

COMMENTARY

Embarking as “Captain of the Ship” for the Curriculum Committee

Kristin K. Janke, PhD,^a Krisy-Ann Thornby, PharmD,^b Kristy Brittain, PharmD,^c Mariann Churchwell, PharmD,^d Kathleen Hill-Besinque, PharmD, MEd,^c Sharon K. Park, PharmD, Med,^f Helen Smith, PhD^g

^a University of Minnesota, College of Pharmacy, Minneapolis, Minnesota

^b Palm Beach Atlantic University, Gregory School of Pharmacy, West Palm Beach, Florida

^c Medical University of South Carolina, College of Pharmacy, Charleston, South Carolina

^d University of Toledo, College of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Toledo, Ohio

^e Chapman University, School of Pharmacy, Orange, California

^f Notre Dame of Maryland University, School of Pharmacy, Baltimore, Maryland

^g University of the Incarnate Word, Feik School of Pharmacy, San Antonio, Texas

Submitted April 15, 2021; accepted July 19, 2021; published April 2022.

This commentary examines the curriculum chair’s responsibilities and discusses considerations when assuming this role, using a “captain of the ship” metaphor. From knowing the crew to managing a diverse set of responsibilities, the path to becoming an effective chair is challenging and each captain’s stripe must be earned. Advice is provided to assist with understanding the curriculum and governance processes, as well as the chair’s various roles and professional development. The need for leadership and management is also emphasized.

Keywords: curriculum, faculty, accreditation, management, leadership

INTRODUCTION

There is a signature knock on your office door one afternoon. The department chair has a favor to ask you: she needs a new curriculum committee chair. You have served on smaller committees for years, contributing, helping overcome some challenges, and meeting deadlines. But serving as Chair would be different. The faculty members have very strong opinions about what should and should not be changed. Plus, there are so many charges for the year! You decide to accept the challenge, but just a few hours later find yourself regretting the decision. “Why did I say yes? Curriculum chair? How will I do a good job?”

Chairing the curriculum committee for a professional program is an overwhelming yet noble role that is central to a school’s academic success. Like the captain of a ship, the curriculum committee chair is a position of responsibility both for the ship (the curriculum), as well as its cargo (resources) and crew and passengers (faculty and students). The captain oversees navigation to the destination, ensures compliance with laws (standards), and maintains documentation. They are responsible when there is smooth sailing and when there are turbulent waters. The

success of any journey (educational initiative) is tightly tied to the captain’s abilities to navigate, as well as their ability to effectively engage the crew.

The captain metaphor may resonate in many ways. For instance, like the captain of a ship, it may be important for the chair to spend time with a “telescope” to see into the distance. Likewise, the chair must avoid any sort of mutiny! The metaphor is not perfect as making curriculum-related decisions, implementing them, and monitoring the results involves an intricate process of shared governance, unlike the clear authority and accountability that may be present on a ship. An effective chair knows the curriculum, understands school governance, executes their various roles as chair, engages in self-development to enhance their effectiveness, and monitors the balance between management and leadership.

To aid new curriculum committee chairs, this commentary provides an overview of these issues. With its interest in supporting faculty as they assume new roles, the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Council of Faculties charged the Curriculum Learning Community to develop this Commentary.

Corresponding Author: Krisy-Ann Thornby, Palm Beach Atlantic University, Gregory School of Pharmacy, 901 S. Flagler Dr., West Palm Beach, FL 33416-4708. Tel: 561-803-2724. Email: Krisy_Thornby@pba.edu

DISCUSSION

Just as the captain needs an understanding of the ship’s structure and its capabilities and capacities, the

curriculum chair needs an understanding of the curriculum. When it comes to curriculum, complexities abound, perhaps because, as Genn stated, “curriculum is the most holistic, inclusive and comprehensive entity and notion in education.”¹ Faculty generally know which courses are taught in which semesters and how courses within a series are designed to help students progress toward graduation. However, curricular structure and sequencing are just the beginning of understanding the curriculum. An overview of questions related to curriculum design that can help the chair develop an understanding of the curriculum are presented in Table 1. In addition, the chair must also have an awareness of the differences between the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum, and the learned curriculum.² The intended curriculum is the envisioned, planned

curriculum that is represented in official documents (eg, courses listed in the school’s catalog). However, when instruction is delivered (ie, implemented curriculum), the planned curriculum may be altered in response to unanticipated problems (eg, snow day), resource changes, student performance, etc. The achieved or learned curriculum reflects what is received by learners (eg, the experience, outcomes, or competencies) that can be assessed, evaluated, and/or demonstrated. For a host of reasons, the implemented curriculum may not achieve the desired learning outcomes and the committee will need to take action to rectify the problem. The chair also must be aware of the presence and impact of the hidden curriculum, which is embedded in the organization’s structure and culture. This hidden curriculum may include “understandings,” which

