Academic institutions work diligently each year to recruit, retain, and graduate Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) students who will be positive contributors to our healthcare system. The emergence of a novel coronavirus in 2019 (COVID-19) has threatened these systems. This commentary is a discussion of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the enrollment management processes of PharmD degree programs, including recruitment, admissions, orientation, retention, and graduation. The authors highlight enrollment management processes that may forever be changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This commentary is intended to assist pharmacy administrators as they reflect on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their own programs and develop strategies to minimize the negative effects.

Keywords: enrollment management, pharmacy recruitment, admissions, orientation, graduation

INTRODUCTION
The global COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education to reinvent itself at a lightning pace. Physical campuses were closed, social distancing was implemented, and curricula and administrative processes were reengineered. The pharmacy landscape was already shifting at an unprecedented rate, from diverse applicant demographics to the expansion of career path opportunities.

The pharmacy academy should be proud of its accomplishments during these extraordinary circumstances. What has emerged is remarkable. Nevertheless, pharmacy administrators, faculty and staff members must quickly move to the next cyclic responsibility: recruitment of the next class of pharmacy students.

DISCUSSION
Recruitment
Priority 1 of the 2018-2021 Strategic Plan issued by the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) is to “enrich the applicant pipeline” to ensure that the appropriate numbers of diverse, qualified students are recruited and trained to meet society’s needs for pharmacists. While some online recruitment resources exist (eg, Pharmacy Is Right For Me), many programs rely heavily on recruitment strategies that involve direct human interaction. As preparation for the next academic cycle begins, recruiters must consider how they will navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic, since physical distancing and stay-at-home orders may be in place through the summer and fall semesters. In addition to advising students via videoconferencing platforms, remote recruitment strategies could include the use of social media, mobile apps, interactive websites, software platforms, direct and personalized email communication, and free promotional gifts sent through the mail. Digital campus tours may replace traditional tours for students and their families.

Admissions
The Chronicle of Higher Education and The Wall Street Journal have described many challenges related to
COVID-19 within areas of enrollment management.\textsuperscript{3,4} For example, the inability of students and/or parents to maintain employment will have a lasting impact on the affordability of higher education.\textsuperscript{3,4} Both the financial and cultural impact from COVID-19 will likely result in decreased international student populations in US colleges and universities.\textsuperscript{5,6} Potential pharmacy students may wonder if now is the right time to begin their college education and whether they will have the same “return on investment” from learning in a remote environment rather than in classrooms, laboratories, and experiential sites where they could interact in person with professors, fellow students, and preceptors. After all, the campus experience, which also includes social and cultural activities, adds value.

The diminishing applicant pool and subsequent smaller class sizes were already of utmost concern to pharmacy programs.\textsuperscript{7} The COVID-19 pandemic added to these woes. For example, by mid-March 2020, some schools had closed or were short staffed and therefore unable to supply transcripts to the PharmCAS application system. This slowed admissions processes and caused frustration for applicants. PharmCAS rallied by accepting unofficial transcripts for review. Admissions committees increased informal communication with applicants, enhanced transparency of processes, and provided flexibility by extending deadlines and communicating the likelihood of an interview prior to the delayed processing.

Even after students’ information was verified in PharmCAS, other data used to make admission decisions were unavailable. In addition to school closures, Pearson VUE test centers, which administer the Pharmacy College Admissions Test (PCAT), were closed through April 30, 2020. Hence, PCAT scores were temporarily unavailable. In addition, many undergraduate programs allowed students to change their grade mode for prerequisite courses to pass/fail because of inequitable learning conditions. This made it difficult for admissions committees to evaluate student performance in prerequisite courses. Likewise, many schools were in the process of conducting in-person admissions interviews when the virtual world became the only interview option. Team-based interviews were suddenly difficult to conduct, and in some cases, eliminated. In response to these challenges, admissions committees implemented innovative interview processes and reevaluated admissions criteria. Committees found they could extrapolate important information about candidates from other sources. Some began reviewing students’ course loads, evaluating the academic rigor of previous institutions they had attended, and scrutinizing the number of courses repeated or for which a grade of C or below was received. Others schools placed greater emphasis on students’ cultural, healthcare, leadership, volunteer, community, customer service, and employment experiences. Some began to assess candidates’ personal characteristics, such as growth mindset and resilience, while other schools gleaned information from students’ letters of recommendation. The pandemic stimulated admissions committees to reexamine their admissions processes and take unprecedented steps to ensure that pharmacy education and the next class of pharmacy students would be ready to move forward when the crisis has passed.

\textbf{Student Orientation and Retention}

The 2018-2019 Student Affairs Standing Committee Report highlighted the importance of technology for iGeneration program delivery and recommended that schools conduct online or hybrid (online and in-person) orientation programs to support students’ development of self-directed learning skills.\textsuperscript{8} An orientation model presented at the 2016 annual AACP meeting received high student satisfaction scores and was associated with improved first-year grade point averages.\textsuperscript{9}

The authors suggest that student onboarding be implemented now for longitudinal delivery through the summer months. Existing course management systems can deliver a variety of information through self-directed learning modules. Content could include financial aid, campus safety, school policies, professional expectations, study skills, stress management, team development, and many other topics. Online longitudinal modules can be paired with high-frequency, high-touch, peer-to-peer and/or student-advisor meetings via video conferencing. Virtual breakout sessions, remote team-building activities, online scavenger hunts, and social trivia games can be employed for larger group activities.

Programs are exploring hybrid content delivery, holding small-group sessions with frequent offerings rather than large class sessions, and other systems that will ensure safe delivery of content with social distancing in place. With the increase in online content, there will be greater focus on the issue of accessibility. Faculty members must ensure new content is inclusive, functional, equitable, and sustainable for students with disabilities who need special accommodations.

The sudden move to remote teaching resulted in a plethora of unexpected issues for students. For example, moving traditional content and assessment processes to online modes at breakneck speed resulted in system failures - many related to technology. In some cases, the technology simply did not work and students were unable to submit assignments. Students were suddenly relocated and differences in time zones caused confusion about
The COVID-19 pandemic has markedly changed how pharmacy schools do business. It affected recruitment, admissions, orientation processes, student retention, and graduation events. However, the pandemic has also been an opportunity for growth, adaptation, and retooling of our educational approaches, which will ultimately strengthen pharmacy education and prepare us for future challenges.

REFERENCES

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