Serving as a student preceptor: Focus on emerging challenges

As the practice of pharmacy continues to evolve and embrace students of different generations and backgrounds, preceptors may find themselves facing challenges unlike those encountered just a decade or two ago. The purpose of this article is to describe some of the emerging challenges a preceptor may face and offer advice on strategies to overcome them.

**Strained interdisciplinary relations.** As health care becomes increasingly team based, pharmacy students are often educated side by side with learners of other disciplines (e.g., medicine, nursing). Students of other disciplines often have goals for experiential education that differ from those of pharmacy students, and a preceptor may find it difficult to coordinate learning experiences that meet the specific needs of various groups of students while ensuring an appropriate, quality education for all. A related challenge often encountered when working with interdisciplinary groups of learners is the concept of hierarchy in health care: Some students may feel that their chosen discipline is superior to others and may resist collaborative learning or behave in a condescending manner toward students in other fields.

One effective strategy for meeting those challenges is to have students teach each other. It is reasonable for students in professional programs to participate in the development of their rotation activities and take responsibility for ensuring that their experiential education goals are met. Also, when students teach each other, they can develop an appreciation of the important contributions of each discipline to the health care team. The preceptor can help students gain increased respect for one another through collaborative activities and help dispel any misperceptions that one discipline is superior to others.¹ ³

**Inappropriate use of technology.** Today’s learners are increasingly technology savvy and expect to use a wide variety of technological resources on a regular basis. Sadly, some students may be tempted to use technology to cheat or plagiarize; examples include using mobile phones to text answers to examination questions to fellow students, taking photos of tests, and searching the Internet for research articles and other work to be copied or modified (with varying degrees of cleverness) and turned in as their own. Such behaviors may become increasingly prevalent as the generational gap widens between preceptors and students.⁴

One approach to managing these issues is to set an example of appropriate use of technology. For example, preceptors can refrain from texting during rotation hours themselves to discourage that practice among their students. They can also demonstrate the appropriate use of information obtained from the Internet, including how to reference online sources appropriately.⁵ It may also be helpful for preceptors to review concepts of plagiarism with students early in the rotation (those concepts should already have been addressed in the didactic curriculum or earlier rotations, so the preceptor will simply need to reinforce them). In addition, the preceptor’s expectations regarding issues of scientific misconduct can be clearly delineated in a general rotation handbook provided by the school or college of pharmacy or in a specific rotation syllabus. Preceptors will also find it helpful to know—and reiterate to students—the consequences of violating institutional policies on academic dishonesty (e.g., honor board actions, professionalism reviews).⁶

**Information-access issues.** Securing students’ access to health care information systems can lead to problems for experiential educators. Learners often need some level of access to the electronic

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medical record (EMR) to fully participate in patient care experiences, and preceptors often negotiate an appropriate level of EMR access for their students. In some health care institutions, EMR access requires personal information such as Social Security numbers and background checks; others have mandatory training or site orientation programs. If possible, preceptors should relay the applicable EMR access criteria to the school or college of pharmacy’s office of experiential education (OEE) well in advance of rotations in order to allow sufficient time for appropriate arrangements to be made. If the host institution serves as a rotation site for multiple pharmacy students, the OEE can collect any necessary personal information and arrange for training before the rotation; if that is not an option, preceptors can try to arrange for students to visit the site one or two days before the rotation start date and complete any required training.

Diversity-related challenges. Issues of diversity can be a particularly challenging aspect of preceptors’ involvement in experiential education. Students who are not native English speakers may find it challenging to communicate with some patients and health care professionals at a rotation site. Some patients served by a given rotation site may have biases against a pharmacy student whose ethnic or cultural background differs from theirs. Preceptors often struggle with these issues while integrating students into clinical experiences. We recommend tapping into the diversity resources of the school of pharmacy. In addition to providing diversity training for faculty and students, the school can perhaps work with the rotation site to arrange such training for the facility’s health care providers and staff.

Lack of professionalism. Challenges in the area of student professionalism include a variety of different issues faced by preceptors. These challenges range from poor student attitudes—“I paid tuition to be here” and similarly dismissive remarks—to inappropriate dress and disruptive conduct (e.g., answering a phone during a clinic). These challenges can be among the most frustrating faced by preceptors. As with the technology challenges mentioned previously, preceptors can lead by example and convey their expectations about professionalism in very clear language in the rotation syllabus.7,8

Closing notes. The emergent and fast-evolving nature of the issues discussed here can make it difficult to anticipate and develop effective solutions for challenges related to interdiscipli- nary tensions, inappropriate use of technology, plagiarism and other forms of scientific misconduct, and lack of professionalism. Preceptors can help keep students on the right path by (1) clearly delineating their expectations about student conduct in the rotation syllabus, (2) being attuned to issues of diversity and interdisciplinary relations and planning accordingly, (3) engaging students in rotation development and team-building activities, and (4) making full use of available institutional resources and informing the OEE if additional resources are needed.


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