Table 1. Suggested Questions for a New Pharmacy Curriculum Committee Chair to Use When Developing a Better Understanding of Their School’s Curriculum

Questions ⁹	Possible Actions
Design-related questions⁹	
What are the values and purposes that pervade the thinking and aspirations for the program (ie, the fundamental character of the curriculum)?	Review the program’s latest accreditation documents, and past committee reports.
What is the curriculum’s purpose? Is there a set of aims, a mission, a vision or a set of graduate characteristics that describe the purpose?	Develop awareness of the accreditation (ACPE) and practice standards (eg, blueprint for licensing exam), especially recent changes, and national resources (eg, ACCP curriculum toolkit). ¹⁶⁻²⁰
What are the intended outcomes/competencies of the curriculum?	Examine the school’s learning outcomes, course catalog, student handbook, and curricular policies, including requirements for graduation.
How is the curriculum organized? What are the specific frameworks or models it uses (eg, modules, spiraling)?	Meet with the last chair and the academic dean.
How are various learning experiences incorporated into the curriculum? What is the balance between these types of experiences?	Work closely with the assessment leads/committee. Work towards good handoffs of data between the groups that collect and need it.
How do we know whether curricular goals are being met? What are the learning assessment and program evaluation plans?	Be aware of the curricular review process and its timelines.
Governance-related Questions⁴	
Who has authority to make which decisions? Who implements them? Who is accountable?	Delineate authority for decisions, accountability and implementation with administration to enhance clarity.
Through what structures, processes, rules and regulations are decisions made?	Understand the college/university procedures for change. Consult faculty handbooks and others for guidance.
What policies document the processes around curricular change to encourage transparency, fairness and effectiveness?	Discuss the intersections with other committees (eg, assessment, admissions), and the program’s strategic plan.
What mechanisms are in place to ensure that there is effective communication and dialogue among and between administration, committees, course directors and teaching faculty?	Meet regularly with other chairs and consider inter-committee meetings annually.
How is it determined who is involved and who has a voice?	Consider a vice chair (if not provided) and involve them in the process of governance.
How are conflicting interests, priorities, values and minority viewpoints allowed to emerge?	

Abbreviations: ACCP=American College of Clinical Pharmacy; ACPE, Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education

include messages about what is and is not valued and taken-for-granted aspects of what happens within the program. The implicit values and norms conveyed in the hidden curriculum can be reinforced or undermined by policy development, evaluation, resource allocation, and institutional nomenclature.³ Therefore, the chair should ask “What are the fundamental values and messages being created and transmitted as we engage in these activities?” Curricula are complex. In addition to the structure, sequencing, and outcomes, the chair must also be aware of the intended, delivered, learned, and hidden curricula.

Accomplishing the charges (and mission) of the committee will require an understanding of the organization’s structure, policies, and procedures, as well as working with various stakeholders (eg, college and university administrators, faculty, preceptors, students). Casiro and Regehr state that “the means by which decisions are made, implemented and monitored constitute the governance of a program.”⁴ They argue that good governance includes three dimensions: authority, decision-making, and accountability. As chair, what will be your authority, decision-making, and accountability? The route to good governance may be less than clear. Questions to ponder and actions to take to support the chair’s work in governance are listed in Table 1. The chair needs to understand the mechanisms for communication and dialogue, be sensitive to conflicting interests and minority viewpoints, and clarify and shape processes for decision-making and accountability. To enact recommendations and change, the committee also needs effective sponsorship from one or more administrators. The chair should work closely with these sponsors to ensure clarity on priorities for the committee and timely, bi-directional communication.

