

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ACROSS THE ACADEMY

Reinventing How Pharmacy Educators Connect as a Community

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Submitted May 8, 2020; accepted May 29, 2020; published June 2020.

The onset of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has added a new layer of complexity to an already difficult period for academic pharmacy. The need to follow social-distancing guidelines has resulted in rapid adoption of technology-enabled communication strategies. While these technologies provide unprecedented ways in which we can connect as an academic community, we must consider their effectiveness in not only promoting exchange of information, but also creating inspiration within the community and supporting the level of interdependence required to tackle the difficult challenges that lie ahead. As the connecting body within the community of pharmacy education, it is incumbent on the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) to consider how we will adapt during this period of disruption. We must adopt new strategies that will allow our members to connect in new, meaningful ways, ways that stimulate ideas, new partnerships, and an overall sense of hope for our future.

Keywords: COVID-19, communication, leadership

INTRODUCTION

Prior to 2020, academic pharmacy was in the midst of what seemed like an unprecedented disruption to our outlook for the near future. From January 2017 to January 2020, verified PharmCAS applications declined 26.1% (Libby Ross, verbal communication, February 2020). The US Bureau of Labor and statistics projected a net 0% growth in pharmacist employment opportunities through 2028, with an 8% reduction in community pharmacy positions.¹ Reports from the field about pharmacies closing and pharmacy graduates having increased difficulty securing positions verified these projections. Additionally, many pharmacists were dissatisfied with their work environments, and this contributed to a sense of professional burnout and lack of joy in practice.² Leading up to spring 2020, colleges and schools of pharmacy, led by AACP, were working on bold, aggressive plans to address these challenges and alter the trajectory of pharmacy education and practice. Then, suddenly, COVID-19, a

threat unfamiliar to us just a few months prior, entered our daily dialogue.

This pandemic has brought a collection of disruptive changes that have and will continue to influence our personal and professional lives now and likely permanently. Even before the emergence of COVID-19, it was difficult to predict the extent that market influences would have on the profession and pharmacy schools over the next 10 years. Now, it will be even more so. Almost overnight, the focus of faculty and administrators turned from concern over marketing dynamics to the urgency created by social distancing guidelines and “shelter in place” orders. We quickly adapted to continue classes, alter experiential education, and adjust curricular operations so that students could graduate on time or continue to progress through their pharmacy program. At the same time, the health care system had to adapt quickly to find new ways to engage patients. The increased use of web-based technologies has been core to many of the adaptations made during this acute period of disruption. At first, these adjustments, both in the academic and health care delivery worlds, seemed temporary. However, it quickly became clear to us that we will not be going back to business as usual when the pandemic ends.

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For better or worse, the use of technology to facilitate communication, learning, and health care delivery will remain present in ways that did not exist prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each program within pharmacy education will have to go through the process of determining how technology will change how we work within our schools, and how we will communicate with colleagues over distances. We all will need to adapt to how the pandemic will influence how we recruit and educate the next generation of pharmacists. Every school and college of pharmacy will be challenged to respond to the impact that COVID-19 has on higher education and health care delivery and the ways in which we will connect and communicate with colleagues, students, and patients. These are extraordinary times, and no institution in our Academy has been spared from these challenges. It is truly a case where “we are all in this together.” Thus, as the ways in which we connect and communicate are possibly altered permanently, it is important to consider how pharmacy educators will engage, support, and thrive as a community in the future.

The Value of Community: Information, Inspiration, and Interdependence

As humans, when faced with difficult times, we tend to look to those that are close to us for support. Our families and our communities, which were part of our foundation for success, rise to new levels of importance in times of need. This is true of the geographic communities in which we live, but also of our professional communities, including the academic pharmacy community.

The onset of this pandemic has reminded us how connected by technology we are in today’s world. Any colleague, anywhere, is but a few keystrokes or a video call away. If you face a challenge for which you wish to get peer input, it has never been easier to seek guidance and potentially receive numerous responses literally within minutes. A review of activity on the AACP Connect platform in March 2020, when COVID-19 policies were suddenly being implemented at universities, shows that there were more posts than in any other month in the last year by nearly a twofold margin (Matt Cipriani, email communication, May 4, 2020). Undoubtedly, the vast majority of these exchanges were focused on sharing experiences related to navigating the challenges to academic pharmacy presented by COVID-19.

We are *connected* in a staggering number of ways, but to what degree are we truly *connecting*? In addition to facilitating exchange of *information*, are we

also conscious about how we use our connections to create *inspiration* that can sustain us in challenging times? As we build platforms that allow us to connect, are we also mindful about how we create the *interdependence* necessary for our community to take on the extraordinary challenges we cannot tackle on our own? If we focus primarily on using technology to share information, are we fully replacing the positive aspects we experience from traditional modes of communication within the pharmacy education community?

Connecting personally and professionally in ways that go beyond the technical aspects of being connected by technology are essential to producing moments of *inspiration*. Rudyard Kipling stated, “When your Daemon is in charge, do not try to think consciously. Drift, wait and obey.”³ Inspiration that will produce solutions to our greatest challenges cannot be conjured on notice, nor does it likely appear in an electronic bulletin board exchange or a scheduled video conference. Inspiration can arrive through immersion in our community, when we are open to ideas and not necessarily seeking a solution to a specific challenge. As our reliance on remote communications in the current and post-COVID period increases, we must consider how we create opportunities to nurture our spirit so that inspiration will arrive, uncover elusive solutions, and generate motivation to tackle our biggest challenges.

