

VIEWPOINTS

Making Community-Engaged Scholarship a Priority

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Applicants to doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) programs often write in their essays about “wanting to help people.” Students tell stories of family members or close friends who were sick and the pharmacists who made a difference in their care. How often do application reviewers and interviewers cast off that reason for accepting a student into pharmacy school, looking for a better one? Although accreditation standards for PharmD programs emphasize the important role of pharmacists in promoting wellness and prevention of disease, how will we graduate future practitioners who share this vision if not by admitting students who have the passion and desire to help others?

Pharmacy and other health science faculty members want our graduates to have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to provide care to their patients and improve health care for their communities. It is unfortunate that service-learning or community service is often minimized when the skills learned from these encounters may be paramount to future pharmacists and other health care professionals responsible for patient care. Communities are where students, faculty members, and pharmacists can improve patient care, enhance medication safety, and promote health and wellness.

Students, faculty members, and administrators need to become engaged in our communities through educational opportunities developed in our classrooms and through extracurricular activities. As leaders in education and pharmacy, we must reach out to our communities through the addition of service-learning or community-based activities in our curriculum. While technology can help students gain pharmaceutical knowledge and show elements of professional practice, it cannot assist students in the refinement of their interpersonal skills. Nor can it help them comprehend and integrate the attitudes and values needed to work effectively with diverse individuals in community settings with health disparities. Interpersonal skills and professional development can only be refined through collaborations with organizations outside our institutions. The question raised becomes how to efficiently utilize these collaborations to enhance our educational programs.

Fortunately, there are numerous educational programs offered through nonprofit health organizations that can be integrated into introductory and advanced pharmacy practice experiences. Furthermore, there are multitudes of community projects with which pharmacy students and student organizations can become actively involved throughout their pharmacy education. Students should not be in the last year of their professional education before they have the opportunity to become involved in their communities. Moreover, pharmacy faculty advisors can play a key role in promoting student involvement with organizations in our community, as well as at the state and national level. Faculty members, faculty advisors, and administrators can support the vision, mission, and overarching goals of the National Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Objectives 2020 by mentoring and working with students and student organizations in these areas as they develop community outreach activities.¹

Finally, community engagement and community-based participatory research ought to be an important element in the research agendas in our colleges and schools of pharmacy. Faculty members interested in launching new research may find that funding for community engagement and community-based participatory research is more available than funding for other programs and has actually grown. For example, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) are interested in community-based research showing improved outcomes from integrated approaches to patient care and approaches to health care for improvement of public health. NIH and AHRQ are looking for the opportunity to provide support to those institutions and organizations that can serve as community partners in their various research and health and wellness promotion activities with the emphasis on documenting successful outcomes. When community members and state and national elected representatives see pharmacists and pharmacy students making a difference outside of the traditional pharmacy settings, it helps them recognize pharmacists and pharmacy students as valuable health care providers who can impact public health and

positively impact the health care system in any number of settings. This can form the foundation for discussions on changes in healthcare policy.

In addition, members of the community can change the face and role of pharmacy by expecting more services and care from pharmacists. This will occur only if members of the community know what pharmacists do and see pharmacists' service to the public. When community engagement by pharmacists and pharmacy students is recognized and documented as critical to the profession and to health care, it is more likely to be reflected in local, state, and national policies and practice opportunities.

Service, community-engagement, and community-based participatory research should not be conducted just

to promote pharmacy but because they are the right things to do. An unknown author reminds us to "make service your first priority, not success, and success will follow." Engaging in and providing services back to communities ought to be a priority of colleges and schools of pharmacy, and in so doing, they will contribute to their continued success and to that of our profession.

References

1. The Secretary's Advisory Committee on National Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Objectives for 2020, Developing Healthy People 2020, Office of Disease Prevention & Health Promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.healthypeople.gov/HP2020/advisory/PhaseI/PhaseI.pdf>. Accessed June 14, 2009.