The curriculum chair has multiple roles. When observing a chair, it may appear as if their role is primarily in agenda coordination (eg, meeting management). However, this is far from the case. Stark and colleagues outline other roles, which are summarized in Table 2, along with possible tasks or actions.⁵ To keep the committee moving forward productively, the chair needs to recognize when a particular role is needed. For example, in the same way a captain can sense stormy weather approaching and chart a route that will ensure safe passage for the ship and crew, the chair must be keenly aware of curricular issues within the school and externally and bring these to the group’s attention. Another common role of the captain is that of advocate. Just as the captain requests assistance from persons ashore, or nearby ships (eg assessment, student affairs), the chair-as-advocate will need to procure resources or clarify priorities with others in the chain of command. The chair may find themselves shifting

roles even in the midst of a particular meeting or conversation.

Professional development is necessary for a captain to effectively lead the curriculum and gain the trust of the crew, passengers, and neighboring ships. As mentioned in Table 2, faculty will often recognize the chair as the curriculum liaison, which requires an understanding of factors affecting pharmacy curriculum and health sciences education. Keeping current on educational trends can be difficult, and a supportive network of colleagues is essential. The chair should consider becoming a member of the AACP Curriculum Special Interest Group and/or attending the AACP Annual Meeting. In addition, the chair should plan to actively scan the horizon for pharmacy education articles specific to active committee charges (eg, course review processes). To begin the learning process, Dorval and colleagues have described useful resources for curriculum committee members that relate to curricular terminology, syllabus review, teaching methods, course review, student workload, and interprofessional education (IPE).⁶

When planning professional development, consider the major work that is needed during the appointment term. There might be a new design or development project (eg, updating quality assurance measures), a college-wide implementation initiative (eg, mapping, new technology), a major evaluative cycle (eg, course review, accreditation self-study), or a challenge (eg, addressing student workload). Perhaps there is knowledge to be gained to aid immediate curriculum design and decision-making, such as a curriculum development process, information on spiraling, use of portfolios, or approaches to supporting professional identity formation.⁷⁻¹¹ The implementation of the curriculum, and feedback from assessment and evaluation, may also be generating learning-related needs, such as strategies for managing cognitive load or encouraging deliberative practice.¹² Depending on the major work being planned, it might be helpful to learn about program evaluation (eg, use of logic models) or particular technologies being used to support the curriculum.¹³ It is not necessary to learn everything, but strategic learning priorities should be identified.

As presented by McKimm and Swanwick, educational leaders carry a “double burden” to both lead and manage the many aspects of their work.¹⁴ This is also true of curriculum committee chairs. Leadership is generally about change and movement, and management is about order and consistency.¹⁴ Kotter describes leadership and management as “two distinctive and complementary systems of action,” each with distinct functions and activities.¹⁵

Management typically involves planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, and maintaining order (eg, monitoring and reporting).¹⁵ For example, the chair must monitor

Table 2. Seven Common Roles of Curriculum Chairs and Associated Tasks or Actions

Role^a	Characteristics	Possible Curriculum Chair Tasks or Actions
Agenda Setter	Gives charges to the committee	Collects and prioritizes requests of the committee. Assigns due dates to meet short- and long-term targets.
Coordinator	Provides structure, task orientation, and paperwork support Functions as a ‘manager,’ and ‘juggler’	Oversees a system for relevant curricular information (eg, program outcomes, curriculum mapping documents). Creates or updates tracking systems regularly when curriculum changes occur.
Sensor	Provides direction to the committee A ‘vision setter’	Develops an attuned awareness of curricular problems and opportunities internally (eg, within the faculty or school) and externally (eg, regional, national). Introduces timely curricular topics to key stakeholders.
Initiator	Introduces ideas, proposals, and drafts	Researches best practices from the literature and/or seeks examples from external contacts. Interacts with AACP’s curriculum special interest group.
Facilitator	A ‘process leader,’ ‘integrator,’ ‘idea prompter’	Organizes strategic planning sessions for faculty and stakeholders to initiate effective curricular conversations and encourage a sense of shared faculty ownership and consensus. Observes committee members’ strengths and interests to appoint appropriate subcommittees. Identifies the key curriculum stakeholders or champions.
Advocate	Serves as an intermediary between administration, faculty and committee members A ‘resource procurer,’ ‘priority setter,’ ‘communicator’	Fosters collaborative relationships with administrators, directors, and other chairs, including IPE leaders, co-curriculum leaders, information technology staff. Initiates conversations with administration to serve as a representative articulating the needs (eg, resources) of the committee to support the committee charges.
Standard setter	May be referred to as a curricular ‘role model,’ ‘time protector’, ‘quality monitor’	Serves as a model example for peer faculty members to have a ‘go to’ for best practices. Ensures that quality assurance measures are being conducted amid routine tasks.

