

COMMENTARY

Achieving Enrollment Outcomes by Aligning Applicant Recruitment and Selection with Unique Organizational Niches

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Submitted June 25, 2019; accepted December 15, 2020; ePublished December 2020

As pharmacy programs use holistic approaches to admissions, changes will emerge in the quantity and quality of the student applicant pool. Several programs have stopped the Pharmacy College Admissions Test (PCAT) requirement, modified pre-requisite coursework, and reduced minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) requirements. In alignment with their unique mission, values, and vision statements, programs have also expanded aspects of their application and review process to increasingly focus on leadership skills, community service, teamwork, collaboration, and paid and volunteer experiences beyond academic performance emphasizing skills and affective domain areas aligned with the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standards and the Center for the Advancement of Pharmacy Education (CAPE) Outcomes. Herein, we will discuss how pharmacy schools and colleges can refine their admissions interview processes in alignment with their unique curricular and programmatic niche areas of distinction.

Keywords: admissions, matriculation, application, progression, holistic

As the numbers of PharmD applicants have steadily declined every year since 2012, and the number of programs have continued to increase to 144 currently, the ratio of applicants to seats has decreased to the concerning number of 1.002.¹ Students are applying to fewer institutions (2.57 programs per applicant), with students understanding they now have a strong advantage and assurance of obtaining admission at their program of choice. In response to this shift, programs need to adapt their mindset to strategically and authentically focus on special niche areas and differentiators to better ensure they attract students that will persist in, and enjoy, the program while thriving academically and professionally. Several differences between programs have been seen across the nation, including length, location, curricular delivery, organizational values and areas of academic emphasis, stackable and dual-credential focus areas, and mission to serve specific patient populations. To capitalize on competitive advantage niche areas and unique institutional branding, programs need to be mindful about marketing, messaging, and application processes to help determine which students will be the best fit for their programs, while helping students decide which program will also fit their needs. Inclusion of program specific elements (such as instructional methodology, program mission, and institutional culture) should be intentionally layered through various program interactions with applicants². Organizational and academic alignment between a program and what an applicant expects, can be described using multiple variables, including academic success, retention, engagement, and satisfaction with the program.³ These elements comprise the organizational brand, and serve to create a psychological contract with applicant expectations.

Interview day composition has started to become more program specific, helping candidates to get a better feel for the student experience at each program. Such strategies allow students to better identify and determine the type of program, expectations, and academic environments aligning with their preferences. Academic philosophy is increasingly becoming an important indicator of a program's uniqueness. Programs are highlighting flipped classrooms, team-based learning, team-based projects and activities, simulation of learning methodology, additional experiential learning, specialized tracks, and dual and joint degree program offerings.⁷ While much of the matter and content of pharmacy programs are similar, sequences, structure, and scope or focus of various pharmacy curricula can vary widely. Intimately connected to the curriculum, co-curricular elements will also need to be increasingly highlighted to help students gain a better appreciation of student life at both the institution and the local cities and towns surrounding them. Schools will increasingly need to make use of their connections to both current and past students, developing a rich network of support

in ways that make the surrounding community a holistic and immersive ecosystem for students to build their skills, networks, and future careers.

Strategies to help determine fit and success include self-assessments of grit, emotional intelligence, moral agency, personal strengths, and preferences, as well as assessments of writing skills and problem-solving abilities.^{4,5} Many programs have these activities to on-site interviews and/or augmented the requirements of their admissions process by adding supplemental applications, essay questions, and program-specific requirements. Other institutions have modified interview practices, including scoring candidates on multiple domains during the on-site interview, adding more robust tools for assessing communication skills and interpersonal skills. Some institutions are using Multiple Mini Interviews and other methods for evaluating applicants' reaction to various clinical and non-clinical interpersonal situations, the ability for maintaining calmness in the face of challenges, or to de-escalate a difficult situation.⁶ Additional assessments have the potential for creating barriers for applicants, particularly first-generation college students, underrepresented minorities, and others who may not be savvy to the process of applying to professional degree programs. Programs have sought to address imbalances brought by standardized examination scores and other metrics that have the potential to favor students from affluent backgrounds and those with experience at more academically prestigious institutions. Many programs have made the PCAT optional, and others no longer include PCAT scores in admissions decisions. Many programs have also eliminated requirements for bachelor degrees and have instead focused more on pre-requisite coursework. These changes were designed to reduce barriers to applying and to open to doors for traditional and non-traditional pharmacy school applicants.

