

Commentary: Unique Challenges to Opening a New Pharmacy Program

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INTRODUCTION

The development and maturation of new colleges/schools of pharmacy has been part of the fabric of pharmacy education over the past 15-years, a trend that seems likely to continue. Along with this trend comes a unique set of challenges: how does one create all the components of a school of pharmacy as part of a new program with no history?

At some point in nearly everyone's childhood, Lego® building blocks were incorporated into creative play. Available in different shapes, sizes, and colors, they offered an infinite number of assembly opportunities, limited only by the builder's imagination and attention span. Starting a new pharmacy program is similar in that the program can identify achievable outcomes for the ideal graduate (the end assembly product) and then attempt to build a curriculum to accomplish this goal. This begs the question of how does one build a program's curriculum to achieve those outcomes when the blueprints are not available or are seemingly infinite in variation? This manuscript will identify sev-

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eral challenges that can occur when starting a new college or school of pharmacy without any blueprints available and then will offer recommendations as to how to address them. It should be noted that while not every new program will face these challenges, being aware of them can be helpful.

DISCUSSION

The challenges highlighted here are not meant to be a comprehensive list of what awaits a new program, but rather are a representative sample of the more common ones. It is important to understand that the challenges that a new program faces each represent a unique opportunity to build a solution from the ground up.

No matter the occupation, individuals will draw on their previous experiences as well as their training to guide them and help them succeed. What if a group of individuals don't have any previous experience or has only very limited experience? What guidance do they draw from when designing and implementing a new program?

Consider the following scenario: The Faculty Affairs Committee, composed of five of peers, is meeting to discuss faculty advancement (promotion and possibly tenure). Invariably someone asks the question, "What should the promotion guidelines be for our faculty?" The response can often be, "I haven't gone through the promotion process myself but can get a copy of the guidelines from my previous institution." The committee gathers promotion guidelines from colleges and schools of pharmacy that are similar in size, institutional type, and mission to ensure that faculty promotion at the institution is consistent with similar programs. The sentiment of the committee often is that promotion and tenure should be neither too easy nor too difficult to achieve, and that faculty should be able to achieve the same rank if they were to move to a similar institution. While establishing promotion and tenure guidelines is always challenging, imagine doing so at a new institution with a committee made up primarily of assistant professors, none of whom as ever received promotion or tenure?

While this specific discussion was unique to this committee, the challenges and potential solutions identified could just as easily have been applied to any other committee, research agenda development, department meetings, or even course development. The programmatic structure that we largely take for granted at our previous institutions simply doesn't exist in new programs. This represents a significant creative op-

portunity for both the faculty and the administration. In this case the challenge is rooted in the statement “you don’t know what you don’t know.” Once committee members realize what they do not know they can seek advice and use sound planning as they begin to move forward without an established blueprint.

Another challenge for a new program is how roles change as the program evolves. Initially most administrators and faculty hired to start a new program are intimately involved with almost all aspects of the program. As the administrative team grows, additional faculty are hired and students enroll, many functions are assumed by others. Passing these tasks onto others may result in those originally hired to perform them losing their feeling of “ownership” and responsibility for aspects of the program which were previously under their control.

Since a lack of academic experience is at the heart of many of the challenges faced by new programs, the development of a faculty mentoring program is one mechanism to help junior faculty navigate academic life without blueprints. While this is a logical solution, realistically it is important to note that new programs often struggle to attract senior faculty. Typically this leaves administrators, who usually have at least some experience, as the sole source of mentorship for the junior faculty. This represents a double-edged sword. When mentors are administrators, there is a risk that their guidance may reflect the needs of the organization rather than the individual faculty member’s personal development needs. The other challenge, and a significant one, is the lack of time and/or availability of the administration to serve as mentors, especially during the developmental phase of a new pharmacy program. A good mentoring relationship takes time and effort for it to be successful. Clearly the best solution is to hire faculty at both the associate or full professor levels as the market bears and as the institution’s *pro forma* allows. While this is not always possible, at least budgeting for it makes it possible in the event these experienced individuals are willing to join a new program.

The culture that a program wishes to foster is another critical component in new program development. In either case, every program strives to have a positive culture that is supportive of the program’s mission. When developing a new program there is a chance to shape that culture starting with the first individuals hired. This represents a wonderful opportunity, as well as a serious responsibility. Over time a culture will evolve from the actions, values, and beliefs of the faculty, staff, and administration, largely being shaped by the personal experiences of every-

one involved regardless of the extent of their collective academic experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the development of a new program, these and other challenges may occur, not all of which can be avoided or side-stepped for very long. The following represents some additional general recommendations that may serve to help resolve these and other challenges:

1. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Whether the discussion is about culture, changing roles, or helping individuals realize what they do not know, open communication is an absolute necessity. With so much going on at any given time it is easy to, but nevertheless dangerous to assume that everyone has been kept informed. Communication is critical in successfully transitioning new hires into the process, as well as ensuring that everyone realizes that roles can and will change as the program evolves.
2. Why reinvent the wheel when the faculty and administration can learn from existing successful programs? In the faculty affairs committee example the members pursued collection of advancement guidelines from comparable programs to use as a starting point. This represents an excellent starting point as long as the information gathered is used for guidance as the faculty develops what they want for their program.
3. The administration needs to foster the concept that not everything needs to be done completely or perfectly the first time. When starting a new program the faculty need to feel comfortable knowing that they do not need to produce a final and perfect product every time.
4. Learn from your mistakes. With nearly everyone in a new role, including at least some of the administration, it is reasonable to expect that mistakes will happen. The key is to learn from them and not make the same mistake repeatedly.
5. Celebrate your successes. This sounds simple, but this does not happen as often as it should. Make time to openly discuss the accomplishments so that everyone involved is aware of what has been achieved and how each individual has contributed. Department chairs can play an instrumental role in this process during the annual review process. This represents an opportunity to dis-

- cuss with each faculty member the extent of his/her service contribution as a result of all of the work necessary to lay the foundation for committees, courses, etc.
6. Hire, when possible, senior faculty into non-administrative positions and foster mentoring opportunities. Funding must be available within the *pro forma* so that when these individuals are available they can be hired. Create non-administrative leadership positions (e.g., Center of Excellence Director) to entice more experienced faculty to join the program. Foster external mentoring opportunities with individuals at other institutions, especially as new faculty are exposed to other programs and develop peer networks via state and national meetings.
 7. Pace yourself and realize milestones. Starting a new program can appear to be a series of sprints. In actuality it is more like a marathon. It is about pacing oneself, celebrating the milestones as they are accomplished, and realizing that each part of the race is just that, a part of something bigger. Remind everyone involved that there may be only one finish line, often beyond the horizon, but there is also a mile marker just around the corner that is well within reach.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that a new college or school of pharmacy will face a variety of challenges as the program is designed and implemented. A few recommendations have been presented to ease the transitions necessary in this process. There are no magic solutions other than to communicate openly and effectively, to acknowledge that mistakes will happen, and to create a culture that fosters creativity and an entrepreneurial spirit.

Great things can come from the freedom that accompanies starting a program from scratch. In closing I am reminded of the closing lines from the Robert Frost poem *The Road Not Taken*, “. . . Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”¹ When starting a new program embrace the opportunities that await and do not be afraid to try unique and entrepreneurial approaches. After all, that could make all the difference.

REFERENCES

1. Frost, R. The Road Not Taken. *Classic Poetry Pages*, Retrieved August 1, 2007 from <http://poetrypages.lemon8.nl/life/roadnottaken/roadnottaken.htm>.