^a Roles and characteristics modified from Stark and colleagues.⁵

the academic calendar, ensuring that decisions (eg, whether to approve a new course) and tasks (eg, the course review process) are completed on time. Leadership is about guiding change.¹⁵ Leadership involves setting direction as well as motivating, inspiring, and aligning people.¹⁵ For example, the chair may need to build commitment among faculty and students for the launch of a new IPE initiative and work to help them see the benefits. Major curricular efforts may require buy-in from many individuals and groups outside of the committee. The chair may also encounter committee initiatives that are reliant on other staff or committees. All of the situations will require building strong relationships with others.

Effective chairs, like good captains, need to utilize both management and leadership skills. In particular, the chair needs to oscillate between problem-solving (management) and problem-defining (leadership).¹⁴ For example, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic involved quick pivoting to online learning that required nimble problem-solving, often

on a day-by-day basis. However, leadership is needed post-pandemic to help chart a new course, potentially exploring hybrid models that blend online and live instruction. In these cases, the chair may need to provide information, raise questions, and suggest options to help the members address the new reality.

With the many roles of the chair, rapidly changing environments, and a dynamic set of charges, the responsibilities of the chair can easily become overwhelming. To ensure productivity, managing time and maintaining order are crucial aspects of committee meetings. Like the captain who looks to the officers and crew for support, the chair must look to the members and staff. For example, there may be the need for a formal first officer (co-chair or vice chair) to share the responsibilities and enable strong continuity over time (ie, preparing them for chair responsibilities). Is there a shipmate designated for minutes or, in the age of real-time document sharing, are they crowd-sourced and reviewed by the committee as a whole?

The answer may depend on organizational culture, history, and the willingness to experiment with new processes. The chair needs to have a sense of these school-specific, contextual variables when attempting to assemble the necessary support.

While the captain needs a working knowledge of the galley, there is no need for the captain to make the meals. The chair needs to be aware of the expertise, interests, and commitment levels of the members and should work to align members with initiatives that draw on their talents. Subcommittees may need to be created for efficiency. Ideally, the membership is sufficiently diverse, connected, and respected to allow information and input to be collected that enables the group to do its work. The credibility and influence of members can have a powerful positive impact in navigating highly charged or political issues. The committee should be sufficient in size to accommodate changes (eg, parental leaves) or temporary members may need to be appointed. Expertise, such as instructional designers or assessment personnel, needs to be available if not specifically appointed to the committee. The captain must consider the journey ahead when assessing the expertise required in the crew. When possible, the chair should advocate for strong membership, suggesting appointments to help diversify the group and provide coverage for the various skill sets needed.

The chair will need to set expectations with the group. For example, how will respectful and inclusive conversations occur? How will the group engage in meaningful deliberation? How does the group work through conflict? When decisions are made, how are they communicated and supported? New members may require an orientation process (eg, trends in pharmacy education, curriculum-related procedures) to ensure they are prepared for the conversations and tasks of the group.

CONCLUSION

While sipping coffee and preparing for your final meeting as curriculum chair, you realize how quickly time has passed in your term. You scan the agenda as you recap the committee's progress. Throughout your journey as chair of the curriculum committee, you will be continuously reminded of the need for accountability and to cautiously navigate issues of authority and processes for decision-making. You will find yourself jumping back and forth between being a coordinator, initiator, facilitator, and advocate, among other roles. But by the end of your journey, you will find you have gained a wealth of knowledge about the intended, delivered, and learned curriculum, as well as the hidden curriculum. Your intentional involvement of stakeholders and productive engagement

of sponsors will bolster the committee's success. Your management and leadership skills will be tested as unanticipated charges are added and challenges arise from both internal and external to the committee. There may be detours and temporary setbacks, but each will create an opportunity for learning, as well as adding to the institution's collective wisdom. While chairs captain the ship of the voyage, a safe arrival is the result of a collective effort. With short-term charges and the committee's long-range initiatives as the compass, you will sail in the right direction for the good of the program and students. As you near the end of your term, you can look forward to making further progress as the committee seeks the next destination and welcomes a new chair.