The transition from undergraduate to professional coursework can be difficult for any student, but can be particularly so for those with lower levels of academic preparedness. Pharmacy programs will increasingly need to examine and assess reasons for academic difficulty and attrition in both the first professional year and beyond within their unique programs. Programs will also have to consider the challenges students face when accessing education and completing pre-requisite coursework at community colleges and less prestigious institutions, as many students are also faced with trying to balance taking care of the basic needs of their family as they address competing priorities of work and school.⁸ Students may have one or more characteristics associated with lower levels of academic preparedness including pre-requisite institution, GPAs (including cumulative and course specific), degree completion status, and standardized test scores.⁹ Other markers may be related to background, including socioeconomic status, first generation college student (or professional student), rural location, and English as a second language.¹⁰ Communication abilities such as listening, writing, and speaking, and presentation skills, can also be tied to student performance.¹¹

Increasing student readiness before starting the program can ease the transition to PharmD coursework. Programs may have to start exploring methods, such as delivering PharmD-related materials and modules via online or live platforms, and may include optional and/or required enrichment activities.¹² Increased focus and resources on these readiness "boot camps", will allow students to receive concentrated educational materials and engage in activities that mirror what they will do in the classroom to increase their exposure, self-efficacy, and confidence. Programs can choose to focus on various aspects of student success, assessing the efficacy of identifying learning strategies and preferences, exploring and evaluating self-awareness, reviewing pre-requisite course materials, and receiving an introduction to concepts traditionally residing within the first year of the PharmD. Programs may also consider extending conditional offers of acceptance to students with lower GPAs or markers of lower levels of preparedness, with admissions being contingent on students completing these types of activities as required coursework before starting the program. Distinction between these pre-matriculation programs and post-baccalaureate programs, which typically require additional tuition, delayed start, and no guarantee of acceptance, will need to be addressed.

Modifications to new student orientation, which has historically been focused on welcoming students and exposing them to information about institution policies and resources can aid in supporting students as they adjust to the rigor of a professional program.¹³ To promote development in the affective domain earlier in the program, institutions have started to add components to help students gain better self-awareness through personality assessments, as well as assessments of baseline pre-requisite knowledge.¹⁴ Programs can use orientation to foster relationships between student teams and between students and faculty mentors, improving feelings of support and belonging, which have been shown to aid in student retention. Expanding both time and content in the orientation process, can be accomplished by utilizing on-line modules for development and readiness assessment in the weeks leading up to the start of the first professional year. Completion of these modules can also serve as a marker for engagement and help predict matriculation¹⁵.

As the admissions pool continues to decline, exposure to pharmacy careers needs to happen before students enter higher education to build a healthy applicant pipeline. It is important for programs to continue working with AACP and the academy on new strategies and marketing, including the Pharm4Me campaign that targets undergraduates as well as younger students.¹⁶ Sharing these resources with potential partners is critical so that we can increase the output of a consistent message to the public about what pharmacists do and what they are capable of doing by way of advanced

education and specialized training. Relationships between programs and potential students can be fostered over time, with applicants learning more about program specific differences as they gain increased exposure to academic and healthcare environments.

Increasing awareness of pharmacy can also help to encourage students to consider pharmacy as a career and increase applicants to pharmacy programs versus other health professions. Looking at the admissions and onboarding processes can be valuable as ways to increase the total number of applicants that are considered for pharmacy admissions in addition to aiding the academic readiness of the students to position them for success in their chosen program and in their future pharmacy careers.

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