Beyond facilitating inspiration, our social systems are also a critical factor in supporting adoption of innovations that allow us to thrive in the future.⁴ Academic pharmacy’s success in addressing the great challenges outlined at the beginning of this commentary is dependent on creating a degree of *interdependence* within our community, to produce successes beyond what we can do as individuals or individual organizations. The ways in which we connect should be purposely designed to actively (rather than passively) disseminate innovations that are good for the entire academic pharmacy enterprise. The way in which we connect must also rise to the level where collaborations are fostered, alliances are formed, and synergies are realized, thereby underpinning new ways to succeed in our academic and health care worlds disrupted by COVID-19.

We can say without question that we are connected across our academic pharmacy community. But are we connecting in ways that will drive positive change and do so at a rate that is necessary to respond to the challenges that impact us? This is a critical question not only for leaders of pharmacy schools, but for AACP’s leadership as we prepare the Association to meet the needs of its members as a “new normal” emerges.

AACP Facilitating Connectedness Post-COVID-19

Secondary to the travel restrictions and social distancing requirements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, AACP's 2020 annual meeting will occur as a virtual event. This disrupts what is the largest annual gathering of academic pharmacy in the world. For many of us, it is the one time of year we get to interact with colleagues, renew friendships, make new connections, and learn things that will impact our schools and colleges. Most importantly, the AACP annual meeting is part of our routine and who we are...and now it is missing.

Conferences, small and large, will be impacted going forward. Whatever software your institution has chosen, whether Zoom (Zoom, San Jose, CA), Google Meet (Google, Mountain View, CA), Microsoft Team (Microsoft, Redmond, WA), Houseparty (Life on Air, Inc., San Francisco, CA), or some other, you have probably been using a virtual meeting platform for communicating with colleagues and students since the coronavirus pandemic began. To some extent, learning new ways to connect with colleagues ("virtual happy hour") has been fun. But the quick shift to an all-virtual conference format is similar to the transition our institutions faced with the move to full distance education, ie, it had to be done on an abbreviated timeline, which caused planners to feel like they were "building the plane as they fly." Much of what we can accomplish immediately is technical in nature. Adoption of new technology, preparing presenters, streaming presentations, and connecting delegates in a virtual House of Delegates are all largely technical activities for which we have existing capabilities. However, over the longer term, we must also be conscious of and address how we can retain the humanistic components that create value in attending conferences. These matters are not technical; instead, they require adaptations to our culture and our expectations.

The AACP will continue to offer a variety of ways in which we can connect with colleagues, but we must seek to leverage our technology and venues in new ways to support our community as we address the challenges described previously. On AACP Connect, the Association provides members with an opportunity to share information and is a tool many have already used successfully. In the future, how can we more strategically apply this resource to facilitate formal learning and action communities to create inspiration among programs? Can we make this resource a critical component of initiatives that create the interdependence necessary to influence the trajectory of the profession? This is an outcome no institution can do on its own.

The AACP Institutes are also conference offerings that will be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Reenvisioning these educational opportunities could help the Academy create the interdependence needed to solve our most difficult challenges. Perhaps we will move from point-in-time "institutes" with a focus on institution-based teams to longitudinal communities designed to create an emphasis on shared problem-solving and formation of new partnerships. This model may rely on a mix of in-person and online modalities, expanding engagement to more individuals from our respective institutions, increasing cross-institution communication longitudinally, and pacing activity across the Academy to accelerate progress. The formation of learning communities that rely on multiple communication streams and broad member engagement can expand inspiration and facilitate new levels of collegial and institutional interdependence. This new way of creating connections could potentially produce a net impact across our community previously unimagined.

Will in-person conferences go away within AACP or other organizations? No. APCO Worldwide research indicates that 83% of Americans working from home miss attending conventions and having face-to-face interactions, and 78% of those people plan to attend more of these events when they are again able to do so.⁵ As humans, we have an innate desire to form connections that go well beyond the transactional process of sharing information. Simply *being* connected is not enough, we need to *feel* connected. Finding ways to facilitate this feeling of connectedness across our Academy is crucial. Accomplishing this during a time when social and financial restrictions disrupt traditional ways of connecting will be a critical challenge for AACP's leaders as we enter the "new normal" created by COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

For many in our Academy, the necessary move to a distance-facilitated 2020 AACP Annual Meeting will create a sense of loss. Leaders in our Academy must acknowledge and understand the dynamics that create this feeling. The sense of loss is not from missing out on meeting content (the meeting platform will actually increase access to information that would have been presented at an on-site event). It is because we are experiencing remarkably challenging times that heighten rather than diminish our need to feel connected to our colleagues. We rely on each other for more than information. We rely on each other for support, insights, rejuvenation, and camaraderie. The ways in which we connect in the future may be permanently altered by COVID-19, but as we adapt, we must remain committed to creating ways in which we will stay personally connected.

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