REFERENCES

1. Genn JM. AMEE medical education guide no. 23 (part 1): Curriculum, environment, climate, quality and change in medical education—a unifying perspective. *Med Teach*. 2001;23(4):337-344. doi:10.1080/01421590120063330
2. International Bureau of Education. Different meanings of “curriculum.” <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/geqaf/annexes/technical-notes/different-meanings-%E2%80%9Ccurriculum%E2%80%9D> Accessed July 12, 2021.
3. Hafferty FW. Beyond curriculum reform. *Acad Med*. 1998;73(4):403-407.
4. Casiro O, Regehr G. Enacting pedagogy in curricula: on the vital role of governance in medical education. *Acad Med*. 2018;93(2):179-184. doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000001774
5. Stark JS, Briggs CL, Rowland-Poplowski J. Curriculum leadership roles of chairpersons in continuous planning departments. *Res High Educ*. 2002; 43(3): 329-356. doi: 10.1023/A:1014841118080
6. Dorval E, Thornby KA, Ottman A, Hubbard M. Useful resources for members serving on a curriculum committee in schools and colleges of pharmacy. *Curr Pharm Teach Learn*. 2017;9(1):145-154. doi:10.1016/j.cptl.2016.08.050
7. Wehrli G. The nuts and bolts of curriculum and assessment. *J Clin Apher*. 2011;26(1):29-46. doi:10.1002/jca.20265
8. Schneiderhan J, Guetterman TC, Dobson ML. Curriculum development: a how to primer. *Fam Med Community Health*. 2019; 7(2):e000046. doi:10.1136/fmch-2018-000046
9. Grant J. Principles of Curriculum Design. In: *Understanding Medical Education*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2018:71-88. doi:10.1002/9781119373780.ch5
10. Driessen E, van Tartwijk J. Portfolios in Personal and Professional Development. In: *Understanding Medical Education*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2018:255-262. doi:10.1002/9781119373780.ch18
11. Cruess SR, Cruess RL. The Development of Professional Identity. In: *Understanding Medical Education*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2018:239-254. doi:10.1002/9781119373780.ch17
12. de Bruin ABH, Sibbald M, Monteiro S. The Science of Learning. In: *Understanding Medical Education*. Vol 311. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2018:23-36. doi:10.1002/9781119373780.ch3
13. Lovato C, Peterson L. Programme Evaluation. In: *Understanding Medical Education*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd; 2018:443-455. doi: 10.1002/9781119373780.ch30

14. McKimm J, Swanwick T. Educational Leadership and Management. In: Swanwick T, Forrest K, O'Brien BC, eds. *Understanding Medical Education: Evidence, Theory and Practice*. Wiley Blackwell; 2019:549-568.
15. Kotter JP. What leaders really do. *Harv Bus Rev*. 1990;68(3):103-111.
16. Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education. Accreditation Standards and Key Elements for the Professional Program in Pharmacy Leading to the Doctor of Pharmacy Degree. Published 2015. <https://www.acpe-accredit.org/pdf/Standards2016FINAL.pdf> Accessed July 12, 2021.
17. NAPLEX: North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination, National Association of Boards of Pharmacy. NAPLEX Competency Statements. <https://nabp.pharmacy/programs/examinations/naplex/competency-statements-2021/> Accessed July 12, 2021.
18. Flannery AH, Soric MM, Benavides S, et al. 2019 Update to the American College of Clinical Pharmacy Pharmacotherapy Didactic Curriculum Toolkit. *J Am Coll Clin Pharm*. 2020; 3:455-464. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1178>
19. ASHP long-range vision for the pharmacy workforce in hospitals and health systems. *Am J Health Syst Pharm*. 2020;77(5):386-400. doi:10.1093/ajhp/zxz312
20. Pittenger AL, Chapman SA, Frail CK, Moon JY, Undeberg MR, Orzoff JH. Entrustable Professional Activities for Pharmacy Practice. *Am J Pharm Educ*. 2016;80(4):57. doi:10.5688/ajpe80457