VIEWPOINTS

Taking Responsibility for Progress Assessments

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The need to ascertain whether or not students are learning and retaining knowledge and skills throughout the curriculum has driven the development of a variety of assessment tools and methods that are intended to provide both formative and summative data. Recognition of this need underlies the current focus on assessment in the accreditation process. One promising tool that has emerged from these activities is a progress assessment/examination. A number of schools have developed their own progress-type assessments while the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) has recently begun marketing a standardized version. Who should be responsible for the development and validation of these important assessment instruments?

Developing an effective curriculum and delivering a high-quality pharmacy education are dynamic processes. In response to the need for increased accountability, responsive schools and colleges fine-tune curricular content and how content is delivered on a regular basis, each within its own unique environment using its own array of skills and expertise. It is this author's view that each college/school, or consortium of colleges/schools, should be responsible for developing and administering a progress assessment that best reflects each unique curriculum. One size does not fit all. A single common examination, given immediately prior to entering Advance Pharmacy Practice Experiences (APPEs), may reflect a common endpoint in pharmacy education, but the opportunity to obtain ongoing useful information regarding students' learning during each stage of their education would be unavailable. Furthermore, we risk underrepresentation of certain critical areas/disciplines such as the basic sciences as a result of their placement in the curriculum.

How should we employ such an assessment? What will we do with the data? Should the data be used solely to determine progression into APPEs, to meet accreditation purposes, or to provide useful information throughout the

curriculum? An ideal assessment tool will have multiple uses that can generate formative and summative data, a guide for improvement or remediation, and documentation of success. Developing a progress assessment is a time-consuming task, but the valuable information that such an instrument can provide is sufficient payback for the effort extended.

A progress assessment is especially useful when administered at key intervals in a curriculum. Timely delivery of scores can provide valuable constructive feedback to individual students, assessment committees, and other stakeholders. Results can be used to identify not only strengths but weaknesses as well so that interventions can be initiated and measures taken to correct them before becoming an impediment to further learning. Additionally, the data are valuable for ongoing assessment of the success of a curriculum. Weaknesses in a curriculum can be identified and a response initiated for ongoing quality improvement. Therefore, progress assessments can and should be used as formative tools early on and then as summative tools to determine progression into APPEs, thus serving multiple institutional needs.

Each program bears a unique combination of curricular emphasis, character of student body, faculty interests, and practice sites. Therefore, schools and colleges of pharmacy should assess the success of their own curricula in achieving designated learning outcomes by a process of their own design. The onus is on us, the academy, to monitor the educational process. Assessment should not be an accreditation-driven process. On the contrary, ongoing quality assessment should ensure accreditation success.

It should be the responsibility of the faculty and appropriate committees to assess student learning and retention. I encourage a collaboration among pharmacy educators to develop and initiate progress assessments to provide necessary critical feedback without compromising the unique qualities of each curriculum.