer review. Session attendance [80% (19%) v. 75% (20%)] and words written per week [251 (125) v. 266 (128)] were not significantly different among participants who did or did not submit their manuscript ($p=.69$ and $p=.86$, respectively).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Faculty Participants

Cohort	Program Dates	No. of Participants ^a	No. (%) in Nontenure-Track Appointments	No. (%) Distant Site	No. (%) with Research Training ^b	Average Years in Rank (SD)	Average No. of Presentations Per Year in Rank ^c (SD)	Average No. of Publications Per Year in Rank ^d (SD)
Writer's Block I	April-August 2013	8	8 (100)	3 (38)	0 (0)	4.0 (1.9)	0.7 (0.5)	0.1 (0.1)
Writer's Block II	October 2015-March 2016	5	4 (80)	1 (20)	2 (40)	3.8 (2.3)	3.0 (2.7)	0.8 (1.0)
Writer's Block III	April-October 2016	7	6 (86)	1 (14)	2 (29)	3.9 (2.4)	2.3 (2.0)	1.2 (1.5)
All Cohorts	April 2013-October 2016	12	11 (92)	4 (33)	2 (17)	3.9 (2.1)	1.9 (2.0)	0.7 (1.1)

Abbreviations: SD=standard deviation

^aTwelve faculty members participated in at least one cohort of Writer's Block, six participated in more than one cohort, and two participated in all three cohorts. All participants held the rank of assistant professor at the time of participation

^bPost-PharmD research fellowship or graduate degree (eg, PhD)

^cInternational or national presentations at a scientific or professional organization meeting

^dPeer-reviewed publications only

Nineteen (95%) participants responded to the post-participation satisfaction survey. Seventeen (89%) agreed the program was helpful in starting their manuscript, and 19 (100%) agreed it was helpful in making progress on their writing. Eighteen (95%) agreed the program was helpful in navigating the writing process. Nine of the 11 listed program components were identified as helpful by more than half of the participants (Figure 1). The least frequently identified component, peer reviews from group members, was an optional component sought for eight (40%) manuscripts.

DISCUSSION

Although there are many motivations for faculty to contribute to the peer-reviewed literature, including contributing to the profession's body of knowledge, fulfilling faculty position requirements, seeking professional advancement, and personal goal fulfillment, pharmacy practice faculty members encounter many obstacles to successful scholarly writing. The design of the Writer's Block program addresses many of the barriers to writing commonly cited by faculty. It follows the concept of "writing begets writing" by combining a scheduled weekly writing time with goal-setting, a group support system, multiple accountability measures, and resources to improve knowledge and writing skills.⁸ Each aspect of the program is designed to assist the faculty member in making continual progress on a manuscript. The program capitalizes on successful interventions described in the literature for other health science disciplines, but combines them in a way not previously described exclusively for pharmacy practice faculty, while adding additional measures of accountability and a scheduled weekly writing time.

The success of the Writer's Block program can be measured in several ways. First, the program was well received by pharmacy practice faculty, with repeated participation by faculty in subsequent cohorts. Participants also reported a high level of satisfaction on the post-participation survey. Further, the program was successful in attracting faculty with little writing experience, as demonstrated by the mean of 0.6 peer-reviewed manuscripts published per year in rank. These faculty participants wanted to fulfill their responsibility to engage in scholarly writing but were inexperienced and eager to learn more about the process. This history of publication is very similar to that reported by Chisholm-Burns and colleagues, who reported a publication rate of 0.51 journal articles per faculty member per year.³ Given these previous data, it is likely that this scholarly writing development program would be generalizable to many other pharmacy practice faculty members who similarly need scholarly writing development.

Figure 1. Writer's Block Program Components Identified by Faculty Participants as Helpful to Writing.

Second, the program successfully aided faculty in developing and submitting manuscripts. Although increases in weekly word counts do not necessarily reflect manuscript quality nor equate with manuscript submission, the incremental progress represents success over many frequently cited barriers to writing, such as lack of time, lack of familiarity, workload demands, intimidation, perfectionism, environmental distractions, and lack of experience.⁴⁻¹⁵ It is important to recognize that the simple act of making progress on the manuscript builds confidence and the desire to make more progress. In addition, 60% of Writer's Block manuscripts have been submitted to peer-reviewed journals. The scheduled writing times, group support, and multiple accountability measures of the program promoted continued progress on manuscript drafts.

It is also evident that the peer support of cohort members was valued by participants. Although the group was relatively inexperienced in scholarly writing, they provided advice and shared resources during the group sessions to help advance peer knowledge and familiarity with the writing process. For example, in one session, participants discussed their practices in identifying, reviewing, and managing appropriate references for their paper, resulting in recommendations for the use of reference management software programs. In addition, a sense of camaraderie developed among participating faculty, and some of the components of the Writer's Block program evolved to encourage this peer support. One of the most noticeable examples of this peer support was the use of the shared diary for supporting and encouraging other participants as they reported successes and setbacks.

This program and its evaluation fill a void in the literature regarding the effectiveness of a scholarly writing-focused

faculty development program specifically designed for and tested among pharmacy practice faculty members. Before the program's development, pharmacy practice faculty frequently sought advice from the facilitator as they expressed their struggles and barriers to scholarly writing. From these conversations, a need was identified for a targeted and practical approach to promote the advancement of scholarly writing skills and encourage the submission of manuscripts to peer-reviewed journals. The resulting Writer's Block program serves as a successful model that can be readily adapted by department chairs and faculty development personnel with relative ease, but it is possible that limitations may exist that limit the generalizability of the results to other institutions. The current analysis includes a small sample size of faculty at one institution; however, it does encompass the experiences of three cohorts enrolled in the longitudinal program. As discussed above, the writing experience level of these faculty participants is likely similar to many other pharmacy faculty.³ The program's group activities are key components of its design and may result in self-selection by faculty who are more comfortable participating in group activities. Faculty who are uncomfortable with group activities may be less likely to participate in the program. The cohorts described in this evaluation each included five to eight participants, and it is unknown whether the program would be successful with much larger groups. The additional incentive of professional development funds may not be generalizable to other institutions. Nevertheless, these institutions may consider other forms of faculty incentives for scholarly writing development that would be equally well received by participants. Finally, more time is needed to evaluate the full effect of the program on current and future manuscript

submission and publication by participants. The program continues to be offered as described to faculty at this institution.

CONCLUSION

As written by Silvia, "Like any advanced skill, writing must be developed through systematic instruction and practice."⁸ The design and evaluation of the Writer's Block program contribute to the understanding of pharmacy practice faculty members' pursuit of scholarly writing and encourage increased knowledge of and experience in the writing process. Its strengths lie in its multifaceted design that includes both individual accountability and group support to encourage continual progress in manuscript development. It was successful in engaging pharmacy practice faculty members in the writing process, evidenced by initial and repeat participation in the program, documented progress in manuscript development, and the cultivation of a peer-support system.

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